

Part four: Early steps toward becoming a Christian — sin and repentance (Chapters 4 & 5)

Talking about sin and repentance is difficult. We've all heard so much about it that there's not a lot new to say to ears who have been in the Christian world for a while. But in addressing this topic we'll back up a little and look at a larger frame of reference for our relationship with God.

Let's get the REALLY big picture

Overall, these two chapters are about the beginning steps of becoming a Christian. Let's do a little experiment. Which of the following words has the greatest emotional meaning to you in your daily life?

family

marriage

holiness

worship

truth

friends

intelligence

It won't surprise me if the words about relationship are spoken of most often. God, too, is all about relationships. Let's spell it out.

- God wants to build a family that includes us...in eternity.
- God uses terms for us like “child of God” and “bride of Christ”, and uses both of the terms father and mother to describe his relationship to us. Jesus calls us brothers and sisters. (Hebrews 2:11-12 Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are **of the same family**. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. “I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.”)
- Who ever gets over their need for a parent?
- How much do people value long term relationships? Friendships? Children? Siblings?

So, relationships are important to us. What else is it we want in life?

- The Four Freedoms were goals articulated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 in his State of the Union address, 10 months before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. In it he proposed four fundamental freedoms that people "everywhere in the world" ought to enjoy:
 - Freedom of speech—to have our values spoken before others; to be ourselves out loud
 - Freedom of worship—to be able to have a relationship with God *in community, publicly*
 - Freedom from want—contentment and satisfaction in life
 - Freedom from fear—to feel secure
- His speech didn't have a particularly big impact on Americans until Norman Rockwell painted his famous Four Freedoms pictures for the covers of *The Saturday Evening Post*. They were used to raise money to fight the coming war.
- It turns out that the things we want in life and also what God wants for us.
- Ok, so the pig picture so far is that wants a family, and God loves us and wants us to be that family, to our good fortune.

But what about sin?

We've got a problem...

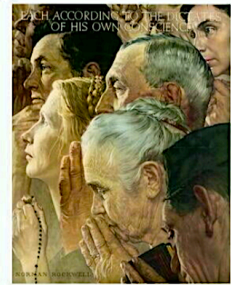
Let's go back to the Garden: What went wrong?

- The serpent convinced Eve that God's motives were not good—that God was not to be trusted. He encouraged Eve to take matters into her own hands and try to equalize her standing with God (like when a child proclaims themselves under their own rule), instead of trusting God as our ultimate parent. Adam joined her, but when the time came reminded God that it was really Eve's fault.
- So we distrusted God. What were the results? We lost the connection with God that gave us spiritual life. We didn't lose it completely, but we were mortally wounded spiritually.
 - God wants us to remember what he wishes Adam and Eve had instinctively known, but didn't: that we don't have to hide our true selves from him, because he's not after perfection but intimacy. He's not waiting for some perfected version of us; he's not disgusted by those parts of us that we'd rather keep clothed. Instead, he simply longs for us to allow him to see us transparently so that he can show us that he loves us completely—and can help us.

OURS...to fight for



Freedom of Speech



Freedom of Worship



Freedom from Want



Freedom from Fear

- What happened to life on earth after Adam and Eve’s sin? Our nature, and the life around us, became corrupted, and the results of that corruption are with us today.
- That left God in a pickle. (And I’m not saying this wasn’t foreseen.) What was God going to do about the hoped for new family? It was corrupted. Whatever plans God had for all of us in heaven were in trouble. We could certainly not go there as we are now...or heaven would become like earth. What a disaster.
- We needed to be restored to the ability to live spiritually as we had been before the fall (and perhaps more even), and, we needed to learn our lesson about distrust and competing with God.
- There are different theories about much of this, despite there being plenty of Bible verses about God’s plan for this. I believe that Christ’s death had to do, in part at least, with there being a need for wrongdoing to have a consequence somehow, because...

Without consequences there is no learning.

- The story of the whipping boy: Back in the day when royalty was common a problem arose about how to discipline a prince during his education. Corporal punishment was the norm, but no one was allowed to strike a prince. A solution was developed that designated a “whipping boy.” This was a boy who was chosen to live with and be educated alongside the prince with the idea that the two of them would become very close friends. When the prince got into trouble he would watch his good friend, whom he hopefully loved like a brother, be punished in his place. The consequence for the prince was the pain of seeing his friend’s receive blows that were the result of his behavior. Hopefully he learned from this, but there was no guarantee that this would happen.
- In a sense, this is what Jesus did for us. There has to be a consequence beyond the natural effect of our corrupted nature.
- Speaking of that nature, spiritually without Christ we were like our planet if the sun no longer gave us adequate heat and light. God did not completely withdraw from us, but we no longer had the spiritual life we once had and would need to live with God in heaven without it becoming like earth is now. We were all corrupted, regardless of our desire to be different.

“Fixing” the sin problem

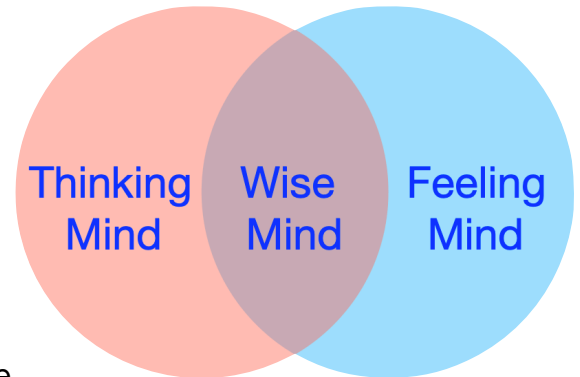
- Wesley spoke boldly about sin, stating on some occasions that his main purpose was to help people escape hell and make it to heaven. He was clear with his audiences about this.
- He then went on to instruct people what they needed to do...and it began with repentance —an internal process that showed outward evidence and action.

When we try to understand spiritual matters, it is easy to try and do that strictly with our intellectual processes. However, that can get us into trouble.

- In one school of psychology, we use a wise-mind model

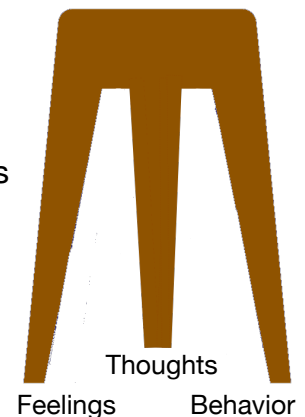
- Wisdom is when thoughts and feelings align
- Some people are more driven by emotion and some by thoughts
- We have our thoughts in our heads, but our feelings in our body
- When we have trauma, we tend to abandon our body, where we have all of the awful feelings, and move into our heads. We then attempt to live our lives from there. Our life becomes more cognitive, and feelings (and close relationships) become more remote.
- Some of us, due to the nature of our personalities, are more feelings oriented, and those feelings control our lives without the stability that solid thinking brings.
- Thus, when our balance is out of whack, therapy attempts to bring them into balance. Thus cognitive therapy when depressed or anxious, and psychodynamic therapy when frozen in thoughts.
- I think the best theology comes from the wise mind's understanding of scripture. But there's more.

Wise Mind Model



- There is another model that takes things further—the three legged stool model.

- This adds behavior into the mix.
- Any change in one of the three legs affects the other two. Thoughts, feelings, and behavior all affect each other. Thus, behavior therapy is added to the arsenal of basic therapeutic techniques.
- AA has an interesting slogan: Act your way into feeling. Cognitive therapy says change your thoughts to change your feelings.
- So—thoughts, feelings, and behavior are intertwined to form a whole person.
- Wesley's approach to living a spiritual life was that we mustn't just think "right doctrine", or just have an emotional experience, or go through the outward behaviors of being a religious person—and think we have become a new (whole) person in Christ. Repentance involves all three, while in the PROCESS of becoming a Christian.
- So, once we understand that there is a problem, what is the next step for us?
 - It's repentance...sorrow for our sin and condition, and a wish to make things right. But how do we get there?



- All of this is enabled by prevenient grace, activated by our willingness to respond, which God makes possible.
- It is the job of the Holy Spirit to “convict” us of our sin. And we, by God’s grace, have to be willing to hear it. That was happening a lot during Wesley’s time. There was an outpouring of the Spirit.
- On our own we can’t do anything by ourselves about our nature and the resulting wrongdoings. We must rely on the Spirit.
- So, Wesley, and our author, describe repentance as having elements of belief, feeling, and behavior—that lead to becoming a Christian. We’ll talk about the “becoming a Christian” part in our next session.

How do we talk about this to others?

- We’ve been commanded to make disciples, and Jesus offered an invitation to each of his disciples to follow him. How do we approach that at a time when most people have heard the “message” already—often in a harsh way?
- I believe that as Christians most of us are stuck when it comes to talking about our faith.
- We fear sounding like a very old, broken record. The questions for us is how to sound authentic and personal...and not hackneyed.
- What would your language be? I’ve thought about this a lot in recent months. You will have your own ideas.
 - For me a good transitional sentence is: “I’ve always thought there is much more to life than we can see, and for me God is part of that.”

Homework

1. Chapter 6
2. Give some thought about how you would invite someone to become a disciple of Christ, and report back at our next meeting.
3. Continue to pray for our time together and that you get your needs met here so far as that is possible.