

MESSING UP

Why do Christians continue to mess up? Why do we continue to commit the same sins after having repented of them? Why can't we get it right? Following his list of the works of the flesh, Paul wrote in Galatians 5:21, "I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." Stern warning. If we do mess up and "practice such things" will we "not inherit the kingdom of God?" From this verse it seems so. Someone told me recently that if a Christian was genuine in repenting of a sin he/she would not continue to commit that sin. What do you think? Agree? Disagree?

I wish repentance was the end of sin, but that is just not my experience in the Christian life and the Scriptures have more to say on the subject of Christians sinning. Michael Yaconelli confesses in *Messy Spirituality*: "I guess I'm not a very good Christian." (This book is worth the reading. It is excellent! Macon Christian Bookstore keeps it in stock.) My spiritual life, too, tends to be more messy than tidy. I have downs along with ups, defeats mixed with victories, sin following confession and repentance.

Scripture and experience leads us to honestly acknowledge that all of us live in the conflict described in Galatians 5:17, "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please." Paul confessed his struggle with sin in Romans 7:15-24. This is the passage where Paul says that he knows what he should do but doesn't do it, and knows what he should not do but does it. In these verses he twice uses the same word "practice" that he used in Galatians 5:21. Paul, in fact, "practiced" the sins he knew he shouldn't (Romans 7:19). Paul is not alone. Abraham, Samson, David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Peter come to mind. Why is this? Why can't we just repent of sin and be done with it? Why do we continue messing it up?

Fyodor Dostoyevsky is one of the most insightful Christian thinkers and writers of our time (d.1881). He writes of the "Madonna" and the "Sodom" that exist within the heart of everyone. "Madonna" represents the good, and "Sodom" represents the evil. Dostoyevsky masterfully develops the characters in his novels to show that the two conflicting forces are so consistently and so immediately intertwined within the soul that distortion and deception are inevitable. Dostoyevsky shows that motives and deeds are seldom pure; more often they are a fusion of good and evil. We are a commixture of good and evil, righteousness and wickedness, turkey and eagle (if you are a Peter Lord fan), the Spirit and the flesh.

Another, more contemporary Russian author, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, wrote of discovering this truth while a political prisoner in the Soviet gulag, "Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, not between political parties either-but right through every human heart."

The line between good and evil runs through the middle of every heart including yours and mine. That line is often blurred or completely undetected. My motives and deeds are never as pure as I would like to think. The human heart is a deep well of conflicting emotions and motives containing both righteousness and wickedness at the same time; Madonna and Sodom at the same time.

How then are we to live the Christian life? Let me share with you my experience since this journey of discovery of the marvel of God's grace. Changes are taking place in my life. It is not always obvious to others. Sometimes it's not obvious to me. But it is there. What is changing are the inner hints of my heart. I use the word "hint" because the changes are

not always a blaringly obvious or even a dominant force. Mostly, they are an inner sense that things are changing within my heart. Sin is becoming less attractive, less enticing, and fellowship with God and a yearning to live in the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control) is becoming more desirable. I hate that that sounds so saccharine, but that's what is happening. I don't want to sound like I now have it altogether; I don't. I still "hint" back to sin. I continue to mess up. One reason for the change is that my focus has changed. I no longer focus on the rules and obsess over my sins when I don't keep them. My focus is no longer on the negative laws: the "thou shalt nots." Rather my focus is on the positive Gospel: God's love and forgiveness for me when I break the law. My focus is no longer on my failures, but on the cross and God's reconciliation. Conviction of sin now gives way quickly to conviction of God's forgiveness and righteousness (John 16:8-9). The focus is not on the restraints of the law but the freedom of the gospel. By no longer obsessing on the rules and my mess-ups, but rather becoming keenly aware of God's loves and grace for me when I mess up, I think that I now tend not to mess it up as bad or as often. At the same time, I am becoming more keenly aware than ever of how messed up I continue to be. The result of this is twofold. First, I renew my fellowship with God on a daily basis. My salvation, redemption, regeneration are not a spiritual experience that took place years ago. These are an ongoing, dynamic, ever-present, contemporary experience. It is happening to me daily. My salvation has become existential not theoretical. Second, there is a constant focus on the cross as a daily reminder of my complete dependence on God and his mercy for messed up people such as me.

Confession, repentance, and trusting in God's mercies and grace are not just part of my spiritual history. They are daily experiences of spiritual refreshing. When the Holy Spirit convicts me of sin, I am learning not to argue, justify, rationalize, etc., but just confess it and repent of it. When I do, there is an awareness of God's love, forgiveness, mercy, and grace. It is sweet. Michael Yaconelli wrote in *Messy Spirituality*: "There is not room for pretending in the spiritual life. Unfortunately, in many religious circles, there exists an unwritten rule. Pretend. Act like God is in control when you don't believe he is. Give the impression everything is okay in your life when it's not. Pretend that you believe when you doubt; hide your imperfections; maintain the image of a perfect marriage and healthy and well-adjusted children when your family is like any other normal dysfunctional family. And whatever you do, don't admit that you sin."

Perhaps you could consider not pretending that you are more than you are: more spiritual, more righteous, more holy, more unmessy. Perhaps you could consider acknowledging that you, too, mess up because you are messed up. If you find the courage to confess it, quickly go to the cross: remember God's goodness, His love, and forgiveness for you. Trust me: there is great joy and freedom waiting to be discovered when you do.

Grace to You,
Steve Johnson

Contributions can be made to:
Reformation Ministries
103 Oberon Place
Macon, Georgia 31210
Reformation Ministries, Inc, is a non-profit, 501 (c) (3) corporation

All contributions are tax exempt