



The Practicing the Way Course

Teaching Notes

Session 06: Healing From Sin

Intro:

- The world is beautiful.
- It's quiet, and calm, and full of goodness.
- But when I drive the streets of LA, it is glaringly obvious that something is wrong with the world.
 - I see beauty — the arts, architecture, culture, people doing life together ...
 - And I see poverty, inequality, addiction, loneliness, and the breakdown of relationships ...
- What if the city is a kind of parable for the soul? What if all of us are both beautiful, and deeply broken at the same time?
- Seam: What if we need to be saved?

Sin:

- The word used by Jesus to name what's wrong with the world is "sin."
- Now, "sin" is an emotionally loaded word for a lot of people.
- You may hear it and instantly feel a kind of inner allergic reaction.
- But sin is just the word Jesus used to name a reality that *all* the brightest minds agree on — ancient, modern, spiritual, scientific, Western, Eastern — pretty much everyone agrees that something is *off* in the human heart.
- It's not just that we do bad things — we gossip or lie or cheat on our taxes or have an affair.
- It's that we often *want* to do bad things.
- And — even worse — when we *don't* want to do bad things, we often *still* end up doing them! Like an addict, caught in a self-destructive loop.
- Calling human beings "sinful" is no more judgmental than a doctor telling someone they have a heart condition.
- It's just true.
- But there's *good news*: one of the *opening* lines about Jesus in Matthew's Gospel is the angel's word to Joseph in a dream about his soon to be born son:
 - "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."
(Matthew 1v21)

- In Greek, the name Jesus is Yeshua, or Joshua, which means “God saves.”
- And what does God save us from in Jesus? Our sins.
- And yet: I’ve been following Jesus for my entire life, and honestly, I thought that by now, I’d be pretty much done with this sin thing! Or at least on the tail end.
- And while I’m not the man I was twenty years ago, I still have a *long* way to go ...
- One of the reasons this confused me at first was because I did not realize that sin is far more multifaceted than I was led to believe ...

Three dimensions of sin:

- In biblical theology, there are three dimensions to sin. The first is ...

1. Sin done *by* us

- This is the category we are most familiar with.
- We mess up; we are unkind, we shame our children, we tell white lies, we dishonor our parents.
- We add our toxicity to the collective pile of humanity...
- The theologian Cornelius Plantinga called this dimension of sin “the culpable disturbance of *shalom*.” The ripping apart of God’s desired harmony and human flourishing.¹
- But that’s only the first dimension; there’s also ...

2. Sin done *to* us

- We’ve all been *sinned* against — hurt, wounded, betrayed, slandered.
- We are both victim and perpetrator.
- And *our woundedness is the cause of much of our wickedness*.
- “Hurt people hurt people,” as the saying goes, and it’s true.
- Starting in our earliest days, we accumulate a coterie of painful memories that we carry implicitly in our bodies, and tragically, against all our best intentions, we often pass them on to those closest to us.
- Cue the heart-wrenching stats on the number of abusers who were abused, cheaters who were cheated on, perfectionists who were raised by perfectionists, and so on.

- A key part of our spiritual journeys to wholeness is the healing of memories.
- Finally, there is ...

3. Sin done around us

- Due to the radical individualism of the West, we often miss this last dimension, but Jesus and Scripture are adamant: Our environment has a warping effect on our soul.
- All sin — even if it's not done *by* or *to* us, but just *around* us — has a deformative effect.
- It's like breathing secondhand smoke — no one would hold you guilty in a court of law, but that doesn't make it any less deadly.
- The orthodox bishop Kallistos Ware said, "We are born into an environment where it's easy to do evil and hard to do good; easy to hurt others, and hard to heal their wounds."²
- The cultural currents we swim in often push and pull us away from the Way of Jesus.
- But the good news is: through apprenticeship to Jesus, we can be healed of sin in all three dimensions, and made whole at every level of our being.

Thesis:

- You've made it over halfway through a course on apprenticeship to Jesus — well done!
- But following Jesus is a *lifelong* journey.
- And trying to go on the spiritual journey without healing from sin is like trying to run a marathon with a broken leg.
- You're not going to get very far.
- So, a *key* aspect of our spiritual formation is healing from sin done by us, to us, and around us.

Seam: And I'm using the language of "healing" on purpose.

Healing:

- In Mark chapter 2v17, Jesus said:
 - "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."
- Jesus' point here isn't that some people are healthy and other people are sick; but that *all* of

us are sick, and some of us know it.

- But notice: for Jesus, sin is like a disease, and he is the doctor.
- Based on this story, ancient Christians called Jesus “the doctor of the soul.”

Hinge: And like any good doctor, he doesn’t just want to just deal with the symptoms, but the disease itself.

- It’s so clear in the teachings of Jesus that he is interested in so much more than behavior modification; he’s interested in our heart ...
- The hard truth is, sin goes far deeper than most of us realize ...

Seam: This clicked for me when I came across a paradigm from Dr. Robert Mullholland on the four layers of sin ...³

Four layers of sin:

- The first layer is what ancient Christians called...

1. Gross sins

- Not “gross” as in yucky, but as in *major* sins.
- Like the saying, “I made a *gross* mistake.”
- Listen to the Apostle Paul’s list of gross sins in Galatians 5(v19-21):
 - “Sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”
- These are the sins that mark so many of our lives before we come to Jesus.
- Gross sins are the first to go in our spiritual journey (sometimes they disappear the *day* we are baptized!); but then comes layer two ...

2. Conscious sins

- These are sins that are socially acceptable in our culture (or even celebrated in our culture), yet are *not* the way of Jesus.

- Sins like:
 - Materialism
 - Bragging
 - Watching dirty TV
 - Gossip
 - Cussing
 - Course humor
 - White lies
 - Negativity
 - Rudeness
- These are called “conscious” sins because even when we know they are contrary to Jesus’ teaching, we still *choose* to do them.
- The problem (at this layer in our apprenticeship) is an aspect of our *will* that has yet to be surrendered to Jesus ...
- Over time, the Spirit gently convicts us of these sins, and calls us to leave them behind ...
- Then we face our ...

3. Unconscious sins

- These are sins of *omission*, not *commission*.
 - Meaning, things we *don’t* do, rather than things we *do*.
 - We *don’t* call our friends when they are suffering, we don’t speak up when we need to, we ignore the poor ...
- Or they are sins of *motivation*, where we do the right thing — serve the poor, speak up for truth, practice the spiritual disciplines — but for the wrong reasons.
- Or it’s dysfunctional relational patterns — how people emotionally experience us — as defensive or moody or negative or judgmental or overly talkative ...
- In layer three, we pass a kind of invisible line in our soul, from the conscious to the unconscious, into what the psychologist Carl Jung called “the shadow.”
- Our shadow is murky and unclear and it’s much harder to distinguish between vice and virtue.

- As our shadow is exposed — by suffering, by our most intimate relationships, and by prayer — it can feel humbling, *humiliating* even ... but it's a key step in the process of healing.
- But we're still not at rock bottom. The final layer is ...

4. Our attachments

- Or in more Christian language, our “idols.”
- Dr. Robert Mulholland called them our “trust structures.”
- Father Thomas Keating called them our “emotional programs for happiness.”⁴
- They are the things we believe we *need* to be happy and at peace.
- These usually aren't bad things at all!
- They are good things that we want in a bad way; just meaning, we *need* them to be okay.
- Things like, our:
 - Health
 - Marriage
 - Children
 - Job or career
 - Success
 - Wealth
 - Beauty
 - Youth
 - Retirement
 - Reputation
 - Plans
 - Friends
 - Food, drink
 - Pleasure
- It's hard to believe, but all these good things — which are gifts from God — can become

the source not of happiness, but *unhappiness*.

- The problem is not the gifts themselves; it's our attachment *to* the gifts.
- As the Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello put it:
 - "If you look carefully you will see that there is one thing that causes unhappiness. The name of that thing is attachment. What is an attachment? An emotional state of clinging caused by the belief that without some particular thing or some person you cannot be happy.⁵
- And it's in this last layer of sin that we are *most* in bondage, and most in need of the salvation of Jesus.
- And it's here that Jesus' teachings are at their most radical.
- The great paradox of Jesus' message is: *As long as you need your life to go a certain way to be happy and at peace, you will never be happy and at peace.*
- Ignatius of Loyola — the founder of the Jesuit Order — went as far as to define sin as "unwillingness to trust that what God wants for me is only my deepest happiness."
- But to believe that, God must *become* our deepest happiness.
- It's in this stage in our formation where we begin to see all the areas in our heart where we do not look to our Creator for our wellbeing, but to created things.
 - *All* sin, and all idolatry, at its root, is our soul's search for happiness, and love; but by looking to the creation rather than to the Creator.
- Which is why the end goal of spiritual formation is detachment from the things of this world ... and attachment to God ...

Seam: So, four levels.

- Let's take the sin of anger as a case study ...
- The "gross" layer of anger is murder, violence, domestic abuse, road rage, etc.
- The "conscious" layer would be things like name calling, yelling at our spouse, mouthing profanities ...
- The "unconscious" layer would be coming to a place in our formation where we would never hit someone or even yell at them, yet we're passive aggressive, and we still feel the lace of contempt in our heart.
- And the final layer, our attachments, would be, say, for example, when my teenage son does

poorly in school, and I mature to a place that I don't snap at him or shame him, but inside, I'm angry, or stressed out ... because I emotionally *need* him to do well in school, to live up to my plans for his life ...

- I need this to be happy; I'm yet to be completely happy in God.
- As you can see, the spiritual journey traverses the ground from the worst kind of outward behavior to the most intimate internal desires of the heart ...

Seam: Where are you in your spiritual journey of healing? Jesus is the doctor of the soul and his desire is to heal you, free you, and save you at every level of your being.

Set up for reflection:

- This was possibly one of the most tender of all the sessions.
- And we want to give you a few minutes, right now, right where you're at, to plot yourself on this continuum ...
- Please open your Guide to Session 06, where you'll find a page for a short reflection.
- Take a few minutes in the quiet, we ask you not to talk, to journal through the following reflection questions ...
 1. What do you honestly believe about how God sees you and your sin? (Don't journal the "right" answer, but what you actually think and feel ...)
 2. What came up for you as we talked about sin? (e.g., a sin you were convicted of, a habitual sin you struggle to break free from? A wound from your past? Fear of confession and vulnerability?)
 3. Is there anyone you need to forgive or ask for forgiveness from, including God?

Set up for group conversation:

- Now let's take a few minutes to process this together. You may feel comfortable sharing with those around you or you may not, that's okay. Just share as much as you're able and willing.
- Here are a few questions ...
 1. Growing up, what was your understanding of sin and God's response to it?
 2. When you sin, what do you normally do? How do you normally deal with any lingering sense of guilt, shame, or ongoing temptation?

3. As you think about your sin patterns, what attachments or idols are you clinging to in your pursuit of happiness?
4. In light of this teaching, what steps may God be inviting you to take towards healing?

Set up:

- As a reminder, this week we are finishing reading *Practicing the Way*.
- Now let's turn to this coming week's practice ...

Confession:

- If sin is a kind of disease, how do we begin to heal?
- Well, there's a saying in AA: "We are only as sick as the secrets we keep."
- The beginning of healing is to tell our secrets, through what the writers of the Bible call "confession."
- Contrary to what a lot of people think, confession is not about beating yourself up or telling all your sins to a priest to get off the hook ...
- It's about courageously naming your wickedness and your woundedness — the sin done *by* you, *to* you, and *around* you — in the presence of loving community who are walking with you on the long journey to wholeness.
- It's not just about the confession of sin; but the confession of God's love for us and others *in* our sin.
- It's about coming out of hiding and leaving behind not only sin, but *shame*.
- And confession is *our* part in the healing of sin.
- You have to go to the doctor and tell them what's wrong for them to heal you.
- And when it comes to the deeper sins, especially layers three and four, that's often all we can do — set our sin before Jesus ... only he can heal and save us.
- *His* job is to deal with our sin; *our* job is to confess our secrets.
- Sadly, the way many modern Christians practice confession is by saying sorry to God in their mind at church or in prayer.
- And that's not bad, but *true* confession is more like sitting down at an AA meeting and

saying, “Hi, my name is ... whatever ... and I’m an alcoholic. Last week I lost it ...”

- It’s *naming* your sin to loving *community*.
- The writer James says this in the NT:
 - “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” (James 5v16)
- Notice his word choice: not just forgiven, but *healed*!
- And while this may sound terrifying at first, it is a crucial practice for all those who want to make genuine progress in the spiritual life.
- As they say in AA: “I get drunk, but we stay sober.”
- We need each other on the spiritual journey of healing.

Tutorial:

Week 6: Confession

- For those of you reading the *Practicing the Way* Book alongside this course, this week we are in the final section.
- The practice we are inviting you into this week is confession.
- When we feel guilt and shame because of something we’ve *done or not done*, confession is likely the *last* thing we feel like doing.
- But the path to being free from shame involves being open and transparent with someone we trust. In James 5:16 we read, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for each other that you may be healed.” When we name our sin or shame or secret with a trusted person, we can experience healing.
- I meet weekly over Zoom with a trusted friend, and we mutually confess our temptations, struggles, and sins and then pray for each other. This may sound heavy, but in practice, it feels truly uplifting.
- I first began to see the value of confession years ago. I had done something to violate my code and conscience. A lot of people would say it was no big deal. But, I knew I had violated an important value and had sinned, and I was feeling guilt and shame.
- Not long after this, I confessed what I had done to a close friend and mentor. He was disappointed, but he also expressed his love for me, and I felt his deep care. After confessing

and being received with love, I felt an enormous burden lifting from my shoulders.

- When we are able to confess something to someone we trust (whether it's a friend, pastor, spiritual director, or counselor) and they don't judge us, but reflect God's grace to us, and say, "I'm not going anywhere," or "Welcome to being human," or "God has forgiven you," we experience healing and freedom. Another person can make the presence and forgiveness of Christ real to us.
 - Our practice for the coming week is confession.
 - This practice is difficult, but powerful:
 - To begin, identify someone you trust and ask them if they would be willing to listen to you as you practice confession.
 - Make a plan to connect somewhere private, where you feel at peace.
 - Tell this trusted person what is on your heart, name your sin (As you begin, you don't need to share every secret of your life, perhaps begin with one. And as you build trust with the person over time, you can become more transparent and vulnerable in your confession.
 - Finally, invite them to respond and ask them to pray over you.
 - Receive their love for you and fully accept the truth they speak and pray over you.
- Now, if someone asks you to hear a confession, it's important for you to affirm God's love and forgiveness over them.
 - Jesus, the doctor of the soul, will bring healing to you as you open new layers of your life to him.
 - God bless and keep you as you practice confession this week.

Summary:

- To review this episode ...
 - A key aspect of the spiritual journey is healing from sin.
 - There are three dimensions to sin.
 - Sin done *by* us
 - Sin done *to* us

- And sin done *around* us
- And there are four layers of sin we move through in our healing.
 1. Gross sins
 2. Conscious sins
 3. Unconscious sins
 4. Attachments
- Our part in the healing of sin is the practice of confession.

Outro:

- Just a few days ago, I went hiking with a close friend ... I was burdened by something I'd done recently ... I was embarrassed and scared to confess my sin ... but he was so loving ... and after our conversation, I felt a thousand pounds lighter.
- This process of healing from sin through the practice of confession may sound *terrifying*.
- It can be, at first.
- But once you experience the love of God — through loving community, who hold your sin and shame up to his healing light — confession becomes a lifeline.
- Confession becomes something you want to do ... because you want healing, you want *health* and life.
- The paradox of discipleship is: It is only when we are honest and true with God, others, and ourselves about all the ways we fall short of love that we enter into the transformational process of becoming more loving.
- The more we hide, the less we heal!
- But as we come out of hiding ... we realize, we thought our secrets were protecting us from shame; but they were actually keeping us imprisoned *in* shame.
- And as we come out into the light ... we find we are more deeply loved than we could ever imagine ...

Notes

1. *Engaging God's World* (2002)
2. *The Orthodox Way* (1979)
3. *Invitation to a Journey* (1993)
4. *The Human Condition* (1999)
5. *The Way to Love* (2011)