

Helping Your Counselee to Confess But Not Obsess Over Their Sin

Overcoming Low-Grade Condemnation

Grace Fellowship Church / Pastor Brad Bigney

- How would you help a counselee that's stuck in a cycle of 'condemnation' that just keeps turning deeper and deeper in on itself?

I. Start By Examining and Strengthening Their Spiritual 'CORE'

I'm talking about their identity in Christ! And here's why it matters so much: Because when you don't know who you are, you can't fight like a child of God.

I think assurance of adoption and identity in the family of God is what comprises the 'CORE' of our spiritual lives. So, Satan goes after it relentlessly.

Ephesians 6:14-15 “¹⁴ Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.”

Because the word 'Gospel' and 'Feet' are being used together in v. 15 a lot of people think he's talking about sharing the gospel with lost people. It's not a verse about us proclaiming the gospel to others. It's a verse about us being convinced of it for ourselves, so that...

- I have peace with God now
- I know I'm a child of God
- I know that I have no shame, no condemnation, and no record of my sin that will ever be brought against me
- Because all of my sins – past, present, and future – have been nailed to the cross so that they no longer define me, haunt me, or condemn me before a holy God!

Romans 5:1-2 “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand...”

Colossians 3:3-4 “³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.
⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

And I know feet and footwear don't sound like the most important thing in battle but Roman soldiers knew differently. They understood that, regardless of your strengths or weapons, the advantage always goes to one whose feet are not slipping. The advantage goes to the one who has a firm foothold and can stand.

II. Help Them to Distinguish Between Conviction and Condemnation

A. The Spirit's Conviction of Sin Is One of the Best Indicators of Being Born Again

When you put your trust in Christ your eyes are opened in a whole new way to see sin like you'd never seen it before. So, it's not that you're sinning more than before you became a Christian; it's just that you have a new awareness of it, so that it grieves you like never before.

This shouldn't be a problem since the apostle Paul said...

Romans 5:20 "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more"

"The Bible nowhere teaches that once we have been savingly united with Christ, we will find grievous sins to be a thing of the past. On the contrary, it is our regenerate state that has more deeply sensitized us to the impropriety of our sins. Our sins feel far more sinful after we have become believers than before. And it's not only our felt perception of our sinfulness; we do indeed continue to sin after becoming believers. Sometimes we sin big sins." Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly*, p. 90-91

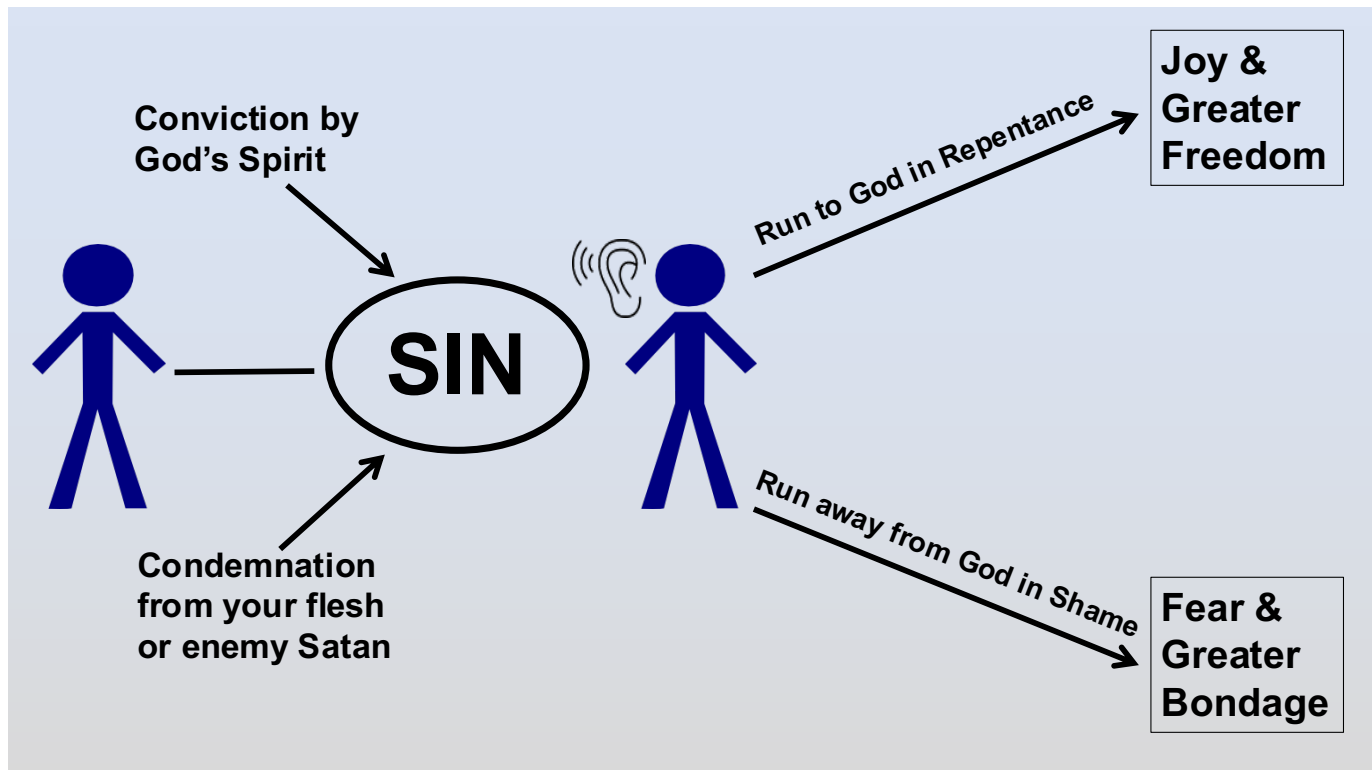
What your counselee may not understand well enough is that while the Holy Spirit convicts us, Satan wants to crush us and condemn us. He wants us to keep feeling guilty, so that we'll live with a low-grade fever of condemnation, because that will actually lead you back into more sin!

"As long as I am stricken with the guilt of my sins, I will be captive to them, and will often find myself re-committing the very sins about which I feel most guilty. The Devil is well aware of this fact; he knows that if he can keep me tormented by sin's guilt, he can dominate me with sin's power.

The gospel, however, stays sin at this root point and thereby nullifies sin's power over me. The forgiveness of God, made known to me through the gospel, liberates me from sin's power because it liberates me first from its guilt; and preaching such forgiveness to myself is a practical way of putting the gospel into operation as a nullifier of sin's power in my life." *The Gospel Primer*, Milton Vincent, pg. 19

B. The Spirit's Conviction Was Designed to Drive You Back to Your Savior

It was designed to bring about confession, repentance, and renewal in our relationship with God, and is intended to drive us into the arms of our Savior! But condemnation distorts the healthy process of what God wants to do through biblical conviction. One drives you back to God and the other away from God.



Ask your counselee to think about the path they typically take regarding their sin:

- Do they pull away from God and try to hide their sin?
- Do they wonder if God still loves them?
- Do they think God is angry and needs time to 'cool off' before they can approach Him?
- Do they feel overwhelmed and ready to give up?

Hebrews 4:14-16 “¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

C. The Spirit's Conviction is Specific and Focused

The conviction of the Spirit is pinpointed. He puts His finger on specific areas of my life, so that I can confess, repent, be forgiven, and move on. In contrast to that, the condemnation of Satan wants to keep you living in a kind of no-man's land of vague and general guilt.

Satan never comes at you with anything specific because it's designed to overwhelm you and make you lose heart, not to grow you and make you more like Christ. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, works with surgical precision that can be painful but, oh, so helpful.

III. Help Them to Distinguish Between Stumbling and Wallowing

Romans 7:21-25 “²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.”

When you listen to the words of Paul in Romans 7, you're listening to a sheep that's struggling with sin, not a pig that's wallowing in it. There's a big difference!

“Sheep and swine both end up in the mire. Yet the essential difference in their two natures is quite visible from the reaction each has to its fallen condition. While sheep do stray and stumble into the mire, they quickly loathe the situation and struggle to get free. They may be dirty, but they desire to be clean. They may be stuck, but they bleat for their shepherd to come and save them out of the muck. But swine, in keeping with their nature, wallow in the muck, content to stay there all day... authentic Christians can and do fall under temptation and into the mire of sin... The apostle Paul prepares us for this: 'Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness' (Galatians 6:1).” *The Great Work of the Gospel*, John Ensor, p. 126-127

IV. Show Them Where to Fix Their Eyes

The success of our fight against sin requires us to keep looking to Christ Who broke the chains of sin in our lives and set us free to live radically different.

That's why right on the heels of the great faith chapter in Hebrews chapter 11, Hebrews chapter 12 gives us one of the most effective strategies for fighting sin – fixing our eyes on Christ and what He's done.

Hebrews 12:1-3 “ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

Take ten looks at Christ for every one look at ourselves.

“There are some Christians who are guilty of continually putting their souls on a plate and dissecting them... so that they stay depressed because they stay so preoccupied with themselves instead of occupied with Christ. there is only one way to get rid of self, and that is that you should become so absorbed in someone or something else that you have no time to think about yourself. Thank God, the Spirit of God makes that possible... But why are [so many Christians] morbidly preoccupied with themselves? The answer is that they are not sufficiently occupied with Him. It is our failure to know Him and His ways as we should know them – that is the real trouble. If we only spent more of our time looking at Him we should soon forget ourselves.” D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Its Cure*, p. 103, 88

Nowhere does the Bible push us towards greater introspection of our own sin. In fact, it consistently calls us to remember who Christ is, and to go deeper in our understanding of what He’s done for us.

- How would you get this going in your counselee’s life?

Get them to read the Gospels (Matt, Mark, Luke, John), the book Colossians, and the book of Hebrews over and over and over until their sin is dwarfed and overshadowed by their great and glorious Savior!

V. Show them How to Turn Regret into Praise

I Timothy 1:12-17 “¹²I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen”

What you see from Paul is that he wasn't afraid of remembering his own sin, because he never stopped seeing it in light of God's mercy and God's Son!

"My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner, and Christ is a great Savior!" **John Newton** – blind and on his deathbed at 82 years old

Suggested Reading for You and Your Counselees

Scrupulosity – *Gospel Peace for Moral Obsession*, Brent Osterberg, ACBC, 2025

Gospel Primer, Milton Vincent, Focus Pub., 2008

Gentle and Lowly – *The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*, Dane Ortlund, Crossway, 2020

Think Again – *Relief from the Burden of Introspection*, Jared Mellinger, New Growth Press, 2017

Good News for Those Trying Harder, Alan Kraft, David C. Cook Pub., 2008

How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian? Jeremy Pierre, Crossway, 2022