An Exercise in Proactive Repentance
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Repentance is the act of agreeing with God about our sin, turning from it and rejoicing in what God has done for us in Jesus. Most of our repentance is reactive. We repent primarily for the sins that are staring us in the face or the ones that others point out. And honestly, even then, sometimes we delay dealing with our sin.

But what if we weren’t just reactive in dealing with our sin, but proactive? This is a trait we see in many of the godly men and women of the Bible: Josiah (2 Chron. 34), Daniel (Dan 9), and David (Psalm 139:23-24) to name a few.

Why Should Repentance Be Proactive?
But why should we be proactive in repentance? Don’t we only need to repent when God shows us something we’ve done wrong? Why in the world, when everything seems good, would it be beneficial to proactively search for sin to repent of?

John the Baptist said: "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance." (Luke 3:8) Consider also 1 John 1:8-10: "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us."

The goal is not to be perfect and sinless... only Jesus fits in that category. But rather to live a lifestyle of repentance, facing our sinful hearts with boldness, confessing the sin that’s there, and believing the Gospel again and again for those areas of brokenness. It is in that broken place of repentance were the Spirit of God begins to change us.

A Spring Cleaning for Your Soul
I encourage you to set aside 2 hours to do this exercise in proactive repentance. Think of this like a “spring cleaning” for your soul. The majority of my house may look clean and tidy but that doesn’t mean there isn’t dirt and grime in hidden places. Every now and then it’s good to pull the couches back from the wall and vacuum, clean out the hall closets and garage, and get to those places I don’t look at every day.

This exercise is a time to ask God to shine light on those dark and dusty corners of your heart. It is a time to expose sinful tendencies that you rarely think of or are even aware of. After staring those sins in the face, talking to God about them, confessing them, you then get to seek God and His Word for what true repentance looks like in your life through your actions.

Over the years I have often taken between 7-10 days to seek God by prayer and fasting to do this very thing: asking Him to show me where there is unrepentant sin that I need to deal with. Oh how refreshing to my soul those times have been! And also how surprised I always am to see the sins creeping into my life in hidden ways I have not yet noticed. This is just a small practice of such a thing.
The Assignment
So set aside 2 hours, get your Bible out and work through the following tasks. Please take your time as you work through this because being rushed will defeat the effectiveness of this exercise.

1. Read Psalm 139. In your journal, write out verses 23-24. Write them out 2 more times. As you are copying these verses, pray them over yourself.

2. Give yourself 20 minutes to quiet your heart and write down any sins or sinful thought patterns that God brings to mind. Set a timer on your phone to help you commit to 20 minutes.

Don't answer texts or emails during this time. If your mind wanders, just reread verses 23-24 again. Use those verses to reign in your thoughts. Listening for God's still small voice is a discipline. It takes focus and work.

3. Take some time to process with God any sins He has exposed. Look up verses that come to mind that relate to those things. Ask God to break your heart over those sins. Ask Him what repentance looks like. If you have a journal, you might write those verses down that you looked up or write out a prayer.

Please don't rush! Take as much time here as you need! Sometimes parts 2 & 3 take me a whole hour. Once you feel ready to move on, go on to part 4.

4. Read Daniel 9:1-19. Read through it a second time with the awareness that Daniel was a good man, not outwardly sinning, not in willful rebellion against God or others. He was proactively seeking God. As you read through this second time, think about why a good, decent man might pray this way. Read through a 3rd time, this time make a list with 2 columns in your journal or on a piece of paper. Label the first column: GOD. Label the second column: US. Read Daniel's prayer and list all the things He says about God in the first column and all he says about “we” or “I” in the second column.

Daniel identifies himself with the sinful people around him. He doesn't point the finger at the sin around him. He sees the same seed of those sins in himself. Is this something missing in your life? Are you quick to point the finger at others and yet never search your own heart?

5. Make a list of the sins you see in other people that bother you the most. Don't be shy or surface-y. Be brutally honest. What in other believers or nonbelievers drives you crazy.

6. Spend 10 minutes asking God to show you where the seed of that same sin is present in your heart. Again, set a timer on your phone to make sure you commit to 10 minutes.

7. Through the process of reading through Daniel 9, has God revealed any other sins to repent of? Take some time to write those down and process them with God as you did in part 3. Consider reading David's famous prayer of repentance found in Psalm 51 to give you an example of a repentant heart.
8. Finally, before you leave where you are, answer the following questions.
   • Was this an uncomfortable process for you? Why or why not?
   • Was there any fear in shining the light in the dark corners of your heart? Were you afraid of what you might find?
   • Did God reveal anything in your heart that surprised you? (Ex: Envy when you were certain you aren't an envious person.) Write down up to 3 specific sins or sinful thought patterns God revealed to you in this time.
   • In your own words, answer the question “what is repentance?” (Feel free to do some research in your Bible to answer this well.)
   • What does "bearing fruit in keeping with repentance" (Luke 3:8) look like in regards to those specific sins you listed earlier? Give some very practical steps/examples of what this will look like for you to walk in repentance from what God has exposed. Remember, exposing sin is always so that through repentance we will change! Not just so that we will know.
   • Please write down any other thoughts you have about this process and your experience.
   • Lastly, write out a prayer of repentance in regards to these things.

Share With Someone Else
I highly encourage you to share your answers to these questions with someone: maybe your spouse or a close friend. While we are commanded to confess our sins to God and repent, He also asked us to “confess our sins to one another and pray for one another that we might be healed.” Community is an important element of how God changes us. We cannot seek God in isolation. Sharing these things with someone else and asking them to pray for you is a crucial element in this process.

I hope you have been blessed by walking through this exercise, and I challenge you to consider setting aside time once a year to do a “spring cleaning” for your soul! Next time, you might consider setting aside an hour or two every day for a week to seek God and be proactively repentant!

“For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it’ You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” –Psalm 51:16-17