

## Christian Growth Course

### Clearing the Past

Introduction: We have all sinned, made mistakes, and hurt others in the past. Every Christian should want to clear up past wrongs as far as possible so that his/her conscience will be clear, his/her mind will be healthy, his/her relationship to God will be unhindered, and he/she will be able to teach others effectively - Acts 24:16; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 1 Timothy 1:18,19; 1 Peter 3:16; Psalm 32:1,3,4. One of the first steps in Christian growth is clearing up the damage caused by sins of the past. In this lesson we focus on three kinds of sin-damage that need to be cleared up:

#### 1. Accumulated guilt

- A. Unrepented, unforgiven sins hinder the grace of God in our lives - Isaiah 59:1, 2.
- B. Unresolved guilt tortures a person, destroys his happiness, and can make him emotionally and physically ill - Psalm 51:3; 32:3-5.
- C. Useless ways of dealing with guilt:
  - 1) Forgetting or repressing, escapism.
  - 2) Rationalizing, evading responsibility by blaming others or circumstances - Genesis 3:11-13; Exodus 32:19-24.
  - 3) Hiding or denying our sins - 1 John 1:8; Hebrews 4:13; Proverbs 28:13.
- D. The only right way to deal with guilt is the way God has provided:
  - 1) Face your sins honestly and repent of them - Acts 3:19; 26:20.
  - 2) Confess your sin - James 5:16; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 32:5; Proverbs 28:13. (Confession need be only as widespread as the knowledge of the sin is. Avoid sordid or sensual details).
  - 3) Seek and accept the forgiveness of God (and others involved).
    - a. A non-Christian should believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, repent of sins, confess his faith in Christ and be baptized - Mark 16:16; Acts 16:30,31; Acts 2:38; 22:16. (God gave his Son as an offering to take away our sins - Titus 2:13, 14; Isaiah 53:4-6; John 3:16; 1 John 1:7).
    - b. A Christian should repent, confess his sins and pray for forgiveness - 1 John 1:9; Acts 8:22.
    - c. If we continue to carry guilt after God's word has assured us of forgiveness, this may show either
      - 1. That we do not believe or trust him enough, or
      - 2. That we know we have not really repented, or
      - 3. That we may not have forgiven others, or

4. That we may be "benefiting" some way from carrying guilt, or
  5. That we may need help for an emotional problem.
- 4) Make any reasonable restitution possible to those you have wronged - Leviticus 6:4, 5; Ezekiel 33:15; Luke 19:8.
  - 5) "Burn your bridges" to the past and replace the evil in your life with good - Luke 9:62; Philippians 3:13, 14; Acts 19:17-20; Matthew 12:43-45.
  - 6) If God forgives you, you are really forgiven! - Romans 4:7, 8; 8:1; Isaiah 1:18; Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 38:17; Micah 7:19; Hebrews 8:12 (God delights to forgive).
  - 7) Wonderful peace comes when we bring our sins to Christ and let him deal with our guilt - Psalm 32:1, 2; Luke 15:17-23.

## 2. Damaged personal witness

- A. Our inconsistent lives cause others to speak evil of God and his word - Romans 2:21-24; 1 Timothy 6:1; Titus 2:4, 5.
- B. It is a terrible thing to cause people to stumble or to hinder them from doing right. Love will always try to remove every offense and cause of sin - Matthew 18:6-10.
- C. Once you have changed your life, you need to seek the forgiveness of people you have caused to stumble in the past and let them know of your change, so as to remove as far as possible the negative witness of your past life.
  - 1) Otherwise, what if you are working for Christ and happen to encounter a person who knows your past?
  - 2) pay any outstanding debts (if you can't pay right now, at least contact the creditor and make arrangements).
  - 3) Particularly try to remember people you have been close to who may have been hurt by your sins:
    1. Parents, mate and immediate family members
    2. Other relatives
    3. Employers, teachers
    4. Friends, school associates
    5. Others
  - 4) Be prepared for possible rejection. When you have done what you can, you are not responsible - Romans 12:18. Just pray for improvement.
  - 5) If you can't communicate with those wronged (because of death, moving, etc.), commit the matter to God and ask him to make a meeting possible (with living persons) if it is his will.

6) Cautions:

- a. God only expects what is reasonable in clearing your witness. Do what you should, but don't let clearing your past record become a legalistic, extremist obsession that keeps you from serving God in other ways.
- b. In your acknowledgements of wrong, don't implicate others who were involved in wrong along with you. That is their own responsibility.
- c. Don't approach any person in a situation where that person's life would be damaged by bringing up your wrong at this time (as, for example, a former partner of yours in immorality who is now happily married). Don't commit a greater wrong trying to right an old one.
- d. Talk personally or on the phone. Don't write if it can be avoided.
- e. If you sin again, ask forgiveness again.
- f. Don't put off contacting people you should.
- g. Deal first with the greatest wrongs you have done. Guilt you feel from these transfer in your mind to other matters that really would not even need to be considered.

3. Broken relationships (We will have a whole lesson on this later in the course.)

- A. We cannot be right with God unless we are right with others (as far as it depends on us) - Matthew 5:23, 24; Mark 11:25; Hebrews 12:14; Romans 12:18.
- B. God will not forgive our sins unless we forgive others - Matthew 6:12, 14, 15; 18:21-35.
- C. We are to go to those who have offended us and to those we have offended - Matthew 18:15-17; 5:23, 24.
- D. The concern is not for who "started it" but with making peace - Matthew 5:9; Romans 12:18.
- E. Concentrate on your contribution to the broken relationship, not the other person's - Matthew 7:1-5. Remove from your own life whatever offends - Matthew 18:7-9.
- F. Overcome evil with good - Romans 12:17-21.
- G. Particularly look at your past relationships with those closest to you in life:
  - 1) Parents
  - 2) Brothers and sisters
  - 3) Mate and children
  - 4) Former lovers or mates

- a. Though it may not always be possible to restore a marriage, it is absolutely necessary for your spiritual welfare that you clear out resentment and have, as far as it depends on you, a peaceful relationship with the person.
- b. God does not expect a person to return to an unfaithful spouse who has not clearly demonstrated repentance.
- c. Forgiveness is a decision of the will, not a feeling. Feelings cannot be commanded.

Conclusion: While many wrongs can never be righted, and all our sins must be handed over to the grace of God, a loving person always regrets causing hurt and wants to heal the damage as far as he possibly can. This is part of repentance. Once a person has done what he reasonably can to clear the damage from his past, he or she has a strong base from which to grow and serve God in the future.

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