

Secret Sins • Ephesians 5:12

Some people live just for the moment while other people are all about tomorrow. Many of us define our lives because of yesterday. Something happened that shaped our lives forever. We describe ourselves by the trauma we endured or by some triumphant 15-minutes of fame. We may wear literal scars on our bodies from that momentous yesterday. But even if there are no scars on our skin there are definite scars on our souls.

If we are ever going to move on to health and happiness we must deal with yesterday. It may be the yesterday of unfulfilled dreams or the yesterday of deep regret. But for many of us it is the yesterday of secret sins.

That's the way it was for a Christian man who had been unfaithful to his wife. She didn't know and it wasn't likely that she would ever find out. But he knew and he knew that God knew. His adultery went with him everywhere he went, like a wound on his heart that would not heal. His secret sin turned every anniversary, every Valentine card and every kiss into a reminder of his betrayal. That lingering secret sin was an unacknowledged barrier to his relationship with his wife and with God. He thought about telling her but he knew the pain that would cause. He said he loved his wife and didn't want to lose her. He feared that their marriage could not survive if she ever found out. His secret sin became like painful shackles imprisoning every part of his life.

St. Paul wrote a fascinating and troubling line in Ephesians 5:12: *"It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret."*

The Bible has no shortage of specific sins. The list is long and would seem to be pretty complete. Yet, St. Paul writes that there are some secret sins that are too shameful to mention in the Bible. This raises my curiosity. I try to think up new and bizarre sins that might be kept secret. I wonder what he had in mind. What could be so

awful that it cannot be mentioned?

One weekend at Wooddale Church our teaching was about the Old Testament scapegoat described in Leviticus 16. During the sermon I asked everyone to use a Post-It-Note from the printed program to write down a personal sin. We collected the notes, put them on a live goat, prayed for forgiveness and watched as that goat was led out of the building, taken over a hill and out of sight. There were some of us who chose not to participate—fearful that someone might read our sin or look over our shoulders as we wrote those tiny words on the Post-It-Notes. That is because some sins are so private, so secret and so shameful that we dare not take the smallest risk they will be exposed.

What might those secret sins be? Perhaps they are the secret sins of greed. We have food, clothing, shelter and money. Maybe we even have multiple homes, expensive cars and lots of grown-up toys. We have health insurance, life insurance, disability income insurance, liability insurance, car insurance, boat insurance and trip cancellation insurance. But it is never enough.

Ours might be the secret sin of pride. All our thoughts are centered on ourselves. We must win every argument. We are deeply offended when we do not get our own way. We disparage those who are different because of their problems, their

poverty, their race, their accent, their lifestyle or their politics. When we hear something bad about another person we proudly gossip, broadly hinting that we are better than that other person.

Perhaps we struggle with the secret sin of lust. Everything is about sex. We analyze every person as a potential partner. Our fantasies dominate our thinking. We seek sexual satisfaction in all the wrong ways and all the wrong places. Pornography is a habitual delight. Our souls have Triple-X tattooed on them in bright fiery letters.

Maybe our secret sin is lying. We are so

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skilled that those closest to us think we are telling the truth. We do everything possible to make ourselves look good. We make up stories or exaggerate in order to deceive. We avoid taking responsibility for our own failures and weaknesses manipulating the truth to subtly place all the blame on others.

Jesus said in Matthew 15:19, “*Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*”

What is your secret sin? I am not asking you to tell me, but are you willing to tell yourself? Not to trigger guilt, but to identify a problem. What have you done that you have never told anyone else? What is so shameful that you would be embarrassed if your closest friends found out? What would you never write in your private journal? What is it that you want to take into the grave as your own personal secret forever?

Secret sins can have frightening power over our lives. They cause us to live a lifetime of secret guilt and constant fear of others finding out. In their extreme, secret sins can destroy our relationships and damage every part of our lives.

When the nation of Israel left Egypt to enter their Promised Land God gave the army a great victory over the city-state of Jericho. The next battle was against the far smaller and weaker city of Ai; but the people of Israel suffered a humiliating defeat. It quickly became apparent that God had withdrawn his blessing from the Israelites. One of the leaders in the army of Israel was a man named Achan who had stolen clothes, silver and gold. He kept his sin secret by burying the loot in the ground under his tent.

You can read the whole story for yourself in Joshua 7 of the Old Testament. The point is that one secret sin brought defeat to an entire nation.

Let us never think that our secret sins don't matter. They can impact our families, our friends, our churches and our nation. It is sobering to realize that my secret sin can cause God to withdraw his blessing from others. It is the power of secret sin.

King David had more than one secret sin. He seduced his next-door neighbor and had her husband killed when she became pregnant. This was

compounded, like many secret sins, when he tried to cover it up and keep it a secret. In Psalm 32:3-4 he has some telling words to describe what happened inside of him when his sins were secret: “*When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.*”

Secret sins sap our strength. Secret sins distance us from God. Secret sins reduce God's blessing. Secret sins impact many others.

So, what are we secret sinners supposed to do? The whole reason we've kept our sins secret is because they are so bad and embarrassing—and because we may even like our secret sins so much that we are reluctant to let go. But, if we hold on to our secret sins we make matters even worse.

The path to forgiveness and freedom begins with the realization that our secret sins really aren't secret at all! God knows the thoughts of our minds and the secrets of our hearts. He tells us in Hebrews 4:13, “*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*”

Let me outline a simple step-by-step path to forgiveness and freedom. However, in presenting a list like this it can sound like I am trivializing something very serious. For many of us it is not an easy path to travel. Our secret sins are so deeply imbedded in our lives that they can be extremely difficult to overcome.

The first step is to identify the secret sin. According to Ephesians 5:10 we are to “*find out what pleases the Lord.*” “Lord” means “Boss”. Christians are committed to please the Boss. Sin is anything the Boss disapproves. So, ask yourself the simple question, “Does this please the Lord?”

The second step is to shine the light. In Ephesians 5:13 we read, “*... everything exposed by the light becomes visible.*” The light is Jesus and the Bible. This is like putting our lives under a very bright light to expose what is right and wrong. Sin hates the light of Jesus. Listen to the way Jesus explained it in John 3:19-20:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.

Think of it this way. When you go to the airport you know your luggage will be screened. If you have secret weapons like handguns, knives, hand grenades and rocket launchers you take them out of your luggage before you go. If you don't, the x-ray light will find out what you have and the security people will take your secret weapons from you. We even check our luggage for penknives and nail files.

The light of Jesus is more powerful than the equipment at any airport checkpoint. Just the realization of being exposed to his brilliance is motivation to dump our secret sins. If we don't he will expose them so we can get rid of them.

Step number three is to confess the sin. The Bible teaches the enormous power of confession. Tell God and tell someone else.

Listen carefully! This is powerful, transforming truth we are talking about. God promises that if we will admit our sin to him and genuinely repent he will forgive absolutely any sin. God will forever forgive the worst and most secret sin.

However, getting sin into the light may also require telling a trusted Christian friend. It is part of getting the sin out into the light!

In a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon Calvin says to his tiger friend Hobbes:

"I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it."

"Maybe you should apologize to her," Hobbes recommends.

Calvin thinks about that and says, "I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution."

David Morrison in his book *Beyond Gay* writes:

My first counselor wore John Lennon glasses, jeans, and a thick sweater with a

collar that cradled his inscrutable face. During the first three 90-minute sessions, he didn't say anything except to ask, quietly, "So how can I help you?"

He was the first person I told about the same-sex attraction in my life. "I think I'm a homosexual," I blurted at the beginning of the second session. There, I'd said it. Silence. I looked up at him and he didn't say anything. His face registered neither approval nor disgust.

"Well," he finally said, "go on."

My life's revolution started in that nondescript office. I had carried this huge, unbearable secret and denied it even to myself for many years"

Now, years later, this is one of the only things upon which advocates for same-sex activity and I agree: life is far better outside the closet than in it. The power the attraction holds over life drops sharply when we first admit its existence to ourselves and then to at least one other person whom we trust and know loves and supports us.

Author Lee Strobel tells about a baptismal service when people were invited to write their sins on a piece of paper, come to the platform and pin the paper on a large wooden cross and then receive Christian baptism. Strobel reports a letter written by a woman who was baptized in that service:

I remember my fear. In fact, it was the most fear I remember in my life. I wrote as tiny as I could on that piece of paper the word *abortion*. I was so scared someone would open the paper and read it and find out it was me. I wanted to get up and walk out of the auditorium during the service, the guilt and fear were that strong.

When my turn came, I walked toward the cross, and I pinned the paper there. I was directed to a pastor to be baptized.

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He looked me straight in the eyes, and I thought for sure that he was going to read this terrible secret I kept from everybody for so long. But instead, I felt like God was telling me, *I love you. It's okay. You've been forgiven.* I felt so much love for me, a terrible sinner. It's the first time I ever really felt forgiveness and unconditional love. It was unbelievable, indescribable.

Identify the secret sin, shine the light of Jesus and confess the sin to God and another. Beyond that there may be need for restitution, for new behavior and for godly counsel. The point here is that life doesn't have to be controlled by some secret sin! God offers a better tomorrow with forgiveness and freedom!

Best-selling novelist John Grisham wrote *The Testament*. In it he tells the story of Nate O'Reilly, a disgraced, alcoholic drug abuser. His biography included two failed marriages, four failed detox programs and dengue fever. Grisham then goes on to describe O'Reilly's great transformation:

With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list, mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgement of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished Nate had

tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered to God. "Please, help me."

As quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean. He breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son so that our secret sins may be forever forgiven and we may be set free to live the good life like Jesus Christ!

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