

## *Evil, Evil Everywhere • James 1:21*

I've seen it hundreds of times. A person becomes a Christian and experiences initial changes in life. There is little doubt that he or she is a Christian. But then they get stuck. They never grow beyond spiritual infancy.

Some Christians stay stuck for years. Then something happens to change that. There is a wake-up call. She faces a crisis and she needs God's help. He realizes that life is passing him by and God has not been very important. Hundreds of previous attempts to get that Christian going and growing never did any good. They were content with spiritual mediocrity. But now the moment has come. He wants to change. She desires a closer relationship with God. But what is that person to do?

James 1:21 gives a specific and practical answer. Some people do what it says and they are transformed by it. Others reject it and slide back into mediocrity. Here's what the Bible says: "Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

It's actually two pieces of advice. The first advice is to get rid of sin. The words used are direct and very descriptive: "moral filth" and "the evil that is so prevalent". Generally, sin is not a very comfortable subject for discussion. It is uncomfortable to talk specifically about our own sins even though Americans seem to enjoy news reports about the evil activities and crimes of famous and powerful people. But we don't like thinking about our own sins. In fact, we have a tendency to pretend that our sins aren't really sins at all.

The truth is that we don't have a chance of growing spiritually until we admit our sins. Like the addict whose first step is to admit he has a problem, our first step as spiritually stalled

Christians is to admit to our sins. We have to admit that we have sinned before we can do anything about that sin that stands in the way of becoming all that God wants us to be.

Like what? Let's take a look at God's list of sins in Galatians 5:19-21.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: 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.

Let's take a look at that list. It starts out with "sexual immorality". Actually, if you have an older version of the Bible or a different translation you may find the word "fornication" which specifically refers to sexual intercourse between people who are not yet married. But the word "immorality" refers to any sexual contact between persons who are not married to each other.

Next on the list is "impurity". That can also refer to sexual sins, but it's bigger than that. It actually means anything you wouldn't do if you had an appointment with God this afternoon.

Third on the list is "debauchery". That refers to always looking for pleasure without ever thinking about whether it's good or bad or without caring what anyone else thinks. Just go for it.

Fourth is "idolatry", or the worship of anything that is human-made. It could be an idol, the kind

of thing you put on a shelf and to which you bow down. But it really refers to anything that is made by human hands that takes the place of God in our hearts.

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Next on the list is “witchcraft”. The New Testament was written in Greek and translated into English and the word that is translated here is witchcraft. The Greeks used that word to refer to the use of drugs because drug abuse was a major problem in the first century.

“Hatred” describes someone who is hostile toward another person.

“Discord” means rivalry or competitiveness, abnormal competitiveness. It is so strong that it causes arguments and bad feelings.

“Jealousy” is the strong desire to have what belongs to somebody else. It is wrong motivation to get something that we really should not have.

“Fits of rage” is not talking about deep down anger; it is talking about sudden bursts of anger that are quick and explosive but don’t last very long.

“Selfish ambition” was the word the Greeks used to describe a person who sought public office, not to accomplish good but to get ahead personally. Today it could mean anyone who is willing to use other people to selfishly succeed.

“Dissensions” and “factions” are similar to some of these other sins that are listed. They refer specifically to words and actions that divide people rather than bring them together. It is constantly forcing people to choose sides in order to cause divisions.

“Envy” is probably the meanest word in this entire list. Envy is an attitude of resentment that we feel when good things happen to other people. So somebody else gets a job or promotion or boyfriend or girlfriend or a marriage or a baby or a house or a car — whatever you want to put on the list. Envy is never glad when someone else succeeds. It isn’t so much that the envious person wants what the other person has; he or she just doesn’t want the other person to have it!

“Drunkenness” was uncommon in biblical times because the people diluted their wine so much. Drunkenness was considered to be a terrible sin by Christians and non-Christians alike.

“Orgies” might be translated as wild party-

ing in today’s terms. It is partying until people are out of control.

Some of these sins are pretty common today, especially premarital sex, drug use, bad tempers, materialism and selfishness. But the key issue here is not what the specific sins are but who decides whether it’s a sin or not. The key issue is that God is the one who determines what is right and what is wrong. It’s really not up to us. If we insist on defining morality on our terms, we set ourselves up as God and that is the worst sin of all.

When Christians do sinful things, we stunt our spiritual growth. So the Bible’s advice is to get rid of this sin. The original Greek word James wrote meant “to strip off”. It was the word for taking off your clothing. In other words, any Christian doing anything sinful like this should take off these practices like an old set of clothing.

When Charleen and I were first married, my job was repairing mobile homes in central Illinois for \$1.50 an hour. In the winter temperatures fell well below zero and the sewer pipes of these mobile homes would freeze up. Unfortunately, residents would continue to fill tubs, flush toilets and run sink water until everything inside the mobile home was completely full. Then they would call for a repairman.

My job was to crawl on my back under the mobile home, disconnect the sewer pipe and melt the ice clog with a small propane torch. The ice would melt a drop at a time until an instant when the clog was gone and the entire sewage contents of the house would pour out the hole.

I never knew exactly when that memorable moment would come. When it happened I would scoot on my back as fast and as far as I could go. Unfortunately, I was never fast enough. No one was! In an instant I was disgustingly soaked. In about three minutes my clothes changed from disgustingly wet to disgustingly frozen. It was never my favorite job.

When I came home from work at the end of the day, Charleen always insisted that I take

off all those frozen, smelly clothes before I did anything else. It wasn't that she didn't like me or love me. I was just that she wanted me to get rid of those clothes before doing anything else.

And so it is with God and us when we have been lying around in the sewage of sin. It's not that God doesn't like us or love us. It's just that God wants us to strip off the sins, to "get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent" before we do anything else.

By the way, Charleen never told me to get cleaned up before I came home. She was wonderful. She would bring me inside from the cold and help me take each piece off and kindly clean me up. And that's what God does. He does not reject us because of the sin that is in our lives. He helps us get rid of sin.

The Bible's second advice for those who want to grow spiritually is to be teachable. In the words of James 1:21, "... humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

Now there are some big assumptions in those few words. It assumes that the word of God can save a person. The word of God refers primarily to the Bible. It has the message that can get a person connected to God, can show us how to have our sins forgiven and can direct our lives to become everything God wants them to be. To save a person from sin is a big promise for a book! The Bible promises the power to save us from the ravages of sin that will wreck this life and damn the next.

James 1:21 also assumes that God's word has already been planted inside whoever reads this verse. It assumes that this person is already a Christian, that this person has accepted Jesus as Savior and Lord. It assumes that the basic truths of the Bible are known but not being lived. It assumes that the reason the powerful words of God are not working is because of "moral filth and evil."

After all those assumptions, any Christian who confesses sins and resolves to get rid of

them just needs to humbly accept the words of God already planted in their heads. The Bible says that Christians already have the right stuff from God to be saved and to become God's best. All we have to do is be willing to learn and change.

But it is not always so easy to be teachable. It means allowing other people to help us, to confront us, to explain things to us. It means an openness to let God change our lives.

Let's try a little teach-ability test. Would you be willing to have someone meet with you regularly as sort of a spiritual director to help you in the development of your Christian life? We actually have a program here at Wooddale Church to match people up who are willing to do that and would like to have that kind of relationship. All you would have to do is ask.

Would you be willing to change your habits of prayer, Bible reading or financial giving to significantly increase all three?

Would you be willing to give up your job or home or other security in life to discover how to live by faith, trusting God for things you now take for granted?

How about learning to share your faith with other people?

Would you be open to doing something you don't like to do? It might mean providing a social service to people you think are less worthy than you are or becoming a servant to someone who is poor, sick with a terminal illness, psychologically troubled or difficult to deal with.

Would you be willing to do whatever the Bible asks, whatever God wants?

You would? Great!! That means that you are ready to grow because you "humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you."

We lived in the same house for 19 years. Shortly after moving in we wanted some fast growing trees in our backyard, so we planted a

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whole row of Russian Olive trees. A couple of years later we also planted six small evergreen trees. Half of the evergreen trees grew huge. The other half stayed small and sick looking. We watered them. We fertilized them. Nothing helped. Then we called in a landscape consultant who said that the only way the evergreen trees would grow was to cut down all the Russian Olive trees that were blocking their sunlight. So, down came the Russian Olives — and the evergreens slowly began to flourish.

That is what James 1:21 is telling Christians to do. Make a choice. Take a chain saw to the sin and grow the good. “Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.”

Well, I’ve explained it as best I can. It’s up to each of us to decide what to do. Are there

sins in your life that God wants you to get rid of? If so, will you do it? Are you teachable, ready to learn and change and grow from the word of God? I hope you will tell God that your answers to these questions are definitely “yes”!

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