



by heather williams

My Basic Overhaul

Sin is not a very popular word around campus. Every time I use it or even allude to the concept of human depravity, I get uncomfortable silence or angry arguments from my fellow students. As a Christian, sin is a core component of my deepest beliefs and, unfortunately, it is also an affront to most people I meet. Once I bring sin into the conversation, I am relegated to the “conservative Christian” category. I am seen as judgmental, intolerant, and incompatible with open-minded multiculturalism. Being a Christian, I do have a basically different world view from the majority on campus. That difference hinges on the issue of sin.

In my world view, sin is defined as “missing the mark,” imperfection, or perhaps better, weakness. I cannot believe that we are pure moral beings capable of establishing and abiding by a rational morality. We are weak, and, in our weakness, we sin against each other by our pride, our selfishness, our lovelessness. I approach my life and the world not from the point of view that we need better education or better government or better communication. We need deliverance not improvement. The basic concept of sin is that we are deeply

flawed and we need divine intervention to help us and to heal us; we cannot help ourselves.

On the other hand, the dominant world view at my university does not really allow for moral or personal weakness. I am a *Stanford* student, everyone reminds me. Stanford -- the Harvard of the West, the Disneyland of the North -- producing hundreds of world leaders every June. Here at Stanford, we are passionate about making the world a better place, bringing all our strengths to bear in making it perfect. "You can make a difference!" "The power lies within!" These are the mottoes that we hear and by which we live our everyday lives. To need salvation is to admit defeat.

During the course of my college career, I have agreed with both world views at different times. When I entered Stanford, I was not a Christian. The world lay at my feet then, waiting to be revolutionized. I attended political meetings, took classes on racism and social justice, and immersed myself at the community service center. I believed in the power within me to make a significant difference in the world. I tutored underprivileged elementary school kids; I ran the day camp at a homeless shelter; I collected leftover food to feed the hungry. Yet, the more I tried to change the world, the more frustrated I became. I confronted bureaucracy, apathy, and...sin. I began to think that maybe human nature needed a basic overhaul.

During this time I was challenged to read the Bible by a friend of mine. I had come to college hating the Bible. I thought it was sexist, homophobic and rigidly self-righteous -- the basic blueprint of intolerance. You see, I grew up in the "Bible Belt." Throughout high school, most of the Christians I encountered were more concerned about knocking some sense into me with the Bible than they were concerned about explaining to me what its pages contained. Most were vocal about their conviction that I was going straight to hell because of my liberal agenda. Yet, when my friend in college challenged my actual knowledge of the Bible (garnered from childhood Sunday school lessons and the literature class examining history's "great works" my freshman year), I realized that I knew very little about Jesus and His followers.

So

I read it. One night, I happened upon a story that Luke, a follower of Christ, told in his account of the good news of Jesus. The story is about a woman who lived a sinful life in a certain town. She had come to Jesus to cry at His feet while He was in the home of a prominent man. As I read, it became clear that this woman wanted forgiveness -- a word from Jesus that would speak to the weariness in her heart and the weakness in her life. Never before, in all the books that I had read, did I identify with a person more than I did this woman. I, too, felt weary and weak -- weary of working for good causes, weary of being a confident, "together" woman, weary of the charade and shame of my personal life. As I cried my own tears, I said out loud: "Jesus, if You're real, if You're still the same person as You were in this story, I need You in my life." Jesus' words to that woman almost 2,000 years ago were the same words that echoed in my heart: "Your sins are forgiven."

That night all my frustrations came to a quiet and unexpected breaking point, and, in that brokenness, I discovered the power to live the life of justice and mercy I always wanted to live. The old Bible school song proved to be true: "We are weak, but He is strong." Admitting my sin and my weakness brought me to a place of humility. I realized that effective and powerful change begins at an encounter with the source of



powerful love -- Jesus, Himself.

After that night, I read more and more of the Bible, sought out other Christians, and tried to make intellectual sense of the Jesus I had met. My friends around me and my boyfriend, at the time, worried that I was becoming a religious fanatic. I worried, too! Eventually, I grew apart from my closest friends. My transformation from intellectual agnostic to committed Christian was just too weird for them. They couldn't relate to the freedom I found in acknowledging my "sinfulness." It made them edgy. They worried that I was judging them, seeing weakness and imperfection. One friend said to me, "I don't understand how someone as intelligent as you can buy into all this sin and forgiveness jargon." I don't understand how we can function in this world without it.

So I leave my college experience a very different person, although I am still passionate about social justice and righting wrongs. Stanford has given me amazing opportunities to grow as a woman and as an activist. The crucial difference is that I now know that any power I have comes from a daily dependence on Jesus and His power to overhaul and recreate my basic character. I still want to revolutionize the world, only now, it's one soul at a time.

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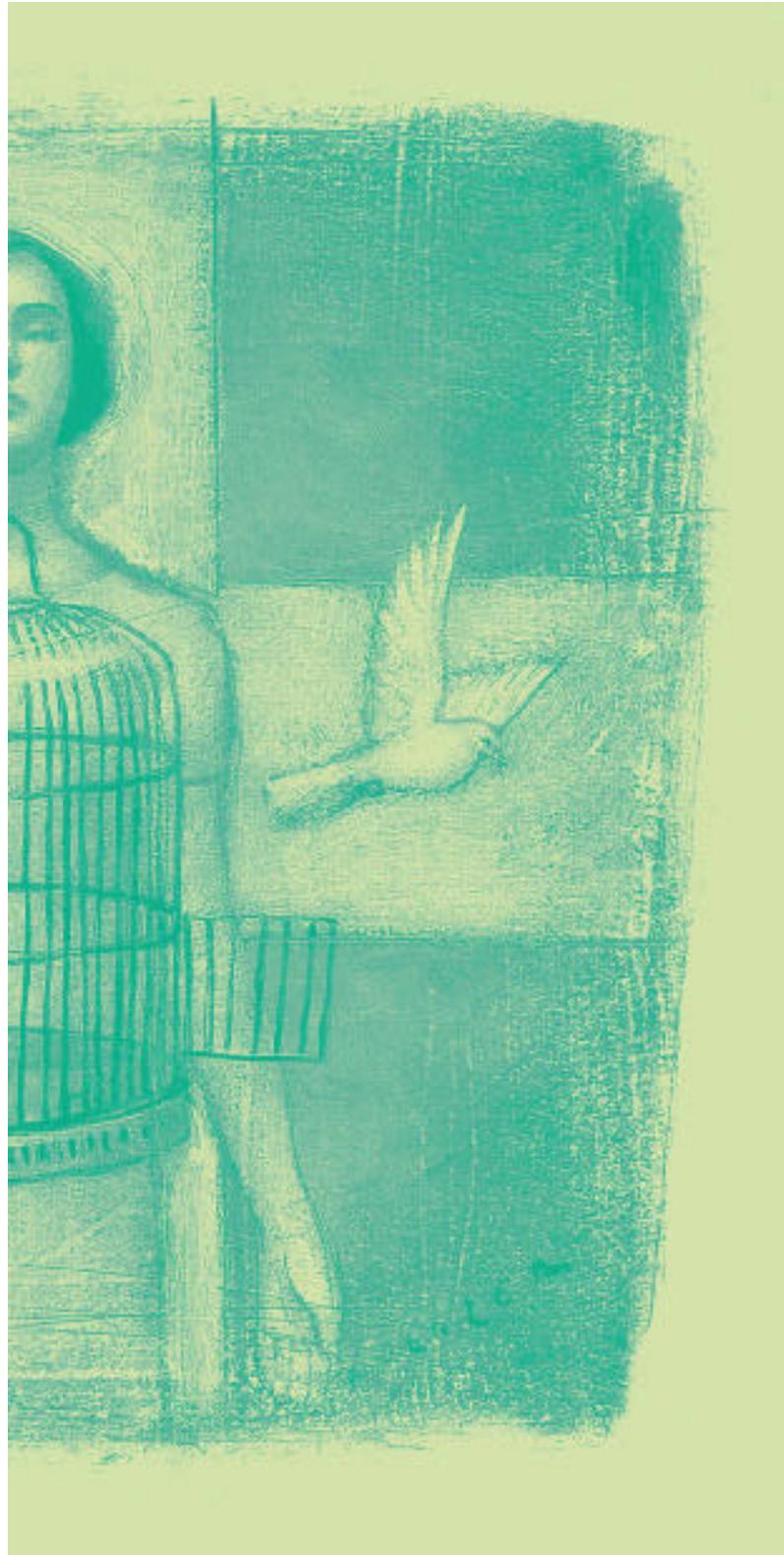
An Interview With Heather Williams

Because we felt that Heather had some interesting things to say, Every Student's Choice decided to probe her a little bit more.

ESC: You said that you grew apart from your closest friends. Do you have any regrets about that?

HW: I do have some regrets about the friends I lost. Actually, I'm reminded of Jesus' response in Matthew 8 to a teacher of the law who declared that he would follow Jesus wherever He went. Jesus responded, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (v. 20). For me this verse talks about the cost of following Jesus -- the cost of displacement that happened when I decided to follow Jesus fully. People don't always lose their closest friends when they turn to God, but for me the change wasn't gradual. After I encountered Jesus in the Bible, I simply did not feel like I was the same person. My friends often commented on the fact that I did seem to be changing. It was hard because here I was happier and more at peace than ever and yet I was not so slowly metamorphosizing into this person they didn't really recognize. Also, I was too immature and inept at adequately communicating what was happening to me.

I regret that my friends had a hard time empathizing with, or even understanding, my change; but I understand that it was weird for them. They wouldn't have guessed that I would become this committed Christian. To be honest, if what happened to me had hap-



pened to one of my friends, I would have been less kind and sympathetic than they were.

Being a vocal and committed Christian is a delicate balancing act these days on college campuses. I don't think college students have enough categories for what religious fervor and commitment could look like without that fervor becoming dangerously fanatical. The stereotype against Christians, especially "evangelical" ones, is really strong. In the eyes of my friends, me falling in love with Christ meant that my lifestyle, my outlook, even my politics, completely changed. There just wasn't sufficient context or mutual understanding for us to negotiate what my "conversion" meant. For me, it meant life and strange, unexplainable freedom; for them, it meant the inexplicable loss of a good friend to the strange world of the Religious Right.

ESC: Do you have ANY regrets about the change that's taken place in your life?

HW: Apart from the regrets about my friends, I really don't have any others. As I said before there is a cost to following Jesus; it's painful to let go and renounce entrenched patterns of sin; it's painful to rethink your entire value system and alter your lifestyle. The road is narrow that leads to life, but the road is never lonely. To be a in a real-live relationship with a God who numbers all the hairs on my head and can perceive my thoughts from afar is a staggering and beautiful daily reality. There is "cosmic companionship" that I won't trade the world for. I am deeply known and loved in a way I can only hope to adequately communicate.

ESC: You talked a lot about character change. Since coming to know Christ, what has been the greatest change in your character?

HW: My present friends could probably answer this one better than I could! I think that the greatest change in my character has been the increase of genuine mercy and love in my heart and actions. I was, and still am in lots of ways, a fairly demanding person. I tend to err on the side of being too independent. I was willing to help people who were oppressed or "downtrodden," but I did not acknowledge the everyday weakness and need of other people. As I came face-to-face with my own need (something I do afresh everyday), I realized how much we are people who need mercy. We need someone to forgive, overlook, our deepest flaws and choose to love us in the midst of them. I experience this from Jesus every day, every moment of my life. Every time I sin, every time I fall short, every time I choose poorly, He forgives, restores, and redeems me. And I have noticed a change in the way that I treat people who annoy me or hurt me. Because I know my own power to annoy and hurt so clearly, I have become more merciful I hope!

ESC: This is kind of a Star Trek-type question: Imagine a parallel universe where everything is exactly like it is in our universe, except that it's about four years behind. What would you say to yourself in that other universe?

HW: I would talk straight with myself. I would lay it all out there - the Bible, its truths, Jesus' death on the cross, everything. Two things, in particular, come to mind:

First, seek out and discover who the real Jesus is. Don't rely on who you think He is or what anyone, including Christians, tell you. Don't rely on commentaries, secondary source; look for the headwaters if you want to understand where the rivers are going. Discover Him for yourself; pursue Him and He will reveal the truth about Himself to you.

Second, don't underestimate the power of mercy. There is no action too selfish, no thought too demeaning, that Jesus is not willing to forgive. There is no lifestyle or thought-life that Jesus cannot completely change. Not only is this man Jesus willing to forgive sins, He has the authority to do so. Don't let cynicism about any real "goodness" in this life rob you of healing.

ESC: What would you say to the person who doubts that Jesus Christ is whom He claimed to be (God in the flesh who came to die for our sins)?

HW: I would say that nothing but a face-to-face encounter with Him will change your mind. If Jesus is who He says He is, then He is both willing and able to reveal Himself. The question is not whether one CAN believe the claims of Christ but whether one WILL believe. Think about what are some of your biggest complaints or doubts concerning the Christian faith. Write them down, talk about them honestly, ask some Christians hard questions. This is a good process and a good place to begin. But in the end, doubts concerning spiritual truths -- those that transcend both thought and emotion -- are only settled by experience. Honest questions at the beginning mitigate the fear that Christianity is a religion manipulated by politics and history, but an experience of the Truth deals a decisive blow to pervasive doubts.

The Truth is not a philosophical concept or a set of ethics you need to comprehend and follow, the Truth is a person you can know and cherish. Mercy, healing, joy, and amazing acceptance are all waiting to be given out freely and abundantly. All you have to do is open your arms and receive Him.

For information about a relationship with Jesus Christ, see www.everystudent.com

