

Confession before Repentance

By Sam Williamson

A week before Christmas, I took some time to repent for something. It wasn't anything all that big. I hadn't robbed a bank. I was simply repenting for a lack of control in eating. During the previous six months I had lost ten pounds but over the prior three weeks, I had been snacking at night and had put several of those pounds back on.

As I prayed, I said, "God, I'm sorry about this lack of self-control; I'm going to stop eating snacks at night and I'll stop buying them so I won't be tempted." And I sensed God say, "Stop!" I thought a bit and recognized a couple other areas in which I lack self-control, and I prayed, "God, I am also getting irritated with a certain person and my personal thoughts need more control. I will start being more patient and I will start thinking more intentionally." Again I heard God say, "Stop!"

I thought of several additional areas in which I lacked self-control and how I could amend them, and again I heard God say, "Stop!"

This time I stopped, and this time I also shut up. Finally.

As I listened more, I sensed the Lord ask me to pause in that moment of my weakness. I had been briefly mentioning weaknesses and then quickly moving on with my solutions. And God was asking me to pause as I confessed my weakness and shame.

After reflection, I realized that my "repentance" was actually a self-justification. I was coming before the Lord on the basis of how I planned to fix my bad behavior. In other words, my "comfort" in God's presence resulted from the self-promise to fix these uncomfortable obstructions.

An unresolved shame inside was triggering a self-covering response. I was covering myself by creating plans for self-improvement.

So, over the last month, I have taken time to come before God and confess my deepest shames, and I've practiced pausing—for quite some time—in that moment.

And something rich has begun to occur. I experienced a heart sense of God's deep love for me. This sense of his love is shaping, strengthening, and encouraging me. It is producing a new perspective from which I see and think in a new way.

Sin, Shame, and Prayer

Part of my weekly pattern is meeting with several men who share their lives. When it comes to embarrassing behavior, a common pattern emerges. When a man falls into a sin for which he has shame—and it can be impatience, pride, pornography, theft, self-centeredness, etc.—he frequently becomes reluctant to meet with others, or pray, or attend prayer meetings, or even go to church.

Most of these men experience a deep sense of shame in some particular area (although these “areas” vary substantially person by person). The shame usually comes from a failure in some conduct they previously succeeded in controlling, and they are ashamed. Frequently they respond with dread of being near God, because they’ve blown it. They are embarrassed, and sometime mortified.

Isn’t this interesting? The person we most desperately need is the one we often so desperately avoid.

Do you connect with this? Have you ever done something against your own conscience and then somehow skipped your next prayer time or missed your next small group?

We appease our avoidance of God by saying we understand God’s holiness and our sin, and that we are too sinful to be in his presence. And of course we are. But we were before that behavior lapse as well. The only real difference in ourselves before the lapse and afterward is our own understanding of our sinfulness.

And we quickly try to forget our sinfulness—as I did—by listing all the good things we will then do to avoid that embarrassing behavior.

We all desperately want glory and significance. But ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, we sense a shame. I am talking about more than guilt. Guilt is a sense of having acted wrongly. Shame is a deep sense that something is radically wrong with us.

Before the first sin, Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed. And after the fall they were still naked but not longer unashamed ... and they began sewing. Because of our shame, like Adam and Eve, we cover. We hide our shame, and we hide ourselves from God.

Putting on fig leaves.

Our need to feel good about ourselves has such power that we have become quite clever in the ways we hide our shame. And we do it in two ways: we hid with *non-religious* fig leaves, and we even hid with *religious* fig leaves.

In *non-religious* ways, we look to success or family or romance. If we succeed at work, when we get promotions or if we get raises, we feel good about ourselves. Or if our family life is working and our lawns are mowed, we are succeeding. We must be something. Maybe I’m not that bad. Or if I can get *that* man or woman to like me, I must be okay.

We also cover with *religious* coverings. First, we stop doing bad things. And we should. But we often do it with a sense that such cessation gives us greater access to God. But it just isn’t so. Jesus told a parable of a Pharisee coming before God in such “moral purity.” Jesus said,

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”
(Luke 18:11)

He felt good about coming before God. After all, he no longer did all those “bad” things. He was pretty good.

These were fig leaves.

Secondly, we also come before God remembering all the good things we do. Not only do we stop doing bad things, we begin to cover with good things. John Gerstner was a Christian thinker in the late 20th century, and a family friend. He wrote this:

The way to God is wide open. There is nothing standing between the sinner and our God. There is nothing to hinder. Nothing can hold us back, except our “good works.” Nothing can keep us from Christ but the delusion that we do not need Him alone—that we have any good works of our own that can satisfy God. *All we need is need.* But, alas, we cannot part with our “virtues,” even though all our virtues are imaginary; but they are real to us. So it is grace that becomes unreal. The real grace of God we spurn in order to hold on to the illusory virtues of our own.

These are fig leaves.

The last religious covering is our repentance. Someone once said that as Christians we grow in our spiritual life this way: first we repent for the bad things we’ve done; then we begin to repent for our good deeds (that we’ve done for wrong reasons); and finally we repent for the way we repent.

God has been teaching me this very lesson, how to repent for how I repent. Because mine has been so self-justifying.

Psalm 51 shows a godly way to repent that rebels against our very nature. The first verse goes like this:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

Notice the psalmist does not say, “Have mercy on me according to how bad I feel,” nor does he say, “According to my plans to change, blot out my transgressions.”

Because these are fig leaves. They are a form of self-covering.

Instead, he comes to God “according to your steadfast love” and “according to your abundant mercy.” These are the grounds for his coming to God and these are the grounds for his asking for forgiveness.

And doesn’t this make sense? I do feel bad for wrong things I’ve done; at least a little bad. And I do want to change my behavior; at least I sort of want to change. My feeling bad and my longing to be good are—on a scale of one to ten of a genuine heartfelt sorrow and longing—perhaps a five or six. On good days maybe I push it to a seven.

But do I really want my access to God and forgiveness given according to that measure? Isn’t it much better to have access and forgiveness in proportion to his infinite love and mercy?

So isn't there much more hope in coming to God in all our weakness and shame, and asking for his forgiveness and access totally based on him? I, for one, would have much more confidence and peace.

When God loves us because of the bad stuff we are avoiding and the good stuff we are doing, we experience some small measure of hope. I guess. But my good actions are from such mixed heart motives and I fail so often; I am resting on very thin ice, and cracks are forming all around me.

In the movie *Fisher King*, Robin Williams plays a homeless man who falls in love with a woman. He follows her for a year and learns all about her. The woman has her own set of problems, she is clumsy, she has few friends, she says silly things (always at the wrong time), and she is terribly shy. One day a friend of Robin Williams dresses him up and arranges for him to date the woman. After the date the woman thanks Robin for the date but says she doesn't want to see him again because someday he'd come to truly know her, and then he'd leave her. She doesn't want that heart-ache.

Robin Williams says he has a confession to make. He's been following her, and he knows she is friendless and clumsy, he knows she reads romance novels of which she is ashamed, and he knows she is socially awkward, and she frequently makes embarrassing comments.

He says, "I know all these things, and I love you."

And she responds, "Are you for real?"

We are all looking for this. We want intimacy, but we hide our faults for fear of rejection. We most desperately need intimacy with Christ. But we wear the fig leaves of good deeds and self-justified repentance, thinking that is what brings intimacy.

What we need most of all, in this entire world, more than jobs or marriage or children or friends or success, what we need most of all is to know the love of Christ.

And he says to us, "I know you to the bottom and I love you to the top."

I suggest we take some time—at least a week, maybe a month—to come before God and pause in the moment of our deepest faults and shame. As we come before God with nothing—with nothing except our need—we will hear him tell us he knows all this about us, and he loves us.

And in the wonder and beauty of that moment we will ask, "Are you for real?" And we'll hear his loving voice say, "I am."

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