

The freedom of the debtors: Colossians 3:12-17

by [John Ortberg](#) in the [December 15, 2009](#) issue

A study done a few years ago showed that a sign of a person's incompetence is his or her inability to *perceive* incompetence. We deceive ourselves about our intelligence, for example. I may think I'm pretty smart until I read about a student who did not miss a single question on the SAT, ACT and PSAT tests combined. We deceive ourselves about our appearance. An older friend of mine got on an airport tram and noticed an attractive young woman sitting nearby. She smiled at him, and he thought to himself, *I've still got it*. "Excuse me, sir," she said. "I can stand. Would you like to take my seat?"

Nowhere does this inability to have an objective, accurate, reality-based view of our performance show itself more than when it comes to the spiritual realm. When it comes to moral character, purity of heart or duplicity in actions, how many of us have given serious thought to how our lives would be graded in the eyes of a holy, just, righteous, truth-telling God?

We don't often think seriously about sin. In *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, Cornelius Plantinga writes, "Nowadays, the accusation *you have sinned* is often said with a grin, and with a tone that signals an inside joke. . . ." Sin has become a word for hot vacation spots (Las Vegas is Sin City) and desserts like Peanut Butter Binge.

But sin is the deadliest force because it takes us out of the flow of the Spirit. Imagine the consequences if we did not have a word for cancer or depression. We must identify and understand that which threatens our ability to flourish, and sin keeps us from becoming the people God wants us to become. All other challenges face us from the outside, while sin works its way inside, strangling our soul.

We used to have a car with a bumper sticker that read "I poke badgers with spoons." It's a line from British stand-up Eddie Izzard. Eddie grew up in the church and heard early on about the doctrine of original sin, but he was a little fuzzy on the concept. He assumed it meant that priests get tired of hearing the same old boring confessions, that they want somebody who will confess *original* sin. So he came up with something that no one had ever confessed before: "I poke badgers with

spoons.” My wife thought it was so funny she had it printed on a bumper sticker.

The phrase “original sin” may never appear in scripture, but its writers (and any moderately perceptive observer) know that we are remarkably prone to do things that we know are wrong. We have a staggering capacity for self-deception and self-justification.

Paul uses one of his favorite metaphors when he writes to Colossae. He speaks of character as a kind of clothing; put off that which is sordid and unworthy the way you put off old rags, and clothe yourself with what is worth wearing. Part of growing up is learning to dress ourselves, and one day we may have the power to do it. But for now, we are able to wear only that which we have been given. We are able to offer only that which we’ve already received. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven.

This year we had a daughter graduate from Azusa Pacific University. My wife spoke at commencement, so we gathered with a group of faculty, alumni and administrators before the ceremony. At one point, university president Jon Wallace pulled three seniors into the center of the room and told us all they were going to be serving under-resourced people in impoverished areas after graduation. Then Jon turned his back to the rest of us, faced the three students, and said, “Somebody you do not know has heard about what you’re doing. He wants you to be able to serve without any impediment, so he’s giving you a gift.” Then he turned to the first student and looked her in the eye. “You have been forgiven your school debt of \$105,000.”

It took a few moments for the words to sink in. The student shook her head, then began to cry. Jon turned to the next student. “You have been forgiven your debt of \$70,000,” then to the third student, “You have been forgiven your debt of \$130,000.”

All three students were trembling. Their lives had been changed in a twinkling by the extravagance of someone they’d never met. For those of us who watched, it was as if we had experienced the forgiveness ourselves. There was not a dry eye in the room.

An unpayable debt. An unseen giver. An unforgettable gift. The freedom of the debtors becomes a blessing to the world. There is a bigger debt we all labor under. We give it labels such as regret, guilt, shame, brokenness—sin. But God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. We know what’s coming. But we need to hear

the words just the same.

Forgive as the Lord forgave you.