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“How Should A Christian Fight Against Sin?”

Picture for a moment a world with no beauty - with no light, no music, and no art – a world filled with darkness and ugliness. This, to a degree, is the state of our world spiritually. Ephesians 2:1 and the first three chapters of Romans declare mankind to be dead in sin, corrupted on every front, and utterly depraved. It has come about as the result of a seemingly harmless sin – the tasting of a fruit from a tree. In breaking God’s commands, however, Adam plunged all of mankind into sin. Because of the disastrous results of sin it is clearly vital to the Christian to know how to combat it. It is this – the mortification of sin – that will here be discussed.

“But what purpose does mortification serve for me?” the antinomian counters. “Legalism has no place here; I have been saved by grace!” Nothing is new under the sun; this objection has been raised before: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” Paul answers “By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” We are God’s sons and daughters through adoption! To want to go against his will is unnatural and a sign that we have never yet experienced his grace.

But the motivation for obedience is more than a grateful one; there is a hedonistic impetus as well. Evil sin separates us from holy God. Sin makes our hearts cold towards God, and as those in the heart of Dante’s Hell, we become lifeless, frozen, and empty. We must cleanse our life of sin in order to draw nearer to God.

Clearly the preliminary step in fighting sin is to understand it – to understand it on many levels. Firstly it must be grasped – truly grasped – that man is sinful. I do not mean merely an “I’m only human!” depravity, but that man is sinful from birth and is by nature a child of wrath. It must really be realized; in the same way that Elwin Ransom in C.S Lewis’s *Perelandra* with a shock understands that his planet is full of wickedness.

Not only must the existence of sin be acknowledged, but we must familiarize ourselves with its essence. In a world of shadow and deception it is often difficult to judge whether or not an action is sinful, but we must mount the lens of Scripture, wield the scalpel of discernment, and peel back layer by layer the action until at its very core we can decide whether, in its essence, it goes against the command of God. Rigorous study of the Scriptures is vital to this step in the process of mortification. We must search out the will of God, studying the many lists of sins and analyzing the action at hand. If at any point it contradicts his Word – in its intent, its means, or its corollaries – it must not be done. As the Holy Spirit abides in us we will recognize as through our conscience a sin intuitively. Growing maturity in Christ brings a greater knowledge of good and evil.

Sins cannot be recognized until they are looked for. We must, then, understand sin on another level, knowing its – and by that our own – habits. Sin must be hunted – no stone of life ought to be left unturned. It is easy to become blinded to sin. Often it is because of a failure to recognize it for what it is, occasionally it is because we are so focused on defeating one particular sin that we leave other sins to rot and fester in our hearts.

Once sin has been recognized, steps must be taken *immediately* to eradicate it. John Owen forcefully insists that we must

“Rise mightily against the first sign of sin. Do not allow it to gain the slightest ground. Do not say ‘Thus far I shall go, and no farther.’ If you allow it one step, it will take another. It is impossible to fix boundaries for sin! It is like water in a channel. If it ever breaks out, it will flow on through the breach. It is easier to stop it in the beginning than after it has begun to run.” (Owen)

Owen stresses that we must stop sin before the dreadful process of James 1:14-15 can continue. The instant there is a confrontation with sin we must flee. The objector will inquire as to recurring temptations, must we be fleeing constantly? Jesus presents a solution in Matthew 5:29

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.” (Matt. 5:29)

Luke 9:25 poses the question “for what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?” Whatever the cause of temptation may be, no matter how valuable in human eyes, remove it! Christ says it is better to lose a crucial body part than to keep it and in doing so sin. We must tear out the eyes of our temptation and thus remove temptation from us. Often we fail to realize the simplicity of this point. We are astounded, like Ransom facing the Un-man, that a merely physical act can deliver us from sin. We refuse to believe that throwing out the magazine will remove the temptation to lust; we delude ourselves into thinking we must combat purely on a spiritual or mental level. But this is vital. We must take radical, *physical* steps in our defense as well spiritual. If we are not committed to battling sin on every front, we are weakened.

It seems impossible. Often it seems so utterly hopeless to begin that once our initial resistance has failed we give in. But we must not neglect our spiritual weapons with which we are equipped. Paul’s admonition bears recounting:

“Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil… stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with perseverance” (Ephesians 6:10,14-18)

Observe the vast arsenal with which we are equipped! Every piece of armor is based upon God’s Word. The gospel– the good news of Christ – provides a joy and readiness that prepares us to fight sin. Dutiful prayer and supplication keeps us ever alert, ready to strike sin the moment it rears its ugly head. The belt – the girdles and buckles that held together a Roman foot soldier’s armor – is the cornerstone of our defense. Truth holds the Christian together; it is the foundation of the attack upon sin. It secures the breastplate of righteousness – the glorious reminder that through Christ we are made righteous and nothing can separate us from the love of God. Christ’s righteousness protects our vital spiritual organs, and though we may be harmed we cannot die. Through Christ we are cleared of all charges, we are no longer guilty. Likewise the helmet of Salvation assures us that we are saved from sin; we are freed from all the power of the devil; we shall not perish and should not despair. Additionally, we stand up against the attacks of the devil by wielding the shield of faith. Our faith in God protects us; if we trust in Him we can stand. Finally, the sword of the Spirit – the word of God – is our attack against sin. As Jesus battled the devil in the desert, wielding Scripture against the devil’s suggestions, so should we.

It may seem to the weary that all strategies are in vain; that no matter what defense is raised it is always shattered; that the struggle is hopeless. It may seem that God’s commands cannot be justified, that we must give in. At this point (indeed, all along) we must be reminded that the entire process is not, primarily, about us. It’s about Christ. Philippians 2:12-13 says

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Phil. 2:12-13)

It’s not about us! It’s about the glorification of God. On our own we cannot defeat sin anymore than a flea can defeat a giant. Tullian Tchividjian’s words are too good to pass by:

“Christian growth does not happen by working hard to get something you don’t have. Rather, Christian growth happens by working hard to daily swim in the reality of what you do have. Believing again and again the gospel of God’s free justifying grace everyday is the hard work we’re called to  
(…)  
As G. C. Berkouwer said, ‘The heart of sanctification is the life which feeds on justification.’   
(…)  
Preoccupation with my performance over Christ’s performance for me makes me increasingly self-centered and morbidly introspective.” (Tchividjian)

Tchividjian hits the nail on the head: when it comes down to brass tacks, the more we worry about our progress – the more we focus on how we’re doing and our success level: the more we look away from Christ. Tchividjian points out that it is only when Peter looked away from Jesus and focused on the wind – the impediment to his progress – that he began to sink.

Despite – or more accurately because of – this renewed knowledge that it is God who works in us, we must know the ropes of spiritual warfare. John Owen reminds us of several things concerning mortification: first (1), that it is a habitual weakening of lust. Second (2), that it is a *constant* fight. Third (3), that there is a degree of success. We ought to be able to look back five years and see an improvement in our spiritual life. Fourth(4), that we cannot totally destroy a sin in this life. It will linger. It is our goal, of course, to annihilate it, but that is unattainable for the present. Fifth (5), that mortification is not just an apparent change regarding a sin. A man cannot mortify his lust simply by hiding it. Sixth (6), mortification isn’t just becoming “nicer.” Just because our people skills rating is through the roof doesn’t mean we are at all progressing in a battle against sin. Seventh (7), mortification is not simply the diversion of sin. To leave one sin for another, to be humble towards your wife but prideful towards your boss – this is only a delusion of success. Eighth (8), an occasional victory is not mortification. A man who defeats his lust one day and gives in to temptation the next has not mortified his sin by defeating it once! Sin comes galloping back shouting the age-old retort “you may have won this battle, but you shan’t win the war!”

That, of course, is where sin is wrong. Occasionally we win battles. Much too often we lose. But sheer volume of temporary victory is no match for the eternal power that shall meet us in Heaven. We may have lost the battle, sin may have won – but God shall win the war. He is winning it even now, through us, through the nagging temptation we feel we cannot resist. But we look towards eternal life – fixing our eyes upon Christ and remembering the words of God, “the old has passed away; behold, the new has come,” and even now is coming, breaking into time. Jesus Christ, pure and perfect, blessed redeemer, accursed for us, through whom we are justified and made righteous – he is coming. This life is but a breath. We have nothing to fear. Sin has no power over us.

“He who testifies to these things says ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!”

In conclusion I find it adequate to quote again Tchividjian, who says

“Every temptation to sin is a temptation, in the moment, to disbelieve the gospel–the temptation to secure for myself in that moment something I think I need in order to be happy, something I don’t yet have: meaning, freedom, validation, and so on. Bad behavior happens when we fail to believe that everything I need, in Christ I already have; it happens when we fail to believe in the rich provisional resources that are already ours in the gospel. Conversely, good behavior happens when we daily rest in and receive Christ’s “It is finished” into new and deeper parts of our being every day— into our rebellious regions of unbelief (what writer calls “our unevangelized territories”) smashing any sense of need to secure for ourselves anything beyond what Christ has already secured for us.” (Tchividjian)

That, I believe, is the essence of this topic. The Holy Spirit of God rests in us. Mortification is our duty. “This [we] must do, this [we cannot] do.” With God, all things are possible. He has given us his Word and Spirit for our sanctification. He does not give them to us that we might run off on our own, boasting in our skill and success, but that we might come running back to him, putting off sin that we might draw near to him.

“For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

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