

(Knowing God's Way) 8. an Axe to the Root

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen emphasizes the necessity of true repentance from self-centered living to genuinely follow Christ and live for God's glory.

Topics: "Repentance", "Sanctification"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches about the deception of living for oneself, emphasizing that sin is rooted in self-centeredness. He highlights the importance of repentance, which involves turning away from idols and living solely for the glory of God. Poonen challenges believers to examine their hearts, acknowledging that true repentance requires a complete surrender of one's desires and ambitions to God. He warns against the dangers of hypocrisy and spiritual pride, urging individuals to seek genuine transformation and a life devoted to God's purposes.

Transcript

Most believers don't believe that Satan can lead them astray through God's Word. But Satan comes as "an angel of light" (2 Cor.11:14). So he won't come to you quoting from some heathen religious book, but from the Bible. If Satan could try to tempt even Jesus by quoting the Scriptures, we can be certain that he will try that with us too.

Someone has said that truth is like a bird and has two wings - "It is written" and "It is also written". If you have only one wing, you will go around in circles perpetually and probably astray. But when you have both wings you move forward.

Consider the answer to this question: Why did Christ die on the cross? The common answer to that question is: It is written, "Christ died for our sins." (1 Cor.15:3). But that is only half the truth. To get the whole truth, we must look at another Scripture. It is also written, "Christ died so that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf." (2 Cor.5:15). Only when we put both these Scriptures together, do we get both wings of truth.

When we read that Christ died for our sins - we need to understand what sin is. This can be understood aright only when we look at the second Scripture. There we see that to sin is to live for ourselves. But that is not the common understanding of sin that most believers have. When you say that you don't want to sin anymore, do you really mean that you don't want to live for yourself anymore?

Sin according to our conscience may mean different things to different believers. For example, a head-hunter's conscience may not bother him even after he has chopped off somebody's head. To others, telling lies is not sinful, but even necessary at times, if we are to live on this earth. So conscience is not a very good guide concerning sin.

As we get a better understanding of God and Scripture, we will realise that sin is not just murder, adultery and theft etc., It is living for oneself. If we live for ourselves, whatever bad habits we may have put away, we are still living in sin.

"If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away" (2 Cor.5:17). This means that the old attitudes, the old way of living has gone away. He is no longer living for himself. He has not reached the goal of Christlikeness. But he has turned around and is seeking to live for the glory of God. This and this alone is true repentance.

You may have given up your gambling, smoking and drinking, and yet not have repented of the root cause of all sin - living for yourself. But there are many preachers today who will tickle your ears and tell you that you are still saved!! Such preachers are happy so long as you go along to their meetings and put your contribution into the offering-bag!!

One of the greatest deceptions that Satan has ever deceived believers with is this - making them believe that a man can continue to live for himself and still be saved and go to heaven at the end of his life.

A man may have turned from a few bad habits that are ruining his life. But that may only indicate that he is trying to preserve his life on earth. There is a statutory warning placed on all cigarette-packets that smoking is harmful for the health. So people don't smoke. For the same reason, people may not drink or gamble. They may not commit adultery, because they are afraid of catching AIDS. But such people have not repented (turned from sin) in the Biblical sense.

We have been created by God to live for His glory. If we don't do that but live for our own comfort, ease and glory, we are not saved. We have not repented. Jesus died to deliver us from that sinful way of life.

A person who seeks to be somebody big in the church and who wants others to respect him is clearly living for himself. He may have painted himself with a bit of religious whitewash. But he hasn't changed basically. He may now use a little Christian language - words like "being born again" etc., But the inner man is still the same.

It is evident why most preachers won't want to preach a message like this, because it will reduce the size of their congregations. They won't be popular and they won't be invited back to the prestigious Christian conventions at which they speak every year. We know of preachers who have read our books, only for the purpose of getting points for their sermons, and for the articles and books that they write. But they are careful to leave out the hard-hitting parts of our message, lest they lose their popularity.

I can guarantee that if any preacher preaches the whole counsel of God for six months to his congregation, and keeps on telling them that to live for themselves is to live in sin, and that those who love money cannot love God, he will either lose his job or 75% of his congregation!!

God looks at our hearts. If the basic motivation of our lives has not changed, we are not saved. The only difference we find in many believers, after their conversion is this: At first, they lived for themselves without any "religious whitewash". Now they are living for themselves with a whole lot of "religious whitewash". In

actual fact their former condition was better - for then at least they knew that they were sinners. Now they imagine themselves to be saints, and are deceived.

Notice that when a woman caught in adultery was brought before Jesus, He never condemned her. Jesus was an unusual type of prophet. He allowed a woman caught in adultery to go scot-free without even a word of rebuke!! Why? Because He could see that she had repented. And so He forgave her.

And then there was this murderer who was such a wretched criminal that the Romans decided to crucify him. But when he acknowledged his sin, Jesus not only forgave him but also took him to paradise. That man hadn't probably done a single good thing in his entire life. He had only done evil, murdering others and robbing them. Yet when he died, he was welcomed into paradise by Jesus Himself. That's amazing, isn't it?

But when it came to the religious people who carried their Bibles and went to the synagogues every Saturday, Jesus called them "a generation of vipers who would not escape the damnation of hell."

Jesus' preaching was so out of the ordinary!! Whereas most preachers in his day told the murderers and the adulteresses that they were destined for hell, Jesus said that to the most religious, and outwardly upright people of His generation!!

Why? Because He knew that hypocrisy and spiritual snobbishness (that makes one look down on other human beings) were a million times worse in God's eyes than murder or adultery. Jesus saw the hearts of people and He didn't care one bit for outward religious whitewash. The Lord is not impressed by our religious language, even when we talk about "victory over sin" and "pressing on to perfection". If a man seeks his own and yet claims to be born again, the Lord will call him "a whitewashed grave and a viper" even today. He is not looking for people who make tall claims about their spirituality, but for people who are broken with sorrow for their sins, who consider themselves as the chief of all the sinners on earth - as Paul did towards the end of his earthly life, even after living in purity for so many years and accomplishing so much for the Lord.

The Lord will always be rich in mercy and forgiveness towards anyone who sincerely desires to turn from his selfish way of living, who is honest about his failures, and who blames no-one but himself for his sins. Think again of that woman caught in adultery. What qualifications did she have? Did she have a good testimony in the city? No. But she was honest. She did not pretend that she was innocent and that others were accusing her falsely. By the fact that she did not open her mouth, she acknowledged her guilt. Therefore there was hope for her.

It is extremely difficult for those who are righteous in their own eyes to find salvation. Those Pharisees were ready to stone the woman caught in adultery but they saw nothing of the sin there was in their own hearts at that very moment. When they put large amounts of money into the offering box and wanted everyone to see it, they were committing a sin that was worse than adultery in God's eyes, because they were getting people to worship (admire) them, instead of worshipping God.

Repentance means an "About Turn", so that we turn our backs henceforth to living for ourselves and decide to live for God alone. This does not mean becoming full time Christian workers. No. God calls only 1 in a 1000 of believers to be full time workers. He wants all His other children to work in secular jobs - earning their own living, but not living for themselves but for the glory of God.

Repentance is described in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, as "turning to God from idols". Many so-called believers have not turned to God from their idols. In India, many of the heathen people are happy to accept Christ as their god - but only as one more god in addition to the many idols that they already worship. We know that this is impossible. One who accepts Christ must give up all other gods and idols.

Remember that it is to believers that the Holy Spirit says, "Little children, guard yourselves from idols" (1 Jn.5:21). There is no difference between a heathen man who wants to accept Christ in addition to his existing gods, and the so-called believer who wants to accept Christ, but still wants to pursue after money (his present god).

That would be like a woman who is already married who now wants to marry a second husband. It is amazing how believers can fool themselves into thinking that Jesus Christ will agree to that type of a marriage with them. How many of us would be willing to marry a girl who is already married to another man. Yet you expect Christ to marry you, without your having forsaken your love for the world and its honour, its pleasures and its wealth.

Idols made of wood and stone are not as deceptive as the invisible ones (like money and honour), because one can see one's idolatry clearly when bowing down to physical idols. If you saw a man bowing down before a statue of some heathen idol in one room and then going into the next room and praying to Jesus Christ, you would not consider him to be a Christian. But what is the difference between him and the man who spends his whole week worshipping the idols of money, the honour of men and worldly ambitions and then comes to the meetings on Sundays and tries to worship Christ. I think there is more hope for the man who worships Buddha than for such a "believer".

When such a "believer" comes to the meeting on a Sunday and sings:

"Take my silver and my gold - Not a mite would I withhold",

- he is telling God a lie.

Christians tell more lies to God on Sundays than on any other day of the week, because they sing songs of great consecration to the Lord, claiming to surrender all to Him and to follow Him etc., God hears all this, but He is not deceived. He says, "With their mouth they show much love, but their heart goes after their covetousness. (Eze.33:31)

Listening to the words of the songs that many believers sing, one would think they are the greatest saints on earth. But in fact most of them are the greatest of hypocrites. And God is not fooled.

To live for oneself is to live like an animal - for all animals live only for themselves and their little ones. They all seek their own, always thinking of what will benefit them the most. This is how a lion thinks in the forest, "If that deer can be killed for my food then I will kill it." And so among animals, only the strongest can survive. But we are not animals. God did not create us to live like the dogs and the pigs, who just eat and sleep and produce little ones and die. Man was created to live his entire life for the glory of God.

I sometimes get letters from people who have retired from some job asking whether we can employ them because they want to spend their retirement years in "the service of God". Imagine a scene where a honoured guest comes to your house and you drink a cup of tea in front of him and then offer him the dregs in your cup!! That is what people do to God. Having lived their entire life for making money in the world, they now want to give the dregs of their lives to God. What an insult!

We must give our lives to God when we are young. All of our lives must be for Him to order as He pleases. Have you turned like that from a life of seeking your own? Many believers are going to have a lot of regret when Jesus returns and they discover that all the money that they earned on earth was no better than the play-money that children play with in a MONOPOLY game - worth nothing!! And all the property that they acquired on earth too was just like the hotels and the houses on that MONOPOLY board - worth nothing. The game of life is over then and they never accomplished anything other than accumulating worthless things that have no eternal value. They have lived a useless life. There will be tremendous regret too if all they sought for was honour and they discover that their honour has evaporated in the light of eternity.

But those who have lived to do the will of God and for the glory of God will find that they have tremendous joy in that day. Material things are only for our use on this earth. That is all. As long as we use them, that is all right. But they should never master us. It is one thing to use money. It is another thing to be mastered by it. Money is an excellent servant but a terrible master. Consider a woman who is married to an excellent man, but who loves the car-driver (chauffeur) more than her husband and spends most of her time with the chauffeur. What would you think of such a woman? That is an exact description of the believer who is always thinking of making more and more money (beyond his legitimate needs) than on how he can be more effective for the Lord.

When God created Adam, He told him to have dominion over the whole earth. But Adam became a slave. Christ has now come to make us kings once again. God has given us many things to enjoy in this world. But when any of those things master us, then we become slaves. Then we are no longer the kings that God intended us to be.

God told the serpent in Eden that dust would be its food. Do you know what gold is? It too is part of the dust that God created on this earth - a little harder and a little rarer perhaps than ordinary dust, but dust nevertheless. And here we see the sad spectacle of man pursuing after the devil's food. Man is enslaved to gold-dust everywhere.

When the devil sees that he can't enslave a man through a bad habit, he will enslave him through something neutral - just so that the man has no time for God, or for reading the Bible, or for fellowship. It could be a good, clean television program that enslaves a man. The devil is looking for believers who will seek their own - their own entertainment, their own profit, etc., The devil has 101 means to keep a man away from God. That is why we need to see sin not just as drinking and gambling and adultery and murder. We must see sin as "living for ourselves". To sin is to do what pleases ourselves, to do our own will. From that root, many fruits of sin come forth. Jesus died to save us from all that.

John the Baptist said that when Jesus came, He would lay the axe to the root of the tree. This is the root that Jesus has come to lay the axe to - living for ourselves and wanting to do our own will.

We can cut off little bad fruits from the tree every now and then. But that does not solve the problem. Our life may look so nice when the bad fruit that others could see have all been snipped off. But the tree hasn't changed. Jesus said that a good tree will never bear good fruit unless you change the tree itself. To change the tree, you have to first put the axe to the roots of the old tree.

Why are most homes war zones today? Because both husbands and wives want to live for themselves. And so we see this amazing thing happening in the world today: So called "born again Christians" are divorcing their partners and marrying again!! This is unique to the 20th century. Even pastors and preachers are divorcing their wives and marrying other women. Some preachers don't divorce their wives,

but just live in secret adultery. Worldly couples have divorced each other in all centuries. But when Christians start doing that, we can be certain that the great apostasy ("falling away from the faith") is upon us and that we are in the last days.

The reason for all this is that believers have not seen that sin is living for oneself. They have not seen it because they have not been taught it. The fault is with their leaders and their blood is on the hands of their leaders who are accountable to God.

Jesus said that "very few will find the way of life". Why?

Because the gate is so narrow.

From a worldly standpoint, the rich young ruler who came to Jesus had four excellent qualifications for church-membership - he was young, rich, influential (a ruler) and morally upright. All churches would love to have such a man as a member. He would have qualified even to be a board-member in most evangelical churches today. But Jesus did not consider him fit to be even His disciple - leave alone a leader. Isn't that amazing?

Jesus was not impressed by his wealth or his worldly influence. If the man still loved money, he was unfit to be Jesus' disciple. He had to give up his love for money before he could enter through the narrow gate. The man went away sad, and Jesus let him go. Jesus did not go after him and suggest that he give up his money in stages - 10% now and another 10% a month later etc., No. There is no bargaining when it comes to discipleship. It is either all or nothing. He could not love money and God at the same time. He had to make a choice. He had to turn from his idol (money) and be united to Christ alone.

If you want to live for yourself, you can go ahead and do so. And as in the case of this rich man, the Lord will leave you alone. And if you find a convenient church where you are told that you are still on your way to heaven, God won't disturb you there either. He will allow you to deceive yourself all your life. You will wake up finally to discover yourself in hell. The reason why God allows people to be deceived is because they don't love to know the truth about themselves. And when some prophet tells them the truth about themselves, they get angry with the prophet.

Jeremiah prophesied during the reign of King Jehoiakim. When the people of Judah read the words that Jeremiah had written on a scroll, they were afraid, for Jeremiah was one of the hardest prophets in the Old Testament, never preaching a soft message. It was judgment, judgment and more judgement (Jer.20:8 - Living). When the king read Jeremiah's scroll however, he got so angry that he cut it up and threw it into the fire (Jer.36). But God told Jeremiah to write the scroll again. That is how we got the book of Jeremiah. But the first time it was written, it was torn up by an angry king who did not want to hear the truth about himself. There have always been people like that.

But there have also been A FEW in every age who have loved the truth. It is a great grace that God has given us an ear to hear the truth. God loved us before we were born and wanted the best for us. He did not want us to waste our lives and to wake up in eternity to find ourselves paupers. He wants us to be wise and to live for the things that are eternal.

All that is created (including money, houses and lands) will be shaken and removed one day. Only that which is not created will remain. So we must be wise to spend our time and energies for that which will remain eternally. And let me say again that that does not mean that you should all become full time

Christian workers. But it does mean that in whatever work you do, you no longer live for yourself, but only for the glory of God. You can certainly work and earn the best salary possible - to support yourself and the Lord's work. But your goal in life must be the glory of God. Your ambition in life must be to please Him.

I am not saying that we can't go for a picnic or have any form of recreation. Of course we can. As human beings, we need that - whether playing games or listening to music or whatever. All that is perfectly all right, if it is clean and healthy entertainment. It is when any of these things master us and begin to be a dominant interest in our lives, that we cross over the red line into dangerous ground. It is very easy for a job or a sport or some harmless entertainment to become so much a part of a person's life that it becomes the main thing in his life. And then even his wife and children get neglected. And God of course gets neglected first of all. When that happens, then you know that that thing (whatever it is) has become the man's master.

We have to turn from living for ourselves, if the Lord is to build His church through us - the type of church that He has planned from eternal ages. He can build it only through people who are not seeking their own, but who are willing to lay everything on the altar for Him.

The Old Testament temple was built on Mount Moriah - where Abraham offered up his son Isaac to God (2 Chron.3:1). Abraham had only one son left, at that time - Isaac, the darling of his heart.

God tested Abraham's devotion that day to check whether Isaac had become an idol in his life. God told him, as it were, that he had to turn from all idolatry if he was to serve the Lord. And so he had to place his son on the altar and give him up. God did not take Isaac away, because God was only detaching Abraham from his unnatural attachment to Isaac that would have hindered his walk with God. God has to do the same with us. We have to give him that which is most precious to us.

In the rich young ruler's case it was his money. Just like God asked Abraham to give up Isaac, God asked the rich young ruler to give up his money. For all you know, if that rich man had only said "Yes, Lord, here it is all", God may have told him that he could keep his money, just like he told Abraham to keep Isaac. But he had to give it up first.

May we then all have the grace to say, "Lord whatever Isaacs there are in my life, I lay them all on the altar and give them all up to You. I don't want any more idols in my life that come between You and me. I don't want to live for myself. I really want to live for You alone. I want to live for the glory of God. I don't want to waste my life."

This is the best news in the world: We don't have to be slaves to our own ambitions and desires any more and thus waste our earthly lives, but can be free to live for the glory of God and thus live useful lives. To live for ourselves is to live in bondage and in chains. To live for the glory of God is to be like the eagles who fly in the sky. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus can break every chain and set you free - TODAY!!

If you have wasted much time in profitless pursuits in the past, you can't do anything about that now. But you can press on to do the best TODAY.

Since there is still time ahead of us, what we should all say to the Lord is: "Lord I can't do anything about the years of my life that are past. But I want to live the rest of life for You alone. Search my life and see if there is any idol anywhere that I am worshipping. I want to turn from every idol in my life to worship and

serve You alone. Lord Jesus I repent especially of this unconscious idolatry of living for myself."

May the Lord help us all.

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