

“Winning the War on Mold”

I John 1:5-10

Series: Red Letter Challenge Week 3. Forgiving

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After our wedding Lisa and I moved into our first apartment at Princeton Seminary. The rent was \$190 a month which was really dirt cheap even in 1983. Remember the words “dirt” and “cheap.” The basement frequently flooded, you had to run the water 30 minutes before it got hot, and you lit the gas oven with a match which occasionally burned off your eyebrows. It was not the best first home for our baby Peter – especially since his first pets were cockroaches.

Our apartment featured brown wood paneling which gave it that classic Brady Bunch Basement look. I thought it was a nice touch until I uncovered its sinister purpose: the dark paneling hid a plague of black mold. Almost every Saturday I declared my “War on Mold.” Bleach and brush in hand I scrubbed the walls until they were white again. It was so satisfying to see the transformation from darkness to light. In time, however, the damp walls and dark room caused the creeping contagion to return. I was winning the battle but mold won the war. Years after I graduated they knocked down all those apartments. Whenever I go back to remember the old days, if I am quiet and listen carefully I can sometimes hear the mold...laughing.

As you know, mold causes health problems. Sinus congestion, itchy eyes, sneezing, coughs, headaches and troubles with asthma. Prolonged exposure to toxic molds can be life-threatening. How does mold grow? Mold spores are tiny seeds which land on a food source – usually a plant based product like wood, wall paper, dry wall paper. Now all it needs is moisture and warmth. And while mold can grow slowly in the light, it loves to multiply and spread in the dark. Today, there are services like Moldman dedicated to fight for truth, justice and a mold-free America. Just say the word and Moldman will go to battle for you and win the war on mold.

There is, however, another war on mold going on in the soul. Sin, like mold, grows and spreads. We feed it through what we think, see, say and do. Every selfish act, every tempting or rebellious thought, every hurtful, caustic word feeds and nourishes the mold of sin. It can grow slowly in the light but it prefers to hide in the dark. Above all, sin is toxic. It poisons us and every relationship including our relationship with God. There is a way to win the war on moldy sin that’s stronger than Moldman. It’s called Grace and Forgiveness.

So far in the Red Letter Challenge we’ve learned about BEING with God. Our DOING flows from our BEING. Grace is the basis of our BEING with Jesus. Grace means God freely forgives us through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Grace frees us from our bonds and burdens. Because of Grace, I don’t need to hang my head in shame. I don’t need to heap up merit badges to earn God’s love. Grace means I am Forgiven. The Challenge theme for this week is FORGIVING. I don’t need to hide my sins since God forgives them. The Apostle John says,

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. I John 1:9

What does it mean to confess? To admit you did something wrong. The Greek word for confession literally means “to say the same thing.” If I steal your cupcake, you catch me with icing on my face, and you say, “You stole my cupcake” confession is me saying the same thing, “Yes, I stole your cupcake.” Confession to God is me agreeing with God about my sin. If I agree with God and confess my sins, He is ready and willing to forgive and purify my sin.

So why don't we confess? For one thing, we **Deny** we do anything wrong. There's a story about a CEO who takes on a new job. He meets with the outgoing CEO who says, “Sometimes you'll make mistakes. When that happens, I have prepared three envelopes for you. I left them in the top drawer of the desk. The first time it happens, open #1. The second time you mess up, open #2. The third time, open #3.”

For the first few months, everything goes fine. Then the CEO makes his first mistake, goes to the drawer, opens up envelope #1, and the message reads, “Blame me.” So he does: “This is the old CEO's fault. He made these mistakes. I inherited these problems.” Everybody says, “Okay.” It works out pretty well. Things go fine for a while, and then he makes his second mistake. So, he goes to the drawer and opens up envelope #2. This time he reads, “Blame the board.” And he does: “It's the board's fault. I inherited them. They're the problem.” Everybody says, “Okay, that makes sense.” Things go fine for a while, and then he makes his third mistake. So, he opens up envelope #3. The message reads: “Prepare three envelopes.”¹

The Apostle John says, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). When we deny sin we fool ourselves. We convince ourselves sin doesn't hurt us or anyone, we can stop anytime, and there are no consequences. We think we have sin under control yet denial actually allows the sin to rule us.

When we Deny sin we also try to **Deflect** the punishment by blaming someone else. We have a long history of blaming others. It goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden when Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on (sorry that's an old Alpha joke). The CEO played the Blame Game until it was Game Over. Blaming others for our mistakes is unjust. It hurts and breaks relationships.

John says Denying sin and Deflecting the blame drive us deeper into the **Darkness**.

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. 1 John 1:5-6

Strange as it may seem, people do prefer the darkness. A website called the “Experience Project” describes itself as the place to share “life experiences.” In one post, readers were asked to respond to the following statement: “I prefer darkness over light.” A young woman wrote:

I prefer darkness over light. The darkness allows me to hide who I am and what I truly feel. In the light all things have a chance to be revealed. Darkness makes it easier to hide.

¹ <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2009/october/3102609.html>

Lost in the dark is a great place to be because then you are free from what you were and can be what you want. The darkness is bliss.²

What is the screen name of the woman who loves the dark? “Beyond Repair.” This is the scary truth about walking or living in darkness: we get accustomed to it – our eyes adjust and it begins to feel normal. We even convince ourselves we prefer it. Yet the darkness is not our friend. It encourages sin to grow like toxic mold.

Denial and Deflection can even drive pastors into the Darkness. In his book on *Grace*, Max Lucado shares how he decided to swear off alcohol at 21. He loves beer. Nothing wrong with that except that alcohol and his family DNA didn’t mix. So he quit. Then many years later

At some point I reached for a can of brew instead of a can of soda, and as quick as you can pop the top, I was a beer fan again. A once-in-a-while...then once-a-week...then once-a-day beer fan. I kept my preference to myself.

He kept this secret. No drinking at home. No drinking in public. That left only one option: liquor store parking lots.

On route to speak at a men’s retreat, I stopped for my daily purchase. I walked out of the convenience store with a beer pressed against my side, scurried to my car for fear of being seen, opened the door, climbed in, and opened the can. Then it dawned on me. I had become the very thing I hate: a hypocrite. A pretender. Two-faced. Acting one way. Living another. I had written sermons about people like me – Christians who care more about appearance than integrity. It wasn’t the beer but the cover-up that nauseated me.³

No matter what sin you commit, no one is beyond repair. No one need live one minute more in darkness. God’s Forgiveness is waiting for you. Leave the darkness and step into the Light.

But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. I John 1:7

Confession purifies our sin and heals our relationships. It’s stronger than bleach on mold. You begin to walk in God’s Light when you get honest.

The place to begin is to **Get Honest with Yourself**. No more deflection and blaming others. No more denial. Stop the minimizing, justifying, whitewashing. What mold in your soul causes pangs of regret, twinges of guilt, spasms of shame? Left unchecked, mold will grow, spread and infect your relationships. You might become sullen, overly sensitive, crabby, even cross with others. When you push feelings down into the dark, they tend to pop out sideways. So take an honest look at yourself – what you thought, said and did. Review your day at bedtime. Honestly confess the sins and shortcomings which accumulated through the day: unkind words,

² <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/january/5012714.html>

³ Max Lucado, *Grace: More than We Imagine/Greater than We Deserve* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012) p. 82.

harsh judgments and prejudices, careless gossip, self-serving acts, unethical decisions, indulgent temptations. Use King David's prayer,

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Psalm 139:23-24

This leads to the second step **Get Honest with God**. Shine God's Light on the sin. Just as light kills mold, so God's Light attacks and purifies sin. This sounds scary. Why would I want to bring my deep dark secret sins into the blinding light of God? Because Forgiveness is waiting there for you. King David knows this. He cries out,

God, be merciful to me because you are loving. Because you are always ready to be merciful, wipe out all my wrongs. Wash away all my guilt and make me clean again. I know about my wrongs, and I can't forget my sin. You are the only one I have sinned against; I have done what you say is wrong. You are right when you speak and fair when you judge. Psalm 51:1-4 NCV

If David counted on God's grace and forgiveness in the Old Testament, how much more can we depend on the Grace of God now that Jesus gave His life to forgive all our sins? God's Light is gentle and gracious, it forgives, cleanses, heals. Always. Remember what the Apostle John said,

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. I John 1:9

It doesn't say, He *may* forgive, He *might* forgive, He'll *think* about it. No. He *will* forgive and purify us from *all* unrighteousness. He is completely committed to our healing and restoration, to winning the war on mold in us. When you come to Be with God on Monday, March 13 this is one of the messages I hope you will hear loud and clear when you pray. But there is a third step and, strange as it may seem, this feels tougher than talking with God.

Get Honest with Someone. The Apostle James says, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective" (James 5:16). Now you may say, "Wait a second! I thought Presbyterians don't have to confess to other people. We can go straight to God and be forgiven." That is true. You do not need a middleman or mediator to receive God's forgiveness. Confessing to another person on earth is for *our* benefit. Why? So long as I try to keep this thing secret between me and God, I'm still keeping it in the dark where it can fester and grow. Bringing it into the light by talking with a trusted, confidential fellow believer means I want to be honest about it and I'm ready to get rid of it. Why do we hesitate to tell the truth? Pride and Fear. Pride wants to present a spotless image. Fear worries about rejection. Pride, Fear and Darkness are the three conditions which encourage the growth of moldy sin.

So how do you find the right person? Look for someone not directly affected by your sin, someone who is confidential and trustworthy, a good listener, a believer in the Lord, and maybe even someone who, by God's grace, is gaining victory over the issue plaguing you.

And if you hurt someone it is also essential to get honest and ask that person to forgive you. A straightforward "I am sorry" or "I was wrong, please forgive me" without justifications and excuses will start you on the road to reconciliation.

Finally, **Get Someone Off the Hook**. If you are forgiven, you must also forgive. The Bible often connects the two. This is why Jesus tells us to pray, "Forgive our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors" Matthew 6:12. If God's forgiveness flows to you, it also must flow through you. This is not easy. You may even feel it's impossible. You might find this is the hardest of Jesus' Red Letter Challenges. Yet if God gave His life to forgive and free us, He wants us to do the same. Getting someone else off the hook, may also finally set you free.

Woodside, let's be a church where people can be honest, where struggling souls receive grace and forgiveness, not judgment and condemnation, where those who mess up countless times can step into God's Light and receive love and hope.

Max Lucado found his church was just such a place. When he realized he was hiding his drinking, Max threw the beer in the trash and sat for a long time in his car praying. It would have been easy for him just to confess this to God. Yet he wanted help. So he met with his elders.

I didn't embellish or downplay my actions; I just confessed them. And they, in turn, pronounced forgiveness over me. Jim Potts, a dear, silver-haired saint, reached across the table and put his hand on my shoulder and said something like this: "What you did was wrong. But what you are doing tonight is right. God's love is great enough to cover your sin. Trust his grace." That was it. No controversy. No brouhaha. Just healing.

After talking to the elders, I spoke to the church. At our midweek gathering I once again told the story. I apologized for my duplicity and requested the prayers of the congregation. What followed was a refreshing hour of confession in which other people did the same. The church was strengthened, not weakened, by our honesty.⁴

There is a lot of moldy sin.

So with God's Forgiveness let's roll up our sleeves and win this war.

⁴ Lucado, p. 88.