

Downward and Outward
Part Seven. Godly sorrow over sin
II Corinthians 6.14-7.11

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Introduction and Orientation

Our back basement, the place where we store our extra stuff, occupies a place of infamy in our family lore.

From time to time, quite reasonably, Sharon will say, “How about if we go work on the back basement for twenty minutes?” which instantly engenders groans and eye rolls from the rest of us, because: a) organizing and eliminating stuff in the back basement is one of our least favorite things to do, and b) we know twenty minutes means some indeterminate period of time between one and four hours, but the one thing it never means is twenty minutes.

A couple of days ago Sharon and I were cleaning out the dreaded back basement. And at one point about two hours into our twenty minutes Sharon turned to me and said, “Do you realize that you have rather abruptly dismissed every idea I’ve suggested for the past fifteen minutes?”

I opened my mouth to disagree with her but realized she was right. My grumpiness about working in the back basement was coming out sideways in an impatient efficiency that was frustrating for Sharon and unattractive in me.

What do we do when we look at our lives and see a gap between the life we are living and the life we were called to live?

* * *

This fall we’ve been working our way through Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian church.

For six chapters Paul has been holding before the Corinthian church a picture of life and ministry that is under the sway of Jesus rather than under the sway of an unredeemed heart and an unredeemed culture.

When Jesus conquers us, Paul tells us in II Corinthians 2 and 3, he intends in that glorious defeat to bring us out of the kingdom of which we’ve been part, and to make us

citizens and subjects of his new kingdom. And he means for our lives to reflect that transfer of citizenship.

He pulls us out of allegiance to the world, and folds us into relationship with himself with the desire that we would live our lives with him and for him, with hearts wholly given over to him.

And then, as Paul reminds us in chapters 4 and 5, he sends us back into the world with the desire that we would be represent him, living as ones who belong to him and resemble him, as the Spirit of God transforms us more and more into the likeness of Christ.

In chapter six Paul describes some of the qualities that will characterize a person whose life is lived under the full sway of Jesus – qualities like love, patience, kindness, purity, and a kingdom outlook.

But all along through this book Paul has been pointing out to the Corinthian church the ways that their lives reflect being more under the sway of the surrounding world than under the sway of Jesus their king. He tries to help them see that their allegiance is divided, torn between their devotion to him and their allegiance to themselves.

So in the second half of chapter 6 he stops, looks the Corinthians in the eye, and says essentially, “Jesus wants your lives to be marked by the love and kindness and patience and humility that marked his life. But those aren’t the things that characterize you, are they? Your lives reflect values and desires and motivations and relationships that are very different from the code of conduct in the kingdom of God. How can that be?”

II Corinthians 6.14-15

For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

Then he shifts from a loving confrontation to a loving challenge. Quoting from the Old Testament, he says:

II Corinthians 6.17

Come out from them
and be separate,
says the Lord.

Now, it sounds like he is saying here that the solution is for the Corinthians to retreat back from the world to which God has sent them, and to keep themselves out of reach of the surrounding culture.

But that doesn't fit at all with what he just said to them in chapter 5, where he reminds the Corinthians that we followers of Jesus are Christ's ambassadors. That means we are sent as representatives of Jesus *into* the world, and to live in close enough proximity to the world that they can see Jesus in us, and experience his love through us, and come to know and love and serve him as we have. We can't live out our call to be his ambassadors when we live behind walls.

But nor can we live out our call to be his ambassadors when we adopt the values of the world and lose our distinctiveness. So when he says "come out from them and be separate," Paul means that their hearts should be stripped of the values and priorities of the world and that their minds should be purified from the self-at-the-center way of thinking that governs the world – not that they should stay out of reach of the world.

II Corinthians 7.1

Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Paul is saying to the Corinthians:

"Turn your hearts back to the heart of Jesus, Put your feet back in his path. Allow the Spirit of God to remake your mind and renew your heart and bring your life back in line with the kingdom of which you are part!"

Paul moves from a loving confrontation and a loving challenge to a loving invitation – to let their remorse for their wrongdoing be the thing that leads them not further *from* God but back *to* God. Just as they have in the past.

II Corinthians 7.9-11

Your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you.

Paul is confronting the Corinthians because he loves them, and because God loves them. He is bringing these things to their attention so that they will be moved to "godly sorrow," feeling the conviction of the Spirit that their faith and their lives don't line up, which leads to "repentance," which means turning around and going back the other way, which leads them back into the arms of God ("salvation").

* * *

This morning, rather than approaching this idea of confession and repentance in a *conceptual* way, we are going to approach this in a more *experiential* way, structuring the second half of this message as a time of silent confession.

Throughout this letter to the Corinthians Paul mentions several dozen different kinds of sins. In a few minutes we are going to walk you through some of those, giving us together, in silence, the opportunity to:

admit where these things are present in our lives
 express our remorse for how we have failed God and wronged him
 ask God's forgiveness
 celebrate that we have been pardoned through Jesus' death on the cross in our place
 and invite the work of his Spirit and his transforming touch – asking him to bring this part of our lives into line with the life of the King and the ways of the kingdom

* * *

For some of us, confessing sin is pretty unfamiliar. For others of us, it might be pretty uncomfortable. So before we come to this time of confession, I'd like to quickly share a handful of practical thoughts on this whole idea of confessing sin.

First, confessing sin is normal – at least it is meant to be. According to James, it is intended to be a regular and familiar part of our Christian life (James 5.16). Here's why. Until Jesus returns and makes us whole, there will *always* be a gap between where we are and where God wants us to be. That was true for Paul, and that's true for every one of us.

That's because something is fundamentally broken in us spiritually. It broke when Adam and Eve defied God and, even when we become new creations in Christ, some part of that brokenness persists until Jesus returns and completes his work of redemption.

Until then, we will always have parts of our lives that fall short of the glory of God. Our failure to live a life that perfectly honors and pleases God doesn't mean our relationship with God is a failure.

Second, when we confess our sins, we are not revealing them to God. He already knows everything that is disordered in our souls and in our lives far better than we do. "Confessing" means "agreeing with." When we confess, we are agreeing with what God already knows is true about us and has lovingly been pointing out to us. Check out Revelation 3.17-19.

Third, confessing sin is relational and personal. When I cross a line, I haven't broken a rule on a list so much as I have broken my relationship with God. In Psalm 51 David says to God, "I have sinned against *you*."

So when we confess, we come before God who loves us, whom we love, and with whom we are in relationship, and we say, "Wow. I messed up. I hurt you. I'm sorry."

Fourth, confession isn't like being sent to the principal's office when we mess up. When we confess, we don't approach an angry tyrant who has it out for us; we approach a gracious and forgiving God – a God who loves us and desires the best for us.

Remember how God declared his goodness to Moses when he tucked Moses in the cleft of the rock and passed before him? This is what God says is truest of all about his loving character; this is what's true about the God to whom we confess our sins.

I am the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. (Exodus 34.6-7)

And the last thought: I love how Brother Lawrence practices confession in his book *The Practice of the Presence of God*. I think it is really instructive for us. He essentially laughs and says, "Of course, God! I can do no better apart from you and your gracious intervention in my life." When he responds that way, that doesn't mean he is failing to take his sin as seriously as he should. It means he refuses to take himself more seriously than he should.

When we kick ourselves around the block in confession – "Agh, how could I have done that? I'm never doing that again!" – it suggests we have much too high a view of ourselves, and we really don't know ourselves as we should. God calls us to own our failure but not to think of ourselves so highly that we think we can improve ourselves and do better the next time on our own strength and effort. Transformation is God's gift, not our accomplishment.

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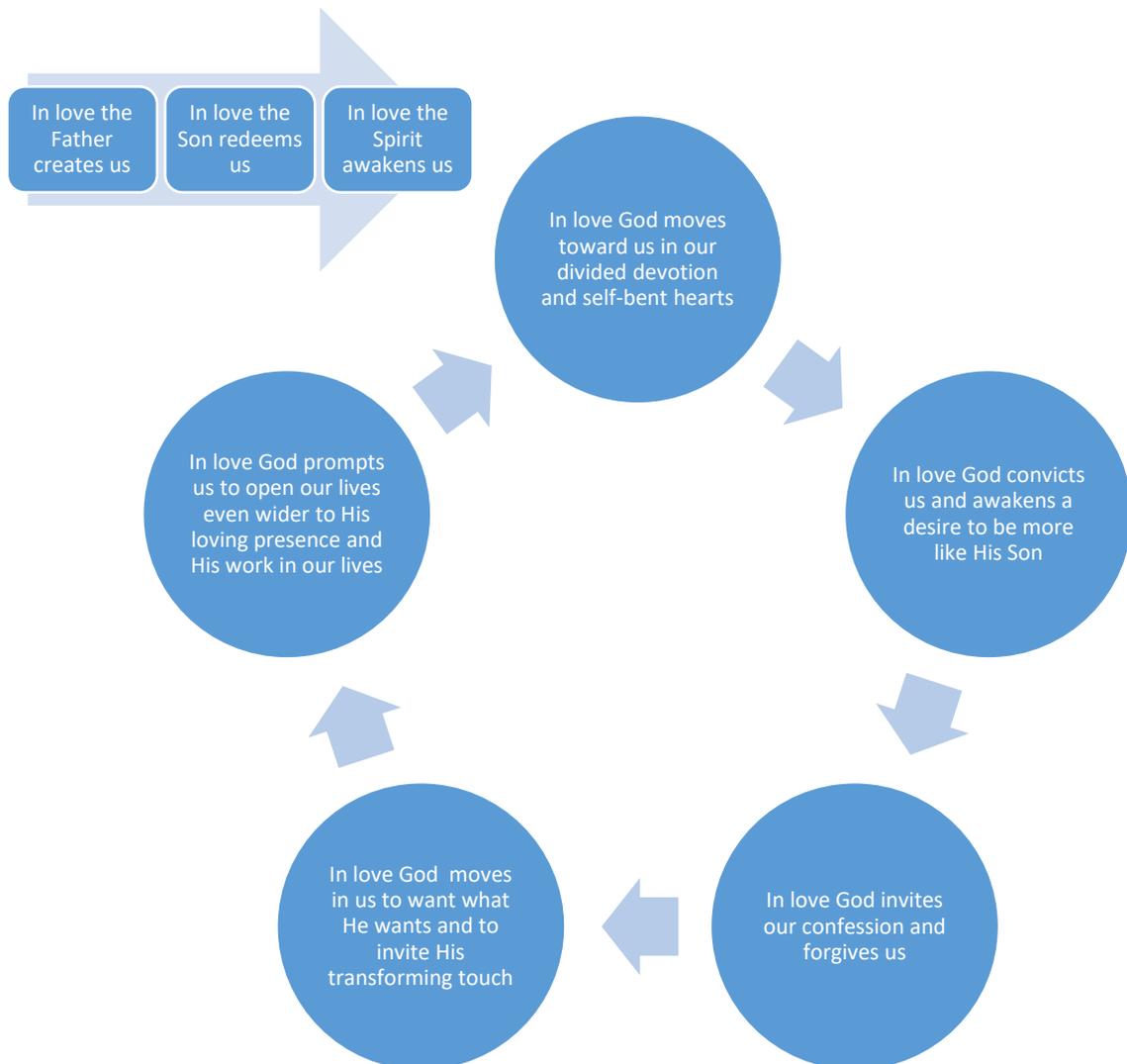
What all that suggests is that we should see confession as part of cycle of gracious invitation that is lovingly initiated by a loving God.

A number of you know Cindy Jacks. She and her husband Doug are longtime members of the Covenant family. Cindy has served as an elder in the past, and she is now working as a spiritual director. I've asked Cindy if she would join me in leading us through our time of confession and our assurance of pardon.

She's going to take a moment now to walk us through this cycle of grace.

Each of you received a confession guide when you came in this morning. On the back of that you'll find what we call the Confession/Invitation Cycle. Would you find that and take a look at that for a moment with me?

The Confession/Invitation Cycle



Here's where it starts:

In love the Father creates us for relationship with himself.

In love the Son redeems us: He came and died in our place in order to forgive our sins and bring us to God.

In love the Spirit awakens us, bringing our souls to life, forming faith in us, and drawing us into a relationship with himself through his son.

And then here's how the cycle unfolds

1. When God sees places in our lives where our devotion to him is compromised, in love God moves toward us in our divided devotion and self-bent hearts, rather than pulling back from us in rejection.
2. In love God convicts us of our sin and awakens a desire in us to be more like His Son, and to live a life that pleases Him.
3. In love God invites us to bring our confession to him, to acknowledge the places where our devotion to him is impure and divided by a concern for ourselves, and he forgives us, removing the sin that stands between us and restoring us to his love
4. In love God moves in us to want what he wants, to desire a life that has him at the center and reflects him in every way, and prompts us to invite his transforming touch
5. In love God prompts us to open our lives even wider to his loving presence and transforming touch, so that we would resemble Jesus even more.

* * *

So we come now to the experiential part of this morning's message, which will include a time of silent confession and an assurance of pardon and then lead us into communion.

We'll begin by using some of Paul's own words from II Corinthians as an invitation to repentance.

Then for our time of confession we'll be using a list that is compiled from the sins that Paul mentions throughout the book of II Corinthians. You'll see those laid out on the handout you're holding.

Let me just say again – Covenant Church and the church in Corinth are two very different churches. We picked this book because of the way it leads us to consider how to live life in a Jesus-shaped way, not because we think the issues that plagued their church characterize this church as well.

But that doesn't make Paul's challenges to the Corinthians irrelevant to us. While it will show up in different ways, sin surfaces in all of us.

We've organized Paul's list of sins into three main categories. We'll walk through each category, and then at the end of each one we'll have a few minutes of silence to reflect on our lives and confess the ways they are out of line with God's best for us.

So let's prepare our hearts with a worship song, and then we'll allow Paul's words to invite us into a season of confession and invitation.

Worship Song

Lord I Need You

Invitation to Repentance

Here is our Invitation to Repentance taken from II Corinthians.

II Corinthians 11.3

I fear that somehow your pure and undivided devotion to Christ will be corrupted.

II Corinthians 6.14-15

For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

II Corinthians 6.17

Come out from them
and be separate,
says the Lord.

Confession and Invitation

Now we move into a time of silent personal confession. Allow God to bring your focus away from the people around you and to rest on him. Spirit of the Living God, lead us.

Lord, we confess the core and overarching sin of rejecting your loving rule over us and elevating ourselves into a place of self-rule

We confess the ways we have

- Diminished your place in our lives, refusing to look to you to satisfy us, and looking everywhere else but to you to satisfy us
(unbelief 6:15, idolatry 6:16)
- We have elevated ourselves over you in proud self-reliance, in arrogant self-importance, and in self-seeking ambition.
(pride 12:7, arrogance 12:20, selfish ambition 12:20)
- And we have want to have the last word, insisting on our own authority and following the wisdom of the world

(following the world's wisdom 10:4, being led by our own rebellious thoughts 10:4, refusing correction 13:7)

Now we'll take a moment of silence to admit before God where these things are true of us.

Ninety seconds of silence

Gracious Lord God,

We admit where these things are present
 We express our remorse for how we have failed you and wronged you
 We ask your forgiveness through Jesus
 We celebrate that we have been pardoned through his death on the cross in our place
 And we invite the work of your Spirit and your transforming touch
 Bring this part of our lives into line with the life of the King
 and the ways of the kingdom. Amen

Now we come to all the sins that spill out from that central sin of taking God's place.

First, Lord, we confess our interior sins, all the dishonoring motivations and desires in our hearts

- The way our disordered loves, our concern for ourselves and being enamored with the things of this world, compromise our pure and undivided love for you
 (our pure and undivided devotion to Jesus has been compromised 11:3)
- The presence of what shouldn't be there in our hearts, the ways we've allowed our hearts to be made dirty by the self-serving values of the world
 (uncleanness 6:17, 12:21, contamination of body and spirit 7:1)
- The absence of what should be there in our hearts, the ways we resist your holy and loving purposes, and close ourselves off from your loving rule
 (wickedness 6:14, darkness 6:14)
- And all the way those places of sin and brokenness seep into our decisions and actions
 (being led astray and being led into sin 11:29)

Again, we'll take a moment of silence to admit before God where these things are true of us.

Ninety seconds of silence

Gracious Lord God,

We admit where these things are present in our lives
 We express our remorse for how we have failed you and wronged you
 We ask your forgiveness through Jesus

We celebrate that we have been pardoned through his death on the cross in our place
 And we invite the work of your Spirit and your transforming touch
 Bring this part of our lives into line with the life of the King
 and the ways of the kingdom. Amen

And now we confess our exterior sins, the ways our broken relationship with you spills over and damages our relationships and how we interact with one another, including . . .

- Mistreating others
 (judging others from a human point of view 5:16, doing wrong 7:12, 11:15, indulging in sexual sin 6:2, taking advantage of others 11:20)
- Elevating ourselves over others
 (making it about us 4:5, commending ourselves 5:12, 10:18, comparing ourselves with others 10:12)
- Resenting the joys and gifts others have been given
 (jealousy 6:20)
- Harboring anger and refusing to forgive
 (fits of rage 6:20)
- Relating to others in a way that tears down and divides
 (slander and gossip 6:20, tearing down 10:8, sowing discord and division 6:20)
- Being dishonest, pretending to be better than we are
 (falsehood and deceit 11:13, lying 11:31)

And once again we take a moment of silence to admit before God where these things are true of us.

Ninety seconds of silence

Please read the prayer of confession and invitation out loud with me.

Gracious Lord God,

We admit where these things are present in our lives
 We express our remorse for how we have failed you and wronged you
 We ask your forgiveness through Jesus
 We celebrate that we have been pardoned through his death on the cross in our place
 And we invite the work of your Spirit and your transforming touch
 Bring this part of our lives into line with the life of the King
 and the ways of the kingdom. Amen

Assurance of Pardon

Hear God's word, as he assures us that we are forgiven through Christ.

I John 1.9 says:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Psalm 32 says:

Oh, what joy for those
 whose disobedience is forgiven,
 whose sin is put out of sight!
 Yes, what joy for those
 whose record the LORD has cleared of guilt,
 whose lives are lived in complete honesty!

When I refused to confess my sin,
 my body wasted away,
 and I groaned all day long.

Finally, I confessed all my sins to you
 and stopped trying to hide my guilt.
 I said to myself, "I will confess my rebellion to the LORD."
 And you forgave me! All my guilt is gone. (32.1-3, 5)

Through Christ and his death on the cross, nothing now stands between us and the God who loves us. We have been reconciled to God. II Corinthians 6.17-18 says:

God has said:
 "I will live with them
 and walk among them,
 and I will be their God,
 and they will be my people."

"I will be a Father to you,
 and you will be my sons and daughters,"
 says the Lord Almighty.

We are forgiven!
 We are reconciled!
 We are grateful!

Worship Song
Gratitude

Invitation to Communion

On the night before he died, Jesus created a celebration of forgiveness and reconciliation for the church to enjoy throughout the ages, and we will share in that celebration together now.

On the last night Jesus spend with his disciples, as they shared the Passover meal together, Jesus took bread and he broke it and he said,

This is my body, which is broken for you. Eat this, remembering me.
He gave his life as an offering and sacrifice, his life given in exchange for ours.

And at the end of that same meal, Jesus took the cup of wine and he said,

This is my blood, which is poured out for the forgiveness of the sins of many.
Drink this, remembering me.
He gave his life to bring us home to God.

If you are a follower of Jesus, if you have entrusted your life to him and given him your allegiance, this meal is for you. As the elements come to you, receive them with joy as we sing together.

And if you are not a follower of Jesus, feel free to just pass the plates along. We want to encourage you to use this time to consider two claims that Jesus made – that through his death our sins are forgiven, and that through his death we are reconciled to God. Reflect on what it could mean for you to be in a relationship with God – the God who created you for that very purpose – and what it could mean to know that your sins were forgiven, your guilt was washed away, your shame was covered over, and you were right with God.

Brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of God, come and celebrate.

Worship Songs

Breathe
How Great Thou Art
Jesus Paid It All

Benediction