



From Coping to Cure

By Henry Brandt, Ph.D.

LESSON 7:

LOOK! DO YOU WANT TO DRIVE THIS CAR, OR DO YOU WANT ME TO DO IT?

THOUGHT STARTER:

Why do you do and say things that you later regret?

So be careful. If you are thinking, "Oh, I would never behave like that"—let this be a warning to you. For you too may fall into sin.

1 Corinthians 10:12, LB

Throughout life, I have tended to resist facing up to my sinful behavior when I was in the middle of doing it. Often, to have my sinful behavior pointed out to me was more distressing than the behavior itself. This graphically happened to me once in a manner that I will never forget.

I was speaking fervently one night on confession and repentance. After the meeting, my wife and I drove a while to our next engagement.

We stopped to spend the night in a first-class hotel. We slept on the finest mattress money could buy. In the morning we had baths and used the deodorants that the ads say you should use to promote good will. We had a good breakfast. We started out in our new, air-conditioned car, complete with stereo radio.

Humanly speaking, we had to have a good day, didn't we? According to the sociologists, I've had a good secure environment, we were well educated, challenged, enjoyed good housing, good food, we were clean, and we had money. We had it made, didn't we?

It was a beautiful day and all was friendly until we came to a crossroad leading on to the freeway. I turned toward Detroit, our destination, when my wife said, "Henry, you are going the wrong way."

That remark burned me up. My sarcastic reply was, "Don't you think I know where Detroit is? Look! Do you want to drive this car, or do you want me to drive this car!?"

And away we went in air-conditioned comfort. We still smelled good. We had a good breakfast under our belts, we had nice clothes, the scenery was beautiful, the car was driving smoothly, and *I was furious*. Telling me that I was headed in the wrong direction! I'd lived in this area for years and surely knew my directions! After all, when you feel deeply and certain about something, you ought to stick up for your convictions, shouldn't you? She said nothing. She was to handle the road map and keep us from getting lost.

After a while we came to the first exit. A huge sign with an arrow pointed in the direction we were going. Above the arrow was the word *Chicago*. And that was the opposite direction from Detroit.

Now, I have a Ph.D. degree. My training is in the area of evaluating data unemotionally and accurately to produce advice based on the data. This is how I make my living; I get paid for my judgments.

I chose to ignore the sign.

Away we went, in air-conditioned comfort. We came to the next exit, which was some distance from the last one. The sign had a big arrow pointing in our direction, and above the arrow: *Chicago*.

Did you ever get that cold, clammy feeling after you have set someone straight that it's possible you might be wrong? I felt myself becoming more angry *at my wife* and decided to try one more exit and away we went.

Can you believe that? You smile, but do you realize that you are smiling at a very sad story? What does this illustrate? The weaknesses and limitations of education. Is it not true that in a fit of anger and stubbornness, all you know can get short-circuited and you can act like a stupid fool?

A brittle, electric silence was in the air. Both of us looked straight ahead and were silent.

The next exit was the same. There was that arrow pointing to Chicago. Would you believe that I decided to try one more exit in order to give me time to figure out how to get to Detroit without turning around?

Have you ever acted like that? You know you are wrong, but, so help you, you are not going to admit it. You do everything you can to avoid admitting you are wrong. That is the way it was with me. You couldn't have dragged me off that freeway with a tow truck!

I shared this story of my driving past exits with a close friend for his comments before submitting the manuscript for publication. He told me that I needed to reduce the number of exits that I drove past.

He said that one or two would be okay, but passing three exits would stretch my credibility and was out of the question. He pointed out that, in his opinion, it also insulted the intelligence of the reader.

I gave his suggestion serious thought and decided that his constructive comments were logical and correct. But, over the next few days, I kept thinking, "But it is a true story!" Then it hit me: My behavior only reinforces the lesson! We as Christians tend to underestimate sin's power over our behavior. I kept the original story.

Human emotions can totally disengage our brain, preventing rational behavior and acceptance of the fact that we sin. I have seen this in my own life and in those of my clients.

An intelligent man nearly destroyed his marriage and family by repeatedly overworking. He was a wealthy, successful lawyer who didn't need to work at all if he didn't wish.

Another client came panting into my office and wearily lowered himself into a chair. He was at least one hundred pounds overweight. He called himself a compulsive eater. He was a physician.

A beautiful, frightened lady was clasping and unclasping her hands as she told me how worried she was about AIDS. She was sexually active.

An affluent couple anxiously asked me for help with a teenage daughter who was on drugs and sexually active. Against their better judgment, they had showered her with money, cars, and clothes for years.

A skeleton of a young lady looked hopelessly forlorn sitting straight in her chair; she was bulimic and starving herself. She was on the honor roll in school.

I find that I must constantly remind myself, again and again, never to underestimate the power of sin to short-circuit my intelligence.

How do you get turned around when you are headed in the wrong direction? The Bible says:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

(1 John 1:9, NKJV)

I have learned from the Bible that confession is a five-step process:

1. I am sorry.
2. I am wrong.
3. Forgive me.
4. Cleanse me.
5. Empower me.

WHY IS IT DIFFICULT TO SAY "I AM WRONG; I HAVE SINNED"?

**For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.
(John 3:20, NKJV)**

How do you get turned around when you are headed in the wrong direction? I am three-and-a-half exits down the road. There are no questions at this point: We are headed in the wrong direction; I blew up at my wife for trying to help; and I even tried to tell her that she was wrong. What to do?

How often do you hear someone say: "I am wrong. I have sinned?"

Instead, I hear people declare that they are unhappy, tense, anxious, worried, disappointed, misunderstood, distrusted, unloved, or under extreme pressure. Frequently I listen to highly intelligent, competent, educated, successful people say the strangest things, such as:

- "I blew up," or "I exploded." People say this very sincerely. Of course this never happens. Picture a person who blew up: teeth, bones, eyeballs, arms, legs, body parts flying in all directions.
- "I broke down." Can you see this quivering, helpless body collapsed in a heap?
- "I lost my head." Can you picture such an unlikely sight of a headless person groping around?
- "She gets under my skin." One can accept the presence of a microscopic creature having entered the body but hardly a full-grown woman.
- "My blood was boiling." This person is no doubt experiencing some bodily changes but hardly the condition described here.
- "I was beside myself." This statement simply defies logic.
- "He turns me on."
- "He turns me off."
- "He burns me up."
- "He turns me cold."
- "I am fed up."

My purpose in recording these statements is not to belittle anyone or to treat their

reports lightly. These are socially acceptable terms to describe bodily changes that we are aware of as we interact with people and respond to the events of the day.

We freely describe ourselves and our problems as being caused by other people. But it is very difficult to say the simple words, "I am wrong. I have sinned."

If I say, "I am wrong; I have sinned," I can then cure the problems. The problems cannot be solved any other way.

The big little word is *if*. That word represents a major hurdle because I have a tendency to say these things like: "I may have been off course, but I have some good points about me. Haven't I been faithful in teaching biblical principles worldwide? Haven't I worked hard at being a good husband and father? Don't I get some points for providing a good home?" None of my past history helped at this point.

I was three-and-a-half exits down the pike and going in the wrong direction. That fact couldn't be sidestepped. When I share this story of driving down the freeway with audiences, I say, "Now sin is doing wrong according to God's standard. What were my sins? Can you help me out?"

Without exception, the ladies in the audience always respond immediately and with the same words: pride, stubbornness, rebellion, impoliteness, anger, and bullheadedness.

I reply, "What are you doing diagnosing me? You are not trained, are you? The point is that it is not very hard to figure out what my sins were. You can tick them off, boom, boom, boom, and you are quickly and accurately diagnosing my problem."

Clearly I am wrong on two points: the list of words that accurately describes the condition "under my skin" and the fact that I am going the wrong direction on the freeway.

Now it is important to understand that I can acknowledge being wrong on all points without agreeing that I have sinned against God. It is important to comprehend that being wrong and being sinful are not interchangeable words. We must be clear on what we mean by being wrong.

I always ask my audiences after they volunteer the words above:

"Are you telling me what you think I want to hear, or do you really believe these words are sins?"

How can an audience diagnose my sins so quickly? Look, all of us are familiar with such behavior. I have noticed the same process in the consulting room. A counselee seldom has any problem describing someone else's weakness or unacceptable behavior. Their memory also serves them well in recalling past instances when someone mistreated them.

To face personal wrongdoing is a different matter. I seldom hear anyone eagerly volunteering information about their own wrongdoings.

But, if it is sin, then there is no human remedy. The cure to the problem involves a miracle and what must happen goes against our human nature.

Step 1: I must confess "I am wrong; I have sinned."

The Bible tells us how to get turned around:

**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
(1 John 1:9, NKJV)**

I need to realize that I am wrong because I have sinned against God's standard. I may have taken a wrong turn, which was not sin, but my words and emotional response to my wife's statement were wrong and sin.

As I was driving down the freeway, I realized I was proud (too proud to admit I was wrong), stubborn, rebellious, impolite, and angry.

That's hard to admit. To call this response sin is even harder. I tend to turn away from this description of myself. It is embarrassing. We always seem to ask, "Isn't there a more palatable explanation?"

The Bible records a midnight conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, the dean of the theological school. Jesus was explaining why people struggle with guilt. He said:

**This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.
(John 3:19-21, NKJV).**

Hear me! It took me four exits to admit that I'm a bullheaded, stubborn, proud, angry person. I don't like that. And my wife had better not tell me that. But, as a counselor who has spent over forty years of my life working to help people, I have observed that it is very, very difficult to take the first step toward the cure, which is admitting, "I am wrong."

And isn't it often true that before we get turned around to face the truth, we are way down the road somewhere? We must all submit to the same treatment if we are to be cured.

But I have found that when there is a crisis, it's easy to get preoccupied with the other

person's sins. When you think of somebody that you're at odds with, can you not think of all the things that are wrong with them? You can even pray for them, "Oh God, straighten them out." Face it! We all tend to deny our sins.

I must talk to God about my own sins and admit that simple but difficult point, "I am wrong," regardless of the other person's problems.

YES, BUT...

If to acknowledge sinful behavior is a struggle, to be sorry about it is more of a struggle. Routinely, people ask for a chance to explain their behavior. Then they proceed to describe external circumstances that explain their behavior and make statements such as:

- "Lord, I'm mad and angry and bullheaded, but who wouldn't be with a spouse like that!"
- "The boss yelled at me, and he didn't have his facts straight."
- "The kids kept fighting."
- "You drove me to it."
- "I haven't been getting enough sleep."
- "I grew up in a bad neighborhood."
- "I haven't been feeling well lately."
- "Let me tell you about the problems my family had . . . "
- "My parents didn't love or understand me."
- "Lord, this is the way I am, but you know how hard I've tried to serve you."

Do these statements sound familiar? You see, I can announce that that's the way I am, but then I want to blame someone else or some circumstances in my life or my background.

Jesus once declared to a group of religious leaders:

"You . . . justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts." (Luke 16:15, NKJV)

Human behavior has not changed over recorded history, and the next step in repenting

is just as difficult today as it was in Jesus' time.

Step 2: I need to say to God: "I am sorry. I have sinned."

Obviously, you can confess to having done something sinful and not be the least bit sorry to God. You may even be purposing in your heart to repeat the same behavior. Or you may be sorry you were caught, because now you will suffer the consequences of your actions.

Other times we can sin and apologize to an individual, but leave God completely out of the situation.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians rebuking them for mixing with idolaters. He describes their response to his first letter:

Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death. For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! (2 Corinthians 7:9-11, NKJV)

It's a struggle to come to the place where I can say, "I am wrong. I have sinned. No excuses, no alibis. This is my sin and I mean it. I am sorry, God."

I'M NOT GOOD ENOUGH RIGHT NOW

Admitting sinful behavior and expressing sorrow for that behavior is something that we do. We find that it's a struggle to let go of the reasons why our behavior is someone else's fault.

When we finally relinquish our excuses, a strange thing often happens: rather than seeking forgiveness, we want to do penance for our sins. Sometimes, we even focus on how sinful we have been; memories crowd in of unpleasant scenes. Instead of seeking forgiveness, which is something God does for us, we find ourselves dwelling on the past. As a result, I hear statements such as:

- "Can't you see I am crying?"
- "Can't you see I'm depressed?"
- "My self-esteem is destroyed!"
- "I hate myself."
- "I am unworthy."
- "My self-image is battered."

In these situations, perhaps more sins need to be dealt with that haven't been acknowledged. Perhaps we don't really accept the fact that our behavior was sinful.

Step 3: I need to ask: "God, forgive me of my sins."

More likely we need to review the good news that Jesus shed His blood for our sins to make the free gift of forgiveness available to us.

We just need to receive it.

Let me remind you that this encounter is directly between us and God. Only He can forgive and cleanse sin. Step 1 of confession and step 2 of sorrow are things that I do. Asking for forgiveness is something I also do, but the forgiving is something that only God does. As the apostle John affirms:

**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
(1 John 1:9, NKJV)**

So, none of the penance programs will help. God simply expects us to receive His forgiveness. It's free. His Son shed His blood to make this free gift available to us. I need to accept the cure for my past sin and say, "God, forgive me of my sin."

I find it interesting that Jesus spoke and the sick were healed. He spoke and the man's sins were forgiven. When we sincerely say, "God, forgive me of my sins," He does.

NOW THAT I KNOW WHAT TO DO, I'LL DO IT!

If I do what I'm supposed to do as a Christian, isn't that enough? We identify our sins and seek forgiveness. John goes further and directs us:

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:9, NKJV)

Step 4: I need to ask: "God, cleanse me of my sin."

My sins were pride, stubbornness, rebellion, anger, and impoliteness. "Cleanse me" sounds easy. However, I have observed this to be extremely difficult for many people--especially talented, educated, self-sufficient, independent people. Our tendency is to put confidence in self-control rather than surrender to God. We say, "Now that I know what the problem is, I'll take charge and fix it" or "Just tell me what I'm supposed to do and I'll do it."

Sometimes we are still not convinced that we have sinned. We take another try at

disciplining ourselves to act the way we think a Christian should act. The sin area is still there, and there is no cure at this time, only the counterfeit appearance of a cure. We keep saying: "There must be *something* I can do!"

Not this time. If it is sin, there is no human remedy. Give it up. You have admitted your sin, expressed sorrow, and asked for forgiveness. Now, receive the cleansing. Be specific about what needs cleansing in your life. And know that only God can cleanse you from sin.

IS GOD A CRUTCH THAT I NEED FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE?

Step 5 is the toughest step of all. It's not a matter of receiving a boost from God to get us started so we can proceed on our own. This step involves the realization that we will be dependent on God forever, not only to cleanse us from sin, but to empower us to keep His commandments in the future.

Step 5: I need to ask: "Empower me."

Intelligent, competent, successful people find this a hard pill to swallow. Our human nature causes us to resist the necessity for a lifetime dependence on God to correct our tendency to sin. And if it's sin, there is no human cure.

For Christians to try to live the Christian life without total dependence on the Holy Spirit is a contradiction in terms. Anything less is just acting. Paul's words are true:

My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19, NKJV)

and

Be filled with the Spirit. (Ephesians 5:18, NKJV)

We want to be self-sufficient and independent. Many people have enough self-control to act the way they choose to act. They can rightly say, "Now that I know what to do, I will act like a Christian." They think they are in total control of their own lives. What they have is only a sad counterfeit that appears to be a cure.

To be clean, forgiven, and renewed is a great relief. Now it is time to turn around.

In my story of driving down the freeway, we were three-and-a-half exits down the pike. Isn't it amazing how long we will fight the truth?

Finally I was ready to reach out to God for help. I had to admit to my proud, rebellious, angry stubborn spirit. My wife can't help me here. She can't cure me. I must deal with God. I asked God to cleanse my heart, to restore His love, peace, and joy to my heart,

to help me face the truth. Guess what? He answered my prayer. Up to that point you could not have dragged me off that freeway. Now, the most delightful thought in my mind was to look for the next exit. I was free from the effects of my sins. Happy thought. I could turn around.

"Eva," I said, "we are headed in the wrong direction" (*as if she didn't know*). "I am sorry. Forgive me." It was now easy to admit the truth.

Soon we came to the next exit. We turned around and drove all the way back. And that's sometimes the trail of repentance; we retrace a lot of steps and make some corrections along the way. There is no other way to start fresh and clean.

Personally, I find that I need to frequently repeat these steps. And the mystery is that one can be determined to be consciously wrong, no matter what, and then, in response to a repentant prayer, be transformed into a person who delights in being consciously right.

THE PROCESS OF REPENTANCE

I have broken down the term repentance into five steps. Actually, as we practice this daily, these steps merge into a smooth process that is like one step. It's like driving a car. A beginner is conscious of the brake, accelerator, speedometer, side mirror, windows, rearview mirror. Gradually all these activities merge into one motion.

To confess and repent can be as simple as slowing down for a driver committed to driving the speed limit.

As a young Christian (and even to this day), I was astounded at the reluctance of people (including myself) to face up to their sins. To bring up the subject creates an atmosphere of resistance, tension, anxiety, and anger.

You would think that everyone would leap at the chance to be rid of sin. Not so. Usually, people do not seek a real cure to their problems (sins); they just want relief from the consequences of their sins.

I'm not some stranger to this material. I'm the one that is teaching and practicing it. But between conferences, look what happened. I don't always know why it happens, but when it does I need to call it by its right name: sin. In my case, I not only blew up at my wife, but I also tried to tell her she was wrong! To admit our own sin is very difficult for all of us because sin has a way of short-circuiting our brain.

This word *sin* is seldom heard; it is despised, dreaded, and hated. Newspapers scream daily about problems that fit the definition, but they refuse to call it by the right name. Society doesn't put sin into you; it stirs up what is already there. And if it is sin, there is no human remedy.

A supernatural cure for sin is available. I can only experience consistent peace, joy, and love when the Holy Spirit is in control of my life.

Lesson: Recognizing my own sin is difficult.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

- Review the thought starter at the beginning of the chapter. What thoughts were started?
 - Review the lead Bible verse. What does it say to you? Did you observe yourself in relation to the verse? Did you observe others in relation to the verse? Did you find any additional verses?
 - What is your response to the lesson at the end of the chapter?
1. Why is it difficult for us to say, "I have sinned. I am wrong."?
 2. Why is it so easy to identify someone else's sins and so difficult to see my own? Look at Jeremiah 17:9.
 3. What does the statement, "Men love darkness rather than light" mean to you?
 4. Why is it so important that we get to tell our side of the story?
 5. What is Godly sorrow?
 6. Discuss the difference between restitution to a person for a wrong done and God's forgiveness of our sins.
 7. Why is doing penance a soothing act for many of us?
 8. What are the dangers of penance and self-condemnation?
 9. What is it in our nature, our culture, our background that causes us to want to solve our problems by ourselves rather than appeal to God for cleansing?
 10. Based on 1 John 1:7, can our relationship or lack of relationship with each other be a measure of our relationship with God?
 11. Why is sin such a despised word?
 12. Why do most Christians ignore the Holy Spirit in light of John 14:16-26?

13. If we are dependent on God for the rest of our life, what, actually, is it that we need?

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