

Moral Injury Moral Victory in Christ



PRCC
CHAPLAIN
MINISTRIES

*Weep not: behold, the lion of the tribe of Judah,
the root of David, hath prevailed...*

Rev 5:5

The Resource Mission of the PRCC:

The military is a culture unlike any other. Its mission brings unique challenges, which churches and organizations that support the Armed Forces must uncover and address.

To assist our denominational churches and civilian ministers, the Presbyterian & Reformed Commission on Chaplains (PRCC) offers resources to make the gospel relevant and accessible to military life. What we provide is based on the beliefs (a) that overcoming any challenge in life begins by turning to Christ, and (b) that apart from the enlightenment of the Word and the regenerative work of the Spirit, a person will not find their greatest purpose, peace of mind, or recovery from sin or afflictions.

With this vision, we hope this pamphlet will offer a way to understand issues confronting military members while pointing to how we can call upon God to bring hope.

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Preface

This pamphlet, written by Dr. Dwight Horn, provides an overview of morality and how that one aspect of humanity can be overwhelming in the face of sin. When we violate God—His character as manifested in holiness and righteousness, and His goodness in creation—we destroy the essence of our being. Additionally, when we violate another person, we destroy the sanctity and purity of that innocent person.

How do we recover from these offenses? How can immorality be redeemed and righteousness be restored in the lives of all?

This material explores these important questions and offers surprising insights into why we often find ourselves trapped in sin and its consequences, though we desperately want to escape. As you will discover, this struggle stems from a profound inability of humans to understand their true identity apart from God and how healing can only be found in God.

My hope and prayer are that this material will bring freedom into your life as Christ becomes your sole hope of goodness and eternal life. I also desire for this tool to be distributed broadly so that even those who do not yet know God will find in these pages the truth that will enable them to be born anew.

Dr. Dwight Horn
CAPT, CHC, USN (Ret.)

Captain Larson was arguably the best drone pilot for the U.S.A.F.¹ He operated the MQ-9 Reaper and in 650 combat missions, he launched 188 airstrikes, earned 20 medals, and killed a highly sought-after terrorist.

Despite success, he suffered in his work. Most egregious to him was watching the drone strikes in color and high definition when civilians (women and children) were in the strike zone. The aftermath could not be erased from his mind.

Larson buried his internal guilt with illegal drugs, and his personality changed significantly as he became depressed, reclusive, and despondent. His father said, "He never really talked about what he did -- he couldn't, but you knew it was bothering him. He said he was forced to do things against his moral compass."²

With his life and career falling apart, facing prosecution for possession and use of narcotics, he committed suicide in 2021, telling his family he was sorry for everything.

As Captain Larson shows,

there is more to war than following orders to kill. There is an inner moral conviction, judging the appropriateness of our actions.

It is precisely what scripture says about man: "their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them."³

It is time to address this part of the human condition that is most often ignored, answering what it means to be moral agents. Ignoring this part of our humanity comes with a significant cost.

2

What is the Common Understanding of Moral Injury?

“Moral Injury” (MI) describes what people encounter when they engage in, fail to prevent, witness, or are subjected to behavior that violates moral beliefs and personal integrity.

That experience brings intense guilt, depression, distrust, aggression, withdrawal, spiritual questioning, shame, misbehavior, anger, anxiety, isolation, disgust with oneself and/or others, and other physical or spiritual issues. In such cases, if the injustice is unresolved, a person’s mental state can deteriorate to the point of suicidality or homicidal rage.

An Ancient Greek writer named Euripides identified this condition as “miasma.” By this, he meant pollution of the soul, a stain of guilt, a defilement of being. That word captures well the idea of that inner turmoil and unrelenting angst for being involved with immorality.

MI is often associated with military personnel and wartime involvement. Yet, it occurs in every vocation:



“[MI] originally discussed in relationship to transgressing moral beliefs and values during wartime among military personnel, has expanded beyond this context to include similar emotions experienced by healthcare professionals, first responders, and others experiencing moral emotions resulting from actions taken or observations made during traumatic events or circumstances.”⁴

From one study, physicians are said to be committing suicide at a rate twice that of active-duty military members.⁵ MI is indicated as the reason why.⁶ When the Hippocratic oath to put the patient first is violated by institutional demands – time spent away from helping the sick on electronic medical record entries, insurers questioning needed care, hospital administration and bureaucratic requirements, the human failings and mistakes made in health care, lack of patient resources, personal financial insecurity – the sting of moral injustice sets in.⁷

Yet, even beyond the work environment, MI can be experienced in any situation where moral values are disregarded for personal gain. This is true in the lives of both the victims who wrongfully incur damage from immorality and the victimizers who later struggle to rid their minds of their wrongful activity. The most horrendous situations are with the most vulnerable, like children, who find themselves helplessly subject to predators who destroy their innocence.

Why Academics Can Fail to Grasp the Underlying Issues Associated with Moral Injury

A.

The Failure of Naturalism with Truth in General

[Note for the reader: this next section critically shows why many professionals who study and treat MI cannot address the root problem that causes the issue. It is because of a bias in the field toward the idea that humans are nothing more than materially evolved animals. That belief, as you will see in reading, is impossible to justify. Yet, the fact that it exists as an underlying belief for many is devastating since it creates ongoing problems for those who struggle with MI. You cannot treat what is fundamentally a spiritual problem by focusing exclusively on material factors. This will become evident in this section. However, in saying these things, some might not need convincing of this point and would prefer to move past this defense of spirituality to get directly to the truth about what brings and resolves MI. For those, turn to section IV. For the rest, patiently work through these insights as they succinctly reveal why truth, meaning and morality cannot exist in an evolutionary only framework.]

MI has become a prominent topic in scholarly discussions. It is because there is recognition that what was typically labeled as PTSD might be something else:



*A new category is emerging to distinguish a certain state of being that is affected by the combat veteran's participation in war, and which is no longer thought to be identical to PTSD, even if many of the symptoms are similar. This state of being is now referred to as "moral injury," which is distinguished from PTSD in the sense of not being induced through a fear response. ... Moral injury refers to a state of being in which the combat veteran experiences a deep sense of having violated his own core moral beliefs."*⁸

This is a major and long-awaited development. **PTSD is a physiological issue.** It is about the brain and body and how significant trauma can corrupt the way internal systems respond to experience, leading to inappropriate reactions. Contrarily, **MI is a spiritual issue.**

It is about one's conscience and how it becomes plagued by a nagging sense of guilt related to actual or perceived illicit behavior. Though both conditions can mirror each other in having similar symptomology, treatment is not the same because the nature of the injuries is fundamentally different.

What is astounding is that the medical community just now seems to appreciate this. Why? A major reason is a bias amongst mental health providers and researchers to reject spirituality. In a series of articles addressed to clinicians, one author writes about a problem with this:



*Clinicians should recognize a negative bias against R/S [religion/spirituality] that may emerge from philosophical assumptions related to the primary biopsychosocial model in mental health professions. Beginning with a push in the Enlightenment to distance scientific endeavors from religion, **naturalism** dictates clinicians contextualize all aspects of professional expertise in terms of processes, relationships, and events that can somehow be observed in the natural world, ... even religiously oriented clinicians might be reluctant to reconcile biomedical appraisals of moral injury with sacred beliefs and values of SMVs [service members/veterans] who seek their care. In extreme cases, clinicians might be prejudiced against metaphysical views that seem “unscientific” and cannot be easily assimilated into a naturalistic paradigm.⁹*

These words are alarming. They show a prejudice in the scientific world to reject the supernatural exclusively for **metaphysical naturalism**, the idea that everything is made of natural properties, and there is nothing more than that involved in existence. In this worldview, a person, or a frog, for that matter, is composed solely of atoms with their subatomic properties, which evolve and are determined by physical forces and laws of nature. Consequently, if a person suffers from MI or any other malady, that is a material problem to be addressed by manipulating substances in the body and brain. How anything beyond that, like God, spirituality, and religion, might be involved is not considered, at least not in a way that honors “scriptural authority.” Is this not naïve and considerably reckless?

Sergeant Noah Pierce was a combat veteran who killed a child by accident and tortured insurgents for fun. He wrote a letter to his mother and said, "It sounds like you guys in the States are for the war. All the soldiers I know, including me, think it is a bunch of [garbage]. We came in and invaded this country and murdered a lot of innocent people. Tell me how we are heroes."¹⁰

Noah's attempt to find help for his guilt when he returned home did not work. **"A therapist prescribed Ambien and told him to come back in a couple of months. The sleeping pills didn't help, and he started drinking more heavily.** Noah drank to forget, and he drank because he hated himself."¹¹ Once he could not deal with his inner torture anymore, he committed suicide, leaving a note saying: "Time's finally up. **I am not a good person. I have done bad things.** I have taken lives, now it's time to take mine."¹²

As we see with Noah, while many might want to accept that we are only physical beings and that nothing more than this can be found with moral issues, it is apparent that this is not true. People have an immaterial part of themselves evoking deep conscience conviction, which the physical world does not explain. Atoms do not have conscious or self-awareness properties that appraise and bring judgment on behavior. They do not reflect on life, engage with syllogistic reasoning, or have free will to determine things.

They arguably, in the complex assembly of molecular components that make up a brain, develop impressive cognitive abilities. Yet, whatever is formed in that structure would still be the outcome of material (electrochemical) states, as predetermined by genetic materials, as directed by external forces. It would be effectively meaningless regarding our sense of truth; nothing would be enlightening about it. You might as well conclude, as far as that

goes, that what is happening in that human process is equivalent to what is found in the brain of a worm before a fish eats it, the brain of that fish before a heron eats it, or the brain of a different worm that later eats the dead heron—the circle of life as evolution blindly moves on toward no prescribed end.

As C. S. Lewis comments about this naturalistic viewpoint and the absurdity of defending its core principle that all is material:



*All possible knowledge depends on the validity of reasoning. If the feeling of certainty which we express by words like must be and therefore and since is a real perception of how things outside our own minds really 'must' be, well and good. **But if this certainty is merely a feeling in our own minds and not a genuine insight into realities beyond them—if it merely represents the way our minds happen to work—then we can have no knowledge. Unless human reasoning is valid no science can be true. It follows that no account of the universe can be true unless that account leaves it possible for our thinking to be a real insight.** A theory which explained everything else in the whole universe but which made it impossible to believe that our thinking was valid, would be utterly out of court. For that theory would itself have been reached by thinking, and if thinking is not valid that theory would, of course, be itself demolished. It would have destroyed its own credentials. It would be an argument which proved that no argument was sound—a proof that there are no such things as proofs—which is nonsense.¹³*

As Lewis astutely points out, when one limits awareness to the result only of physical interaction in the brain from sensory experience and memory, one falls short of any capacity to assert factual statements based on real insight. A computer might gain information because of its hardware and software, but it will never understand what that knowledge is about, stepping outside its matrices to find truth and make declarations about it. It would forever remain ignorant of what it has uncovered.

Similarly, the physical body and brain in the naturalistic design would only chemically follow its programming, existing under the constraints of biology and physics, unless something transcending the system intervenes to bring truth and meaning, allowing for a reasoning capability that is not exclusively governed and passively prompted by physical forces.

As we can see, the naturalist perspective does not adequately explain life as we know it. We believe that what we know as truth is not a false reality contained and found in our brains alone, as if we all live in a private world of brain events programmed exclusively by natural experience and void of meaning.

Because of this, we completely disagree with naturalists like Richard Dawkins, who himself wrongly concludes about reality:



If the universe were just electrons and selfish genes, meaningless tragedies like the crashing of this bus are exactly what we should expect, along with equally meaningless good fortune. Such a universe would be neither evil nor good

*in intention. It would manifest no intentions of any kind. In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. **The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.***¹⁴

It is odd that Dawkins even makes such an assertion, given that he is trying to communicate meaning in a meaningless existence. It is akin to a dog barking at its echo in the canyon. If he really believed himself, he would not even bother publishing his thoughts. Something is fouled in his thinking.

If we cannot justify meaning and truth through a naturalistic lens, how do we establish them? That has to do with a special kind of knowledge. It is what philosophers refer to as First Knowledge. It is truth we know through intuition, and our grasp of it is immediate and non-inferential. Consider these examples: “all things are equal to themselves” (Law of Identity), “the whole is greater than the part” (mathematical axiom), or “a bachelor is an unmarried person” (analytic truth).

This knowledge is simply known. It is not uncovered through science as it has no physical properties. It just is.

To want to define it beyond that is to misunderstand what it is, and equally as true, to deny its reality is to leave one without any way to make a truth claim: “If nothing is self-evident, nothing can be proved.”¹⁵ As C. S. Lewis states, when showing the need to accept

First knowledge:



You cannot go on 'seeing through' things forever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it. It is good that the window should be transparent, because the street or garden beyond it is opaque. How if you saw through the garden too? It is no use trying to 'see through' first principles. If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To 'see through' all things is the same as not to see."¹⁶

To have truth and meaning is to base it on foundational knowledge. Naturalists provide nothing here, as one of its adherents, John Gray, willingly admits:

*Modern humanism is the faith that through science humankind can know the truth—and so be free. But if Darwin's theory of natural selection is true this is impossible. **The human mind serves evolutionary success, not truth.** To think otherwise is to resurrect the pre-Darwinian error that humans are different from all other animals.¹⁷*

Before we close this analysis, there are other challenges to the naturalist's position, which should be mentioned, because they additionally show the irrational nature of espousing this view:

1) it involves circular reasoning since it claims that “the material world is all that exists and is knowable” and then, justifies this by offering data from the natural sciences, which is focused exclusively on what the material world reveals, offering a conclusion that is presupposed by the premise¹⁸; 2) the theory claims that “material things are all that exist” which thereby precludes the possibility that “material things are ‘not’ all that exist,” but the only way to assert that the initial claim is true (material things are all that exist) is to rely on a logical law, “The Law of Non-contradiction,” which itself is a mind thing, an intuition that informs reason, having no material properties, making the naturalist’s position impossible to uphold without disproving itself¹⁹; and 3) it does not account for other things we know to be true which are not based on sensory experience from the material world, such as deductive reasoning principles like modus ponens (if P, then Q, P therefore Q), or basic mathematical rules like the additive axiom (if two quantities are equal ($1=1$ and $2=2$), then adding an equal amount to both results in the same sums ($1+2=2+1$)).

In the end, metaphysical naturalism, when asserted as a truth claim, is hoisted upon its own petard. You cannot have it both ways: if only material things exist, meaningful statements, assertions, and axioms—as based on immaterial and intuitional knowledge and as known by an immaterial state of consciousness—do not.

We must reject the predominant thinking about MI, i.e., it is a problem fixed by exclusively focusing on the brain and body, giving no consideration to the supernatural side of this problem. Understanding this has important implications, as we are about to see regarding morality.

Thought Bubble: How does the mind know apart from experience? Example of The Principle of Causality

If what I know is the result of how the brain is impacted by material factors alone, then the brain, as a sensory processing organ, might deal with a circumstance, like hitting one's head on something (cause), and link it to the pain that follows (effect). From there, it might realize that it should avoid pain by protecting its head, learning a cause-and-effect relationship. It might even link many experiences with this pattern and discern better ways to survive. Yet, that would be the end of that in a natural world.

Consider now a world invaded by supernatural truth. In this instance, the brain might continue inferring from experience a cause-and-effect relationship. But then, it might, apart from that, be enlightened to see, as if a light bulb went off, that all experiences in life, even those imagined, not only have a cause and an effect relationship, but must have that—'events' do not self-materialize, they have 'causes'.

This is where the person recognizes that a different sort of thing is going on. It is a supernatural invasion of the natural world where there is awareness of the principle of causality, uncovering truth that objectively, universally, and necessarily orders not just one's life's experience but how the created world works. The naturalist cannot explain this, and that it happens with self-evident knowledge and that we cannot deny it without being ignorant of the logical challenges of doing so, makes it certain that the supernatural exists.

Setting aside the broader discussion of rational knowledge and looking specifically at morality, if we are honest, we must accept that there is yet another kind of supernatural revelation we uncover related to behavior—how we interact with others and this world. It is a kind of truth that makes us aware that all creation is ordered according to goodness, and that we should maintain that relationship in all we do: we ‘ought’ to be good.

This sense of goodness is often called “The Natural or Moral Law”. It is unique in our experience. For example, decisions related to moral behavior are not like those connected to a biological preference, such as choosing a favorite color or food, or incidental mistakes like stubbing one’s toe or playing wrong notes at a concert. If they were, when it came to moral claims, we might well be indifferent to what others do, and/or we might lack any sense of righteous indignation if they choose actions that violate our sense of goodness. But that is not how we are. If a neighbor told us they brutally tortured and murdered their child, and wanted help cleaning up the mess, we would not react the same as if they stated they broke a water pipe in their house, creating severe damage to the walls and floors, and wanted assistance with the restoration.

Moral choices, involving goodness, impact us differently from all other kinds of decisions we have in life. When people act in love, generosity, compassion, kindness, and charity, we joyously celebrate the goodness involved in their behavior. When people regard and defend equality and the right to life, liberty, and happiness, we again internally respond with cheerfulness. On the other hand,

when people act out of jealousy, spite, selfishness, miserliness, and hatred, we recoil in disgust. We viscerally respond to life based on goodness and how it is upheld. It is what makes us, as humans, markedly different from other animals, who rape, murder, cannibalize, or commit infanticide without any sense of wrongfulness, regret, or peer judgment.

The question is, from where does this sense of goodness come? The answer is that it comes as a revelation, as a way of knowing, just like what we find with the rational principles of truth we discussed. As G. E. Moore stated about this knowledge of the good and how we know it in his highly acclaimed work, *Principia Ethica*:

*The Fundamental principles of Ethics must be self-evident. ... The expression 'self-evident' means properly that the proposition so called is evident or true, **by itself alone**; that it is not an inference from some proposition other than **itself**.*²⁰

In other words, this truth about the good has no basis for knowing it, other than we apprehend it and know it to be true. We do not find it in this materialistic world, like we do physical properties. Recognizing this, let us, in ignorance of knowing about this truth, other than accepting what is salient and right about it, acknowledge and submit to the moral law of goodness, which by nature is sui generis and beyond the vain and prideful attempts to define it in a way that always turns out to be far less than it is. **In simple terms, let us humbly accept what we know to be true: we have an internal moral guide.**

We must not leave this discussion without addressing an objection often levied against the idea of a supernatural law, as we are discussing. The question is asked, how can humans know

to be true, like an imposing supernatural moral law, yet easily disregard it? Does that not show that this principle of goodness is not real?

The rebuttal is fairly obvious. As clearly as we can know what goodness is in the comprehension of it, we can suppress what we know for selfish impulses or delusional ideas, and in the process, distort truth and justify wrongful behavior. The Salem Witch Trials, slavery, and racism are pernicious examples of that in America. Simply because we know something is true does not mean we can be dissuaded from believing otherwise. We will discuss this in more detail later, but for now, we should acknowledge that foolishness or denial to accept truth does not refute its existence. I can fail to obey the law of gravity and jump off a building, thinking, in my delusion, I can fly. It has happened.²¹ Judgment, however, will come. We are bound to properties and forces that govern existence and decisively invade our reality, whether we are willing to observe or accept them.



My first day in Vietnam, I knew something was wrong. On my first patrol, I saw an old man beaten by a squad leader for no reason other than that he was Vietnamese. What I saw in my fellow Marines was not the attitude of men who believed they were fighting for a noble cause. Their behavior was an admission that no one cared about what the war was about anymore. That day was the beginning of my education, and an immense darkness opened under me. What I saw that day in these men was a kind of soul damage.²²

From what we intuitively know, we must accept that morality points us to something supernatural. Robert George, in his book, *In Defense of Natural Law*, describes this moral sense in this way:

“Our knowledge of the most fundamental principles of human well-being and fulfillment may be underived—because these principles are self-evident practical truths.”²³ They are foundational truths upon which knowledge, reasoning, and meaning are derived.²⁴ They have no physical basis and are uncreated by us. They just are. In working his readers to the point of understanding this, C. S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity*:

*It begins to look as if we shall have to admit that there is more than one kind of reality; there, in this particular case, there is something above and beyond the ordinary facts of men’s behavior, and yet quite definitely real—a real law, which none of us made, but which we find pressing in on us.*²⁵

What more can we know about this intuited moral truth? Why is it so compelling that people find themselves, at times, willing to risk their safety to uphold it, to the point of heroism and death?

4

What is the truth about Moral Injury?

A.

The Nature of Morality

The real answer to why we aspire to be virtuous is not found in the identification of a behavior (respectful, loving, fearful), in the emotion that comes from it (pleasure, anger), in the benefit that it derives (self or societal advancement), or in the mores that shape

our culture, but in this Moral Law that underlies ethical awareness and activity.

To gain more insight into the nature of this law, we can look to the Bible, which speaks about this in detail. As we do, one thing that becomes clear is that morality is related to God. It is His pure, holy, just, righteous, and immutable character as witnessed in creation (Is 5:16, 6:3; Rev 4:8; Rom 1:18-25). It is the testimony of His Perfect Being in the form of righteousness: “The LORD is righteous in all His ways.”²⁶ It is the expression of His sovereign will that orders how He intends mankind to live in themselves and in relationship to all other things (Ps 11:7; I Jn 2:29; Rom 2:12-16).

Charles Hodge, in his Systematic Theology, provides this regarding morality and God:

[T]he will of God is the ultimate ground of moral obligation to all rational creatures. No higher reason can be assigned why anything is right than that God commands it. This means, (1.) That the divine will is the only rule for deciding what is right and what is wrong. (2.) That his will is that which binds us, or that to which we are bound to be conformed. By the word “will” is not meant any arbitrary purpose, so that it were conceivable that God should will right to be wrong, or wrong right. The will of God is the expression or revelation of his nature, or is determined by it; so that his will, as revealed, makes known to us what infinite wisdom and goodness demand.²⁷

Morality is the revelation of God’s righteous will in this world, perfectly reflecting His nature and specifying what goodness is and what one must do to be aligned justly with creation and God.

B.

The Nature of Moral Injury

The next thing we consider, which the Bible also reveals, is why MI exists. The answer is due to man's desire to reject God, His righteous character, and purpose for creation (Gen 3; Rom 1:25).

This began with Adam and Eve. Their decision to turn away from goodness for selfish pleasure destroyed creation (Gen 3:17-19; Rom 5:12ff). It left all mankind, though created uniquely in God's image by having immortal souls capable of consciousness, knowledge, reason, freedom to choose goodness (WMC 4.2, 6:2; Gen 2-3, 14-15, 25; Romans 2:14-15), defiled in both body and spirit (Gen 6:5; Ps 51:5; Jer 17:9; Eph 2:1; Jn 5:42; II Cor 7:1; Mk 7:14-23; Rom 1:21, 5:12, 6:6; I Tim 4:2; II Tim 3:2-4; Tit 1:15; Heb 3:12).²⁸ Then, once in that condition, man continued in his own volition to rebel against God (Rom 3:23, 8:5ff; I Jn 3:4). He denied, ignored, and hardened his mind to moral rightness, and lived exclusively for physical passions and desires (Rom 7:14-23). It left him with no hope of being morally good before God, creating in his own wickedness MI wherever he went:

There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave. With their tongues, they keep deceiving. The poison of asps is under their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood. Destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.²⁹

However, and importantly in this discussion, even as we see what original sin is and does to our moral state, it does not render man incapable of knowing what is right (Rom 1:18ff; 2:14-15). He does not lose moral intuition and can know and experience goodness. He is not “as bad as he could be” or “entirely destitute of virtue.”³⁰ His nature is not “evil in itself”, nor is his spirit “inactive”.³¹ A pagan can love his children, be beneficent, show compassion, and care for the poor. It is just that his desire for goodness, whatever form it takes, will always be mired in a priority to honor self over godliness (Is 64:6; Rom 3:10-12, 14-15, 7:18, 8:5ff; Eph 2:1-3; I Jn 3:4). It is a life destined for MI and the endless manufacturing of it, since it is a life lived, as scripture says:

*In the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.*³²

C.

The Implications of Knowing about the Nature of Morality and Moral Injury

From what is offered, we find that what God makes known to us about Himself and morality is rejected (Rom 1:19-20, 2:14-15; 3:10ff). Our choices become either about the egoistic pursuit of sensuality, happiness, emotional well-being, power, status, position, and wealth at the expense of others, or the selfish desire to discard what is right in view of being afraid, anxious, or wrongfully connected to or dependent on other people or things. In all these ways, the worship of everything but God becomes our desire, allowing MI to exist.

Yet, as much as we know those things to be true, we know that something in ourselves does not want that.

A part of us wants what is good. Our conscience is influenced to do what is just and right. We find in ourselves an inner moral awareness that is influential, but not determinative in guiding behavior.

How do we get past this dilemma? How can we avoid and overcome MI by living for God to maintain a life committed to moral goodness?

5

The True Healing from Moral Injury through Christ

A.

Christ is the Restorer of Righteousness

Ironically, once sin entered the world, it was the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus and the summary rejection of Him by mankind that became the very means by which MI is addressed. It is not something we do. It was and is done through Jesus' death on the cross, as the perfect sacrifice for sin, where God's immutable and Holy nature, along with His love, mercy, and grace, remained unblemished. **Christ's death makes us righteous and frees us from sin and the punishment of it so that God can address sin, and we can have fellowship with Him:**



All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.³³

God is a perfectly just God (Ps 99:4; 96:13; Rom 6:23). In His Son's death and resurrection, He maintains His righteousness and righteous order with us. This becomes the very foundation for our morality. We live in and for goodness, not in and for ourselves, but through faith in Christ, receiving in that union the call of the gospel (Rom 8:30, 10:14-17; I Cor 1:24), regeneration (Jn 3:3-8; Titus 3:5), conversion (I Pet 1:23), faith to believe (Eph 2:8-9), justification (Eph 1:7-8; Rom 5:1), sanctification (I Thess 5:23-24) and eventual glorification (Rom 8:30). Our place now is to surrender to the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit in us, leading us to good works (Col 1:10-12; Gal 5:24-25). That is what has the promise of living a moral life so that MI is avoided.

Once we see that our righteousness is found in Jesus alone (Phil 3:9; II Cor 5:21), that we do nothing to affect our status before God, other than maintain faith in the finished work of Jesus (Rom 1:17-18), there is the temptation to think that what we do in the flesh does not matter: “Live however you want because righteousness is secured in Jesus.” That line of thinking is addressed many times in the Bible. Paul succinctly answers it by saying, “If you want to go down this lane, your condemnation is just” (Rom 3:1-8).

All in all, we must be righteous in our behavior because we live for God (Rom 6:1-2). We must be Holy like God because we are now one with God (Lev 20:26). We must put to death the sinful nature to overcome fleshly desires and seek goodness because that is who we are in God (Col 3). We must seek righteousness, not using freedom in Christ to serve sin, because we are servants of God (I Pet 2:16; Rom 6:18). We must love others unconditionally because we now live that others might know God through our faith (Acts 1:8; Matt 28:19-20; Jn 13:35).

This calling is what we find in the life of Christ. Even being God, perfect in all ways, He became a righteous servant to God His Father (Matt 12:18; Acts 3:26). He remained humble and pure (Heb 4:15; Heb 5), and no matter what the temptation, He remained faithful (Phil 3:5-8). Amid horrendous suffering, His life never became about what was best for him (Matt 26:53-54); it was to be a sacrifice for sinners (Mk 10:45; Rom 3:24-25).

Being called to the example of Christ ourselves (Phil 2:5; I Pet 2), let

us receive what Christ offered and consider the path we need to follow to be free from MI.

6

The Steps to Find Freedom from Moral Injury

A. The Challenge for All

Sin is a direct violation of God. When King David says to God, “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge,”³⁴ his confession is about adultery and murder. He destroyed the lives of two people. Despite that, his focus is on what He did to God, violating His righteousness and righteous order. As he sees his offenses, they were attacks directed at God and a refusal to find goodness in Him.

This is revelatory. Immorality is not “directly” about what happens when people fail to relate to others appropriately. Central to it is rebellion against God. People reject their Creator, despite their creation being in that image, and they reject the goodness of their own creation, despite the cost to themselves and others. These spiritual truths explain MI and why it is so destructive. When I rebel against the essence of who I am, I create death and destruction in my relationship with God, in myself, and with those impacted by my sinful choices (Is 59:2; Rom 6:23; Gal 5:15).

You will not find those insights addressed in the academic literature on MI. The focus will be on the person struggling with MI and what “they feel they need” to be happy. From there, the goal will be to

effect physical change in that person toward their personal goals through treatments like Adaptive Disclosure Therapy, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Psychotropic Therapy, Exposure Therapy, Self-Forgiveness Therapy, Narrative Therapy, or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. God, and how He brings healing to MI, will not be in view.

This raises the issue of how these standard approaches to MI will ever be therapeutic. It is not an indictment on them as far as what they can provide, but recognition of their limitations and the absurdity and utter arrogance of man to think that wholeness of being can come apart from God.

It is through God and the sacrifice of Jesus that one establishes moral rightness, and from there, it is through God and one's relationship with Jesus that one can maintain moral order, being free of MI. The simple prescription to follow is what Jesus offered:



“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”³⁵

B. The Challenge for Victimizers

We should be mindful that God does not create evil. It comes when a person is so enticed by lust that he misappropriates the

goodness of God's creation for his purposes (Jam 1:13-15). That is idolatry, murder, lust, adultery, stealing, and the like. A person rejects what makes something good in its true purpose for creation and abuses it for selfish designs. This is what it is to create MI and bring corruption into the world.

King David provides a classic example of one who brings MI into existence. He defiled the goodness of his relationship with God, his own being, Bathsheba, Uriah, and even his appointed role as King, which ironically was a position given to him to protect goodness in all things. His life became a curse to the world rather than a blessing. Fleshly lust became the enticement and motivation to desecrate purity, directly in rebellion against God and indirectly in the exploitation of creation.

In humility, though, let us not see David as different than ourselves (Jm 2:8-10). All people are sinners and thereby destroy the goodness of creation and their relationship to the Creator (Rom 1:24-25; I Jn 1:8). It is never a question of whether we sin, but if we see that sin.

Yet, here is where God will be continuously at work in our lives. As with David, whose secret sin was exposed by Nathan the prophet, so God will work to hold us accountable and expose sin (Num 32:23; II Sam 24; Prov 28:13; Heb 12:6; Gal 6:7-9). It can happen dramatically sometimes, as with James Crisp. He killed a man and got away with it. Then, he became a Christian. At that point, he felt a renewed conviction about his crime and could not let the guilt of that sin go. For three years, he struggled with what to do until "He made the decision to risk his physical freedom in order to regain his spiritual freedom and hopefully help bring closure to this case for the sake of himself and the Taylor family."³⁶ He walked into the sheriff's office in the district where the crime happened and confessed to

the murder, accepting punishment for his crime.

That is a picture of God actively involved in the lives of His people. The Holy Spirit renews our spirit, taking away our inability to know and desire goodness (Ezek 36:26; Tit 3:5). We see ourselves as the sinners we are in the flesh, “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me,”³⁷ and cry out for mercy, “Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.”³⁸ In humility, we accept the punishment of sin just for the promise of finding goodness: “Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which You have broken rejoice.”³⁹ Then, armed with the power of the Holy Spirit (Jn 15:26; 16:13; Rom 8:26-27), the joy of salvation, and a willing spirit (Ps 51:11-12), we set out to fulfill our true purpose in God: “I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will be converted to You.”⁴⁰

That is the work of God in the life of a sinner to set one free from MI.⁴¹ Let us look more closely at some critical steps to follow in this process.

1. Identify the sin: As you feel conviction about some wrongful act, identify what you did. Give it a label and think about all the ways that action violated goodness in your relationship with God and in who God made you to be.

Consider here that as sin becomes part of your life, it weaves itself into all aspects of your life: behaviors, thoughts, emotions, activities, finances, and relationships. In time, if you fail to repent, you will be entrapped by those sins, addicted to their pleasure, and slowly overcome by their impact. That is a dangerous point because what

you once felt in control of will control you: “For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.”⁴² Calamity will follow.

Thus, identify that sin today so that Satan will not ensnare your soul (I Pet 5:8). Seek to know your sin and confess it. This is within your power as a child of God (Rom 6:6-7), and it is a part of what it is to be born of God (I Jn 3:9-10). Live, therefore, to know the goodness of Christ for which you have been set free: “having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.”⁴³

2. Go before God with your sin: After identifying sin, seek forgiveness from God. While your righteousness remains secure in the work of Christ (I Pet 2:24; Heb 7:27; Col 2:13-14; Eph 2:8-9), confession releases our minds from guilt (I Jn 1:9) and brings renewed joy as we rediscover communion with God (Ps 51:14). King David says it this way:



*When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through groaning all day long. For day and night, Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and You forgave the guilt of my sin.*⁴⁴

3. Accept Forgiveness in God's mercy and love: The weight of sin can be unbearable, and there are times when we cannot imagine ever finding forgiveness. With God, however, forgiveness is always available. In His immutable character, His mercy, grace, and love are unending (Ps 103:8-12). This is what scripture makes obvious: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved."⁴⁵

Our sins can never stop God's willingness to forgive. All we must do is confess those sins, and God will cleanse us from our unrighteousness (Pr 28:13).

If you do not know God, use this as the time to experience God. Go before Him in confession of your sin and the need for forgiveness through Christ. Here is the simple truth you must follow:

*If you confess with your mouth Jesus **as** Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for **with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness**, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, 'whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed'.⁴⁶*

From here, if you have challenges freeing your mind from the conviction of sin, you should keep your focus on scripture and prayer. God can and will release you from thinking you are unworthy of forgiveness, even if you see your crime as unforgivable (I Cor 10:13). There is no sin for which Christ's death cannot atone (I Pet 3:18). Let scripture control your thoughts (II Tim 3:16-17). Do not let Satan falsely accuse you so that you live with a false sense of guilt (Rev 12:10). Christ is your Savior, and in Him, you have no guilt: "Therefore,

there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”⁴⁷



Bud, Korean War Veteran, a Haunting Memory

I was drafted into the Army at 19 in 1952. One night I'm on guard duty, and I see a figure coming to my position. I told him to stop, but he kept coming. I dream about what happened next almost every night. It's hard to take a life, even if it's your duty. I had all this baggage after the war. I kept it all inside. In 2017, I decided to kill myself. I said, "I don't care to be here anymore. I don't know why I'm here." I got a gun and was going to kill myself in the yard at a family gathering. I was talked out of it and went to a holding facility. The next Sunday, I was asked to go to church. I didn't want to go. But I went. The sermon given hit me right straight in the heart. It felt like God was speaking to me, like nobody else was around. I realized that I've got to forgive myself. From now on, I've got to hold onto Jesus, and that is when I met Christ. I knew I could do nothing on my own. I've done a lot of wrong in my life, and I carry the condemnation, and it's too heavy. I accepted Jesus and was baptized, and Jesus Christ lifted all these bad things I'd done, all of them, off of me. I felt free. How great it is that God does this for someone who rejected Him. It's an incredible thing. It's never too late, no matter what a person has done, no matter what kind of character, God can take care of that.⁴⁸

4. Resolve not to live in that sin again: When you are one with God, sin should not be part of your life (I Jn 1:15-16). You have changed, as Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I

now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.”⁴⁹ Thus, resolve never to live in the sin which gave rise to your offense. You are not a slave to it (Rom 6:6-7). Transform your mind to serve God by focusing on what is “good, and acceptable, and perfect” (Rom 12:1-2). Let go of the past and press on to the upward calling of God in Christ (Phil 3:13-14).

Keep in mind that repentance in the Bible brings complete transformation. That means the associations you had in the past that spurred on sin in your life should not be part of your life as you move forward. This includes not only people around you who helped foster immorality, but old habits, lifestyles, places, literature, material things, and media content that brought temptation to your flesh.

Be aware, too, that wholeness and purity in God should make immoral behavior detestable. Hate sin and be repulsed by it (Amos 5:15; Ps 5; 97:10; Ps 101:3; Pr 8:13). “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.”⁵⁰ Be mindful that sin, however entertaining or enthralling it might be in the moment, never leads to goodness. That is why Christ had to die, enabling you to know redemption. That is why you must die to yourself, which enables you to live in that redemption.

5. Seek out those offended as God directs: This can be the hardest step in finding freedom from sin. One military pilot was facing the need to tell his wife about a string of adulterous affairs. He said, **“I’ve flown over 60 missions in enemy territory. I’ve been in firefights and had missiles shot at me. But all that seems so much easier than telling her what I’ve done.”**⁵¹

We must stop hiding behind a false image of who we want people to

think we are. We need to be honest about our failings. As scripture tells us, we should confess our sins to others without shame (Matt 5:23-24; Acts 19:18; James 5:16). This has several benefits. It allows victims to restore a sense of goodness about you and the world. It shows that you are willing to face the consequences of your actions, accepting correction even if it means fiscal or civil punishment. It opens you to accountability and provides the opportunity to seek wisdom on why you sinned and how to avoid sin in the future. It frees you to live in the light, not hiding from your sinful past, but finding in the cross of Christ a new confidence and empowerment to face truth and overcome sin. It can be difficult, seemingly impossible. That is what it means to have faith in Christ, though, and face the consequences of sin (Prov 28:13; Gal 6:7-8; Heb 13:4).

A caution here is in order. Let God, through wise counselors, direct you in confessing your sins to others, especially those you offended. You want to ensure that your confession is done for the right reasons and offered with the right words. You want to know that the timing for this confession is right. You want to ensure you do not revictimize someone because you reacted or did something inappropriate when you apologized. You do not want to put the victim or yourself in a dangerous situation by going to them. It might be that it would be imprudent to confess the sin to a person, or it might be impractical, or impossible to do so in a way that brings goodness. There might be many things to consider as you work to correct your mistakes. Let others help to think and work through these issues.

Be mindful that our purpose in Christ is to serve others (Gal 5:13). We live like Christ to bless others so that every moral virtue practiced, every good deed done, every fruit of the Spirit is offered to heal the broken, uplift the dispirited, bring witness to the fallen, feed the

broken, uplift the dispirited, bring witness to the fallen, feed the hungry, and generally enable life to flourish (Phil 2:3-5). Therefore, live for Christ and not self so that your life will enrich the lives of those around and you will know the fullness of God (II Cor 5:15; I Thes 5:21-23).

6. Find your satisfaction and joy in ministry, not sin: The greater our sin, the more embarrassed we are by it and want to keep it hidden. In Christ, this is not how we should be. If anything, God might well use the sins of the past to be our platform for ministry. It makes sense in that we are the experts on how those sins entrap the soul and how God liberates us from them. Perhaps this will not be your path. Regardless, recognize that God calls you out of sin to be in Christ to use your life and testimony that others might hear the good news. Find that ministry as you move forward.

“Cheno,” Ramses Echevarria, by the age of eight, was already in a gang, and by sixteen years of age, he had been to jail nine times. His life was filled with drugs, crime, and sexual immorality. When he was nineteen, it all caught up to him, as he was being prosecuted for yet another crime, only this time, the prosecutor was requesting a sentence of ninety years from the judge. Now, God had “Cheno’s” attention. At this point, Cheno said, I fell on my prison bed and wept. “Amid the tears, I knew I needed to change. ... I asked God to have mercy on me, forgive me, and change me. As the peace of God enveloped me, I sensed my life would never be the same.” Fortunately, the judge had mercy on Cheno and, after a much shorter sentence, and having used his time in jail to grow in Christ, he went into ministry when he was released, reaching out to any who would listen as he told the story of his life and the unbelievable love of God to rescue

him from death. Cheno is now in full-time ministry, with his Christian wife, at a church he planted. He says, "My journey to the pulpit was far from conventional. Nevertheless, I am living proof the gospel still changes lives."⁵²

C. The Challenge for the Victims

The sadistic part of sin is that while it corrupts the sinner, it violates the purity and integrity of an innocent person who is forced into suffering for the base pleasure of another. Sometimes, as well, victims are told that they are in part to blame for what happens to them. Blame shifting is the original form of denying responsibility for one's actions (Gen 3:11-13), and that erroneous accusation only brings more suffering.

A victim of sin is never to blame for what another does to him. A victimizer makes his own decision to destroy goodness. For a Christian, he can always choose to act in goodness, love, mercy, and grace, no matter what the situation is (Rom 6:20; Jn 8:34). But even for an unbeliever, though being stuck in sin, it does not mean he "ceased to be a free moral agent. He is free because he determines his own acts. ... He is a moral agent because he has the consciousness of moral obligation, and whenever he sins, he acts freely against the convictions of conscience or the precepts of the moral law."⁵³ Victimizers would do well to remember these truths when they blame others for their actions.

In sum, victims are entirely innocent when someone violates their integrity and goodness. It is part of what causes the deep pain, experiencing the deep injustice of this fallen world. Even in those situations, though, there are ways for victims to recover.

1. Know your identity: When you think about who you are, it is tempting to define yourself by the sin thrust upon you. That is not accurate. As a Christian, you have the greatest of all identities in that you have been specifically chosen by God to be one with Him from the foundations of the world (Jn 15:16; Rom 8:28-30). Think about that. You are a chosen one of God. Of all people throughout history, the God who created this world personally selected You! I do not honestly know how to process that; it completely silences me. You are unique and special beyond measure in the eyes of God (I Pet 1:3-7).

It gets better. As a result of your selection, you are a child of God, adopted into His family (Jn 1:12-13; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5). You are holy, a part of a royal priesthood, a person for God's own possession (I Pet 2:4-5, 9). No longer do you, like those outside of Christ, find your identity in a cause, a cultural issue, a political party/position, a skill, an accomplishment, or an ability. You have been liberated from seeing yourself through worldly things like beauty, wealth, power, vocation, social status, or reputation. All that controls the mind of unbelievers no longer determines you. You have been liberated in Christ: "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore, keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."⁵⁴ You are in God, and most importantly, God is in You (Eph 2:8ff; 3:19; Rom 8:9; Col 1:27). That is your identity. Do not think of yourself apart from God, but through His eyes alone.

This requires a fundamental shift in thinking, particularly when it comes to MI. We label people to be morally injured and let them live with and under this stigma. When we interact with them, MI is the controlling agenda and sometimes the sole focus of every interaction.

Yet, that is not befitting for you. Somebody might have morally injured you, but in Christ, that does not define or control you (I Cor 10:13). It might be a part of your story and struggle in life. Yet, it can never be who you are. You are a new creation and alive in Christ (Eph 2:5; II Cor 5:17). You are victorious over those in this world who wish you harm (Ps 118:6; Rom 8:37; I Cor 15:58). You are amazingly empowered directly by God in your suffering and weakness so that you do not hide from the suffering but revel in how God delivers you from it:



“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.⁵⁵

That fills out your identity. **You are not a victim but an overcomer.**

Your identity is in Christ, and though “In the world you have tribulation, ... take courage; I have overcome the world.”⁵⁶

Think, act, and live as the person you are now in Christ; one who has been reconciled to God to be “holy and blameless and beyond reproach.”⁵⁷

Your identity is never about you; it is always about Christ in you.

2. Know your purpose: The Apostle Paul in scripture is clear about our role in Christ (II Cor 5:14-6:7). We have the “Ministry of Reconciliation” (II Cor 5:18). As God brought us to Himself through Christ, we are to bring others to Christ by proclaiming His message (II Cor 5:19). This makes us ambassadors for God, living in righteousness because of Christ and living out righteousness to show Christ (II Cor 5:20-21). We are to do this by “giving no cause for offense in anything so that the ministry will not be discredited” (6:3). This means, as Paul goes on to say, maintaining this Christ-like disposition “in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness.”⁵⁸

This is challenging. We are told that nothing others do to us changes our purpose to love them. As Christ suffered by offering unconditional love so that we might have eternal life, we suffer by offering unconditional love so that others might have eternal life:

For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.⁵⁹

This is our purpose in life: to live so that others might know God. For this reason, your life and ministry cannot be about you, despite what happens to you. It must be about the opportunity to have a ministry that reconciles the lost to Jesus. All you do must fit into that. All that happens to you does not change that. You can never be thwarted in your purpose or stuck in some label like MI, where that becomes what you are about. You are victors in Christ (I Cor

15:57).

3. Know your obligation to forgive: As you carry out this ministry for Christ, offering yourselves to others in love, you are called to forgive those who abuse you. This forces you to comprehend in a new way what it means to sacrifice yourself for others. The attitude is clearly one of death to self. You must lay down your life like Christ, even to the point of loving your enemies. As Christ loved you and died for you while you were His enemy (Rom 5:8), you must do the same.

It is fair to ask how you are supposed to do that. It is a nice idea until someone assaults you so violently that rage fills your every thought of that person. At that point, we say with exasperation, "Try forgiving."

The simple response, which clarifies the issue, is that the power to forgive is not in you. In yourself, you cannot be loving and sacrificial in any real, unconditional way (II Cor 3:5). In the flesh, you will hate and harbor resentment toward your enemies (Gal 5:13, 19-21). That is what the flesh does and what controls it (Rom 8:7). If you want to react differently, you must be dead to yourself (Rom 8:5-10), and alive in the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16-17, 22-23). As Paul says, "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit."⁶⁰

While this still might seem impossible, as far as forgiveness is concerned, there are examples of Christians throughout history who have forgiven the most heinous sins. One is Corrie ten Boom, who famously said about forgiving a guard in the Nazi concentration camp where her sister died:

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. **Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more?** Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. ... Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness. ... And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness or goodness that the world's healing hinges, but on his. When he tells us to love our enemies, he gives along with the command, the love itself.⁶¹

God can meet us in the act of forgiving so that a person's sin, whether slight, egregious, or repeated, can be forgiven without measure (Matt 18:22). Anything less than that fails to understand what it means that Christ forgave us and how our life in Him brings a new way of relating to sinners (Matt 18:23-35). Let us go back then, and renew our sense of purpose in the area of forgiveness as Paul spells it out for us:



*"If anyone is in Christ, **he** is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all **these** things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and **gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.**"⁶²*

4. Know that God will bring justice: Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, in due time their foot will slip; For the day of their calamity is near, and the impending things are hastening upon them. For the LORD will vindicate His people.⁶³

When those who are innocent incur MI, be certain that there will be judgment against sinners (Is 13:11; II Thes 1:8). God will restore righteousness, and justice is that way (Is 42:1-4; Ps 89:14). It is how sin is punished (Rom 6:23), and sinners are redeemed (II Cor 5:21). It cannot be avoided with God: “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled ... He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”⁶⁴

Retribution will come in many forms. First, living in sin always hastens death. For the activity itself, ensnares and weakens a person (body, will, and spirit), causing him to fail to the point that illicit gain vanishes in the face of earthly judgment (Prov 3:11-12; Heb 12:5-6; I Cor 11:30; Rev 3:19).

Beyond that, living in sin brings Divine punishment in myriad ways (Ps 89:31-33; Ezek 18; Heb 10:26-29, 12:6ff). As the Apostle Peter says, “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from a trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, and especially those who indulge the flesh in its corrupt passion, and despise authority” (II Pet 2:9-10).

Finally, living in sin, for those who do not experience atonement through Christ, will bring the greatest penalty of all: eternal damnation (Jer 30:16; Rom 1:18ff; Heb 9:27; Jm 1:15; Rom 13; Matt 25:46). Judgment from God is always exercised.

That is the work of God to punish sin. Yet, how does that Divine judgment fit with our need to forgive those who sin against us? First, we let God be God, submitting to His righteous judgment and trusting that all sin will be addressed through His perfect will, both now and for eternity: “God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.”⁶⁵ Next, we allow and support God’s appointed rulers as they mete out earthly punishment for evil (Rom 13). Finally, on our part, we maintain the ministry of reconciliation, putting aside the temptation for bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, and malice, and putting on the desire to be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving (Eph 4:30-32). Our goal is not to see victimizers perish but to see them redeemed through love and prayer (Luke 6:27-31; Matt 5:44), and in this way, we do not dismiss the need for God’s justice but allow it to be divinely executed.

There is a humbling example of what this ministry of reconciliation can be, which is seen in the life of Gary Ridgeway, the infamous “Green River Strangler.” In a powerful courtroom scene, this heinous killer, after being convicted of forty-nine murders, sat and listened to the victims’ families as they expressed to him their hate, contempt, and hopes that he would be sent to hell to receive his torture.⁶⁶ But then, the court was silenced as Robert Rule, a father whose sixteen-year-old daughter was savagely murdered by this man, received his turn to share his thoughts. He said, “Mr. Ridgeway, there are people here that hate you. I’m not one of them. I forgive you for what you have done. You’ve made it difficult to live up to what I believe, and what God says to do, and that is to forgive. And he doesn’t say to forgive certain people, he says to forgive all. So you are forgiven, sir.”⁶⁷

To see that moment is intensely moving. It goes against everything

the other families in the courtroom stated. Their statements were understandable. His statement was “divine.” It moved the murderer and convicted criminal to tears.

Some years later, the sheriff who investigated this case and who felt that Ridgeway was truly the devil himself, went to visit this man with the intent of sharing Christ, not wanting this man to go to hell. He sat across from Ridgeway and said, “Look, I don’t like what you did, but my faith tells me that I don’t want anybody to go to hell. I don’t even want you to go to hell. And neither does Jesus.”⁶⁸

After saying this, Ridgeway broke down in inconsolable tears. Then, the sheriff went further and shared the gospel in great detail, making it clear what repentance really meant.

Once the sheriff was done, Ridgeway pulled out a piece of paper and gave it to the sheriff. On it was a simple prayer that Ridgeway prayed every night, admitting that he was a sinner, asking God to forgive his sins and to save him from eternal damnation, and praying to find mercy in Jesus’ name.

From a father and sheriff, who pursued the ministry of reconciliation above themselves, we hear a profound story of forgiveness. It shows the power of God to forgive sin, not just for Ridgeway if he truly seeks that out in Christ, but equally and just as needingly as much for each one of us.

As Jesus cried out in His final moments on the cross for those around and for all the world:

“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”⁶⁹

Marine Corps Capt. Tyler Boudreau could not deal with his life when he returned home from war: "When I first came back, I was a mess. I found it very difficult to focus, to manage my emotions."⁷⁰ I'm like, falling into extreme rages. I wouldn't shower for weeks. I wouldn't leave the house if I could avoid it. Every little kind of interaction was a high strain for me." Boudreau was diagnosed with PTSD and given drugs and therapy to alleviate his symptoms, but it did not help address what he was feeling.

Of the many war experiences he had, what haunted him most were calls he would get in combat from snipers who wanted permission to kill someone who was potentially engaged in burying roadside bombs. As the leader, his job was to give the authorization to shoot, and once he did, he said he never heard the shots, saw the blood, or heard the screams. Yet, as he says,



"It doesn't occur to me until later to say, 'What about that? What's your role? What's your responsibility? What's your accountability in that? ... A life was taken, somebody was killed and you said, 'Go ahead and do it.' That kind of troubling debate, internal debate, is what we're talking about with moral injury. ... We have soldiers coming back, killing themselves, suicide after suicide, why? This question's being asked, but this moral injury, there's a connection there. There's something that's bothering a lot of soldiers about this."

Studies on MI show that it is becoming increasingly impossible to miss the association between questions concerning moral behavior and its negative influence on one's psyche.⁷¹ When a person cannot rid themselves of guilt and shame associated with immorality, the impact becomes self-destructive or can manifest in violence toward others.⁷² This can be true whether one is a victimizer or a victim of depravity.

To help those who struggle with these symptoms of MI, academic literature, as noted, indicates that the moral problem is a physical one. It is resolved through medication or by various means of cognitive therapy that try to redirect one's thoughts to make them feel better about themselves. The standard mental therapy approach focuses on having clients: 1) face what they have done to process it and diffuse the emotions that have been paralyzing; 2) recognize that as much as they would sympathize with another who went through this experience they had and would want them to remove their shame and guilt, so should they do the same for themselves; 3) gain an objective lens from which to see themselves as normal and not at all distinct from others who are forced into similar trauma; 4) accept the positive appraisals of themselves from trusted advisors and learn to define themselves through those people, rather than their own negative thoughts; and 5) find ways to see the past, in its good and bad, as pathways to a better you in the future. While those approaches can be beneficial, they fail to bring the true and complete healing from MI that God offers.

In sum, morality is fundamentally a spiritual issue. MI is fundamentally a spiritual failure. Jesus is exclusively the spiritual healer who restores and enables moral goodness. His perfect display and fulfillment of righteousness as the sacrifice for sin is what makes us whole and holy before God. Being one with God is

the real answer to MI.

As believers, let us strive to be holy as God is Holy. That means remaining righteous in our interactions with others and forgiving those who sin against us. It is a calling that elevates us above the experiences of this life to be a light to those in darkness. In this way, we live in unity with our Savior and God, our Father, looking ahead in faith to the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”⁷³

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, “FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED.” But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁷⁴

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The material is written by Dwight Horn. He retired in February of 2023 from 28 years of active-duty service in the Navy as a Chaplain (CAPT, CHC, USN, Ret.). His advanced education includes a D.Min, M.Div., M.A., and ThM. He works for the Presbyterian and Reformed Chaplain Commission (PRCC) as an Associate Endorser.

Resources to Explore:

1. Dwight Horn, "PTSD From War, The Ever Real, Ever Present, Ever Controlling Impact of Combat and the need for light to shine in the darkness", <https://resources.pcamna.org/categories/chaplain-resources/>.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000).
3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1980).
4. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, (Louisville, KY: GLH Publishing, 2025).

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Endnotes

¹ The following story and details come from this resource: Dave Philipps, The New York Times, “The Unseen Scars of Those Who Kill Via Remote Control”, April 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/us/drones-airstrikes-ptsd.html>.

² Ibid.

³ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ro 2:15.

⁴ Koenig, Harold G, and Faten Al Zaben. “Moral Injury: An Increasingly Recognized and Widespread Syndrome.” *Journal of religion and health* vol. 60,5 (2021): 2989-3011. doi:10.1007/s10943-021-01328-0, https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8270769/pdf/10943_2021_Article_1328.pdf

⁵ Simon G. Talbot and Wendy Dean, “Physicians aren’t ‘burning out.’ They’re suffering from moral injury”, <https://www.statnews.com/2018/07/26/physicians-not-burning-out-they-are-suffering-moral-injury/>, July 26, 2018.

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¹⁰ Parenthesis word replacing “bullshit” and emboldened text for emphasis. Ashley Gilbertson, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, “The Life and Lonely Death of Noah Pierce”, <https://www.utne.com/politics/lonely-death-noah-pierce-ptsd-iraq-war/>, February 13, 2009.

¹¹ Ibid., [emboldening added for emphasis].

¹² Ibid., [emboldening added for emphasis].

¹³ C. S. Lewis, [Bold text added] *Miracles*, On-Line, https://www.basicincome.com/bp/files/Miracles-C_S_Lewis.pdf, Chapter 3, The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism, pp. 18-19.

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995), p. 131.

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1974), p. 40.

¹⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1974), p. 81.

¹⁷ [Bold Text added] John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*, p. 26, as resourced through The Digital Sauna, <https://digitalsauna.wordpress.com/2016/02/08/straw-dogs-by-john-gray-2002/>, February 8, 2016.

¹⁸ To claim that all I know is based on the interaction of sensory experience in a material only existence—a la John Locke’s *tabula rasa* theory—and then to make a “factual claim” about that material system by using experience from that material system as the grounding for the claim, is an untenable argument. It is circular reasoning because it attempts to justify some aspects of nature by appealing to nature; in essence, the conclusion merely restates the premise. If I claim that I exist and support that claim on the fact that I am aware of my own existence, I argue for nothing meaningful. Independent justification is needed.

¹⁹ When one asserts that “material things are all that exist,” the only way to make that factual claim is to base it on a rational principle, and in this case, the principle required is the Law of Non-Contradiction. That principle states that for any proposition made, such as “material things are all that exist”, that proposition and its opposite, “material things are ‘not’ all that exist”, cannot both be true at the same time, for the same thing, and in the same way. All is well and good to this point. Make it your assertion that “material things are all that exist.” Yet, here is where the problem arises for the naturalist. The Law of Non-contradiction is not a material thing. It is a mind thing, an intuition that informs reason, having no atomic properties. This puts the naturalist in a self-defeating conundrum. Either he accepts that material things are all that exist and there are no mysterious supernatural laws of logic upon which to base any truth claims, or else logic exists, thus refuting his materialistic claim, which opens the door to all sorts of transcendent possibilities.

²⁰ G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, (Cambridge: University Press, 2002), p. 193.

²¹ Yeni Safak, “Man jumps from building thinking he can fly After taking a few sips from his drink, a man jumps off the second story of a building thinking he can fly. The man is disappointed, and his friends are entertained when he falls face first onto the ground below”, <https://en.yenisafak.com/video-gallery/humor/man-jumps-from-building-thinking-he-can-fly-2126345>, 03/02/2017; and China Daily, “Boy dies after trying to fly like Superman”, July 8, 2011, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2011-07/08/content_12859764.htm.

²² [emphasis added to show immediate conscious awareness] Renos Papadopoulos, Ed., *Moral Injury and Beyond*, Ch. 6, Robert Maegher, “Just war and moral injury”, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), p. 79.

²³ Robert George, *In Defense of Natural Law*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 87

²⁴ An intuition is not a belief, much less an uncritically accepted belief. As we are using the term, an intuition is the way something seems to you upon careful reflection and attention. We sometimes express an intuition by saying that we can just “see” that something is the case. For example, modus ponens is the famous principle of logic: 1. If P, then Q; 2. P; 3. Therefore, Q. When this is put on the board in an introductory logic class and the students are asked if modus ponens is a correct law of logic, students correctly answer that it is. When asked how they know it is a correct law of logic, they usually say that one can simply “see” that it is correct. Cf, J. P. Moreland and Scott Rae, *Body & Soul, Human Nature & the Crisis in Ethics*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2000), p. 172.

²⁵ [clarification offered to shorten quote] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1980), pp. 19-20.

²⁶ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ps 145:17.

²⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol I*, Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books%20II/Hodge%20-%20Systematic%20Theology%20I.pdf>, P. 310.

²⁸ Westminster Confession of Faith.

²⁹ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ro 3:10–18.

³⁰ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932), p. 61.

³¹ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932), p. 61.

³² *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Eph 4:17–19.

³³ Bold Text added. *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ro 3:21–26.

³⁴ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ps 51:4.

³⁵ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Mt 22:37–39.

³⁶ All details from this story are found in this source, Anugrah Kumar, “Man confesses to murder after he turns his life over to Christ and feels convicted”, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/man-confesses-to-murder-after-putting-his-faith-in-christ.html>, September 03, 2022.

³⁷ *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ps 51:3.

³⁸ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ps 51:1.

³⁹ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ps 51:6–8.

⁴⁰ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ps 51:13.

⁴¹ “All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them

an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.” Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. X, The Westminster Confession of Faith. 3rd ed. Lawrenceville, GA: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1990.

⁴² New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ro 7:15.

⁴³ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ro 6:22.

⁴⁴ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ps 32:3–5.

⁴⁵ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Eph 2:4–5.

⁴⁶ [emboldening added for emphasis] New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ro 10:9–11.

⁴⁷ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ro 8:1.

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⁵⁰ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ro 12:9.

- ⁵¹ Garret Kell, "Walk in the Light: How God Uses Our Confession to Others", Christian Living, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/confession-others-sin/>, July 14, 2021.
- ⁵² Rameses "Cheno" Echevarria, "This is My Story: Prisoner to Pastor", AG News, <https://news.ag.org/en/articles/gc2025/2023/02/this-is-my-story-prisoner-to-pastor>, (February 7, 2023).
- ⁵³ Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, Part 2: Anthropology, Chapter 8: Sin, P 15 Inability, https://dn721904.ca.archive.org/0/items/charles-hodge-systematictheology_202406/Charles%20Hodge%2C%20Systematic%20Theology.pdf, p. 920.
- ⁵⁴ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Ga 5:1.
- ⁵⁵ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), 2 Co 12:9–10.
- ⁵⁶ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Jn 16:33.
- ⁵⁷ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Col 1:21–22.
- ⁵⁸ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), 2 Co 6:4–7.
- ⁵⁹ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), 2 Co 5:14–15.
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- ⁶¹ [emphasis added] Kendra Fletcher, "I Daresay, Elisabeth Elliot Would Not Get a Book Deal in 2017", <https://www.kendrafletcher.com/kendrafletcher/tag/Elisabeth+Elliot>, October 11, 2017.
- ⁶² New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), 2 Co 5:17–19.
- ⁶³ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Dt 32:35–36.
- ⁶⁴ The Holy Bible: New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 2 Th 1:6–9.
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⁷³ New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995), Heb 11:1.

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Notes



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