

Chapter Two

Repentance – Sometimes we make mistakes, scars can be physical reminders

When I first started picking blackberries in our woods, I was extremely naïve. I thought I could stroll into the coolness of the forest in a tank top and shorts and leisurely pick all the berries I could fit into my bucket. How foolish I was! I quickly learned that the thorns on blackberry brambles are extremely sharp and can be dangerous. On my first trip into the bramble, I stumbled on a tree root and fell forward into the sharp thorny branches. While the majority of the scratches eventually healed, I still have a small scar where a thorn went deep into my forearm and had to be pulled out with tweezers. It serves as a reminder to me that mistakes have consequences that may affect the rest of my life.

Inevitably when we begin to grow closer to God, He will expose those areas of our life that need reform. This can be difficult and met with great resistance. It can even cause us to reconsider our commitment to spend time and grow closer to God. It is uncomfortable. We don't want to face all the areas where we fall short of God's expectations, and it can seem insurmountable to make all the changes our lives need.

In recent years, I have struggled with my weight. Stress, lack of sleep, and poor eating habits finally caught up to me until one day I realized I was fifty pounds overweight. At first, I was in denial. How could this be? My clothes still fit me! Well, not really. Why didn't anyone tell me? No one wanted to hurt my feelings. But the scale and the measuring tape didn't lie and I finally realized I needed to do something about it. Nothing too drastic, of course, like giving up bread or pizza or cheeseburgers, I just needed to cut back a little and the pounds would fall right off, right? Again, not really. I did Weight Watcher's, South Beach, Pilates, ran on a treadmill – nothing helped and worse, I continued to gain weight. It was obvious that serious changes needed to be made. The main problem was that I was not consistent. I'd exercise every day for three or four days, then quit for two weeks. I'd eat salad and oatmeal for a week, and then go back to cereal and sandwiches. I had to acknowledge the fact that my way was not working. I would start off full of enthusiasm and vow to be "perfect" in my meal choices, portion sizes and exercise every day. The reality of these choices was difficult to execute and I would quickly revert to my old ways. Not because I didn't really want to lose weight, but because I was trying to change too much all at once. I didn't gain the weight overnight and I certainly wasn't going to lose it overnight. So, I decided to break my task down into smaller pieces. I started

by listing all the things I felt I needed to change: smaller portions, less bread, less sugar, more water, more vegetables, more whole grains, consistent exercise and stretching. I chose one thing to make a permanent change – no more sugar in my tea. First, I switched to a non-sugar sweetener. Once I was accustomed to the new taste, I cut the amount of this sweetener in half. Eventually, I weaned myself of needing any sweetener in my tea at all. I'm still struggling with my weight, but I know that setting my goals too high only increases my risk of failure and disappointment which inevitably leads to my defeat. Smaller goals that are attainable and grant me some measure of success and encouragement will help me to make the long term lifestyle changes I need to obtain and maintain a healthy weight for the rest of my life.

Turning from all the bad habits we've allowed ourselves to fall into over the years is much the same. Making a list of all the ways God shows us change in our lives is needed is a first step. This list is between you and God, so being honest is the best way to begin tearing off the chains that keep you from growing closer to Him. Commit the list to prayer and ask God's guidance in choosing the first one to begin eliminating from your life. Try to break this into smaller goals to encourage yourself and help you feel as if you are making

progress. When you slip, don't let it keep you down. Ask God's forgiveness and get right back up again.

These are some common areas of sin and some very general suggestions on how to begin to address them in our lives:

Gossip: Identify when and where you are most tempted to participate in gossip – is it at work? Church? Facebook? Commit to yourself that the next time someone around you begins to gossip you will do your best to change the subject or just get up and walk away. Do not use prayer requests to reveal personal information about others to others – this is a sly way to gossip with a good motive. Limit the amount of time you spend on Facebook daily (use a timer if necessary) to help you cut back and/or eliminate reading and responding to gossip. Better yet, quit Facebook altogether!

Foul Language/Taking Lord's name in vain: Begin by substituting other words for the foul language that has infiltrated your vocabulary: Cheese and Crackers, fiddlesticks, dad-gummed, whatever works for you. Buy a thesaurus and increase your vocabulary to permanently replace the foul words and their substitutes. Just think how smart you'll be (and sound!).

Poor time management: Make a list of all the things you need to do each day: go to work, care for your children, feed the dog, cook dinner, etc. Estimate how long each item takes or give yourself a time frame to complete each daily task (i.e. dinner is from 5:30-7 including preparation, eating, and cleanup). Identify the time not specifically assigned to a task and use this to accomplish all those items on your procrastination list. Be flexible – don't get discouraged if you don't keep to your schedule. Remember it is a tool to help you, but ultimately, real life and its quirks will get in the way. The important thing to remember is that this will help you identify why you may not be getting as much done as you think you could or should. Maybe you aren't "wasting" time – maybe you are overextended and need to clear some extraneous activities out of your life. If nothing is extraneous, then maybe you need to ask for help and/or delegate tasks to others. Even Moses had helpers!

Sexual Impurity: This can take many forms, anything from: looking at scantily clad individuals in magazines; improper books, movies and music; to the physical act of adultery. Gradually remove yourself from situations where you are tempted. When going out with friends, either suggest a movie that doesn't advocate sexual situations or avoid movies completely

and suggest another activity instead. Clean up your reading list and clear out your secular music collection. If you are in a sexual relationship outside of marriage to that partner, determine if this relationship has the potential to be long term. If so, discuss it with your partner and determine if they are willing to take steps to make a long term commitment. Express to your partner your desire to stay pure from that point forward until marriage. If this is not well received, then you are not unified as a couple and the relationship is on a poor foundation. Seek counseling as a couple to confront and resolve your differences. If this is not successful, end it. Do not compromise in this area.

Poor financial stewardship: Does your checkbook reflect your faith? Do you regularly give to God's kingdom? This doesn't necessarily have to be tithing to a church, but there should be evidence that we are faithful in using the resources God has entrusted to us to bless those He has placed on our hearts. If you are not doing this, why aren't you? Debt enslaves us and prevents us from using the money God gives us in the way He intends. We may also have trust issues and believe that we need to provide for ourselves without trusting God to multiply His blessings as we give to others. Malachi 3:10 encourages us with the following words from

the Lord, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,' says the Lord Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.'" Examine your spending habits and make a list of all the ways you spend money for an entire month. Commit to cutting at least one frivolous item out of your budget each day/week/month. Maybe you decide to pack your lunch three days a week instead of eating out every day. Or you eliminate fancy coffee on your way in to work. Determine to get out of debt. There are many ways to do this and organizations that can help. God will help as we help ourselves.

True repentance is not just confessing your sin; it is a commitment to remove it from your life. It is impossible to keep God in a box and ask for His help in certain aspects of our lives when we are unwilling to allow Him access to our whole life. He wants all of me, and all of you, and not just our Sundays, but all our days. You're not alone – He will help you every step of the way.

Assessment and Further Thought

According to God, what areas of my life need adjustment?

Which item from the above list should be the first area for change?

Can this item be broken into smaller goals? If so, list them below and a time frame to accomplish each.

Be prepared that those closest to you may feel threatened by the changes you intend to make. How will you address opposition from those you love regarding these permanent adjustments?

Verses for study and encouragement

Jeremiah 6:16 This is what the Lord says: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Jeremiah 33:3 Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.

Romans 12:2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good, pleasing, and perfect will.

Prayer time

Dear Jesus, please forgive me for the way I have allowed myself to drift away from You. Grant me the strength to adjust my life in a way that is pleasing to You and in accordance with your Word. Guide my focus to the areas You consider most important. Show me how to accomplish these goals and grow closer to You. Fill me with Your wisdom in decision making. Help me to respond to opposition in appropriate ways that honor You. Thank You for Your faithfulness. Amen

Additional items for prayer