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— 01

Spiritual Cartography

# Four Layers of Sin

From the cutting room floor of  
*Practicing the Way*

01 – Spiritual Cartography

## Four Layers of Sin

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From the cutting room floor of the book *Practicing the Way*.

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JOHN MARK COMER

In the fourth century, Saint Serapion the Sindonite, one of the best known of the desert fathers, traveled from his monastery in Egypt to visit a woman in the city of Rome who had become widely known as a spiritual master of the Way. Unlike Serapion, she did not retreat to the desert, but stayed at home and devoted herself to prayer. When he found her, she was quietly sitting in her room.

Serapion asked her, “Why are you sitting here?”

Her answer: “I’m not sitting, I am on a journey.”

A throughline in *Practicing the Way* is that following Jesus is a kind of journey of the soul. When Jesus invited his first century listeners to “follow” him on “the Way,” he was simultaneously saying that apprenticeship to him is a lifelong pilgrimage to our home in God.

Yet this journey is not one of geography, but one in which we traverse the landscape of our inner woman or man. As Bishop Kallistos Ware put it, “We are on a journey through the inward space of the heart, a journey not measured by the hours of our watch or the days of the calendar, for it is a journey out of time into eternity.”<sup>1</sup>

And the spiritual journey calls for a kind of “spiritual cartography,” for a map to plot your location and chart your progress. Thankfully, such maps exist. We’re not the first apprentices to travel this path. Many saints have gone before us and left behind their hard-earned wisdom — warnings of what to avoid, directions for confusing crossroads, and inspiration for the seasons when we flag and falter, for what Eugene Peterson called the “spiritual badlands.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the use of spiritual cartography itself comes with all sorts of potential pitfalls.

First, there is no *one* route. We may have the same destination, yes, but we all start from different places.

Second, when we plot our location on a map and chart our progress, we can easily feel “behind” or, even worse, “ahead” and, as a result, fall prey to either pride or despair, both of which trip us up on the journey.

Finally, a map can be used and abused as just another attempt to control our spiritual formation, which cannot be controlled. This is an especially acute temptation for those of us (like myself) who are more task-oriented and success-driven; we can easily approach our spiritual life like our career, as a task to accomplish or a mountain to climb. And it *is* a mountain, but waiting at the top is not a podium where we receive a trophy, but an altar where we offer a new surrender. As Father Thomas Keating put it, “The spiritual journey is not a career or a success story. It is a series of humiliations of the false self that become more and more profound.”<sup>3</sup> The journey is not “up and to the right,” but *downward* into cruciformity — the pattern of death to self followed by new life in God.

But, these dangers notwithstanding, mapping the spiritual journey is still worth the risk. Because *the only thing worse than trying to measure your spiritual progress is not trying to measure your spiritual progress*.

We *all* experience stages and seasons in our life — spiritual or otherwise — and each one has its own unique temptations, challenges, and invitations to growth. To loosely hold a map in your mind can (1) help you realize you’re not alone, and (2) help you avoid the various temptations (which change over time), meet the challenges of each new season with poise, and say *yes* to Jesus’ invitations at each stage.

To that end, this little trilogy is designed to offer you a few maps of the spiritual journey: one from the vantage point of spirituality, the other from the world of

psychology, and the last from the domain of theology. They overlay one another beautifully.

Let's start with one I find incredibly helpful: sin.

One way to think about the spiritual journey is as a multi-layered process of what the ancients called “purgation” — the burning off of ever-deeper layers of sin which conspire to hold us back and hamstring our journey into the full-flowering of maturity.

A cognate to purgation is the word “purgatory.” The Medieval doctrine of purgatory (the idea of a shadowy period in between death and entrance into heaven where we are “purged” of our remaining sins) may have been developed on questionable Scripture references for even more questionable political purposes<sup>4</sup>, but love it or hate it, the philosophical logic behind it was quite sound: God is holy; to travel into union with God, we must be burned clean of all that is *un*holy. As the saying goes, “The fires of heaven are hotter than the fires of hell.” (A saying *not* to be taken literally.) The sin in our life must be burned off, like dross from a precious metal, in order to become the radiant soul God always had in mind.

The process of purgation goes through four layers of sin<sup>5</sup> that we all carry in our body.<sup>6</sup> The first is what the ancients called:

## #1 Gross sins

Not gross as in *eww*, but gross as in *major* sins (think of the saying, “It was a gross mistake.”), such as those found on the Apostle Paul’s list of sins of the flesh. “Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy;

drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”<sup>7</sup> What the Apostle John calls “sin that leads to death.”<sup>8</sup>

Gross sins are the first to go in our spiritual journey. These often populate the testimony stories we hear in church, about people saved out of a life that was dramatically at odds with Jesus’ vision of human flourishing — drugs, addiction, crime, etc.

But gross sins are just the beginning.

The next layer is:

## #2 Conscious sins

These are sins that are perfectly acceptable, even celebrated, in the culture at large, yet are clearly *not* the Way of Jesus — watching sex scenes on TV or in film, gossip, cussing, dirty humor, dishonor of authority, materialism, and more.

I call these “conscious” because these are sins that we know are contrary to the teachings of Jesus, yet for the most part we *choose* to do them<sup>9</sup>, with our will. John Wesley called them “willful transgressions of the known will of God.”<sup>10</sup> We’re not yet dealing with the automatic responses of sin in our body that are so hard to dislodge, but with our unyielded self-will.

Over time, if we keep our heart soft to Jesus’ gentle touch, he will lovingly convict us of these sins and invite us to a deeper layer of surrender, and with it, freedom.

### #3 Unconscious sins

In layer three, we pass a kind of invisible line into the shadow of our soul, from the conscious to the unconscious, where it's much harder to delineate between vice and virtue; where we're not even aware of all the sin we carry within us, or just how deep our wounding goes.

Here, under the shadow line, we have sins of *omission*, not *commission*; of what we *don't* do, rather than what we do; of *inaction*, rather than *action*.

We have sins of *motivation*, where we do the right thing (serve the poor, stand up for justice, give our resources, etc.), but for less-than-noble reasons (to look good, gain status, consolidate power, make money, etc.). This is an especially acute danger for pastors and people like myself who are “professional Christians” (please read herein a sardonic tone).

Then we have all our sins of *compulsion*. The sins we genuinely *do not want to do*, yet get sucked into doing, again and again. All the addictive ways we self-sabotage; the ways our best intentions succumb to the unhealed impulses of our body. These sins are often rooted in pain or trauma from our past, and incredibly difficult to dislodge.

And we have our *dysfunctional relational patterns*, the ways that other people emotionally experience us — as defensive, negative, condescending, overly talkative, uninterested, or self-focused, etc.

Let's pause for a moment and take the sin of anger as a case study.

- The gross layer of anger would be violence — brawling, domestic violence, road rage, murder, etc.

- The conscious layer would be yelling at people who dare cross our will, mouthing profanities, and name calling.
- The unconscious layer would be maturing to a place where you would never hit another person or even yell at them, yet inside you're still seething with resentment or unforgiveness and it's leaking out in non-verbal cues that cause pain to those you love. Or no matter how hard you try, you find yourself making biting comments to your spouse or children.

This third layer is a far more painful stage of purgation, yet it's essential.

Layers one and two are just about *behavior*. And while behavior modification is a good thing, it doesn't go deep enough to the root problem — our warped heart. If all we ever deal with is behavior, even if we succeed (which is highly unlikely), we're no better than a Pharisee. But once you get into layers three and four (up next), we're dealing with what the psychologist Carl Jung and others call "the shadow," the parts of our self that are hidden even from our *own* view. As our shadow is exposed — by the unexpected twists of life, by our closest relationships, by suffering, and by prayer — it can be incredibly painful and humbling, even humiliating.

Yet again, each new layer of surrender comes with a new level of freedom.

But we're still not to the very bottom of things.

Layer four is our:

## #4 Attachments

These are not necessarily sins at all; they are often good things — very good things, even — but things that we emotionally depend on to live a happy life.



Keating called them our “emotional programs for happiness.”<sup>11</sup>

Dr. Robert Mulholland called them our “trust structures” and defined them as, “deep seated attitudes and inner orientations of our being out of which our behavior patterns flow ... those deep inner postures of our being that do not rely on God but on self for our well-being.”<sup>12</sup>

The Reformed tradition calls them “idols of the heart,” which pastor Tim Keller famously defined as “a good thing made ultimate.”<sup>13</sup>

They can be anything that does not go by the name of Jesus, yet we feel we *need* to be okay.<sup>14</sup>

Things like:

- Health
- Emotional well-being
- Marriage
- Children
- Relational status
- Friendships
- Career
- Ministry
- Success
- Wealth
- Reputation
- Plans

It's hard to believe it, but these gifts can become the very source of our unhappiness. The problem is not the gifts, it's our emotional attachment *to* the gifts.

As the Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello put it:

“If you look carefully you will see that there is one thing that causes unhappiness. The name of that thing is attachment. What is an attachment? An emotional state of clinging caused by the belief that without some particular thing or some person you cannot be happy.”<sup>15</sup>

We cling to these attachments because we genuinely believe that we need them to be happy, yet they are the very source of our misery.

Why? Because *all of them can be taken away*. Not one of them is safe from harm.

As a result, they promise us peace but give us great anxiety.

And it's in this last layer of sin that we are *most* in bondage, and most in need of saving by Jesus. And it's here that Jesus' teachings are at their most radical.

The great paradox of Jesus' message is: *As long as you need your life to go a certain way to be happy and at peace, you will never be happy and at peace.*

Instead, you will live with a nagging undercurrent of *fear* — what Jesus called “anxious care.” And this underlying fear will sabotage not only your happiness, but your growth into a person of love. Because as long as we *need* our lives to go a certain way to be okay, despite our best intentions to love well, we will inevitably manipulate and bully and hurt those around us whenever they get between us and our attachments. We are still at a point in our spiritual journey where we would rather *cause* pain than *suffer* it, as Jesus did, and *surrender* to God in it.

This is the end goal of the spiritual journey: a radical trust in and surrender to Jesus as your one true source of happiness and peace.

What the mystic Jean-Pierre de Caussade called “abandonment to divine providence.”<sup>16</sup>

What Saint Ignatius called “freedom,”<sup>17</sup> and captured so well in his famous saying:

“We should not fix our desires on health or sickness, wealth or poverty, success or failure, a long life or a short one. For everything has the potential of calling forth in us a deeper response to our life in God. Our only desire and our one choice should be this: I want and I choose what better leads to God’s deepening his life in me.”<sup>18</sup>

And *all* the spiritual masters, from the writers of the New Testament to the saints of church history, sing in harmony: The primary way we are liberated from our bondage to attachments is through the crucible of suffering. It is *there* — in the fire of pain and loss — that we are purged and purified.

Suffering is the gift *none* of us want. But it’s still a gift, because it has the effect, *if we let God work in it*, of stripping us of our attachments. All that we cling to — health, well-being, loved ones, material wealth, our plans, even the sense of God’s felt-presence — is torn away, against our will. It’s excruciating emotionally, but *if* we say yes to Jesus’ call in suffering and attach to *him* in a deeper way, we discover the one source of happiness that can never, *ever* be taken away from us. We experience an unshakable peace. The kind of peace Saint Seraphim of Sarov was referring to when he said, “Peace is gained through tribulations.”<sup>19</sup>

The beautiful surprise is that when we lose the very things we are most terrified of losing, we realize we’re still okay; God is with us, his love is all around us, our life is still full of goodness, and Jesus can and will bring good *out* of our pain — as Julian of Norwich put it, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”<sup>20</sup>

So, let go of your fear, of your futile grasping for (what you cannot possibly) control. “Let patience finish its work so that you may be mature and complete.”<sup>21</sup>

Peace is waiting for you on the other side.

# Notes

1. Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (1986)
2. Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (2011)
3. Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (1999)
4. Such as indulgences.
5. I'm borrowing heavily in this section from Robert Mullholland's work in *Invitation to a Journey* (2016), for which I am deeply grateful.
6. Please note: 1) This process is not as linear as I will make it sound, and 2) We all mature unevenly; you could be on layer four in the purgation of the sin of, say, anger and still on layer one with anxiety.
7. Galatians 5v19-21
- 8.1 John 5v16
9. One clear exception would be pornography, which is an addiction that's often far beyond our willpower and in need of inner healing to be set free from.
10. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1777)
11. Thomas Keating, *The Human Condition: Contemplation and Transformation* (1999)
12. M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (2016). This is a book I can't recommend enough.
13. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (2008)
14. The best way to self-diagnose your attachments is to hold something (or someone) you value before your mind and ask yourself, How would I feel if I lost this? (My job, my fiancé, my good name, my investment, etc.)
15. Anthony de Mello, *The Way to Love: Meditations for Life* (2012)
16. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Abandonment to Divine Providence* (1751)
17. Usually his Spanish is translated as "indifference," but that word has negative connotations in English, so a number of scholars argue "freedom" is a better alternative.
18. From "The First Principle and Foundation," translated by David Fleming (2015) <https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/offices/ministry/pdf/First%20Principle%20and%20Foundation%20-March%202015%20%282%29.pdf>
19. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, translated by Benedicta Ward (2004)
20. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (14th century)
21. James 1v4



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You can find his books and teachings at [johnmarkcomer.com](http://johnmarkcomer.com).

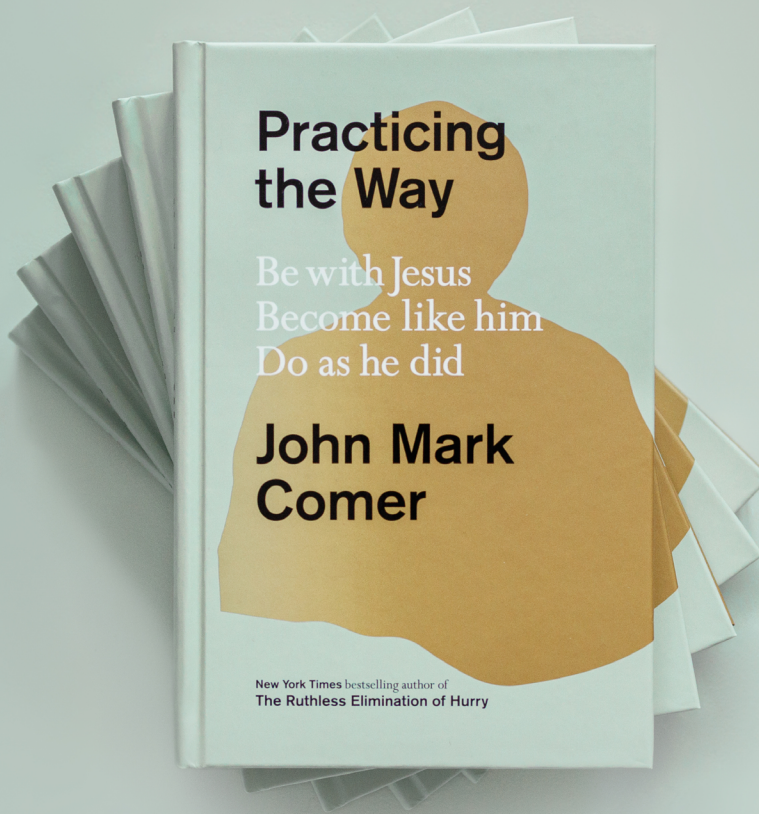


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All of our resources are available for free, thanks to the generosity of The Circle and other givers. The Circle is a group of monthly givers from around the world who partner with us to see formation integrated into the church at large.

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