

Week 7

The Disorder of Sin — Personal Patterns **Guide: Uncovering the Mystery of Our Sin**



Last week we reviewed the record of our sins in the light of God's love for us. This week we give ourselves the time to probe the *patterns* of our sinfulness that we might even more deeply understand God's love and desires for us.

We've all seen those children's puzzles that begin with a page full of dots. As we draw lines to connect the dots, an image appears that we couldn't see before. That's what this week is about.

We want to connect the dots and see the patterns emerge, so as to understand just how sin happens in us. What motivations come into play? What forces are in tension in my heart? Can I identify underlying *inclinations* that habitually and instinctively work against God's desires in me? Can I put names on my most basic *unfreedoms*? My most basic *fears*?

Sin, and the unfreedom that supports it, are complex realities. Nobody really gets up in the morning and says, "I think I'm going to be unloving today. I've decided to be selfish, in fact, just plain absorbed in myself today. Yes, whenever given the choice, I come first. I'm going to give in to lust and greed today, and I'm going to block out the cry of the poor; I just won't pay attention to my role in the rest of the world." We all know that it is much more subtle than that. We always sin by choosing something that we think is good, that we think is right for us, that we think we need. Our desire here is to uncover the way we approach sin.

Throughout this week, let's increase the intensity of our desire for God's help. Just as when I am approaching a critical surgery and ask everyone I know to pray for me, I might turn to loved ones who have died to ask them to intercede with the Lord for me, so that I might be given an instinctive insight into my sinfulness. I can feel them eager for my freedom. I might spend time with Mary, the mother of our Lord, and ask her to intercede on my behalf. I can surely feel that she is there for me. Then I can turn to Jesus directly, pouring out my gratitude for the graces already received in this retreat and begging him to ask God, the Father and our Creator, to give me the grace to see the sinful patterns in my life. Finally, I turn to the God who made me and beg that I might embrace the freedom being offered me.

The more deeply we comprehend the mystery of our sin, the more intensely we will feel that the mercy and love of the death and resurrection of Jesus is for me.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

Honesty, humble sorrow, and deep gratitude are graces we desire for this week. What concrete means can we use to open ourselves to receive these graces from our Lord, who deeply desires to give them to us?

First of all, it may be important to review last week's help, regarding some important cautions about doing these exercises without a director.

Penetrating focus is the key. Here are a few examples.

If one of the sins that I have remembered is that I had an affair a number of years ago, this is the week during which I can uncover all the grace that is being offered me. (Any serious sin offers the same opportunity.) The temptation here is to say that it is something I did in the past, it is over, I confessed it, I was forgiven, and I shouldn't dwell on it because it will never happen again. Why dredge up an old sorrow?

This is a possible time for several new graces. I can beg to understand the pattern or patterns beneath the sin. I can ask to understand the underlying dishonesty and recklessness, even to explore the neediness and selfishness that was there. If I keep going, in the confident trust that God's love and mercy will show me a grace that reveals the depth of that love, God's grace will be given. Perhaps I will discover that the heart of this sin was not sex, for example, but an escape from myself, from the loneliness or pain I was feeling. Perhaps I will be given a grace to see, in this trusting exploration, that my deepest sin was that I failed to turn to the Lord in my need; I didn't rely on or even listen to what grace might have been offered me there.

When I'm in trouble, I do something to fill the void, escape the pain, hide the mistake, compromise here and there. Perhaps I will see a pattern in my unwillingness to accept the cross in my life — dying to myself — because I haven't accepted the depth of the freedom offered to me in the Lord's dying on the cross for me. And what can draw me into this depth is the attraction to know the profound embrace of love that is offered me there, when everything is opened in the light of God's love.

If one of the areas I'm examining as a pattern this week is my failure to love in a variety of ways, this can be a powerful week to understand a complex rut I may be stuck in and to experience the graced desire to surrender my heart in grateful response to the love offered me. So, what lies beneath the limits I place on relationships? How about the way my friends and I securely judge, even attack, those others who we believe are sinners? What is the unlove that characterizes the traits that people see in me? What has been the basis of my coolness to becoming involved in service for the poor? It is in the answers to these questions that I will discover the graces being offered me. Here is where I will discover the need for deep healing of parts of me that seem deep rooted.

Because I don't see myself as a big sinner, I can too often avoid looking at the patterns that prevent me from becoming an effective disciple of Jesus with all of my heart. Here is where I discover the Lord's desire for the rest of my heart. And, of course, it is here that I discover the

depth of Augustine's prayer: "Oh, Lord, our God, you have created us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" — and, we might add, to rest in a wondrous love beyond what we can ask for or imagine.

Throughout this week, with whatever I discover, it will be important to keep drawing it together into an image of myself, loved by God. From time to time, if I penetrate the patterns deeply, I will discover an image of myself that is complicated, often inconsistent, very messy, quite unattractive to myself. I will be overwhelmed with the mystery of how God could possibly love someone who has been such an unreliable servant, someone who has had such a divided heart. Here is where God reveals himself. It is right here that we discover who we are and here that we discover our need for a savior.

A final image might help throughout this week, as we look at the photo of ourselves, deep in prayer. We can imagine our lives like a house. Our lives, like houses, often have nice front yards. We might even invest lots of money in presenting an impressive image when driving by. Just inside our house is an entryway and living room, where we greet and entertain most of the people who come into our lives. People who are more intimately involved in our lives are invited farther in as dinner guests, next-door neighbors or lifelong friends. And, of course, the intimate places in our house — the bathrooms and bedroom — are where only the most intimate parts of our life happen. But in every house — in every life --- is a basement (or attic or garage) where the less-than-presentable stuff is kept. This week, we can imagine going down into that basement, even if a lock is on that door and we haven't visited it in a long time. We need not be afraid, because we're going to go down there, accompanied by Jesus, who will show us all the stuff there, old stuff there we wouldn't want to show anybody else. Embarrassing stuff is there, in hiding. As we walk around it all, we can imagine Jesus telling us he loves us here, in this place. We can hear him tell us he loves all of us— our whole self.

Don't avoid this week for fear that it will be negative. That would avoid a tremendous grace. A check we can use throughout the week is to ask whether we are growing in a sense of God's love, in a sense of gratitude for that love, in a sense of ourselves as a loved sinner. Then the focus won't be on ourselves, but on the one who desires to fill our restless hearts.

For the Journey: Comfort in Our Discomfort

Praying about personal sin has several meanings. The prayer of it has to do with regaining a sense of how impersonal I have really been in my relationship with God and God's creatures. The gifts of my life have been given as a relational experience; God as person contacting me as person.

My personal pattern of sin is how I have objected to the personal contact from God and refused to see these gifts as from God, but simply as objects for my own conversation with myself. Praying about my pattern of sin centers my attention on what fears, what needs, what circumstances, and what demands are operating when I lose contact with the personal gifts around and within me.

Actions flow from attitudes, and such fears and hungers break out into acts that we can call personal sin, but they actually are impersonal as well. Simply stated, I forget or choose not to regard everything as personally offered by the personal God. We pray this week with Jesus personally encountering those people who are honest enough to admit their sickness, disability, and injury. Before Jesus can meet them in a healing way, they have to have met themselves in a humbling way. They have to have faced the truth of their own personal condition.

In praying about our sin and patterns of being impersonal, we, like the prodigal son, have to come to our senses and return to ourselves first. Jesus meets those who have first met themselves. It is extremely important for those considering the patterns of sin to do so while sitting at the feet of Jesus, where we can experience the personal touch of his compassionate eyes. To do such reflection on the patterns and history of our sin in isolation will lead only to further disgrace and self-rejection. Honesty is not humiliation, but a prelude to being engraced. True freedom is worth the time it takes to sit at his feet and be comforted in our discomfort.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Lord,

Please. I'm not sure where to begin, but I think I need to begin with your love. If I don't feel that, I'm not sure I can go any farther. Here, I sit in the dim light, surrounded by my sins like mushrooms springing up in a damp forest. As I look closer, more and more of them seem to crop up.

I review my life and see basic sins, but now as I look again, I see patterns to them and the same sin coming up over and over again. Oh, Lord! The way I treat people, angrily, impatiently, always needing to be in control. My life seems to be ruled by the need to look good, and yet I know that inside are so many parts that are small and selfish and very dark. What is it inside of me that makes me turn my back so completely on you and the love you hold out to me?

Please, Lord. I beg you. Let me feel the pain and alienation of being separated from you. Let me know what it really is to be disconnected from your love and to feel so very lost without you. Free me, my God. Free me from the attachments I cling to. Touch the parts of me that need so much healing. Touch the selfishness inside me that makes me forget how I long to be next to you.

Help me turn to others with more compassion and forgiveness, the same compassion and forgiveness you have held out to me with open arms so many times. How can I so easily be angry and unforgiving with others and then turn to you so automatically when I need forgiveness?

Hold me gently, Lord. Calm my heart, so frantic and disconnected from you. Teach me to cherish others as you cherish me. I have so often asked you to soften your heart toward my sin. Please, I ask you now to soften the hardness of my heart toward others.

I want to say to you as Peter did, "Lord, don't come near me! I am a sinner." But I know that you will turn to me, as you did to Peter, and say, "Don't be afraid."

Heal me. Hold me. Be with me, God.

Scripture Readings

Matthew 8:1–13

Luke 9:23–25

2 Corinthians 12:8–10

Luke 5:1–11

Luke 5:17–26

Matthew 25:31–46