

THE GOSPEL IN STEP 4

We're going to look at two Scripture passages tonight, as we look at the Gospel in step 4. I want to start off with the first one, Psalm 130:

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;
² O Lord, hear my voice.
 Let your ears be attentive
 to my cry for mercy.
³ If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins,
 O Lord, who could stand?
⁴ But with you there is forgiveness;
 therefore you are feared.

The Gospel in step 4 is this: **God does not keep a record of sin.**

Believe that! If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, God does not keep a record of your sin. Your record of sin was wiped out by Christ on the Cross.

And yet, step 4 is all about *making* a record of sin. We are called to do a "fearless and searching moral inventory." An inventory is an accounting. It is a record. It is taking a clipboard, or chalk slate and recording sin, both our sins and the sins of others against us.

Why? If God keeps no record of sin, why do the Twelve Steps include this one? Why an inventory? Because God wants you to know what the record really was, so that you can be truly amazed at his grace when he throws that record out. Fill up the slate. Be fearless in the process. And stand amazed at Jesus, who has wiped your slate clean. God does not keep a record of sin – he doesn't want you to keep a record either. Yes, make the record of sin, the inventory, but then watch what God does with it and what you do with it.

Saint Augustine says that, “the beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner.” Personally, the more aware I am of my own sin, the closer I feel to Christ, because of his amazing grace. He did not come save the righteous, those who were in no need of a physician, but to call sinners to repentance, to healing. Thank God I’m a sinner, because Jesus came for me!

So let’s do a fearless moral inventory, because God is for us. Make the record of sin so that God say to you, “I keep no record of sin on you. Jesus has wiped your slate clean.”

The second passage we’re going to look at tonight is Ephesians 4:22-5:2. First, Eph 4:22-24:

²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. I really believe this happens when a serious fourth step is done.

Put Off the Old Self

Here’s a picture for us as we begin to look at what doing an inventory means. We’ve all seen homeless individuals wandering the streets, wearing all their clothes, even on hot days, carrying packs with all their possessions. This is no judgment but when we see them we are sad. As Christians, we are spiritually in the same way. We are homeless in a real sense, wandering this world looking for our home. And then Christ enters our lives, tells us where our real home is, and gives a sense of purpose and direction to our wandering.

But focus with me on the layers and layers of clothes, and the heavy bags and packs. They encumber us. They sap our strength. They are a burden. And yet, we've come to believe that they are the most important things in our lives, and we refuse to part with them. They are nothing more than rags and junk to an objective observer, but they come to define who we are.

All sin is rooted in unbelief. We don't believe that God is sufficient; that he will provide what we need; that he cares. So we sin – we look for love and acceptance elsewhere; we look for pleasure and self-gratification. And then we cover up – we hide; we put on layers of protection, so that our heart won't be hurt; we put on clothes to make us look really good to the outside, knowing how bad we look on the inside.

Doing an inventory is taking these rags off, layer by layer, putting them in a pile, and assessing their real value. This is what “putting off the old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires”, means. Our desires have deceived us – we will see that as we take off the layers of rags and lay down the bags of junk that once seemed so important to us.

Now Paul proceeds in this Ephesians passage to give us a list of how we are to be as we put off the old self, are made new in the attitude of our minds and put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness:

²⁵ Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. ²⁶ “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, ²⁷ and do not give the devil a foothold. ²⁸ He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of

redemption.³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.

Be honest, stop telling lies; Control your anger; Stop stealing, stop being selfish; watch what you say about and to others; and do not grieve the Holy Spirit by continuing to be a bitter, spiteful rage-aholic. OK? Just stop it!

And you say, “But people have lied to me and they’ve lied about me.” Who? Write that person’s name down in column one, and what they did in column two. “But I’ve been hurt by someone’s anger (maybe even abused).” Write that person’s name down, and what they did. “People have stolen from me. My spouse has withheld their love from me. My parents never had any time for me. It feels like they stole from me.” Write it down. “People have judged me, and then talked about me.” Write it down. What are you still bitter about? Who are you still bitter about? Write it down.

This is putting off the old self. As you write this stuff down, you are taking off layers of rags and laying down bags of junk that have sapped your strength and kept you sick.

So many people want to keep these layers on for protection. They don’t want people to really know them – they’re hurt, angry and sad, and the layers keep them that way. It’s a form of protection and safety. That’s why the step is described as a fearless inventory. You need to be in prayer, and you need a sponsor to hear you as you process stuff you’ve been avoiding for years.

And there are more layers to take off. You’ve listed people and what they’re actions were. Now write down **the effect** their actions had on you – did you

feel shame, or rejected, or stupid, or weak and powerless? Were you made to feel that something was wrong with you? Did you begin to be afraid, isolate, stay away from certain situations? Write it down. These layers are harder to take off – no one wants to talk about feeling weak, shamed, rejected, stupid, afraid. But when you share this with someone who cares and does not judge, someone who has shared some their similar struggles (a sponsor!), you begin to feel that, “Hey, these layers have been weighing me down! As I put them in a pile and really look at them, they were just keeping me from seeing what I needed to see.”

And the next layer – **the damage**. How have you responded to the person and the action? Are you afraid? Have you said, in effect, “Enough of this. I’m going to go get as much of what I want as I can, because if no one else cares, why should I?” What have you done to medicate, to ease to pain of your circumstances? Has a lack of love or compassion caused you to have difficulty being intimate with anyone? Write down the damage. Keep peeling off the layers of rags, and let go of the junk. Look at it all, in piles in front of you. This is your old self – all that stuff is a measure of the deceitful desires that have corrupted you, Paul says.

(As I write this, my heart is encouraged at what God does in the person’s heart that has had to courage to take off all these layers, put them in a pile and look carefully at them. May someone tonight get the courage to do this, and to do this well.)

Be Made New in the Attitude of Your Minds

Now we come to the fifth column – your part. You’ve peeled off some layers of rags to get you to the part God has wanted you to get to for a long time –

your part. Look at your interaction with the person who hurt you, or lied to you, who caused you to feel shame or anger or unloved. Be fearless – remember what

Psalm 130 says:

- ³ If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins,
 O Lord, who could stand?
⁴ But with you there is forgiveness;
 therefore you are feared.

Only fear the one with whom there is forgiveness – have a healthy fear of God. Come before him in humility, sold-out, helpless except for his grace, and do not forget that he **keeps no record of sin**.

I said earlier that all sin is rooted in unbelief. If that's true, then it's also true that all righteousness and holiness is rooted in belief. A lot of us struggle with really believing that we're totally forgiven, so I want us to remind us of the truth of justification – be open to the renewing of your minds. The renewing of our minds has to mean movement from unbelief to belief. God does the renewing, but be open to it, as it is the way for us to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still **powerless**, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹ Since we have now been **justified by his blood**, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been **reconciled**, shall we be **saved through his life**! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but **we also rejoice** in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

We come to Jesus as powerless sinners (step 1), trust in His blood, and we are declared not guilty – that is justification; that is throwing out your record of

sin. And, having been justified, we are saved from God's wrath and are reconciled to him – we have been adopted into his family. We have the guarantee of inheritance by the presence of God's Spirit in us. And it is this Spirit that saves us even now.

And the result, Paul says, is that we should live a life of joy because of these truths.

Recovery means more joy, and I think the fourth step is a place where this process to joy happens. As we look at our part, we will be grieved at the extent of our sin, but we will also be beyond grateful at the amazing grace of our Savior.

We look at these layers of rags and junk that we've put on the ground, and by God's grace, we now see them differently. We see our part, and that affects everything.

Two examples from my life (some of you have heard these): My dad cheated on my mom, as I found out for most of their marriage. I found out as an adult, but it did rock my world. When neither he nor my mom would change, get better, I reacted with anger. I couldn't fix them. As I came to understand, part of my codependent behavior, especially as a child, was to be as perfect as possible, over-achieving, in an attempt to keep everything together. It was a losing battle, and I deal with perfectionism all the time now.

But what was my part with my dad? It took a long time, but I came to realize how harshly I judged him. Sure, I had prayed about the situation, but I came to a point where I realized I had never forgiven him for what he did to my mom (this happened after she had passed away). It was clearly God who enabled that realization within me, but my part was being really judgmental. I was able to let that go, and our relationship improved, thankfully not that long before he passed

away. It was not my place to deal with my dad's sin – that was between him and God. It was my place to offer forgiveness, even as Christ has offered me forgiveness. And I will tell you, there is tremendous freedom not only in being forgiven, but in offering forgiveness.

My second example is the EPA. I was, for about a year, the target of a criminal investigation. There was no basis for the charge, but the cost to defend was really high – it created stress, worry and concern about the future. I had absolutely no control over the situation, and that was really hard for me.

Now what was my part? Nothing – I was a victim of an overzealous EPA agent – I tell you this example because it is quite possible that when you get to your part of the conflict, you may well be able to say, “No part.” This is certainly true for victims of abuse. Hopefully, even in the analysis of the hurt, being able to say you had no part in the conflict can bring a sense of relief – no more, “what could I have done differently?” If the honest, prayerful answer to that is, “Nothing” then you should acknowledge that.

Remember the Gospel principle in view here: God does not keep a record of sin. He doesn't keep a record of your sin, and the sins of others listed on your inventory are no longer your concern. If God forgives you, then who are you to judge yourself? And if God offers forgiveness to others, who are you to get in the way of that?

So you look at the rags you've taken off and the baggage you've unloaded. This stuff used to be important to you, but as you look at it with a renewed mind, as you see it clearly as a burden keeping you from walking in the

way God wants you to go, you let it go. All that matters is getting right with God, coming to him in repentance and faith with your stuff, and believing the good news that God will not keep a record of it. And if God does not keep a record of it, then you don't have to either.

You are naked before God – honest before God. And you are now ready to put on his robes of righteousness.

Put On the New Self

I think verse 24 is awesome – we were created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Because this is what we were created to be, therefore, as Paul says in v. 2 of chapter 5, be “imitators of God, as dearly loved children.” The fourth step is a difficult, sometimes painful process, as you peel off the layers and baggage. But the more you peel off, the more you can see that, amazingly, you are a dearly loved child of God, and you were created to bear his image of righteousness and holiness. You! That is good news; that is the Gospel.

These two verses are the bookends of the commands we spoke of earlier. When you believe all the good news that we've talked about tonight – Christ died for you, so that you have been justified and declared not guilty; as a result of Christ's work on your behalf, your record of sin is gone; more than just being forgiven, you've been reconciled to God, adopted into his family; you are a beloved child – you can put on righteousness and holiness. Again, if sin is rooted in unbelief, righteousness is rooted in belief.

So put on the robe of truth and honesty. It matters less and less whether someone has been honest with you. Jesus Christ is the Truth, and that is

enough. Speak and act truthfully with your neighbor. One of the gifts I see given to many alcoholics in recovery is their ability to speak truthfully without judgment. It is righteous behavior, and comes from working the steps with God working in them.

So put on the robe of peace and self-control. People and circumstances will still conspire to make you angry, but when you look at your inventory, you realize your angry responses have been your responsibility. Put on the robe of peace and be like God; imitate God. Consider all that you have done that should have made God angry with you and then consider his response. His wrath was poured out at the Cross so that he doesn't have to stay angry with you. You are reconciled to God – make every effort to be reconciled to all those around you.

So put on the robe of giving. The selfish acts of others are now rags that you've taken off and piled up on the ground. Give of yourself – service here is a great start, but begin to give of yourself to people who you have withheld yourself from. You've closed yourself off from others. You've not shared the real you with others. You have something to share with others, and it's you. Be an imitator of God, who did not withhold himself, but gave of himself, to the point of giving his life. He has shared his life with you. With the robe of giving, you now can share yourself in the same way.

So put on the robe of encouragement. Others have said stuff that really hurt you and angered you, but this stuff is now rags in a pile on the ground in front of you. Encourage others by your words, even as you continue to look to God's word to encourage you. Be an imitator of Jesus – because he encourages you, and because you have put on his righteousness, you can now build others up with your words.

We often say to “stick around until the miracle happens.” In my experience, that does not often happen before step 4. I believe one of the miracles is what happens with this record of sin we call a spiritual inventory – the miracle is that you enter this process focused on the sins of others, but you leave it focused on you. When that happens, God has captured your attention, and that is the miracle. You put off the bitterness; the resentments; the hurt; the disappointments. You affirm that God keeps no record of sin. You are forgiven. And if that’s the case, you don’t have to keep a record of sin either. And when you let go of this, and put on the robes of Christ’s righteousness, transformation begins to really happen. Be fearless as you approach this step, do it prayerfully, seriously, with a sponsor, and see what God does. I promise it will be a miracle!