

# Repentance after Confession: Filling the Emptiness

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I once felt betrayed by a friend; it was not a simple sense of betrayal but a deep visceral sense of treachery. I felt hurt and angry and I thought ill of my friend; I wanted justice. Of course I've read not to let a "root of bitterness grow" in my heart (Hebrews 12:15), but I continued to experience bad thoughts about my friend. I would repent for those bad thoughts; I'd resolve to stop thinking them; and I'd confess such thoughts to God and close friends. And yet they kept popping up, no matter how hard I tried to stop.

And I am not alone. I have friends who also have patterns of behavior they wish to change. They too confess and resolve to stop, but more often than not, the conduct rears its ugly head again (and again). No matter how hard the effort.

When most of us think of repentance, we think of a change in behavior, turning from bad things and resolving to live a good life. We tend to focus on external actions; we'll stop doing *this* and start doing *that*. Unfortunately, most of us find that our resolutions to repent, like short-lived fireworks, fade away after that brief flash of inspiration. In a few weeks or months—perhaps only a few days—our resolve has crumbled and our previous behavior is back. Sometimes with renewed vigor.

Our resolve to change seems powerless; we need an interior motivation. We need a change of heart and mind. In fact the Greek word for repentance (*metanoia*) can be translated as a "change of mind or heart." It means more than changed behavior; it means a change in motivations of the heart.

As I struggled with my friend's betrayal, God led me to Philippians 2:3, where Paul asks us to, "do nothing from rivalry or conceit." Paul pursues *why* we act. He is not only addressing *what* we do but *why* we do it. He is asking, "What *fuels* our behavior?"

We think of conceit as a pride or cockiness. But the English translation for Paul's exhortation to "do nothing from conceit" falls short of the mark. The old King James translation was better when it said do nothing from "vain glory." The Greek word (*kenodoxia*) actually means "empty glory." Paul teaches that many of the actions we dislike in others (and ourselves!) arise from an emptiness of glory. He says, "do nothing fueled by that emptiness."

Acting from our empty glory is the root of many of our harmful actions. When repentance merely consists of commitment to modify behavior, it misses our core motives. It's like taking cough syrup for lung cancer; it may momentarily quiet the symptoms, but it doesn't address the disease.

Our issues seem insurmountable because they involve our nature. In the first chapter of the Bible, God says we are made in his image, designed for glory and significance. In the fall through Adam and Eve's disobedience, we lost that glory, but we never lost our *need* for glory and significance. Glory is core to our very essence. We'll never get healing of our very person until we see how desperately we need it and how frantically we grasp for it.

When we feel empty of glory, something inside of us seeks to fill that emptiness. When I remembered my friend's betrayal, another thought inevitably accompanied that sense; I said to myself, "I would never do that." In saying, "I would never do that," I was trying to fill my empty glory. I was saying, "I'm not that bad; in fact I'm pretty good."

Whenever we try to self-satisfy our hunger for glory, we end up acting contrary to the new nature Christ has given us. And not only do we act wrongly, we also leave a wake of destruction caused by the sucking vacuum of our emptiness.

Take a moment and think of how others we know have created this vortex of destruction:

- A man you know falls back into pornography because of an inner dissatisfaction, and he is discovered, and trust is broken.
- Bosses you know who aren't satisfied with their recent promotion; in addition they take credit for others' ideas, they constantly promote themselves and they need to win at every office game. Their "management life" is about *them* and how great they are, not about their employees and how to care for colleagues.
- Ministry workers unceasingly express self-affirmation: "Didn't I give a great talk, and wasn't that a profound idea? And look how well I lead small groups!" People flee from them like the plague.

Now take a moment and reflect on how we each fill our own emptiness:

- Do we always have to be in control or in charge?
- Are we constantly seeking affirmation?
- Are we constantly expressing, "Woe is me, I am so hurt, poor me."
- Do others consider us arrogant?
- How do we handle criticism, just or unjust?
- Do we frequently think of our own hard work or our relative goodness or smarts or success?

Can we see our own vain attempts to self-fill our inner emptiness, and can we see such attempts never satisfy? We keep trying to fill that void, but we are still devoid of glory. As in quicksand, the more we struggle within ourselves to fill this emptiness, the deeper we sink. We need something outside ourselves to fill us with glory.

This attempt to self-fill our own emptiness is just not possible. It's like trying to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps; motivational speakers love to teach it, but it's physically impossible. The more we try to pull our boots up, the more we pull ourselves—and others around us—down. We need outside help.

As I was praying, confessing my anger toward my friend, I felt God gently nudge me toward some self-reflection. Are there ways I betray Christ? The self-reflection convicted me in these ways: I take credit for my success in the computer industry; I take credit for working hard; I take credit for ideas God has given me. All of these self congratulations form a type of spiritual plagiarism. I'm stealing credit from God. If I had been born 100 years ago in Tibet to other parents, what are the chances of my computer success, or my hard office work, or my "profound" ideas? Everything I have is from God's grace. And I take credit ... simply to fill that void of empty glory.

And yet, despite my own betrayal of God by my plagiaristic ingratitude, he continues to love me. He loves me so much he sent his Son to die in order to give me a new heart and a new life. In the moment of my deepest betrayal, God was there deeply loving me.

This is the change of heart I need; his love in the midst of my failure.

True repentance transcends mere commitment to behavior change. It is a change of heart and mind. It is a movement from trying to fill myself toward a heart that is filled by the glory and love of Christ. It means going to God in our emptiness and allowing him to fill that void with his love and care. We stop acting out of our old hearts and begin operating from our new hearts.

Do you feel condemned by a sense that you have been trying to fill yourself up? Stop it! That is just one more attempt at self-filling ("Oh, I feel so bad, aren't I great for feeling so bad!"). Instead, bring those convictions of self filling (not condemnations) to Christ and pause in that confession. And sense his love, forgiving you and filling you with his love.

This is the deep repentance—the change of heart and mind—that we need for a rich life. It is seeing that the significance and importance we need in our hearts can only be satisfied by seeing what Christ paid *for us* in order to have us. It is hearing God say we are his beloved.

So, in the moment of confessing my betrayal of Christ; in the moment of emptying my self-glory—in that moment, Christ fills me with a sense of his incredible love. I see him loving me even in the midst of my betrayal, and now I care far less that someone betrayed me. All of a sudden, I no longer look for "justice." All of a sudden I begin to be filled with a sense of love for my friend. I begin to feel his emptiness and what he has to do to fill it, and I begin to care for him and feel the pain he must be feeling.

In that moment, I am filled.

The Philippians verse I quoted above (“do nothing from rivalry or conceit”) is followed by an ancient song called *The Kenosis* or *The Emptying*. It goes like this:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing  
to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the  
likeness of men.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to  
the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is  
above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and  
under the earth,

and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

(Phil 2:5-11 English Standard Version)

Most sermons on this song conclude with, “So live like Jesus did, be humble, and care for others.” But the passage does not begin with, “Have this *example* among yourselves.” Instead, it begins, “Have this *mind* among yourselves.” It is saying, “Change your heart and mind; *truly* repent.”

Even though Christ is one with God, he does not “grasp” onto that glory; he isn’t self-filling. Instead, he empties himself. What is he doing? He is *emptying himself* of his glory so that he can *fill us* with his glory. Christ emptied himself of glory so he could pour his glory into us. When we see him doing that for us, we are filled.

Deep repentance is not mere behavior change; deep repentance is the mind and heart which sees and senses—deeply knows—his love in our hearts in such a way that we are filled with his glory. Deep repentance is not merely clipping the dandelion flower of external actions; it is removing the tap root of self-filling behavior and coming to sense the deep filling love of the one who sees us as we are—and loves us.

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