

HOW *to*
MAINTAIN JOY
in YOUR LIFE

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For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son... (Romans 8:29a MV)

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lust... (Romans 6:12 NKJV)

But now that you have been set free from sin, and become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life... (Romans 6:22 NIV)

These texts tell us that we should be like Jesus Christ. Jesus did not save us so that we could sin—He saved us so that we would not sin. One of the biggest problems the average Christian has is how to handle sin in his life. It seems to be endemic that Christians sin and that they sin far more than the Bible allows for them to.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin... (1 John 2:1a NIV)

The Bible does not command sin. It commands the opposite. What I am talking about in this article is not the primary solution to sin in the Christian's life, but it is part of God's solution. It is more like rust remover than it is like paint. It is not preventative; it is curative.

There is an old illustration in a poem I read as a small boy, long before I was a Christian. It was called "*A Fence or an Ambulance.*" I cannot recite the poem anymore, but I used to like it. It was a story of a certain cliff that dukes and peasants fell over regularly. Everybody was falling off this cliff. The people in the shire had to come up with a solution for this problem. They held a meeting, and one of the councilmen said, "What we need is an ambulance. We'll keep an ambulance parked in the valley. Whenever anyone falls off the cliff, the ambulance will be right there." Everyone was voting for the ambulance when someone objected and said, "No; put a fence at the top of the cliff."

They shouted him down. "What do you mean, a fence at the top of the cliff? We've interviewed every single person who has fallen off that cliff, and nobody has asked for a fence. They are always asking for an ambulance. We've got you outvoted. Obviously, the ambulance is what is needed."

God has a fence, and God has an ambulance. This article is about the ambulance. Why am I talking about the ambulance first? Well, when people are already smashed at the bottom, they are more interested in the ambulance. So first I will talk about how to get people fixed up so that they can be interested in a fence. Look at Psalm 32:

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"—and you forgave the guilt of my sin. (Psalm 32:1-5 NIV)

There are two conditions here. One is where the person's sins are covered, are forgiven, where he has confessed his transgressions to the Lord. The other is when he keeps silent. David says his bones wasted away through groaning all day long when he kept silent. Have you ever felt like that, like you are just wasting away, that you are groaning all day long, that your strength is sapped? The King James Version says, "dried up, the drought of summer." This is because the hand of the Lord is heavy on you for your sin. "*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me.*" Keeping silent—that is not being willing to admit sin. Simple admission gets forgiveness.

The whole of Psalm 51 is on confession. In verse 13, David says, "*Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.*" That is what we would like. We would like sinners turning back to God. We would like to be able to teach transgressors God's ways. But verse 13 started out with "*Then...*" Well, when is that?

Look earlier at verse 12: "*restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.*" Then both Psalm 32 and 51 say that the person is "*blessed whose transgressions are forgiven.*" The joy of the Lord's salvation is restored *when sins are confessed.*

We would like to think that there are other reasons for people losing their joy. We would like to think that one of the reasons people lose their joy is temptation. "Boy, if you went through the temptation I went through, you would not have joy either." But the Scripture says "*count it all joy when you fall into various (many different kinds of) trials*" (James 1:2 NKJV). Trials and temptations are no reason to lose your joy.

"Well, if you were persecuted like I am persecuted, you would lose your joy." What does the Bible say about that? "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake*" (Matthew 5:10a NKJV).

"But I just lost my mother." And the Scripture says, "*Do not sorrow, as others who have no hope*" (1 Thessalonians 4:13 NKJV).

The Scripture also says, "*Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say,*

rejoice" (Philippians 4:4 NKJV).

The normal Christian life is a life of joy. The reason that we lose joy is that we think circumstantially. "If you were in *these* circumstances, you would lose your joy." I'm not saying there aren't pleasant circumstances and unpleasant circumstances, but when people think that circumstances or environment are reasons for joy, they are not right.

People say, "If I were in Sun Valley skiing, I would be happy," or "If I were married, I'd be happy," or "If I were divorced, I would be happy." When they talk like this, they are saying that their happiness is dependent upon circumstances: good circumstances - happiness, bad circumstances - unhappiness. People who are happy because of their environment and think that that is the joy of the Lord are mistaken.

There is the one biblical reason why the joy of the Lord is taken away. Hebrews 12:11:

No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (NKJV)

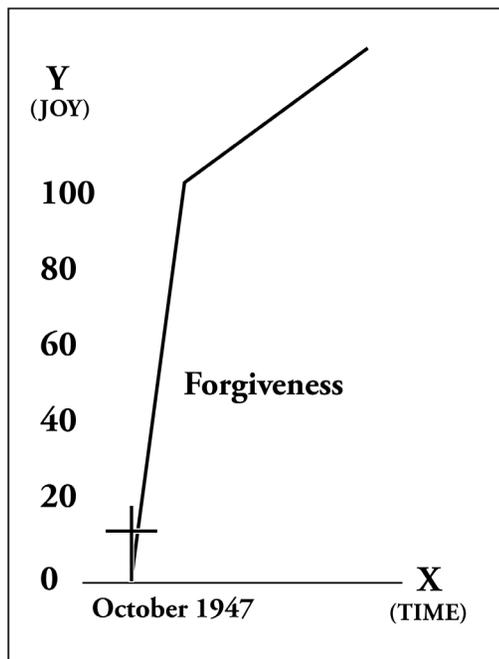
God disciplines believers. If you are without discipline, you are not a believer. Hebrews 12:8 says that "*you are illegitimate children and not true sons.*"

When you are disciplined, it is not pleasant. The discipline of God is the only biblical reason to lose your joy. So when you get disciplined, you say, "Boy, I'm so miserable; I might not be a Christian." Maybe that proves you *are* a Christian. Have you ever known anyone who seems to get away with murder and it doesn't bother them? Then you step out of line one little fraction and get disciplined fast? It's because the Lord loves you. It is not pleasant. However, if you pay attention to it and respond to the discipline by confessing your sin, you are blessed and your joy returns.

Here is a visual aid. This is not inspired. It is a graph. The x axis,

which goes horizontally to the right, is measured in time. The y axis, which goes vertically, is measured in joy, love, peace, and other fruits of the Spirit. It applies to any one of them or all of them.

Graph 1:



Romans 10:9-10

...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes to righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made to salvation.

John 1:12-13

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to them who believe in His name; who were

born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

Psalm 32: 1-2

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.

I will describe the graph in terms of my life.

I became a Christian in October 1947 after a Navy football game in Baltimore. I was 20 years old. I was proceeding along the x axis at that time, measuring zero joy and peace. I had none. I had the

world's substitutes for it, but I did not have the fruit of the Spirit. Right where the cross is, I received Jesus Christ and immediately had love, joy, and peace like I had never had before. The joy continued increasing because of my obedience. My capacity for joy also increased.

I remember the bus ride coming back to Annapolis that night, sitting there all by myself. The guys who had led me to the Lord were class of '49, and they had another hour's worth of liberty in Baltimore, so I went back alone.

I was so exploding with joy that I made a decision in the first half of the trip to stand on top of Bancroft Hall at the Naval Academy and tell the whole brigade of midshipmen that if Jesus Christ could save me, He could save anybody. However, I had a whole hour to think about that and realized that the Navy would take a dim view of such conduct, send me over to the hospital for a few days, and then ship me home.

“Well, I’ll at least have to tell the people in my company.” Then I thought, “No, that’s not going to compute. If I tell my roommate that I have just been saved from my sins, he’ll say, ‘What sins, Wilson? I have been trying to get you to sin all year!’” He already knew I was going to a pre-reveille Bible study seven days a week. He knew I didn’t use profanity or slang. “No, that’s not going to make sense.” I decided that I couldn’t tell anybody.

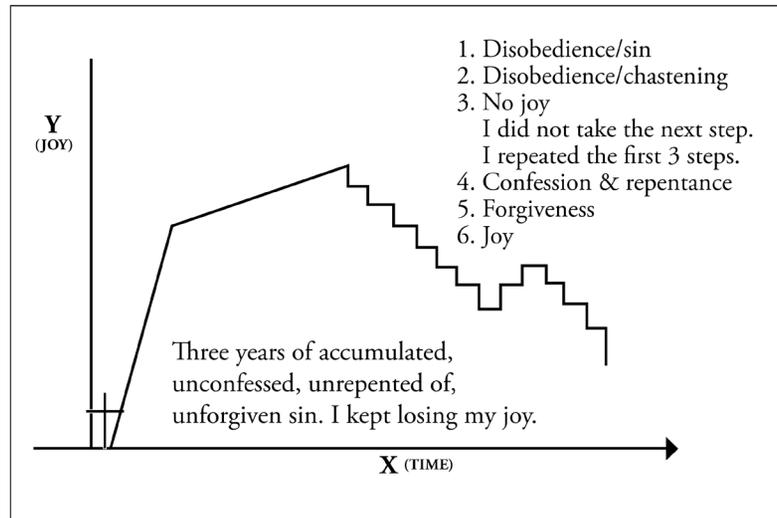
Three weeks went by, and my roommate said, “OK, Wilson, what happened?”

I said, “What do you mean?”

He said, “The last three weeks you have been unbearably pleasant.” I have been telling people ever since. It was joy—I had great joy.

The joy was instantaneous when I was converted, and then it kept on going up because of my obedience. I’m not sure when I started down the staircase of losing my joy.

Graph 2: Illustrates losing my joy



Graph 2 illustrates what happened when I sinned. As soon as I sinned, I got disciplined, chastised by God. When God disciplines me, He takes away my joy.

Why does He do that? To bring my disobedience to my attention so I will repent and confess. Let's suppose God did not discipline me. Suppose that every time I sinned I would have more joy in the Lord. It is true that where sin increased grace increased all the more (Romans 5:20). That does not mean we should "go on sinning so that grace may increase" (Romans 6:1).

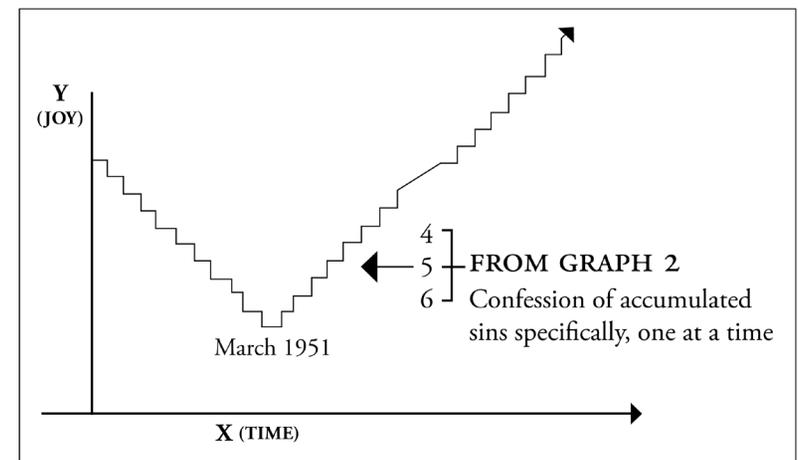
No! God takes away my joy so that I will admit my sin in repentance, be forgiven, and have joy again. My descent into less and less joy continued for three years. Yes, I confessed some sins during those years, but my state went gradually downhill.

This is really a 6-step process. The first thing I do is sin/disobey. The second thing is I get disciplined. Third, I lose my joy. God takes it away in order to get my attention so I will confess, repent, and be forgiven.

Well, my joy started going down, but not very steeply all at once. It would go down gradually and then come up a little bit, then go down some more. It went down very gradually over the next three years. In the meantime, God was using me in different ways, but my joy was less.

It was in the Sea of Japan, in my stateroom on the *USS Brinkley Bass* (DD887) in March of 1951, that I realized what the problem was. It was 3 years of accumulated, unconfessed sin. I began to confess sin, and as I did, my joy came back up. It was great. It was just like a new birth, except this was not a new birth. When I was born again I did not confess all of my sins. I couldn't possibly have. I confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. When I confessed Him as Lord, all my sins were forgiven. That was the new birth. After my restoration in March of 1951, I would again disobey, get disciplined, and lose my joy. This time, instead of not confessing, I would confess after a while... ten hours, a week, 2 weeks. So I lived the gap-toothed life shown on the right of Graph 3.

Graph 3:



I did that for about four years, until 1955. Then I realized that if Jesus Christ could forgive 20 years of sin at one instant, as He did when I received Christ, and if He could forgive my 3 years of accumulated sin in a few hours, and if He could forgive 10 hours'

worth or two weeks' worth, He could forgive me in one instant. I could sin, lose my joy, confess it, and be back in the joy of the Lord in a very short interval of time (see graph 4).

Let me give you an illustration. I had learned this truth of keeping short accounts in March 1951, but I did not always live by it. Then in April of 1952, I got married. I had all of the qualifications of a new, young husband. It only takes one. Dumb! Some people stay dumb for quite a while. I found out I could offend my dear bride all kinds of ways by just being thoughtless. I do not think I was ever malicious. I don't think I ever tried to "get to her." But I managed. I was dumb, but I was not so dumb that I did not know when I had offended her.

I found myself living in a cold house. I could figure out that there was something wrong there someplace. I would find out what it was, and when I did, I would confess to God. God would forgive me. It was God I had sinned against when I failed to do what God said:

*Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church.
(Ephesians 5:25 NKJV)*

Let me get this across clearly: sin is never social. It is never horizontal. *God* is the one who gives the commands. *God* is the one against whom I sin, and *God* is the one who forgives. When God forgives me, I'm forgiven. The other person may or may not forgive. But if I confess it to God, I am really forgiven. Sin is against God, so I confess to God.

Only *after* I am forgiven by God do I go and make things right with the other person. So I would get right with God, confess to my wife, and be back in the joy of the Lord.

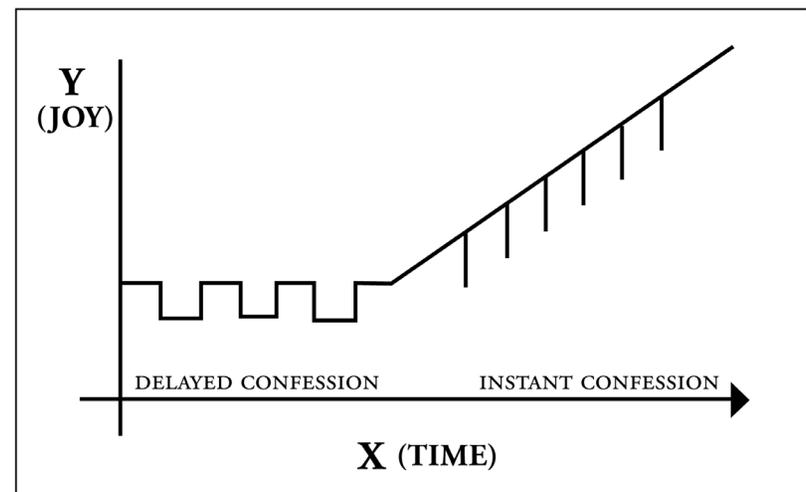
2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "*For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.*" Notice, there are two kinds of sorrow. There is a sorrow that causes death, and a godly sorrow that causes repentance. If you have godly sorrow, and you repent, God forgives you and the sorrow ends. Worldly sorrow says, "You sinned. You should be sorry," day after day after day. People believe it. They carry remorse around until they die.

Then from 1955 I learned and began to practice immediate confession, or if not immediate, certainly by 10 o'clock in the morning. If I have a collision with my wife at 8 a.m., one of us calls the other by 10. If not, I know it is going to be one awful day. People are going to be looking to me for solutions to their problems, and I'll be hurting and spiritually dragging. It isn't worth it.

Get on the phone with God and get on the phone with your wife. If you wait until bedtime to make things right, you have just lost your day. There have been times in these many years that I have carried things for a month or two, and I probably knew about my sin at the time and could have confessed it right away.

Sometimes I went for a while before confessing, but generally I would confess right away or within a couple of hours. I'm not saying I have not sinned in these years. My family remembers most of them. They could probably tell me when I did. But I have a low tolerance for discipline. I do not like it. As long as I am unrepentant, the discipline stays on me; the hand of the Lord is heavy. I can remove the discipline of the Lord just by repenting *now*.

Graph 4:



Here are 14 ways to stay miserable. You can find occurrences of these in the Scripture:

Satan's Lies

1. Justify—it was really right.
2. Excuse—it was really wrong, but...
3. Hide—cover it up.
4. Pass the buck.
5. Put it off.
6. Vague terms
7. Mistakes—they were errors in judgment.
8. Too many to confess.
9. I can't remember them all.
10. Nobody's perfect.
11. I'm going to do it again, so why confess?
12. I'm too proud to make restitution (Leviticus 6: 1-7).
13. Bitterness
14. Introspection

1. *Justify – it was really right*

I am not forgiven, I have no joy, the hand of the Lord stays heavy upon me, and my moisture is turned into the drought of summer, all because I am saying that what I have done is right.

2. *Excuse – it was really wrong, but...*

An excuse is the opposite of justifying. Justifying says it was right; an excuse says it was really wrong, *but...* If I confessed that what I had done was really wrong, period, I would be forgiven. But if I say, "It is really wrong, *but,*" and tell God all kinds of reasons why I did it, I do not get forgiven. God does not want the song and dance. He does not want the explanation. When I confess, I am forgiven. When I confess and then say "but..." there is no forgiveness.

3. *Hide*

Did Adam and Eve hide their sin from God? As long as they were hiding, were they forgiven? No! People still hide. In fact, "cover-

up" is a modern day word. When people cover up, they are hiding, but God still sees the sin, and their joy will not come back until they confess that sin to Him.

4. *Pass the buck*

Did Eve pass the buck? Did Adam pass the buck? We have been doing this for a long time. It doesn't work. Eve said, "The serpent deceived me." That was true, but she was still blaming the serpent. Adam said, "The woman *You* gave me, God, she gave it to me." Whose fault was it *really*? People blame God and then wonder why they are not forgiven.

As long as I am confessing my *wife's* sin, my joy does not come back. Even if she is not in sin, I say, "She is the reason I am in sin." My joy still does not come back, because she is *not* the reason I am in sin. "Well, did she help you along?" Maybe, maybe not, but whatever the case, she is *not* the reason. I am in sin because I chose to sin.

5. *Put it off*

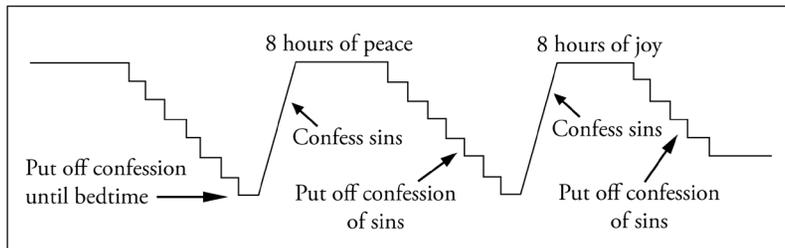
Procrastinate. We mentioned this already. Let us suppose my joy level is high, but then I have a collision with my wife at 8 o'clock in the morning. As soon as it is over I know that I was in the wrong. I know it, but I think, "This is not the right time to admit it, so I will confess it tonight when I go to bed. No sense letting her know I was wrong now. If I confess it to God now, I will probably have to confess it to her now, so I will just wait and confess it tonight." So what happens to my day? It is awful! Not only do I stay under the discipline of the Lord, but I collect a few more sins during the day because I am in no condition to withstand any temptation that comes my way.

I promised the Lord in the morning that when I confessed my sin that night, I would not justify myself, I would not say I was right, I would not excuse myself, I would not hide it, I would not blame my wife. I would confess it openly and honestly *later*.

So I am going to keep my word. At 11 p.m. I confess all dozen sins. I am back in the joy of the Lord for the 8 hours I am asleep. I have perfect fellowship with God. I do the same thing again tomorrow; I put it off till bedtime, confess all of my sins, and have 8 more hours of peace with God and the joy in the Lord.

Look at graph 5. It is funny, isn't it! I have had lots of people say to me, "Jim, I confess my sins every night before I go to bed," and they do not laugh when they say that because they think for some reason that that was the right thing to do. Yes, it is better than not confessing, but if they had confessed the sin when it occurred, most of the others would not have happened at all, and they could have gone through the day in joy. Most people don't even confess at night.

Graph 5:



6. Vague terms

This is general confession. It is accumulating sins all day, then getting in bed and saying, "Lord, please forgive me for anything I might have done today," and rolling over and going to sleep. The result is you have 8 hours of no joy, instead of 8 hours of perfect joy.

A woman came up to me once at an Air Force base quite a few years ago and said, "I want to tell you that my husband has been quoting you from ten years ago when you were in Monterey." I was afraid to hear what I supposedly had said in Monterey. But it was this: "You cannot go to bed dirty and expect to wake up clean." That is very true.

If you have a physically dirty, cruddy job, you do not say, "Boy, I can hardly wait to get in between the sheets so I can wake up clean tomorrow morning." A lot of people think, "Well, tomorrow's another day. All of this is history. All this is water over the dam or under the bridge; I'll start clean tomorrow." No way will you start clean tomorrow! You will start with what you accumulated yesterday. If you want to wake up clean, you need to go to bed clean.

There is a case where general confession is true and right, but only after the specific sins have been taken care of. General confession will probably cover things that you did not do that you should have done. Psalm 19:12 says, "*Cleanse me from secret faults*" (NKJV). But don't call sins secret if they are not. Do not make them secret; do not hide them.

There may be sins that you do not know of that God knows. I think 1 John 1:9 also covers that when it says, "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins...*" Which sins? The ones we have confessed, "*to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1 John 1:9b).

Be specific on confessing your sins. Why? Because confession is made of three things:

1. Knowledge of what you have done
2. Admission of what you have done
3. The intention to forsake what you have done

When you confess, it means that you know what you have done, you admit it, and you have every intention of renouncing it. That is why it has to be specific. After confession of the specific sins God has shown us, there is a cleansing of all other unrighteousness. This is not a repetition. This is the faithfulness of God continuing the work of cleaning.

7. Mistakes—they were errors in judgment

Do not use euphemisms for sin. It will not get forgiven. In the last several years, many politicians and television evangelists have gotten into moral trouble. In several cases, they did not say it was moral trouble. They said, "I made a mistake." A mistake is saying that $2 + 2 = 5$. That is not a sin. That is incompetence, not immorality. These people would rather be incompetent than immoral. Unfortunately for them, God does not forgive incompetence. He forgives sin. If we call immorality immorality, it gets forgiven. But if we call it something else, it does not. That is just another form of justification, just another way to say, "I wasn't really at fault."

8. Too many

Over forty years ago I was talking with a young woman who said, “If I had to confess all of my sins specifically, it would take me ten years.” I assured her it would not if she would just start confessing. People who say there are too many are just making excuses because they do not want to start. That girl was right with the Lord before the weekend was over.

When my youngest son was 15, I was getting ready to make one of my trips to the East Coast when I realized I needed to have a visit with him before I left because things weren't going too well. So he came into my study and we sat down. He took the floor. He had seen me give this talk privately and publicly several times, so he knew it. He started right in and said, “Dad, if I started confessing my sins right now, and continued for the next ten years, it would only bring me up to mediocre.”

I said, “If I were you, I would get started.” When I called home from my trip, he answered the phone. I wanted to talk with his mother, but he wanted to talk with me. I couldn't get him off the phone. He said, “Dad, I want you to know that my room is spotless.”

I said, “Would you please give me an explanation for that?”

“Well, when you are clean on the inside, it is easy to be clean on the outside.” It did not take him ten years. He got cleaned up on the inside right away and then wanted to be clean on the outside, too.

There are never too many sins to confess. The Scripture says, “*But where sin abounded grace abounded much more*” (Romans 5:20b NKJV). You cannot out-sin the grace of God.

9. I cannot remember all of my sins

That is probably true, but the ones you cannot remember are not the ones that are bothering you anyhow, so start with the ones you *do* remember. As you name those, your joy will come back up, and very likely your memory will get better as you get closer to God.

10. Nobody's perfect or I am only human

These are two ways of saying that sin is inevitable. They are simply excuses.

11. I'm going to do it again, so why confess

If I say, “Lord, just forgive me for everything,” I will not be forgiven if I don't have any intention of quitting it. Some people quit confessing because they don't intend to quit sinning. “I will do it again, so why confess?” In other words, they do not renounce their sin, although they know it is sin. “Of course I'm going to do it again.” But if you renounce it, it is amazing how things will disappear out of your life.

12. I'm too proud to make restitution

The LORD said to Moses: If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the LORD by deceiving his neighbor about something entrusted to him or left in his care or stolen, or if he cheats him, or if he finds lost property and lies about it, or if he swears falsely, or if he commits any such sin that people may do—when he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found, or whatever it was he swore falsely about. He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner on the day he presents his guilt offering. And as a penalty he must bring to the priest, that is, to the LORD, his guilt offering, a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way the priest will make atonement for him before the LORD, and he will be forgiven for any of these things he did that made him guilty.” (Leviticus 6:1-7)

This quotation from the Old Testament simply says that there are two conditions for forgiveness.

1. Sacrifice for sins
2. Taking the money back plus 20%

Jesus is the one sacrifice for sins forever. That is God's part. What is our part? Restitution! If we have stolen it, it is not our money. We take it back. See the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. Restitution is not

works. It is an essential part of repentance.

If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. (Exodus 22:1)

Notice that this restitution is not 20%; it is an additional 400% for the ox and 300% for a sheep.

The LORD said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites: 'When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD, that person is guilty and must confess the sin he has committed. He must make full restitution for his wrong, add one fifth to it and give it all to the person he has wronged. But if that person has no close relative to whom restitution can be made for the wrong, the restitution belongs to the LORD and must be given to the priest, along with the ram with which atonement is made for him.'" (Numbers 5:5-8)

If the person or relative cannot be found, restitution goes to the Lord.

13. Bitterness

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:31-32)

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. (Hebrews 12:15)

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. (James 3:14-16)

Bitterness is simply prolonged resentment. It is difficult to repent of because we get focused on the other person's sin. Bitterness is our own sin, regardless how wrong the other person is. It makes no sense to stay miserable because someone else is in sin. See the booklet *How To Be Free*

From Bitterness. It can be obtained from *Community Christian Ministries* free of charge.

14. Introspection

But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isaiah 35:9b-10)

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. (1 Peter 1:8 MV)

Introspection is not the same as God's inspection. It is accusatory, and it is a downer. It does not aid in confession. It is a hindrance to it. Introspection needs to be confessed as sin in itself. There is also an article on *Introspection* in the booklet *How to be Free from Bitterness*.