

Confession, Repentance, and Leadership

Courage to Lead Series

1 Samuel 7:2-17

Pastor Bryan Clark

It's not so unusual that Christians make bad decisions, and that's compounded by more bad decisions, and sometimes we find ourselves in a pattern of sin and bad decisions, and ultimately end up neck-deep in the mud. In the mud, life gets miserable and we reach a point when we hit bottom and we want out. So we cry out to the Lord to deliver us and to set us free. Deep in our soul there's a longing for something different and something better than the bondage of sin that we're experiencing. In that moment, if you're serious about returning to the Lord with all your heart and experiencing the life that God wants for you, there are two critical steps that are necessary if you're really going to be serious about addressing sin and finding freedom. What are those critical two steps?

That's what we're going to talk about today. If you have your Bible, turn with us to 1 Samuel, Chapter 7. If you're visiting with us, we're working our way through the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. Last week we ended with the ark of the covenant being returned to the people of God. It is basically in storage in Kiriath-jearim, and there it will remain for the next one hundred years.

The battle of Aphek, which is 1 Samuel 4, was about 1100 BC. The ark stays in Kiriath-jearim until David moves it, and that's about 1000 BC. So over the next one hundred years that's where the ark sits. So the people feel this—there's no real religious center. Shiloh has been torn down; the ark is in storage; the people are in confusion, and that's where we pick up this story in verse 2:

From the day that the ark remained at Kiriath-jearim, the time was long, for it was twenty years; and all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD. (*NASB, 1 Sam. 7:2)

The time reference of **twenty years** is a little bit confusing. It's not saying twenty years the ark remained there, because we know it was about a hundred years. It's a reference to, from the moment it was stored until the "**then**" of verse 3—until Samuel steps on the scene and something changes. So the people are lamenting for the Lord. It's helpful to understand it's been four hundred years of darkness and despair. The land is littered with pagan gods and idols and pagan worship. It would be fair to say that these people, while they were the people of God, they were the people of Israel who had virtually never known a time in their lifetime when the nation was committed to Yahweh, their God. So while deep in their hearts they very sincerely want something different—you might say they've hit bottom—the nation has no religious center; they live in fear of the Philistines; everything is falling apart, and something deep within them longs for something different—something better, something more. But they just did not know what that means. They didn't even know where to start. So for twenty years they kind of linger in this state...which then leads to verse 3: "**Then Samuel...**"

Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, "If you return to the LORD with all your heart, remove the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your hearts to the LORD and serve Him alone; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines." So the sons of Israel removed the Baals and the Ashtaroth and served the LORD alone. (Vs. 3-4)

“Then Samuel”...It’s interesting in this text how much emphasis is on Samuel as the leader, leading his people through the necessary steps in order to experience the relationship with God that they longed for. So you have two things going on: For let’s say approximately forty years, God has been preparing a leader for this moment. At the same time God has been preparing a nation for this moment, that they would come together after forty years and experience for the first time in the lifetime of these people what it would really mean as a nation to return to the Lord.

Now it’s interesting as Samuel describes what’s necessary. “If you’re going to be serious about returning to the Lord with all your heart, then you’ve got to clean it up.” The land is littered with the gods of the Philistines: these idols, these Baals, these Ashtaroth, which would be Philistine gods and idols that littered the land. Now this is a bit of a peek into the spiritual condition of the people. These are the people of Israel. This is supposed to be the people of God, and yet the land is littered with the idols and the gods of the Philistines. Now it seems to me it’s rather obvious— twenty years of wondering what to do. It would seem like what Samuel said is right out of the “duh” file. It’s like, “Well, duh, people, clean up the land!” But it wasn’t that obvious to them. I think these people were completely sincere. That’s evident by the fact that once Samuel said, “Okay, people, here’s what you need to do,” they immediately did it. They just needed someone to help them understand.

Sometimes in the midst of sin, it gets so dark; it gets so confusing that it is hard to know: where do I turn? I want out; I just don’t know what to even do. I think there are two mistakes that leaders tend to make in these kinds of situations. Again, we’re defining leadership very broadly. Anyone who is serious about being a Christ-follower and wants to influence others for Christ is a leader. We’re influencing them or leading them in the right direction.

So there are two mistakes that we tend to make: One is we stand on the sideline and we throw rocks at people that are stuck in the mud of sin. And our assumption is if they want out, they can get out. You know, the way out is fairly obvious. Well it is probably fairly obvious to those of us who are not stuck in the mud. But we underestimate what happens when people get that deep in their despair and sin; it gets so confusing; it gets so dark for them. The enemy attacks them with lies that they just get stuck there and they don’t really understand how to get out.

Leadership—spiritual leadership—is not about standing on the sideline and throwing rocks. It’s about rolling up our sleeves and getting in the mud. Getting in the mud and saying, “Listen, let’s do this together, and I’ll help walk you through the process of what it means to break free from this.

The other mistake that I see—and this is very common these days—is that we think that it’s just enough to get in the mud with them. In other words, they look lonely in the mud, so they need a companion; so I get in the mud with them so they won’t be so lonely. I know they’re really discouraged, so I want to encourage them, and I want to tell them, “You know we all struggle together. I struggle too, so let’s just struggle together in the mud.” That’s not helpful either. Leaders need to lead—which means you roll up your sleeves; you get in the mud; but you say, “Listen, this is no way to live, and God has called us to so much more. I’m here to help you through the process out of the mud to the life that God wants for you.”

Romans, chapter 7 is that classic passage where Paul says, “*I don’t do the things that I should do. I do do the things that I don’t want to do...*” and he ends it by saying, “*...miserable man that I am. Who will set me free?*” A lot of Christians go to Romans, chapter 7 and kind of identify with that—that that’s a picture of the Christian life and it’s a struggle; so let’s all struggle in the mud together. But that is not the point of Romans 7. Romans 7 sets up Romans 8. Romans 7 ends with, “*Who*

will set me free?" Romans 8: *"The Spirit of Jesus has come to set you free from the struggle."* The imagery of the Christian life is not Romans 7; it's Romans 8. God has given every Christian everything he or she needs in order to experience the life that God has called us to. No Christian needs to stay in the mud. But what they sometimes need is someone to step in the mud with them, roll up their sleeves and say, "I know this is confusing; I know this is hard. Let's do this together and let's walk out of the mud and back to the life that your soul longs for."

So you have a classic example of this with Samuel stepping before the people. It seems so obvious, but he tells them, "Here's what you need to do," and the text tells us that's what they did. Verse 5:

Then Samuel said, "Gather all Israel to Mizpah and I will pray to the LORD for you." They gathered to Mizpah, and drew water and poured it out before the LORD, and fasted on that day and said there, "We have sinned against the LORD." And Samuel judged the sons of Israel at Mizpah. (Vs. 5-6)

A couple of details: This idea of judging is confusing to us. It doesn't mean that Samuel stood there and judged them, meaning throwing rocks at them. The idea of a judge—this is a carry-over from the book of Judges—Samuel is the last of the judges. Technically we're still in the era of the Judges. The judges were political, spiritual, and military leaders, and so they were the leaders of Israel. So when it says **Samuel judged Israel**, in our language it is better stated, "Samuel led the people." That's what he's saying there.

Now Mizpah was about seven miles north of Jerusalem. It's a very high part of the land there. Several significant things happened there: It won't be too long until Saul is presented as the first king of Israel at Mizpah. It's very visible—maybe one of the reasons for that is when the nation would gather, they're vulnerable to attack. From that vantage point they could easily see the Philistines and know whether they were in danger or not. So here they gather—not literally every person from the land—but representatives from all the tribes gathered there together for this moment. Nobody knows quite for sure what the significance was of the pouring out of the water or the fasting. Some people think it's related to one or two of the feasts, which may well be. Since we know fasting was really symbolic of having a hunger for God, maybe it's just the imagery of the people hungering and thirsting for God, and that's what this moment was really about. That's what makes the most sense to me.

The critical point in the text is when the people say, "**We have sinned against the LORD.**" We've waited for a long time to hear those words. Finally the people confess their sin before a holy God. The word *confession* literally means *to agree with God*. I've found in my own personal experience, it's very helpful to actually use that language. It's easy to be remorseful or sorry when we sin; but there's something different about confession. Confession is saying, "God, I agree with You that this (and name what the sin is) is sin; therefore it's offensive to You." And what's implied in that statement is because I care about my relationship with God, that behavior must stop. That's the power of confession; I'm saying, "God I agree with You. This is sin and it's offensive and therefore, this behavior must stop." Imagine how things could have been different for these people if twenty years earlier, when thirty-four thousand people were slaughtered, if they would have confessed their sin to God?

There are two critical steps that are necessary when you find yourself in the muck and mire of sin and you hit a place when you say, "I want to be done with this. This is a miserable way to live. I want out." Step one is to confess your sin—to agree with God this is indeed sin and it's offensive to

You and with that comes the understanding then it must stop. This leads to the second step which these people took in the paragraph before and that is, in New Testament language, repentance!

Repentance is a change of mind. It's a turning and going a different direction. So at one time the reason I sinned was I thought this would make me happy. I thought this would meet my need. I thought this would work out for me. I thought I could beat the system—whatever the thinking was that caused me to sin against God. And then it becomes a pattern of sin against God that causes me to end up in the mud. Whatever the thinking was, repentance is saying, "I've changed my mind. I don't think this will make me happy. I don't think this will meet my needs. I don't think this is going to work. I don't think I can meet this need apart from God. I've changed my mind. And part of the implication of repentance is it will stop! Basically the idea is, "I am now willing to do whatever is necessary in order for this behavior to stop."

Over the years—30 plus years of being a pastor—I've had a lot of people come to me when they get caught. Everybody is sorry when they get caught in sin; and sometimes they come to see me. Sometimes it's because a spouse makes them come see me—you know, you have to go see the principal! Or maybe a friend or a parent, but somebody is saying, "You know, you've got to go talk to the pastor." So they knock on my door. There are two basic responses that I see over and over and over again. It takes probably five minutes of conversation to figure out which one it's going to be.

The first one is regret. It's sorrow—I got caught. So there's a level of sin management. There's a level of trying to minimize the damage—it's damage control. "So my spouse said I have to come talk to the pastor, so I'm here to tell you I was naughty; I got caught." And then I can check that off the list. I went and talked to the pastor. But in the conversation you start to realize this is about damage control. "I'm trying to keep this quiet. I'm trying to control the situation. I don't want a lot of people to know." And you get the sense that this isn't true repentance. This is just somebody who got caught and they're sorry and now they are doing some level of damage control. Typically when those people leave my office, I know it won't be long until they'll be knocking on the door again, because they're just not serious about sin.

The other category of people is those that come and you can tell quickly they are broken. This isn't damage control. This isn't trying to manage sin. This isn't a feeling where they're still in control and they're still calling the shots. "Hey, Pastor, I just thought I'd let you know I messed up; I was naughty. Just so you know that." These people are broken. They don't care who knows and at the gut level what they're saying is, "I don't know what to do. Somebody help me out of this mess." And when they hit that level of brokenness, it's the first real step to getting out. It's the critical step of confession and true repentance.

If you tell God over and over and over again that you're sorry for a particular sin that happens over and over again, you need to understand you have not repented. You're sorry; you have deep regret; you may feel it deeply, but repentance carries the idea that whatever is necessary I will do, but this must stop! I need to talk to people. I need to get help. I need somebody to help me walk through this, but it must stop and it must stop now! For those who have been deeply wounded by patterns of sin—a spouse, children, friends—the last thing you want to hear from the person who has wounded you are the words, "I'm sorry," because it's like, "I have heard this so many times, I don't want to hear it again. It almost makes the pain worse." What that person wants is evidence that something is actually going to change. We've been down this path so many times; don't tell me you're sorry one more time! Do something about it!

This raises the question: how do you know when someone is serious about confession and repentance? The first thing I would tell you as the wounded party is: I would not take their word for it if it's a pattern of behavior. Everybody's sorry when they get caught. What is necessary is clear evidence of change over time. We have a saying around here that time and truth go together. This has been a pattern of bad, sinful behavior; I need to see a pattern of different choices down the path of righteousness before I can believe something has really changed. There's going to be something that happens that reveals whether there's been true heart change or not, which is where we pick up the story in verse 7:

Now when the Philistines heard that the sons of Israel had gathered to Mizpah, the lords of the Philistines went up against Israel. And when the sons of Israel heard it, they were afraid of the Philistines. Then the sons of Israel said to Samuel, "Do not cease to cry to the LORD our God for us, that He may save us from the hand of the Philistines. "Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it for a whole burnt offering to the LORD; and Samuel cried to the LORD for Israel and the LORD answered him. Now Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, and the Philistines drew near to battle against Israel. (Vs. 7-10a)

So the Philistines see Israel gathered at Mizpah. They assume they are gathering to fight, so they muster their troops and it's game on. The Philistines are moving up toward the Israelites and it says *the Israelites were afraid*. Well, they should be afraid. The last time they had a big showdown was twenty years earlier and thirty-four thousand Israeli soldiers died. So there's legitimate reason to be afraid, only this time it's totally different. Twenty years ago their response was to go to battle. Four thousand soldiers died. They backed up, thought, "You know what we need to do differently—let's get the ark. It's like a good-luck charm. Bring it down here. That will solve the problem." But thirty thousand soldiers die. The ark is taken by the Philistines because their heart was not for God. Now twenty years later they've gone through confession; they've gone through repentance, and their first emotional reaction—their first real test—is they turn to Samuel, their spiritual leader, and they say to Samuel, "Cry out to God! Cry out to the Lord our God that He will save us!"

Imagine what could have been different had that been the reaction twenty years earlier? This time the words have credibility because Samuel has led them through a process where they have cleaned up the land. They have removed the Baals and the Ashtaroth; they have turned their hearts toward God alone. They have confessed their sin; they have repented of their sin; they have genuinely pursued God with all their hearts, so when they say, "Cry out to the Lord our God," they mean it sincerely from their hearts, and the action of their lives has demonstrated this to be true. So Samuel goes before the Lord, offers a sacrifice to the Lord; the Lord hears Samuel and answers him. That's biblical language for God saying, "I'll do it. My people now are pursuing Me sincerely with all their heart. I'll handle this."

There's a bit of a play on words: In verse 7 it says **...the Philistines went up**; in verse 10 it says, **...Samuel was offering up the burnt offering**—the same Hebrew root word. This is really the description of the battle. The Philistines went *up*; Samuel offered *up*, and now we're going to see who wins. That's kind of the play on words there. Now imagine being the Israelites: You're up on top of Mizpah; you visually see the Philistines coming up. The Philistines were a fighting machine and the only thing you really have is Samuel to offer a sacrifice and you're trusting God to come through. So the text is saying Samuel is offering; the Philistines are coming up, now what happens?

But the LORD thundered with a great thunder (literally a great voice) on that day against the Philistines and confused them, so that they were routed before Israel. The

men of Israel went out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines, and struck them down as far as below Beth-car. Then Samuel took a stone and set it between Mizpah and Shen, and named it Ebenezer, saying, "Thus far the LORD has helped us." So the Philistines were subdued and they did not come anymore within the border of Israel. And the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel. The cities which the Philistines had taken from Israel were restored to Israel, from Ekron even to Gath; and Israel delivered their territory from the hand of the Philistines. So there was peace between Israel and the Amorites. (Vs. 10b-14)

So as the Philistines are coming up to Mizpah, God cuts loose with a thunderous voice from the heavens. Whatever it was, it absolutely terrified the Philistines and they turned and ran. Now there's a couple of interesting notes here: Psalm 29 talks about the "*...voice of God in the thunder in the midst of a storm.*" But it's also interesting to note in 1 Samuel 2:10, when Hannah was singing her song—remember we called this the "Song of Hannah,"—at the end of that song she talks about "*...the voice of God thundering against their enemies to defeat them.*" This was a beautiful fulfillment of what Hannah had prophesied back in chapter 2. So the Philistines run; the Israelites run after them, and they rout them and they completely defeat them. So defeated are they that, over the lifetime of Samuel, the Philistines will basically be a non-factor. Israel got back their cities; they got back their land, and apparently they signed some sort of a non-aggression pact with the Amorites. For the first time in the lifetime of these people, they would experience peace and safety and prosperity in the land. And it started with two critical steps: confession and repentance.

The idea of the **Ebenezer**—the Ebenezer literally means a stone of remembrance, and there's debate about whether this is the same Ebenezer from chapter 4 or is this a different Ebenezer? You ask, if he didn't name it until chapter 7, how could it have been the same one from chapter 4? It's helpful to understand that the writer would use reference points to help the readers understand some of the details of these stories. It doesn't necessarily mean that those details were known when the event happened.

So let me explain it this way: Let's imagine I'm trying to explain to you where the Oregon Trail traveled in Nebraska. So I say to you, "Well, when you get up around North Platte, the Oregon Trail ran just south of Interstate 80." Well, that's a very helpful reference point to a modern audience. You know where North Platte is; you know where Interstate 80 is; and so that gives you a reference point for the Oregon Trail. That's not to imply that when the people were traveling on the Oregon Trail, there was an Interstate 80 or there was a North Platte. It's just helping you understand a reference point.

So it's possible that there wasn't really a place named Ebenezer when Israel gathered there, but later as a result of this victory, then Samuel names it Ebenezer and the writer uses that as a reference point. It's hard to tell for sure because Beth-car and Shen—two cities we have no idea where they were—so it's hard to tell exactly where this was happening. So it could be two places; it could be the same place; but the theological point is the same either way. It's meant to create bookends that remind us that twenty years ago the people of Israel went to war against the Philistines and they got slaughtered—thirty-four thousand soldiers died. Twenty years later they went up against the same Philistines and they experienced a great victory. What made the difference? And that's the point of the Ebenezer. Mark it; don't forget it—confession and repentance. They got serious about returning to the Lord with all their heart and God honored that decision. Verse 15:

Now Samuel judged Israel (led Israel) all the days of his life. He used to go annually on circuit to Bethel and Gilgal and Mizpah, and he judged Israel in all these

places. Then his return was to Ramah, for his house was there, and there he judged Israel; and he built there an altar to the LORD. (Vs. 15-17)

So through his lifetime, once a year he would make a fifty mile circuit. Otherwise home was at Ramah. The idea of an altar there was: this now had become the spiritual center and Samuel was their spiritual leader offering sacrifices to God.

This is a beautiful end to what has been a very difficult portion of 1 Samuel. So now we want to just quietly close our Bibles and the people of God live happily ever after. (*laughter*) That's kind of how it feels, which is why we're so shocked at what happens in chapter 8, which we'll talk about in a couple of weeks after the Missions Conference.

For this morning a couple of things to think about: One is as Christians who are serious Christ-followers, we want to influence others for Christ. It's how we're defining leaders in this study. It's not helpful when you see those who are struggling in sin to stand on the sideline and throw rocks, assuming if they want out they can get out. It's fairly obvious to us. It may not be obvious to them. They may be so confused and discouraged it's not as clear to them. So we roll up our sleeves and we jump in the mud, not to be a companion to say, "Hey, let's struggle here in the mud together," but to say, "Let me walk with you and help you out of the mud to the life that God calls you to."

Second application: There are those of you here this morning—if you were to be honest—you are in the mud. The people around you may know; the people around you may not know. But you've made bad decisions and now you find yourself neck-deep in the mud, and it's a miserable way to live. You feel it deeply. Your soul longs for something different, for something more, but now it's become such a mess you don't even know the way out. My question would be: Is this the bottom for you? In other words: it can be if you want it to be. It's up to you. How miserable does life have to get? How much do you have to lose? How much do you have to wound the people around you before you're finally ready to say, "I want out? I want something different."

Step 1: True confession. It's not enough to be sorry. It's not enough to be remorseful. Everybody is sorry when they get caught. There has to be a true confession: "God, I agree with You. This is sin and it's offensive to You." And what's implied in those words is, then it must stop. I can't sincerely say those words and then just keep doing it. So with that comes repentance—that I've got to change my mind. Something has to dramatically change. I have to make the decision that, as of this day that behavior stops, and I will do whatever is necessary in order to get out of the mud and back to experiencing the life that my soul longs for.

The New Testament says, "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" I absolutely believe God stands like the father of the prodigal son waiting to welcome you back. No matter what you have done, no matter how deep the mud has gotten, God stands ready to forgive and to welcome you back. God's grace is enough. God has given every Christian what you need to get out of the mud through the power of the Spirit who dwells within you. It may take a lot of help from others, but let's do this together. But the first step is yours—true confession; real repentance—to experience the peace, the safety, the life that your soul is longing for.

Our Father, we celebrate this morning that You picture Yourself as the Father of the prodigal son. Lord, this morning You stand anxiously awaiting for Your children to return with open arms. Lord, if we choose to confess our sin, if we choose to repent, if we put

down a stone of remembrance today, that from this day forward, it will be different. Lord, my prayers for those that are struggling in the mud this morning, may this be the day that something dramatic changes. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Life Story:

“I grew up in a religious home. My first impression of God was that He was constantly upset with my performance. My mom was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. My dad was never available because his energy was spent taking care of her. When I was a freshman in high school, my parents divorced. I became depressed and I filled the void in my life with drugs, alcohol, and pornography. When I reached college, I became angry and bitter, and by the end of my senior year of college, I quit attending church all together. Circumstances in my life brought me back to church and I began to learn that God accepted me no matter how I performed, and I placed my trust and life in the hands of Jesus Christ. It was the first time that I had ever experienced peace in the chaos. I can tell you from personal experience that sin destroys. The more you try to hide it, the deeper you sink into the mess. The way out is clear: The first step is confession and repentance of sin. I invite you to take that step today and to experience God's forgiveness and freedom that has changed my life.”

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Confession, Repentance and Leadership

Courage to Lead Series

I Samuel 7:2-17

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. What is the difference between true repentance and simply remorse? How can you tell the difference? What are the marks of true repentance? What are the signs that someone is simply doing damage control after being caught in sin?
2. Have you ever been so deep in the mud of sin that you could not see the way out? What caused such confusion and what happened to set you free?
3. Spiritual leaders (any Christian serious about influencing others for Christ) can error in two ways related to sinning brothers and sisters. Either we avoid the mess and cast judgment on the sinner or we get in the mess with the sinner but fail to lead him/her out to freedom. What would a balanced approach look like?

Bible Study

1. Read I Samuel 7:2. It appears Israel had hit bottom and wanted to change but for 20 years didn't really know what to do. What does this teach us about others who are stuck in their sin? What are the lies the enemy tells us when we are deep in sin?
2. Read I Samuel 7:3-6. God has raised up a leader for such a time as this. What was Samuel's role as a spiritual leader? What is confession of sin? What does true repentance look like? What did Israel do to demonstrate the sincerity of their repentance? What do we learn from their actions? How is this different than simply being sorry?
3. Read I Samuel 7:7-17. What was the evidence that something significant had really changed in the hearts of the people? Compare this story to the people's reaction in chapter 4. What had changed? What do we learn from this? How can we really know if someone has changed? What does it mean that time and truth go together?
4. After 400+ years of struggle the nation of Israel experienced a lasting time of peace under the leadership of Samuel. What brought this about and what do we learn from this? What was necessary for God to prepare a leader and for God to prepare a nation?

Application

1. Any serious Christ follower will influence others (be a leader). What is your responsibility to fellow believers who are deep in sin? When do you step in and when you step back and wait? What should be the goal once you step in?

2. Is there an area of sin that you are struggling with right now? What would it mean to confess that sin and repent of that sin? Have you truly repented of this sin before or was there just remorse? What needs to change to break free from that sin?