

## **“Winning the War on Mold”**

I John 1:5-10

*Series: Grace Week 5. Honest to God Grace*

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogle

The Woodside Church

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In a few days Lisa and I will celebrate 35 years of marriage. We’ve come a long, long way from our first apartment – which was actually just over in Princeton. Before we moved in the seminary told us these are luxury apartments: parquet wood floors, dishwashers, air conditioning all for the low rent of \$190 a month which was really dirt cheap even in 1983. Remember the words dirt and cheap. When we moved in we discovered the bathrooms featured fashionable pink tile, you had to run the water for thirty minutes before it got hot, the air conditioning never made it to the second floor, and the gas ovens were lit by a match which occasionally burned off eyebrows. We reported these concerns to the maintenance crew. They dutifully wrote them down which, as it turned out, meant absolutely nothing. It was not the best first home for our first born Peter – especially since his first pets were cockroaches.

Yet our apartment did feature brown wood paneling giving it that classic 70s 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. There was so much mold in our bedroom, I thought it was the wallpaper. Almost every Saturday I declared my “War on Mold.” Bleach and brush in hand I scrubbed the scourge until the walls gleamed 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 losing the war. Today, if you take the Meadow Road exit off Route 1 near the MarketFair Mall you will find trees, grass and no apartments – they are all gone - wiped off the face of the earth. If you stand very quietly in the middle of the field you can hear the mold...laughing.

As you know, mold causes health problems. Sinus congestion, itchy eyes, chest tightness, 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, darkness is its preferred place to multiply and spread. 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. Yet there is a way to win the war on moldy sin that’s better and stronger than the methods of Moldman. It’s called Grace.

So far in our series on Grace we've learned how God's Grace frees us from our bonds and burdens. Grace means:

- I don't need to hang my head in shame.
- I don't need to heap up merit badges to earn God's love.
- I don't need to hug my grudges and resentments

Now Grace breaks a fourth chain: I don't need to hide my sins and shortcomings. This is called Confession. 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 the word confession mean? A simple definition is 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 by admitting, "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, by His Grace 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. John Ortberg tells a classic story of denial. He and his wife Nancy bought their first new piece of furniture - a mauve colored sofa.

From the time the sofa arrived, the number one rule in the house was "Don't sit on the mauve sofa". Rule #2 was "Don't sit on the Mauve Sofa. Additional rules were: Don't touch the mauve sofa. Don't play around the mauve sofa. Don't breathe on, look at or even think about the mauve sofa." It was like the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. "On every other chair in the house you may freely sit, but upon this sofa, the mauve sofa, you may not sit, for in the day you sit thereupon, you shall surely die." Of course, the inevitable happened, the FALL – the STAIN appeared on the mauve sofa. Not just any stain. It was a red stain of the jelly variety.

So, Nancy, who adored the mauve sofa lined up their 3 children in front of it for the great stain inquisition. She told them: "The man at the sofa store says it is not coming out. Not forever. Do you know how long forever is? That's how long we're going to stand here until one of you tells me who put the stain on the sofa." Daughter Mallory was the first to break. "Laura did it." She shouted. Laura passionately denied it. Then there was silence, for the longest time. No one said a word. They wouldn't talk, because they knew if they did, they would spend eternity in the time-out chair. John Ortberg, however, knew they wouldn't talk because he knew the truth: he put the red jelly stain on the mauve sofa and he was saying "nothing...not one word." He would find a safe place away from Nancy to confess.

John, the Apostle John not John Ortberg, says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (I John 1:8). When we deny sin we are fooling ourselves –

that 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.

A second thing we might do to avoid confession is **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). Mallory blamed her sister Laura for the red stain on the mauve sofa. Even dogs know how to pass the blame. (watch Harley blames Lola the dog – link). Blaming others for our mistakes is unjust. It hurts and breaks relationships.

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

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 (I 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 responded:

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. The darkness is a place where you can lose yourself. 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."<sup>1</sup>

That's the really 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. What does the woman who loves the dark call herself? Her screen name is "Beyond Repair."

Denial and Deflection can even drive pastors into the Darkness. Sometimes we wake up and discover we are in way too deep. In his book on Grace, Max Lucado shares how at the age of 21 he decided to swear off alcohol. He loves beer. Nothing wrong with that except for the fact that alcohol and his family DNA didn't mix and he quietly 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 and quiet. No drinking at home. No drinking in public. That left only one option: liquor store parking lots.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/january/5012714.html>

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.<sup>2</sup>

None of us, no matter what sin we commit, is beyond repair. None of us need live one minute more in darkness. The Light of God's Grace is waiting for us. Yet we have to leave the darkness and step into it. That's Confession.

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. Where do we begin? If, as John says, walking in darkness is living a lie, then to walk in God's Light means getting 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, that mold will grow, spread and infect your relationships. You might become sullen, overly sensitive, crabby, even cross with others. Feelings pushed down into the darkness tend to pop out sideways. So take an honest look at yourself – what you thought, said and did. Bedtime is a good time to review the day, to honestly inspect and confess the sins and shortcomings which accumulated through the day: unkind words, harsh judgments and prejudices, careless gossip, self-serving acts, unethical decisions, indulged temptations. Do this examination with God. King David prayed,

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 helps kill 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 Grace 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)

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<sup>2</sup> Max Lucado, *Grace: More than We Imagine/Greater than We Deserve* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012) p. 82.

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

Even though we are not faithful and just, God is. He is completely committed to our healing and restoration, to winning the war on mold in us. 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. 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 any middleman or mediator to receive God's forgiveness. Confessing to another person on earth is for our benefit. Why? So long as I think I can 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 certain 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.

Woodside, let's be a church where people can be honest, where struggling souls receive grace and mercy, not judgment and condemnation, where those who feel they are beyond repair, those who have messed 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 gather 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.<sup>3</sup>

There is a lot of moldy sin.

So by the Grace of God let's roll up our sleeves and win this war.

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<sup>3</sup> Lucado, p. 88.