

Sins That Keep Me Down

Jesus said in Matthew 15:19, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.” If ever we could stop sinning on the inside with our thoughts, we could also stop sinning on the outside with our bodies.

No one stated the struggle more openly than Paul when he said in Romans 7:15-20:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

Let me state the problem in everyday words. A person becomes a Christian, receiving eternal life and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. He is euphoric over the changes God has made. Old habits are broken; new desires are God-given. But he is startled to experience the reappearance of sin. He asks God’s forgiveness and receives relief. He thinks the problem is over, but it is not.

This is the beginning of a life-long struggle with sin that keeps him down. He hears a hundred different suggestions, but none seems to work. What’s this sinning saint to do?

I chose this topic, not because it’s your problem, but because it’s my problem. But it’s your problem, too, isn’t it? I’ve heard and read the range of solutions. My Pentecostal friends tell me that the answer is in the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the accompanying speaking in tongues. My Keswick friends tell me that “victorious Christian living” is possible through total surrender to Jesus Christ. My

Wesleyan friends tell me that entire sanctification is possible through “perfect love”. And my Calvinist friends reply that any notion of perfection in this life misdefines and underestimates the power of sin. Then there are those psycho-evangelical friends who counsel me that I need to better understand and improve through their help and self-help.

Actually, there is good advice in all of them. But there are also problems. For it doesn’t take long to discover that the one who speaks in tongues also speaks in pride. The one who has totally surrendered also gives in to gluttony. The guy who argues for perfection in love can say some rather unloving things about those who don’t agree with his position. The theologian who can so precisely define sin seems powerless to overcome sin. The counselor who seeks to help others is unable to follow his own advice.

Hebrews 12:4 begins with the words, “In your struggle against sin” I’ll admit to you that I struggle against sin. I am not one who has all the answers. You will not receive from me some clever little formula that you can write down in the flyleaf of your Bible that will make you perfect by morning and sinless forever.

I share with you as a fellow struggler, a fellow searcher for God’s victory in my life and in yours.

As part of that search for an inside-out victory over the sins

that keep us down, let’s explore three different topics. The first topic is sin, and we begin with a definition. Actually, sin may be defined in two completely different, but accurate, ways. Sin may be defined as a compulsion, or sin may be defined as an action.

When Adam and Eve sinned by choice and by action, our human nature was bent — away from righteousness and toward sin. That bent toward sin has been passed down to every one of us since the Garden of Eden. It is a powerful, powerful force. God said to Cain in Genesis 4:7, “. . . sin is crouch-

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ing at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” Romans 3:9 says that all are under sin. No one lacks this compulsion to sin. No one stands successfully against this irresistible force. So sin may be defined as compulsion.

But sin may also be defined as action. The action of sin is the implementation of the compulsion. It’s doing what we should not do or not doing what we should do. In Galatians 5:19-20 we read:

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.

Now all that sounds so very theological. We need something to help us understand it in terms of our everyday thinking. So let’s talk about gravity. Gravity is constant force in our world. There is no place we can go to escape it. The power of gravity is immense and potentially fatal. But that does not mean that everything falls.

If I hold a piece of paper in my hand it will not fall. It is not because the pull of gravity is no longer at work. It is because some other force is at work. So understand that there is a difference between the power of gravity and the actual falling of an object, just as there is a difference between compulsion and action in sin. The power is inescapable, but the action is not inescapable. It is possible to not sin.

We are living in a spiritual war. Ephesians 6:12 says, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the power of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Never, never underestimate the brutality of this conflict! Sin and Satan are out to alienate us from God, to destroy our marriages, to abuse our children, to kill our bodies, to divide our churches and to rule our world. Every day and in every place the spiritual warfare rages — including our insides.

The horrors of military war are great. But the horrors of spiritual warfare are far greater. Sin is awful stuff, and the stakes are eternal. We would be certain casualties if it were not for Jesus Christ who provided the payment for sin.

In Galatians 1:4 we are instructed that Jesus Christ “gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.” And in I Peter 2:24 we read, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.”

Jesus Christ died on the cross to atone for our sins. His death and resurrection were successful in winning our victory over the penalty and the power of sin. “Victory over the penalty” we understand. It means we go to heaven and not hell. The power part we still struggle with. It too often seems as if the power of sin has not been cancelled through Christ’s death and our salvation.

So we sin again. Even after salvation. God doesn’t like it and neither do we. We want and need forgiveness for our sins. And God has an answer for that in the familiar words of I John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” That has to be one of the best promises in the Bible! No matter what our sins and no matter how many times, God will forgive us and cleanse us.

The purpose of all this is plain in I John 2:1: “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin.” It seems so simple! Salvation. Sin. Confession. Forgiveness. Finished. No more sin. But we sin again and hate it! The old bent is still plaguing us. And the sin just won’t go away. That’s why there is more to I John 2:1. “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.” God recognizes the reality of our continued sin and turns us back to Jesus Christ for what to do.

Don’t look up ‘sinventory’ in either your Bible or your dictionary. You won’t find this word there, but it’s still a good word. “Sinventory” is taking an inventory of the sins in your life.

If you read a time management book you will find that the only way to get control of your time and become productive is to first figure out how your time is being used. You will never sell your products until you inventory your stock and see what you have to sell. You will never conquer the sin that keeps you down until you take a ‘sinventory’ to determine exactly what you are dealing with.

Make a mental, or better yet, a written list. It may be a very uncomfortable process. But, if you are really serious about being an inside-out Christian, it is worth the pain. What would your list include? Christian teaching often refers to sins of commission and sins of omission.

Sins of commission are those things we do that we shouldn't. What are yours? Sexual immorality? Gossip? Pride? Anger? Selfishness? Greed? Drunkenness? Envy? Sins of omission are things that we don't do that we should. They may include lack of witness, failure to provide for your family, lack of love or inadequacy in prayer life.

Make a specific list with the expectation of defining your enemy and the expectation of appropriating the power of Jesus Christ to win the victory. Make a list . . . and check it twice!

The chances are that your list is faulty! The power of sin even distorts our understanding of our own sins! Many Christians "major" on minor things that are not really sin. Let me list several possibilities not named in the Bible: gambling, masturbation, daily Bible reading, poor grades, failure to go to the mission field or saying stupid and inappropriate things out of ignorance rather than out of malice.

At the same time, many Christians totally ignore issues about which the Bible gives direct commandment: unjust wages for employees; unkind words of malice to another person; failure to pay full taxes; use of spiritual gifts; providing for the poor; praying for government leaders.

I sometimes wonder if we are laboring under false guilt for some things while being totally blind to the great sins in our inner lives. So how do we find out? Ask God. Pray for divine guidance to know what is sin and what is not. Ask God to help you order your priorities.

Study the Bible. Give far greater weight to what the Bible calls sin than to what culture and conscience calls sin.

Seek counsel. Ask friends, pastors and professionals. Others will see you and help you in ways

you cannot see and help yourself.

Rewrite and prioritize your 'sinventory'. Confess every sin. Seek God's power to win the victory over the sins at the top of the list before moving on to the lesser sins lower on the list.

Sanctification is the divine process whereby the Holy Spirit makes us practically holy and sinless. It is a process. It takes time. In fact, it takes from the moment of salvation to the moment we go to heaven. II Corinthians 3:18 says that Christians "are being transformed into (Jesus') likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Do you get that? Ever-increasing glory; one step at a time; one inch at a time. It takes time to make us holy. It takes time to win the practical victory over all our sins.

Why are we not instantly and permanently sinless at salvation? I don't know. I don't have a good answer except to say that God

does sanctification his way and in his time. Remember that Jesus did not instantly die on the cross either. It took time. The point is that God guarantees the completion of the process. Philippians 1:6 tells us "that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." God guarantees that we will be absolutely and permanently sinless. Until then we have a Christian responsibility.

II Peter 1:3 says that "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness." God has already provided all that is necessary for power over sin. It is our responsibility to claim and use God's provisions.

In Romans 6:12-14 we read:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments

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of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

Make a deliberate choice not to sin. Seek the power of God to stick with that choice.

Studies have been done on people who suffer depression and other ailments because they don't get enough sunlight in winter. Now there are special lights to sit, study or sleep by to get the power to make it through winter.

The same goes for our spiritual winters. When we are stumbling and sinning we need light. Jesus Christ is that spiritual light. We must seek our power from him. That is not legalistically done by a certain number of minutes in daily Bible reading and prayer. It is through the building of a relationship. Bible reading and prayer are part of it. So is surrendering or yielding to his will. So is the filling of the Holy Spirit. So is time.

Here's what happens. Through the power of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit we win a partial victory over our Number One sin. And then a greater victory, and then a full victory, until eventually, by God's amazing process of sanctification, our Number One sin is removed from the list. And then Number Two sin becomes top priority and the process of sanctification begins to chip our sins away. It takes a lifetime, but it is an exciting and thrilling experience! We increasingly experience the truth of Philippians 4:13, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Keep Jesus Christ central. Not sin! Sin is terrible and sin is important, but Jesus Christ is far, far greater. Even if it were possible to erase every sin in our lives for the rest of our lives, if we lacked Jesus Christ life would be empty. Don't focus on your sins. Don't allow sin to be the center of your

attention. Keep Jesus Christ central!

Remember — it's a war, not a formula. Those inside-out sins that keep us down will not be eliminated by some clever one-two-three step formula. It's a war . . . a war with different battles and different tactics. The war will be fought differently at different times and places in our lives. We can never be sure where or when the next attack will come. But there are some things that stay the same. We can be sure that we have the same power of God and the same Jesus Christ as our commander and the same victory is guaranteed.

My dear friends, by God's grace, fight and win that war! And, in the words of Romans 6:12, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body"

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