

Spiritual Growth Lessons from Christian Ambassadors

Lesson 37

Repentance – Our Return To God

By Sharon K. Griffiee

Some months ago, I received a letter from an inmate who had just been hand cuffed, stuffed in a van and sent to Ad-Seg (Administrative Segregation, Maximum Security). He was charged with inciting a riot and disobeying a lawful order. Why such serious charges?

He had refused to sit and eat his lunch with a child molester and tossed his tray in the air. This was not the first time he had been sent to Ad-Seg. It was in fact, the third time. Sitting in 23-hour lockdown once again, with time on his hands to think about what just went down, the Holy Spirit started to deal with him about his attitude. In his moment of clarity he saw what had tripped him. He said,

*“It wasn’t gangs, or drugs, or violence that tripped me up this time. It was a stiff neck! Pride! **When did I start thinking I was better than others?**”*

The Word of God warns us that when we have an exaggerated opinion of ourselves, it causes us to look down on others and value them as *less* than we are.

Romans 12:3 (Amplified Bible) - *For by the grace (unmerited favor of God) given to me I warn everyone among you not to estimate and think of himself more highly than he ought [not to have an exaggerated opinion of his own importance], but to rate his ability with sober judgment, each according to the degree of faith apportioned by God to him.*

This revelation of truth, *thinking he was better than others*, exposed the *motive* for why he refused to sit across the table from a particular inmate. It also exposed the sin that led to the riot.

James 1:13-15 (NIV) - *When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*

As this inmate listened, the Holy Spirit continued to shine the light on his situation. He said,

“The problem with living in here is the evil. It’s everywhere. You must breathe its stench day in and day out. And if you let your guard down for just one second, it gets into you. You begin to look at other people differently. You begin to judge others race, religion, culture, or crime. You will find fault if you want to. And so begins the decline.”

“You will find fault if you want to.” No truer statement could have been made. There is a choice. We can find fault, *if we want to*.

The evil that is prevalent in prisons across the country is very real. It is not a figment of the imagination, nor is the mental and emotional pain associated with living in such an environment. There is no doubt about it, there is an *evil*, which accompanies pain caused by sin, and it can get into you, *if you let it*. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

I Corinthians 10:13 (NIV) - *No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*

Whether our pain succumbs [gives in] to the evil in our environment or not, depends on us (the choices we make). When we submit to God, He is faithful to provide a way out so we *can* stand up under the pressure of evil. Lesson learned; this inmate didn’t have to fall into Satan’s wicked trap, to think that one sin (or one sinner) was better or worse than another.

Until we learn to trust God (**Proverbs 3:5-7**) and lean on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, oppressive pain will have its way and loom too large in our life. The spirit of evil will take over our lives, *if we let it*. It will consume our thoughts, making us self-centered, judgmental and critical of everyone and everything. It can literally darken our whole outlook on life.

The consequence? Our relationship with God is jeopardized. Instead of obeying God and loving our neighbor as the Word teaches, we get caught up in following Satan’s cues. Satan’s hatred gets in us,

driving us to zero in on our neighbor's sin. Satan is, after all, the accuser of the brethren (**See: Revelation 12:10**). He is the one who keeps bringing our sins up before us, day and night. This obsession with our brother's sin blinds us into a false sense of superiority (**Proverbs 8:13**).

How so? As long as our focus is on our *neighbor's sin*, we foolishly think we don't have to deal with our own sin. With this mindset, Satan has us where he wants us, drifting farther and farther away from God.

As we seek the Word of God, we find Jesus asking an essential, life-saving question to bring us back;

Matthew 7:3-5 (NIV) - "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

What Jesus says here can be the critical turning point to our spiritual growth. When the plank of *hatred* has been removed from our own eyes, we begin to see our brother the same way God sees Him, through the eyes of *love and compassion*. We clearly see our brother's need to be brought back to God. We see for the first time that under the mud, the muck, and the mire of sin, our brother is really no different than we are.

Romans 3:23 (KJV) – "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

If all have sinned, we *all* need to repent; laying down our old sin nature, so we might return to God who has graciously restored us to favor with Himself.

II Corinthians 5:19 (Amplified Bible) - It was God [personally present] in Christ, reconciling and restoring the world to favor with Himself, not counting up and holding against [men] their trespasses [but canceling them], and committing to us the message of reconciliation (of the restoration to favor).

The bottom line: Jesus isn't sitting in heaven counting all our sins, so He can hold them against us. If Jesus isn't holding our sins against us, then neither should we be holding our brother's sins against him. We are currently living in the church age of God's

grace – that is good news! That means we should do everything we can, in this time of God's favor, to clean up our own lives; then with *humility* and God's loving support, help a brother clean up his!

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Questions for personal or group study:

1. The inmate in this lesson said he refused to eat lunch with a sinner. Yet the Bible says that Jesus ate with "sinners" on many occasions. When the Pharisees asked Jesus why he ate with sinners, what was his response? **See: Matthew 9:10-13**
2. What happens to our relationship with other people when we have an exaggerated opinion of ourselves, thinking we are better than others? How should we think about others and ourselves? **See: Romans 12:3**
3. The evil that is prevalent in prisons across the country is very real. How can prisoners stand up under the pressure of evil? **See: I Corinthians 10:13**
4. *Hatred* is the driving force that Satan uses to get us to zero in on our neighbor's sin? How does **Revelation 12:10** describe Satan's character?
5. What is the underlying reason why we focus our attention on our neighbor's sin? What are we avoiding?
6. Jesus tells us we need to make some changes in our own life *first*, before we can see clearly how to help our brother. What do we need to remove? **See: Matthew 7:3-5**
7. The good news is that we are currently living in the church age of God's grace. How important is it to get the message of reconciliation to those in need of repentance? **See: II Corinthians 5:19-21**
8. As a Christian inmate, have you found yourself falling into the trap of finding fault with other inmates, or are you reaching out to them with the love of God?