

Series: **BREATHING ROOM** - February 14, 2010

MORAL MARGIN

Matthew 5:27-30; 7:1-6; 1 Corinthians 6:18-20; 4:5

1. “I wish I could hit the rewind button on my life.” “I *never* thought it would happen to me.” “How could I have been so *blind*?”

-There’s a word that fits all of these expressions. Anyone know what it is? It would be the word **regret**. Has anyone here ever felt a **tinge** of regret? Man, *I* have! It has to be one of the worst feelings in the world. And it’s a **useless** feeling—because it doesn’t change anything.

-In the past 30 years I’ve had working with people—I’ve watched a lot of lives fall apart. Some of the people were close friends. And to a **person**—they never planned to blow up their marriage, devastate their kids, lose their job. I mean, **no one** says, “You know, I think I’d like to become drunk...or become addicted to porn. I haven’t decided which, yet, but...” But they do. **We** do.

-As I thought about finishing this series on Margin by talking about Time last week, it didn’t seem quite right. And then I heard someone talk about **moral margin**—and I thought, “That’s **it!**” Because sin and brokenness and regret and shame put **overload** into a whole different category. We need **margin—distance** between us and temptation.

-My caution on this is that I’m going to be in some pretty messy territory. If you think you might be offended—now might be the time to leave.

2. As I thought about this area, the story that came to mind was from David’s life—many of you have heard it. The story line is pretty simple. He couldn’t sleep one night, went for a walk on the roof, and saw Bathsheba, his neighbor’s wife, taking a bath on the roof next door. He watched her for a while, then sent for her. He could do that because he knew her husband, a friend of his, was away on a military campaign. They had sex—and she got pregnant with his baby. He tried to manipulate things to make Uriah, her husband, think it was his baby—but it didn’t work. So...he had Uriah put in a place where he would be killed in battle. See, when he took Bathsheba as his wife—everyone would think, “Wow! What a wonderful, Godly thing to do!”

-David knew God really well. He was a man after God’s heart—the one God made promises to! What David hadn’t figured on—was a prophet named Nathan. Nathan tells a story—about this big deal rich guy who has flocks of sheep—but, for his guest, takes his neighbor’s pet lamb, kills it and eats it. The fascinating turn in this story is how righteously indignant David gets. “This man **deserves** to die! He must pay that man back with **four** lambs!!!” And then Nathan sucker-punched him. “David, **you’re** that man!”

-What happens next in this story makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Not only does David lose the son born to him in this act of adultery, this sin—which went public—wreaked havoc in his family. One son raped his daughter; another son

murdered him—and then tried to depose David as king—and was killed by David's troops. And then a **fourth** son tried to take over as king—and was executed. Remember David's words, "He must pay that man back with **four** lambs."

- a. Here's the question. How does a man who seems to hear God better than anyone ever has—who's over here...wind up—over **there**? There's a very simple statement in the beginning verses of this story.

In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem. (2 Samuel 11:1 (TNIV))

-Did anyone pick up on anything different? ***In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab...But David remained in Jerusalem.*** Think about that—pretty much all the men in the city are off fighting; David, ***renowned as a warrior***, stayed in the city where a whole **bunch** of young women—who admired him—were without their husbands for **weeks**. I would find it hard to believe that David had never noticed Bathsheba before—and I would also find it hard to believe that Bathsheba just **happened** to be bathing on the roof right next door to David's house.

-Does the concept of what **margin** is start to get clearer. Our hearts are really quite clever. We have needs inside—and we will instinctively **find ways** to meet them. And unless we spot this tendency and are honest with our own hearts—we will sacrifice more than we ever thought we'd sacrifice—and end up like David at some point, sobbing over the third son to die, ***Oh Absalom, my son, my son, my son! I wish I had died instead of you!***

- b. I thought about us—and our need, in a world like ours, to develop **moral margin** in our lives. We live in a culture that has gone insane—morally. There are **so** many moral issues where we need margin—but I thought I'd stick to two issues from David's life that are issues we face, too—and always seem to walk hand in hand. ***Sexual immorality***—something that finds its way into the news every day; and ***judgmentalism***—a hidden problem that **also** finds its way into the news. This was my thought: What if ***Playboy*** had a discussion with ***Moral Majority***. Wouldn't that be bizarre? Two **radically** different philosophies. And **yet...**pieces of both find themselves in the same people. Like in the Jimmy Swaggart and Ted Haggard scandals.
- c. Here's our temptation: It's to declare **both** forms of behavior—**normal**—when the Bible says that they are detours from the path God has called us to if we're going to follow Jesus. **Both** paths lead to a cliff—and that's why we need plenty of margin.

3. Let's be clear where the line is on this stuff. The boundary line the Bible sets on sexual involvement is **within** the confines of a marriage between a man and a woman. That's what the book of Genesis says; that's what all the moral correctives in both the Old Testament and the New Testament say, and that's what Jesus affirmed.

-And there are clear reasons for that. Sex is such a powerful drive that when it gets out of that arena—it wreaks havoc. When two people are connected sexually, it goes beyond two bodies being naked together; sexual intercourse connects souls. Two people, in some mysterious way, become one flesh—and when that is left unprotected by a covenant, we just move on to someone else. And someone else. And take pieces of them with us.

-In the 60's people talked about sex as “just being another appetite—like hunger.” That's ridiculous. If you've ever talked to someone who's been raped—or sexually involved and then rejected, they *never* talk about it as if someone stole their lunch.

-The cost of casual sex in our world has been nothing short of *massive*. Think about the pricetag of sexually transmitted diseases, of sexual addiction, of therapy for those who have been used and thrown away, of the devastation of sexual unfaithfulness and divorce on kids. Add the scourge of AIDs and teenage pregnancy—and we haven't even begun to calculate the damage of the internet porn industry to the next generation.

- a. Let me limit myself to one passage written to a sex-saturated society by Paul, an early leader.

Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body. Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honour God with your body.
(1 Corinthians 6:18-20 NLT)

-Now, here's the deal. The Bible is very clear and consistent from one cover to another in its teaching on this issue. *What* the Bible says is clear. We just have to decide in our heart of hearts if we believe that what He has said is true and trustworthy—or whether our culture has found a better way. It comes down to this; we're going to live the way God, our Creator, says to live—and leads to *life*; or we're just going to defy what He says and do what we feel like doing and take our chances on the broad road that Jesus said leads to destructiveness.

-It is not my responsibility to convince you that what God says is good and whole and right. I know the character of God; He's loving and filled with affection for us. But He's also Lord of all. And if He's not Lord of your sexual behavior—then you're taking your own path which you think is better. I'm telling you though—I've watched a *lot* of lives—and the broad way in our culture is easy—it's the downstream way—I mean, you don't even have to *paddle!* But it does *not* lead to life.

4. If you are going to choose to obey God in this arena of life, you will have to make sure you give yourself some moral margin. Remember the first words of the passage I quoted? *Flee sexual immorality*. Does anyone here know what the word *flee* means? It means—**run the other direction. Don't play games with it!**
-We used to live in a part of Pennsylvania that had a *lot* Timber Rattlers. Getting bitten by one of these things could either kill you—or make your life miserable for a

long time! Imagine someone playing with a rattler. Carrying it around in their pocket—poking at it, “Hey—how does it *feel* to have fangs, Bucky!” The best policy with a rattler is—*flee! Don’t play games with it!*

-And that’s exactly what Jesus said when he talked about the blessed life:

“You have heard the commandment that says, ‘You must not commit adultery.’ But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. So if your eye—even your good eye—causes you to lust, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your hand—even your stronger hand—causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” (Matthew 5:27-30 NLT)

a. Jesus is talking about *moral margin*. He says, adultery starts with *lust*—the imagination. If you don’t stop it there, you *won’t* stop it! The trouble starts with what you look at and think about—and *how* you think about others. The point is to put *out* the fire, not throw gas on it, right?

-It sounds a little gory—ripping out eyes, cutting off hands—but Jesus isn’t into death metal, so it must be something else. I believe his point is, **Do radical surgery! Don’t play games with something that can cause regret and shame and bring all kinds of consequences—do whatever** it takes to obey God in this arena, *even if it seriously inconveniences you!*

b. Paul, the same one who told the Corinthian followers of Jesus to flee sexual immorality, said later in Ephesians 5:

....Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for the Lord's people. (Ephesians 5:3 TNIV)

Notice where the line is; *not even a hint?* Why so strict? I’ll tell you why; the sex drive in us is so powerful—these are the only kinds of walls it understands.

5. What does *taking another sidewalk* need to look like? Do you want some suggestions?

a. You have to pay attention to something called the *law of exposure*. The deal is that what you feed on when it comes to what you read and watch and the images you look at will cause you to think in certain directions. And what you *think* about and *dwell* on—you will become. It’s that simple!

b. I want to mention something, too, that nobody talks about. *Modesty*. If you’re not sexually available—like your plan is to honor God in this arena of your life—why would you wear something that’s kind of a flashing sign that says something else? What do you want people to notice about you first—and is that how you dress? Who you are—and how you dress—should be saying the same thing, right?

- c. And if you're married—you need to be **very** careful and wise in your contact with the opposite sex. If you're a guy—and you're taking business trips with a woman colleague—you're asking for trouble.

-When I do pre-marital counseling, I **always** challenge couples on being close friends with someone of the opposite sex. Want to know why? Because affairs don't typically happen with strangers; they usually happen between friends who being sharing inappropriately intimate things.

- d. And in your dating relationships, you will have to just determine that you are **not** going to skate on the thin ice. Stay away from the edge—which would be doing everything **except** going all the way. Set some guidelines.

For example:

*All four feet on the floor—clothes on.

*No sleepovers or playing house for any reason

*Avoid dangerous places. If the gym is a dangerous place for you, don't be stupid! Don't go there.

*Avoid the things that get your mind going in the wrong direction—whether it's romance novels or the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue.

*If you have trouble with the internet—**do radical surgery**. Get rid of it—or have someone who holds you accountable—and knows what you're looking at. And my advice? Stay out of chat rooms.

- e. I know **exactly** what some of you are thinking! “Man, that's not **normal!**” Really? So the chaos, pain, and shame that affairs cause—that's normal? Herpes, AIDs, cervical cancer, STDs and teen pregnancies—that's normal? A **million** abortions a year in North America—that's normal? It's normal that people carry all the mess and brokenness and feelings of rejection and self-loathing from one relationship to another—that's normal? Addiction to hard-core porn—that's just...**normal?** Regret—secrecy—fear—that's **normal?** -In our world, that **may** be normal—it's the broad road. Jesus said it does **not** lead to life. And you'll have to decide if you just want a normal, downstream life—or if you want **LIFE!** Which is it going to be?

6. Now, to be totally honest—the religious professionals that hated Jesus and had him nailed to the cross would've probably given me an A+ so far. In fact, Jesus was too soft on sexual sin for their taste. They dragged a woman before Jesus who had been caught in the very act of adultery—and challenged him to have her stoned. That is, until he asked the person without sin to throw the **first** stone. The advocacy team from Playboy Enterprises and Desperate Housewives, Int'l would've been ready to high-five Him, “That's right! Someone famous once said, “Judge not...” That is, until Jesus told her, “Go now and leave your **life of sin.**”

-What was both **fascinating** and **disturbing** about Jesus was his scandalous grace quotient—and forgiveness, **and** his total intolerance for and hatred of judging. Remember David? He'd just had sex with a friend's wife, gotten her pregnant, and had him killed to cover it up—and he's all righteously indignant about a guy who had a neighbor's lamb for supper! Judgmentalism is **really** sneaky—and it's **deadly**. Here's

the problem—people, like us, who hang around churches are **really** good at it! And we're sneaky; "Let me tell you **this** about **them**...so you can pray intelligently!" And our **pride** get's wrapped around it. And when pride gets in the middle of anything? Watch out! We'd rather go to hell than confess it and deal with it! -Let's briefly look at what Jesus said about it:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in someone else's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5 TNIV)

- a. First, **Do not judge, or you too will be judged**. Now, how many times have you heard people quote this? "Hey, do not judge, uh, uh, uh!" We need to get some kind of a handle on what Jesus is really saying here. The word translated **judge**—**krino**—is actually used three different ways in the New Testament.

-**Krino** can mean to resolve...or **make a decision**. Was Jesus saying, "Don't make any decisions"? No, don't think so. It can mean to **judge, as in a trial**.

Was Jesus saying, "Just do away with the court system"? Probably not.

-Jesus is uses this word that same way Paul does in talking to the Corinthians about the snarkiness going on in the shadows about him:

Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of people's hearts. At that time each will receive their praise from God. (1 Corinthians 4:5 TNIV)

-The kind of judgment Jesus is talking about it where the deepest motives of people's hearts are exposed. Something that only **God** is qualified to do. What Jesus is dealing with here is the way in which we critique, evaluate and draw conclusions about others. It's how we make ourselves higher, better, more like Jesus—or whatever—but lowering someone else.

-What happens, generally, is that we see at least the **outer** actions of another person—actions that, to us, seem unwise, destructive or wrong. Then based on our observations we make declarative statements about their essence, their identity, or their worth as a whole person. We **presume** to know what their core motivation is.

-Have you ever had that happen to you? Where you did something that you did that they didn't like—and then talked about you or treated you in a way that drove you down, or shamed you or ignored you. Or they took your reputation off into a corner with others and pontificated on what was wrong with you?

-Jesus is saying here, "When you do that—you are assuming, first, that you actually **know** all there is to know about this person's actions. And, secondly,

you are assuming the place of God in **knowing the motives of a person's heart. That is not your role!**

- b. Jesus follows this by talking about specks and planks. He says, "Why would you try to pick a tiny piece of sawdust out of someone's eye—when you've got the whole plank in yours!" The people listening to this would've been rolling down the hillside laughing. It's a hilarious image. Someone walking around, "Uh, Dude. There's this awkward thing you've been doing that we've all noticed—and I've been appointed as the one to come and talk to you about it..." It's a little like David's anger at the guy who stole the lamb!

-The question is—why does Jesus connect judging with the plank and the speck? Well, to critique someone—to criticize what they do and point out their faults has its roots in something **way** more destructive. Judging is an attempt to control someone by correcting, shaming, ignoring, or speaking against them. If I ignore you—I show you how deeply flawed you really are—to shame you. I critique you—to get you to do something that better serves **my** purposes, **my** agenda.

-Not only does our attempt to control others not work—it alienates us from even being able to help the person. What you're doing by judging someone—playing God when you **aren't** God is so off target—it neutralizes any good you could be.

- c. And the deal is that when you indulge in this kind of behavior—you put yourself on the shelf. And the only thing that will get you off the shelf where God can use your life is for you to do put **margin** between yourself and the judging that's been going on in the way you've been thinking and talking about others. -And that margin is made of **humility**. It's removing yourself from the judge's bench, putting down your little gavel—and placing yourself back under the authority of the only One who has the right to do that work. God.

7. Finding and choosing moral margin in this arena is tough. Know why? Because we are so blind to it; because we don't want to stop doing it! Has **anyone** here ever known an arrogant, judgmental, critical person who **actually** owned up to it—repented of it--and was changed to a loving, humble person? Not many. And yet it **grieves** the Spirit.

-Jesus says, "If you want God to use you to help others, you have to stop this stuff. Stop your judging and criticizing and pontificating, remove the plank from your eye! Do a searching, moral inventory. If you find yourself habitually thinking or talking negatively about others—Jesus is talking to you. You need to ask yourself:

*"What do I **really** know about this situation? And **why would I presume to do this, to talk like this?**" Am I treating others as I would hope others would treat me?

*Am I hanging with people—listening to people who are doing this kind of stuff—and **acting like it's okay?** When someone backs up the truck with their load of garbage—do I need to tell them to get off my lawn?

*Why is it important to me that I others think negatively or suspiciously about people I don't like?

*The margin for this, friends, isn't outward margin; it's the inner margin of the Holy Spirit—who **wants** to make me—and make **you** into a loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, gentle, kind, good, faithful, self-controlled person. God can use us to help others and build His Kingdom—but **not** until we get the plank out of our eyes—and stop trying to control others and raise our own stock by lowering others!

8. And Jesus warns people about the consequences that come from judging others, “Not only does it **not** work—not only does it **not** make you seem morally or spiritually superior; not only can you **not** control people and situations by doing it—it will **backfire** on you!

-It's simple. According to Jesus, when we set ourselves up—**we set ourselves up!** When you judge someone, when you place yourself **above** someone—you have put yourself in the precarious position of doing God's job. Jesus is very clear about this; that if you put yourself in the position of a judge—it's **going** to come back around to you. Not it **might** come around—it **will** come around. This is the closest Jesus gets to the concept of karma.

-It's like Jesus is saying, “God will deal with you later!” Don't do God's job. Not only are you not very good at it—**God** will do God's job—and then evaluate you for trying to do it. That's not a review you want to be a part of.

-But you also set yourself up here; if you are this kind of judging, critiquing person, you are going to bump into things that are going to hurt. When you set yourself up as a judge—you're setting yourself up for a fall. This will haunt you, track you down, pursue you—and you'll be miserable.

-And I need to ask you—have you been this kind of person—constantly noticing the faults of others? If you are—you are stuck in a loop—it won't end well--and you need to bring this to the cross and repent of it.

9. Alcoholics Anonymous sometimes uses a poem entitled, **Autobiography in Five Short Chapters (Portia Nelson)**. It is very short. Mind if I read it for you?
Chapter 1: I walked down the sidewalk and fell into a deep hole. I couldn't get out and I couldn't figure out why. It wasn't my fault. It took a long time to get out.
Chapter 2: I walked down the sidewalk and fell into the same hole again. I couldn't understand. It wasn't my fault. I really had to struggle to get out.
Chapter 3: I walked down the sidewalk and fell into the same hole again. This time I understood why and it was my fault. This time it was easier to get out.
Chapter 4: I walked down the sidewalk and saw the same big hole. I walked around it. I didn't fall into that hole.
Chapter 5: I chose another sidewalk.

Q & A

10. One of the most important things to know as we close this series is that we live in a world that has **seriously** lost its way in a lot of areas. Now, you can play games, nibble around the edges, play Russian Roulette, skate as close to the edge as you want—because God has given us a powerful gift. The gift of **choice**. We have the power to choose the broad way—this highway that everyone seems to be on. -It sounds so cool and so brave—so **current**--to say, “I will choose my **own** way—no matter what God or anyone else thinks!” And we can do that—but in doing so, we choose our own frustration and pain. But as good and as fun and as satisfying as it feels at the time—it doesn’t lead to life. You have to **choose** life. Life is an upstream move in a down stream world. A **Yes** to life means a hundred **No’s** to inviting detours. God will **not** bless our detours and defiance, but He **will** give us all the power we need to obey. So I would urge you—**Choose life! Choose life!**

Homework:

1. **Sit down in a quiet place and ask: Where in life am I closest to the edge of disaster? Lay out *all* the consequences of making a bad choice in that area. Is that where you *want* to go? If not—what guardrails will you put in place?**
2. **Read Matthew 7:1-5 and Romans 14:10-13. What needs to change about the way you handle other people’s lives and reputations to live out this truth? Remove the plank—do a thoroughly honest moral inventory of your own life. Ask someone who loves you to help.**
3. **Ask: “Where do I need to choose LIFE”**