Make Your Faith Your Own

Kyle Skaggs encourages believers with practical suggestions for growing one's faith in Christ.

I was inspired to write this article when another believer told me they weren't sure whether they continue to be a believer because they believe for themselves, or because of their parents' faith. It is that uncertainty I want to address.

One of the first questions our students are asked at Mind Games is, "Why are you a Christian?" Most of them can't give a good answer. There can be any number of reasons for this, but the one I am concerned with is a lack of spiritual maturity. Knowing and communicating why you are a Christian is one of the first steps to making your faith yours. Being able to definitively say that your faith in Christ is yours and not something inherited from family, friends, or culture gives you the confidence and the fortitude to be an effective witness to the world, which is critical these days.

The writer of Hebrews wrote, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." (Hebrews 5:12-14)

To make your faith in Christ your own is to mature spiritually. Those who have grown up in the church, yet have not taken responsibility for their walk with Christ, are unable to discern good from evil because they are like children. At some point, you need to stop waiting to be spoon-fed by your parents or your pastor every Sunday and start

being deliberate about your relationship with God. This means adopting a mindset that encourages spiritual growth.

To grow spiritually, we need to first desire to grow closer to God. If you lack that desire, then doing any activity to grow spiritually will become a chore. This requires prayer and introspection guided by the Holy Spirit. If you ask God for it, He will change your heart to give you that desire. Put yourself in God's shoes: don't you think it would please Him to be asked, "Lord, I want to WANT to grow closer to You. Please give me a heart that seeks You more"?

Next, expect Him to work in your life. Trust that God will change you. Furthermore, trust that God will not lead you astray. Trust that He will speak to you through the scriptures, through other Christians, and through prayer. In our culture it is popular to be skeptical, and that is fine so long as that is used to discern God's word from man's; but we still need to be open to the fact that God can and will reveal His will to us. Trust that the Holy Spirit will guide your interpretation. You still need to learn to discern truth from falsehood. If what is said does not contradict scripture, then it may be true and helpful. Engage in activities that will form godly habits.

Spend more time with God. Just as you get to know someone better by spending more time with them, you will get to know God better as you spend more time with Him. Be deliberate about this, planning your day around that time you have set aside for Him. That looks like spending time in His word, meditating on what you have read, talking to Him in prayer by sharing your heart with Him and then listening for a response. It can look like cultivating mindfulness of God's presence with you and His gracious activity in your life through giving thanks for the ways in which He provides, protects, and shows His love for you.

It is frustrating to ask God to change you, only to continue

to stumble over sinful habits. Stop relying on yourself to change your behavior. Don't simply ask God for help, yet change nothing about your life. The New Testament frequently uses the word translated "repent" to describe a U-turn in actions and direction. Repentance is something we need to do—with God's help, but it is still our responsibility. God does not do it for us. Start doing things that will help you grow spiritually. Studies have shown that when people engage with the scriptures at least four times a week, the odds that they will engage with sins like drunkenness, marital infidelity, gambling, and pornography decrease significantly. Meanwhile, those who experience what researchers call "the power of 4" more than double the odds of sharing their faith, memorizing scripture, and discipling others.{1}

In the same way that you need to eat well in the weeks leading up to a race, you need to fill your head with godly things. For example, if all your music is about sex and violence, is it any surprise your thoughts drift to those subjects? Do whatever you can to increase the amount of godly things going into your head through your eyes (your screens) and ears (your playlist).

Trust that God will answer your prayers. If for example you sprain your ankle, and a friend lays their hands on you and prays for healing, trust that it was God who healed you. He is in control of all things, choosing to act directly, or through people, or through the natural processes He created. His actions do not need to be miraculous, so do not hesitate to give Him credit when your prayer is answered.

Remember the prayers God answers. It is in our nature to remember the bad things that happen to us more than the good. So it can be easy to allow every unanswered prayer to overshadow those that are answered. Keep track of what you are praying for, and as time goes on, see what prayers God has answered. Being able to see how God has been at work in your life will increase your faith, which in turn leads to

spiritual maturity. Start praying and looking for opportunities to act in faith. To do this, you need to be listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes, these opportunities will seem random. Whether witnessing to somebody, or helping the needy, taking the opportunity to glorify God will increase your faith in Him. Finally, always ask the Holy Spirit to reveal your heart to you. It is so easy to lie to yourself, and God cannot be pleased by the self-righteous.

To summarize, if you want to grow as a man or woman of God, you need to take responsibility for your faith. Decide that you want to grow spiritually. Develop godly habits that encourage your faith to grow. Pray for opportunities to glorify God. Trust God to reveal His will to you. Remember the prayers He answers. As you develop these habits and learn to make Christ the Lord over your life, your faith will grow.

Notes

1. Cole, A., & Ovwigho, P. C. (December 2009). *Understanding the Bible Engagement Challenge: Scientific Evidence for the Power of 4*, Center for Bible Engagement. bttbfiles.com/web/docs/cbe/Scientific_Evidence_for_the_Power_of_4.pdf

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"Our Granddaughter is Severely Confused About Her

Gender Identity”

I just read an article by Sue Bohlin on transgender and God’s view on it. We completely believe our granddaughter is severely confused and we believe her gender identity is being greatly influenced by the people she is hanging out with. She is almost 22, we have told we love her unconditionally but do not support her lifestyle as it goes against God’s Word. She understands that we will not compromise our faith and what the Word of God says. But we have been reaching out to pastors and they have offered zero spiritual guidance. In fact they really do not want to discuss it. Our pastor told me to buy a secular book on homosexuality from Amazon. I told him I do not need or want the world’s view on it, I need spiritual guidance. He had nothing. I’m reaching out because I agreed 100% with what Sue said and we still need spiritual guidance. We love our granddaughter and pray for her all the time but we are struggling with how to deal with it.

I am so very, very sorry for the pain you are experiencing in this spiritual battle. The enemy has gone after your beloved granddaughter, deceiving her with lies and demonic schemes about her true identity. You are undoubtedly right about the influence of the people she’s hanging out with, and that would extend to (and may even entirely consist of) the voices she is listening to on social media.

In terms of how to deal with it, let me encourage you that you are already doing the two most important things: loving her and praying for her. Your love will be a beacon for her to find her way out of spiritual darkness back to truth, and your prayers are powerful for the pulling down of strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:3-4). This is a battle that has to be fought on your knees, using the supernatural weapon of prayer. Trying to convince her out of her delusion won’t work; it has to be God’s power.

You will need encouragement from others who are also in the battle for their children and grandchildren. Let me suggest two places to find that. One is the Friends and Family forum at Living Hope Ministries. www.livehope.org. The other is to request access to the private group "CHANGED Movement" on Facebook, where you will find very encouraging testimonies from those who have come out of the LGBTQ community.

Let me close with a story I hope encourages you.

A couple were heartbroken that their daughter had jumped into the LGBT community and identity, and needed to know what to do about it. On the recommendation of a mutual friend the husband called me; as we talked, the Lord dropped an idea into my head, which he followed.

He took her out for a meal and said to her, "Sweetheart, I want to tell you something, and I'm only going to say this once, so pay attention.

"Your mom and I see that because of your choices, it's like you're on the Titanic, and we know that eventually it's going down. But we're out here in a lifeboat, rowing around the ship, and we will never stop rowing. We'll be here to love you and pray for you, and we'll be here to help you when you realize you've got to get off a sinking ship." They were so faithful in daily praying for her.

Ten years later, their daughter showed up on their doorstep. When Dad opened the door, the daughter asked, "Are you still in the rowboat?"

That was *ten years later*.

And many many prayers later, they just celebrated the one-year anniversary of her repentance . . . of her recognizing the ship was sinking and she got in the lifeboat with her parents. This man said that in all his many years, he has never seen such a full and beautiful repentance as what his daughter

exhibited.

Recently, in fact, he and his wife and their daughter stood in front of his Sunday School class to tell their story. For the first time, the daughter told her side; can you imagine what it was like for the parents to watch their beloved daughter give testimony to God's goodness and her parents' faithfulness in praying for her? In fact, she had sent an email at one point that said, "Mom and Dad, thanks for never giving up rowing."

The dad had also told his story to a men's conference, sharing the rowboat part, and said the other men, all fathers who would do anything for their children, were in tears. They all understand how hard it is, especially as men designed to "fix" things, not to be able to fix their children's hurt or destructive choices or the consequences of those choices. But the power of a praying parent can redeem the pain and the choices and the consequences.

So. . . don't give up rowing!

And [please hear my voice being very very gentle here] let go of your expectations for God's timetable. He knows how long it will take for her to see the light, in a way that will bring the most glory to Him and the greatest benefit to your granddaughter.

I'm sending this with a prayer that God does amazing things in your family. Please remember—if it's not good yet, God's not done yet!

Warmly,
Sue Bohlin

Posted Sept. 2022
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“I Stopped Believing After Visiting an Atheist Webpage; Can God Forgive Me?”

I accepted Christ but then I went to the atheistic page that convinced me and I stopped completely believing for a few days. Later, I realized it was a mistake and repented. Can God forgive me? Am I apostate? Hebrews 6:4-6 is why I’m afraid.

Thanks for your letter. Hebrews 6:4-6 is a highly disputed passage with a variety of interpretations on offer. Fortunately, however, I do not think that we really need to delve into any of these in your case. The sort of sin that is in view in Hebrews 6:4-6 appears to be a very willful and determined apostasy from Christ. It appears to picture someone who, in spite of numerous spiritual benefits experienced, nonetheless turns his back on Christ and utterly rejects Him forever. In other words, the passage seems to suggest that anyone who has committed this sin will never turn to God again in repentance. Their heart has been (or is) irrevocably hardened against God and they will not repent.

But this is clearly not you! As you say in your letter, you realized that you had made a mistake and you thus repented and turned back to God. Sometimes atheist websites can seem convincing and a believer might be temporarily fooled by them, so to speak. But for a true believer, this will be very temporary indeed (as again, your own case shows). For the true believer has the witness of the Holy Spirit within him (or her) self—and this witness testifies to the truth of Christ

with all of the authority of God himself!

The bottom line, I think, is this: anyone who is willing to repent of their sin and turn to Christ for forgiveness and salvation cannot have committed this sin. For the person who has committed this sin is irrevocably hardened against God and will never again be brought to repentance.

One final note. As believers it is important for us to grow in our understanding of the riches of our faith. Although some believers are called by God to engage with the material on atheist websites, the Lord always prepares such believers exceedingly well beforehand. Personally, I would encourage you as a brother in Christ to stay away from the atheist websites. The fact is, these sites are utterly wrong in their denial and rejection of God. They will not encourage nor build you up in your faith. Instead, I would recommend daily reading (and actually studying) your Bible, getting involved with a good Bible-believing and Bible-teaching church (and small group), and reading good works of theology and Christian apologetics. Take the time to carefully read something like John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, for example. And for apologetics, read the articles on the Probe website (www.probe.org) – and check out the material as well on William Lane Craig's site, Reasonable Faith (www.reasonablefaith.org). Don't waste your time—I say this in all seriousness—with atheist websites. Rather, go deep in your study of the Bible, Christian theology, and Christian apologetics. You won't regret it!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Posted April 27, 2017
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Turn to Jesus, Tiger

Yesterday (Jan. 5, 2010), Fox News commentator and analyst Brit Hume *became* the news with his delightfully provocative comments about and to scandalized über-golfer Tiger Woods, which instantly showed up in places like an entertainment "news" show and in several YouTube videos.

> "Tiger Woods will recover as a golfer. Whether he can recover as a person, I think, is a very open question, and it's a tragic situation. He's lost his family; it's not clear to me whether he'll be able to have a relationship with his children, but the Tiger Woods that emerges, once the news value dies out of this scandal, the extent to which he can recover, it seems to me, depends on his faith. He's said to be a Buddhist; I don't think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. So my message to Tiger would be, 'Tiger, turn to the Christian faith and you can make a total recovery and be a great example to the world.'"

I love it that someone spoke the plain, un-PC truth that Buddhism offers no solution to the weight of grief and shame that Tiger is carrying.

But Jesus does.

Our culture has become voracious in its appetite for celebrity and celebrity news, which is why a man's unfortunate and self-indulgent choices to engage in numerous extramarital affairs gets much more attention that it deserves. This isn't just about news that sells newspapers and magazines; this is a real life train wreck, with real life trauma and pain to a man and his family. And that's why what we believe matters, because real life in a fallen world involves pain and suffering—some

because of our own sinful choices, some because of others' sinful choices, and some because pain and suffering is inextricably linked with a world hostile to God and intent on operating independently from Him.

Pain and suffering is not optional, but we have choices in how we interpret our experiences and how we respond. Brit Hume, himself a Christ-follower, knows that God can bring hope and change and redemption out of the most painful parts of life. He knows, because he is a man forgiven by God and others for his own sins, that there is freedom and relief in the forgiveness made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection.

Tiger needs to know.

Would you join me in praying for the man, every time you hear or see him mentioned in the media? Pray for grace to repent and not merely grieve that he got caught. Pray that he turns to Jesus.

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/turn_to_jesus_tiger

"How Do We Repent If Those We Hurt Are Dead or Far Away"

If we are asked to make up to those we may have offended, ask for their forgiveness—before prayers are answered or before coming to God, how do we possibly repent if those we hurt are no longer alive, or if many years have passed and they are now married, have good jobs? If we hurt people in the past by our very attitude daily—and everyone, really, we came in contact

with for any length of time through negativity and criticism—how can such a lifelong sin be forgiven? How to ask repentence of so many? A very kind woman is praying for me today, and I don't want to get too close, or mislead her, but her prayers are so BIG I almost think I can begin again after many, many years away from life. Don't mean to sound self-pitying. I really do just want to make sure I don't weaken another good person again.

What wonderful questions!! I can sense that God is answering your friend's prayers by opening your mind to a new way of thinking.

Repenting means to change the way we think and to turn 180 degrees around, a U-turn, in our behavior. Repenting of our bad thinking and behaving patterns is the first step. Then comes the step of asking for forgiveness, which is necessary for there to be any reconciliation. They are two separate steps.

If the person we hurt is no longer alive, then we can't ask for forgiveness. We can receive God's forgiveness, but that's where that process ends. The next step may be to grieve the loss of that relationship and the loss of the ability to be reconciled. You just have to leave that in God's hands.

If the person we hurt is still around, then we need to pray and ask God if HE is the one telling us to contact the other person and confess our sins and ask for forgiveness. (In some situations, that would cause even more pain and it's best left in His hands.) As you continue to pray about each person you have hurt, God will give you direction about what you should do concerning each one. The best way to handle it is often through a letter because it gives the other person the opportunity to think about what you've said before replying. And it even gives them the opportunity to decline to reply at all. So you honor that person in several ways.

Your “lifelong sin” can and WAS forgiven in one moment (the moment you trusted Christ—I am assuming you have made that decision) because Jesus paid for it. His love is stronger than your sin, and His blood is more powerful than your sin. He wiped out the penalty for it. You may not have the forgiveness of those whom you offended, but you DO have God’s total and unconditional forgiveness. God doesn’t command you to secure the forgiveness of everyone (you don’t have that kind of power), He tells you to do what is within your power to do. That is, acknowledge and confess your sin, and ask for forgiveness. That’s why Romans 12:18 says, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” If someone doesn’t grant the forgiveness you humbly ask for, you can’t be reconciled with them, but at that point it’s not your fault.

I hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

“Is God Punishing Me Because I Committed the Unforgiveable Sin?”

I enjoy your website a great deal, and have especially found comfort in the Probe Answer to E-mail “I Fear I Have Committed the Unforgiveable Sin.”

I, much like person who wrote in, have been assailed by doubts and fears that I’ve blasphemed the Holy Spirit. I’ve read so many things indicating that I haven’t, but I’ve had a hard

time accepting them. I recall a specific time in my life that I (for no reason) wanted to push God's limit. Knowing there was a blasphemy against the Spirit, I tested and cursed (in my head) God. After a while of this (and I didn't want to do any of these things—they came out of nowhere—or just my sinful nature, perhaps), I started reading the scriptures dealing with this sin and wondering, "What if Satan's really behind Jesus and His miracles? What if Satan has fooled us all into believing in God, but it's all a joke?" Immediately after thinking these things, I just knew I had blasphemed the Spirit by calling God Satan.

While I'm also aware that other scriptures don't carry the disclaimer, "unless you commit the unpardonable sin," I fear that it still applies, since Jesus Himself made this sin the one exception. Just because it isn't always there in a disclaimer doesn't seem to make it null and void, in my opinion. In addition, I feel that my concern doesn't really prove my innocence. A lot of times, people say that the fact that I'm concerned means God is working with me, but could it be that God has left me, and my own conscience is torturing me? Or maybe it's Satan, telling me, "You can never be saved now! You're through!" Perhaps it IS God working with me, but He isn't offering forgiveness. Maybe, as part of my punishment, He's calling me—dangling that carrot of salvation out in front of me, while also saying, "You've gone too far—you can't be saved!" Why is there no evidence that He did it with the Pharisees, if this is the case? Maybe He did! Or, given their personalities, maybe it would be worse punishment for them to build more and more power, just to see it crumble when they reach Hell. With my sensitive conscience, perhaps the greater punishment would be to torment me here AND in Hell.

Is there any way you might be able to clear this up for me? My girlfriend, who is a Christian, says there's no way God would send someone to Hell for having weird thoughts, and I

desperately want to agree with her. But we all, as sinners, deserve Hell to begin with…so I'm very torn. Every time I feel safe from worry, I start over-analyzing and talking my way out of assurance…

"Everything can be forgiven, but you've rejected the last appeal.." vs. "Everything can be forgiven, but you've gone too far!!"

Dear _____,

Bless your heart. Satan really has been playing mind games with you, hasn't he? What a dirty rotten liar and skunk.

Please remember that God loves you, MUCH more than you have the capacity to receive or even imagine. Please remember that He understands just how fallen your intellect and your conscience is (as is the case for ALL of us). Please remember that He fully knows that we can only "see through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12 KJV) on this side of eternity. Therefore, He completely understands that we're going to jump to faulty conclusions because we have faulty thinking, and He has more grace to extend to you than you can possibly experience.

I think growing older will help you with this. Once you are married and you are a father, you will understand the heart of God toward you much more than you can now. You will know that God passionately loves you and will do just about anything to help you know Him and understand Him and ENJOY Him. As a father, you won't want to play mind games with your children or dangle carrots in front of them—your love will blow those kinds of thoughts away.

Instead of trying to explain away all the mental gymnastics you've been going through to wrack yourself with doubt over the fear of committing the unforgiveable sin, I'm going to make a very serious suggestion: that you pray every day, for three months at least, "Lord, teach me that You love me." Look

for the ways He will answer that prayer. (And He will!)

And then write me back and let's see where you are in your spiritual life.

I really mean this, _____.

Sue Bohlin

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Crime and Punishment – A Christian View of Dostoevsky's Classic Novel

Michael Gleghorn looks at the famous novel through a Christian worldview lens to see what truths Dostoevsky may have for us. We learn that this great novel records the fall of man into a degraded state but ends with the beginning of his restoration through the ministry of a selfless, Christian woman.

Introduction and Overview

In 1866 the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky published *Crime and Punishment*, one of his greatest novels. It's a penetrating study of the psychology of sin, guilt, and redemption, and it haunts the reader long after the final page has been read. It tells the story of an intelligent, but impoverished, young Russian intellectual named Raskolnikov. Under the unfortunate influence of a particularly pernicious theory of society and human nature, he exalts himself above the moral law, grievously transgresses it by committing two murders, "and plunges into a hell of persecution, madness and terror."{1}

Raskolnikov had conceived of himself as a great and extraordinary man, on the order of a Napoleon. He tried to convince himself that he wasn't bound by the same tired old moral code that the vast mass of humanity lives in recognition of, if not obedience to—the merely *ordinary* men and women who accomplish little and amount to less. Nevertheless, after committing his horrible crime, he finds that he cannot escape his punishment: he cannot silence his sensitive and overburdened conscience. In the end, when he can stand it no longer, he decides to confess his crime and accept suffering as a means of atonement.

Joseph Frank observes that Dostoevsky, the author of this story, had "long been preoccupied with the question of crime and conscience."{2} In one of his letters, Dostoevsky describes his story as the "psychological report of a crime."{3} The crime is committed, he says, by "a young man, expelled from the university . . . and living in the midst of the direst poverty." Coming under the influence of "the strange, 'unfinished' ideas that float in the atmosphere," he decides to murder an old pawnbroker and steal her money. Dostoevsky describes the old woman as "stupid and ailing," "greedy" and "evil." Why, it would hardly be a crime at all to murder such a wretched person! What's more, with the money from his crime, the young man can "finish his studies, go abroad," and devote the rest of his life to the benefit of humanity!

Inspired by these thoughts, the young man goes through with the crime and murders the old woman. But, notes Dostoevsky, "here is where the entire psychological process of the crime is unfolded. Insoluble problems confront the murderer, unsuspected and unexpected feelings torment his heart . . . and he finishes by *being forced* to denounce himself."

This, in brief, is the story of *Crime and Punishment*. In what follows, we'll take a closer look at the theory which led Raskolnikov to commit his crime. Then we'll consider why the

theory proved false when Raskolnikov actually attempted to put it into practice.

The Ordinary and Extraordinary

Raskolnikov committed two murders, in part simply to see if he really has the bravado to put his theories into practice. But what are these ideas? Where do they come from? And why do they lead Raskolnikov to such heinous actions?

Essentially, Raskolnikov's theory, which was partially developed in an article on crime that he had written, holds that all men, by a kind of law of nature, are divided into two distinct classes: the *ordinary* and the *extraordinary*. This theory, which finds some of its philosophical roots in the writings of men like Hegel and Nietzsche, claims that ordinary men exist merely for the purpose of reproduction by which, at length, the occasional, extraordinary man might arise. Raskolnikov declares, "The vast mass of mankind is mere material, and only exists in order by some great effort, by some mysterious process, by means of some crossing of races and stocks, to bring into the world at last perhaps one man out of a thousand with a spark of independence." The man of genius is rarer still, "and the great geniuses, the crown of humanity, appear on earth perhaps one in many thousand millions."{4}

The distinctive features of the ordinary man are a conservative temperament and a law-abiding disposition. But extraordinary men "all transgress the law." Indeed, says Raskolnikov, "if such a one is forced for the sake of his idea to step over a corpse or wade through blood, he can . . . find . . . in his own conscience, a sanction for wading through blood."{5} So the extraordinary man has the right—indeed, depending on the value of his ideas, he may even have the duty—to destroy those who stand in his way. After all, Raskolnikov observes, such ideas may benefit "the whole of

humanity."{6} But how can we know if we are merely ordinary men, or whether, perhaps, we are extraordinary? How can we know if we have the *right* to transgress the law to achieve our own ends?

Raskolnikov admits that confusion regarding one's class is indeed possible. But he thinks "the mistake can only arise . . . among the ordinary people" who sometimes like to imagine themselves more advanced than they really are. And we needn't worry much about that, for such people are "very conscientious" and will impose "public acts of penitence upon themselves with a beautiful and edifying effect."{7}

But as we'll see, it's one of the ironies of this novel that Raskolnikov, who committed murder because he thought himself extraordinary, made precisely this tragic mistake.

A Walking Contradiction

James Roberts observes that Raskolnikov "is best seen as two characters. He sometimes acts in one manner and then suddenly in a manner completely contradictory."{8} Evidence for this can be seen throughout the novel. In this way, Dostoevsky makes clear, right from the beginning of his story, that Raskolnikov is *not* an extraordinary man, at least not in the sense in which Raskolnikov himself uses that term in his theory of human nature.

In the opening pages of the novel, we see Raskolnikov at war with himself as he debates his intention to murder an old pawnbroker. "I want to attempt a thing *like that*," he says to himself.{9} Then, after visiting the old woman's flat, ostensibly to pawn a watch, but in reality as a sort of "dress rehearsal" for the murder, he again questions himself: "How could such an atrocious thing come into my head? What filthy things my heart is capable of. Yes, filthy above all . . . loathsome!"{10}

This inner battle suggests that Raskolnikov has mistaken himself for an *extraordinary* man, a man bound neither by the rules of society, nor the higher moral law. But in fact, he's actually just a conscientious *ordinary* man. The portrait Dostoevsky paints of him is really quite complex. He often appears to be a sensitive, though confused, young intellectual, who's been led to entertain his wild ideas more as a result of dire poverty and self-imposed isolation from his fellow man, rather than from sheer malice or selfish ambition.

In fear and trembling he commits two murders, partly out of a confused desire to thereby benefit the rest of humanity, and partly out of a seemingly genuine concern to really live in accordance with his theories. Ironically, while the murders are partly committed with the idea of taking the old pawnbroker's money to advance Raskolnikov's plans, he never attempts to use the money, but merely buries it under a stone. What's more, Raskolnikov is portrayed as one of the more generous characters in the novel. On more than one occasion, he literally gives away all the money he has to help meet the needs of others. Finally, while Raskolnikov is helped toward confessing his crime through the varied efforts of Porfiry Petrovich, the brilliant, yet compassionate, criminal investigator, and Sonia, the humble, selfless prostitute, nevertheless, it's primarily Raskolnikov's own tormented conscience that, at length, virtually forces him to confess to the murders.

So while Raskolnikov is guilty, he's not completely lost. He still retains a conscience, as well as some degree of genuine compassion toward others. Dostoevsky wants us to see that there's still hope for Raskolnikov!

The Hope of Restoration

After Raskolnikov commits the two murders, he finds himself

confronted with the desperate need to be reconciled with God and his fellow man. From the beginning of the story, Raskolnikov is portrayed as somewhat alienated from his fellows. But once he commits the murders, he experiences a decisive break, both spiritually and psychologically, from the rest of humanity. Indeed, when he murders the old pawnbroker and her sister, something within Raskolnikov also dies. The bond that unites him with all other men in a common humanity is destroyed—or "dies"—as a sort of poetic justice for murdering the two women.

This death, which separates Raskolnikov both from God and his fellow man, can only be reversed through a miracle of divine grace and power. In the novel, the biblical paradigm for this great miracle is the story of the raising of Lazarus. Just as Lazarus died, and was then restored to life through the miraculous power of God in Christ, so also, in Dostoevsky's story, Raskolnikov's "death" is neither permanent nor irreversible. He too can be "restored to life." He too can be reconciled with God and man.

While this theme of death and restoration to life is somewhat subtle, nevertheless, Dostoevsky probably intended it as one of the primary themes of the novel. In the first place, it is emphasized by Sonia, Porfiry Petrovich, and Raskolnikov's own sister, that only by confessing his crime and accepting his punishment can Raskolnikov again be *restored* to the rest of humanity. In this way, Dostoevsky repeatedly emphasizes the "death" of Raskolnikov.

In addition, the raising of Lazarus is mentioned at least three times in the novel. One time is when, in the midst of a heated discussion, Porfiry specifically asks Raskolnikov if he believes in the raising of Lazarus, to which Raskolnikov responds that he does.{11} This affirmation foreshadows some hope for Raskolnikov, for the fact that he believes in this miracle at least makes possible the belief that God can also work a miracle in his own life. Secondly, the only extended

portion of Scripture cited in the novel relates the story of Lazarus. In fact, it's Raskolnikov himself, tormented by what he's done, who asks Sonia to read him the story.{12} Finally, at the end of the novel, the raising of Lazarus is mentioned yet again, this time as Raskolnikov recollects Sonia's previous reading of the story to him.{13} Interestingly, this final reference to the raising of Lazarus occurs in the context of Raskolnikov's own "restoration to life."

Restored to Life

Near the end of the novel, Raskolnikov at last goes to the police station and confesses to the murders: *"It was I killed the old pawnbroker woman and her sister Lizaveta with an axe and robbed them."*{14} He is sentenced to eight years in a Siberian labor prison. Sonia, true to her promise, selflessly follows him there. Early one morning she comes to visit Raskolnikov. Overcome with emotion, he begins weeping and throws himself at her feet. Sonia is terrified. "But at the same moment she understood . . . . She knew . . . that he loved her . . . and that at last the moment had come."{15} God's love, mediated through Sonia, had finally broken through to Raskolnikov: "He had risen again and he . . . felt in it all his being."{16}

Although Raskolnikov had previously been something of an outcast with his fellow inmates, nevertheless, on the day of his "restoration," his relations with them begin to improve. Dostoevsky writes:

> *He . . . fancied that day that all the convicts who had been his enemies looked at him differently; he had even entered into talk with them and they answered him in a friendly way. He remembered that now, and thought it was bound to be so. Wasn't everything now bound to be changed?{17}*

What's more, Dostoevsky also implies that Raskolnikov is being

restored to relationship with God. Picking up the New Testament that Sonia had given him, “one thought passed through his mind: ‘Can her convictions not be mine now? Her feelings, her aspirations at least . . .'”{18} And Dostoevsky then concludes his great novel by stating: “But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life.”{19}

So by the end of the novel, Raskolnikov, as a type of Lazarus, has experienced his own “restoration to life.” He is ready to begin “his initiation into a new unknown life.” And interestingly, the grace which brings about Raskolnikov’s restoration is primarily mediated to him through the quiet, humble love of Sonia, a prostitute. Just as God was not ashamed to have his own Son, humanly speaking, descended from some who were murderers and some who were prostitutes—for it was just such people He came to save—so also, in Dostoevsky’s story, God is not ashamed to extend His forgiveness and grace to a prostitute, and through her to a murderer as well. *Crime and Punishment* thus ends on a note of hope, for the guilty can be forgiven and the dead restored to life!

Notes

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam Books, 1987). Citation from cover blurb on back of book.
2. Joseph Frank, “Introduction” to Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, ix.
3. The citations from Dostoevsky’s letter come from Joseph Frank’s “Introduction” to Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment,* viii-ix.
4. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 229.
5. Ibid., 227.
6. Ibid., 226.
7. Ibid., 228.

8. James Roberts, *Cliffs Notes on Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment*, ed. Gary Carey (Lincoln, Nebraska: Cliffs Notes, Inc.), 70.
9. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 2.
10. Ibid., 7.
11. Ibid., 227.
12. Ibid., 283.
13. Ibid., 472.
14. Ibid., 458.
15. Ibid., 471.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 472.
19. Ibid.

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West Africans to African-Americans: "We Apologize for Slavery"

Rusty Wright presents a contemporary example of a new Christian offering repentance for past sins committed by his people and reconciliation through Christ in moving forward in the forgiveness of God. This is an excellent example of how those with a Christian worldview can work to bring healing to those wounded by past, grievous sins.

The president of the West African nation of Benin has a message for African-Americans: His compatriots are sorry for their ancestors' complicity in the slave trade. During

December, he’s going to tell them that at a special Leadership Reconciliation Conference on his soil.

An often-overlooked facet of slavery’s ugly historical stain is that black Africans sold other black Africans into slavery. When rival tribes made war, the victors took prisoners and made them indentured servants, often selling them to white slave merchants. Tribal animosity seethed.

Benin president Matthieu Kerekou says intertribal hostility over the slave trade still exists. Many of his people have never seen descendants of their forebears who were shipped off to the Americas.

Kerekou attended the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington last February and sought African-American church leaders to whom he could apologize. The pastors offered forgiveness. As a result, 125 Western leaders will gather with tribal chiefs from across Benin for the reconciliation event. U.S. Senator James Inhofe (R, Oklahoma) and Congressman Tony Hall (D, Ohio) will participate along with pastors, athletes, celebrities and representatives of European (former) slave-trading nations.

Brian Johnson, an African-American living in Virginia, heads a U.S. sponsoring group COMINAD (Cooperative Missions Network of the African Dispersion) and works with many black churches. Johnson says the infamous “Gate of No Return” that stands on the Benin beach where slaves embarked will be renamed the “Gate of Return” and/or destroyed. African-Americans will be granted Benin citizenship.

Plans exist for a larger reconciliation event in 2000. A ship will sail the old slave route from the Canary Islands to Benin and business leaders will host an international business exposition to help stimulate trade.

Johnson says President Kerekou’s mission has a spiritual flavor motivated by the president’s own recent commitment to Christ. “In the same way that God offered forgiveness by

presenting His Son, who was offended first," Johnson notes, African-American church leaders want to offer forgiveness to the descendants of their ancestors' captors. Both the president and the pastors hope to effect reconciliation and to provide an example to help ease global racial tensions.

Johnson says the realization that blacks sold other blacks into slavery has been hard for many African-Americans to handle. "This made it difficult to just hold the white man responsible," he notes. "This creates some problems in our own psyche. We have to deal with another angle to this and it makes it difficult. It's not [merely] a black/white thing."

He says the problem is in human hearts. " 'All have sinned,'" he claims, quoting the New Testament. "All of us need to confess our wrong and appeal to [God] for forgiveness."

Former Senator George Aiken of Vermont once said that if we awoke one morning to find everyone were the same race, color and creed, we'd find a new cause for prejudice by noon. Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy lamented that "Everybody thinks of changing humanity, but nobody thinks of changing himself." Perhaps Johnson's and President Kerekou's prescription is worth considering.

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