



## Respectable Sins: Directions for Dealing with Sin

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Last week Alexandra got a nice big whiteboard for her birthday, and with it she also got an easel for it to sit on. Veronica came into the room the next day as I was trying to get both of them setup. One of the problems was that this is no ordinary three-legged easel – it’s collapsible and adjustable. And so it’s got all sorts of clamps on it and legs and arms that extended up and down and out. I was having trouble making heads or tails out of it all. My dad had setup a similar one for my niece not long before and sort of told me how it worked, but once I had it in my hands his instructions just didn’t add up. And then Veronica came into the room as I was fighting with it and trying to figure it all out – and not having much success – and, just like a wife and sounding utterly perplexed, she just asked, “Did you read the instructions?” Well, in my defence, I didn’t know there were instructions – and at least initially, it seemed like something easy enough not to need instructions anyway! You know how kids are when they open a present – everything goes everywhere and everything but the actual toy gets shoved aside. So we managed to locate the instructions and setup the easel without much more ado.

Now there is a point to my story. You’ll remember that in the first sermon in this series we looked at what Holy Scripture tells us about the fact that we are sinners, and last week we looked at the good news of the Gospel for us sinners. And last week we looked specifically at how the Gospel of Jesus Christ is, as Augustus Toplady put it, the “double cure.” The Gospel doesn’t just save us from the penalty of our sins, it also saves us from sin’s power. And I think that’s the really good news for those of us who have been redeemed by putting our faith in Christ: sin no longer has dominion over us. But last week we talked in general terms. And I know how frustrating it is to hear in general terms that sin no longer has dominion over me and that Jesus has conquered sin and death, because for a lot of years that’s all I ever heard. And as I continued to struggle in my fight with sin I just got frustrated – “If I’m no longer under sin’s power, why am I still struggling with it? Where’s the Gospel’s power?” I’d ask. I felt a little like I did with the easel. I could see the picture on the box showing me what it was *supposed* to look like, but I was having trouble getting there. When we hear generalities about overcoming sin, we see a picture of what we ought to be like. The problem lies in getting

there. We need the instructions. Without them we’re left to struggle on our own. We may or may not figure it out. And, of course, there’s an awful lot of bad advice out there that muddles things up. So tonight I want to look at THE instruction manual that God’s given us, and in doing that I want to give you seven directions for dealing with sin as a Christian.

*First*, we need always to address our sin in the context of the Gospel. What happens a lot of the time is that God shows us a sinful pattern in our life that we need to deal with, but as soon as we start working on overcoming it, we forget the Gospel message. We forget that God has already forgiven that sin through Jesus’ death. St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “[God has] forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2:13b-14). God hasn’t just forgiven our sins – sort of balancing our righteousness account to zero – he’s also credited Christ’s perfect righteousness to our account. Remember that Jesus was perfect in *everything* when he was here on earth. Do you struggle with unrighteous anger? Jesus never sinned in his anger. Do you struggle with anxiety? Jesus always trusted perfectly in God’s provision. Do you struggle with gossip or unkind speech? Jesus never once sinned in opening his mouth. For his entire three decades here, Jesus was always perfectly obedient to his Father, even obedient to the point of death as he died for our sins. Because of that, his righteousness has been credited to us.

So in our fight with sin, we need to remember first and foremost that God, through Jesus Christ, has already forgiven our sins and that he accepts us as *already* being righteous because of the sinless life and death of Jesus Christ. We need to remember this for two reasons: first, keeping this in mind will keep us from turning our fight with sin into something through which we try to earn God’s favour – we already have his favour through Jesus. And second, knowing what God has done for us, and knowing we already have his favour, this should motivate us to serve God out of joy and gratitude instead of slavish duty.

*Second*, we need to learn to rely on the enabling power of the Holy Spirit as we fight to overcome the sin in our lives. St. Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “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” (Rom. 8:13). Just as we tend to forget the Gospel message, we also tend to fall back into our old “fleshly” ways in this respect too. We see sin in our lives and we try to overcome it by sheer willpower – but that’s only going to work for a limited amount of time. Trying to overcome sin without relying on the power of the Spirit is like trying to go someplace in your car with an empty gas tank. You might be able to push the car for a little while, but you’ll never make it to your

destination. From the moment of our conversion, God pours his Spirit into us and gives us everything we need to be holy people. And this is where there’s been a lot of bad advice out there. The whole idea that started with the Methodist revivals in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, that became the “Holiness” Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup>, and gave rise to the Pentecostal movement in the last century, is all based on the idea that God doesn’t fill you with his Spirit until you’ve earned it by overcoming sin – that because he is holy, the Spirit can’t fill you until you’ve emptied yourself of sin. There are two giant problems with that: First, we can never overcome sin without first having already been filled with the Spirit, and second, we can never be holy enough on our own to merit anything from God – our righteousness – our holiness – is not our own, it’s Christ’s! The New Testament assures us over and over and over that from the moment of our conversion, Christ has given each of us the fullest measure of his Spirit completely regardless of our merit and that he’s given us that Spirit to enable us to follow him. We need daily to cultivate an attitude of continual dependence on the Holy Spirit.

*Third*. Even though we rely on the Holy Spirit’s power, we also need to realise that we have a responsibility to do everything we can to deal with the sin in our lives. Think of it this way: Going back to the car imagery. The car won’t get you to your destination if it doesn’t have any gas in it, but by the same token, if you don’t get in the car, turn on the ignition, put it in gear, and step on the accelerator, you’re still not going to get to your destination. Imagine someone sitting in their car, with the ignition off, going absolutely nowhere, but oh-so-proud of himself because, “Woo-hoo! Yeah! I’ve got a full tank of gas!” It sounds silly and stupid, but think about it. How often do we as Christians do the same thing spiritually. We’re full of joy because we have the Spirit. We thank God because we have the Spirit. We tell people we have the Spirit. But we live our lives as if we don’t have him at all. Number Three: You have the Spirit. Live accordingly!

*Fourth*. We need to regularly examine ourselves and identify sin in our lives, big and small. The big ones are usually pretty easy to identify, although not always easy to overcome. But often we don’t even realise the “small” ones are there. As I said last week, as we live in the Spirit, God applies his divine microscope to our lives. He has us to look into the eyepiece and as we look he shows us our sins so that we can deal with them. The thing is that as we deal with sin and as we grow closer with him in our walk, he continually increases the power of the lens. Just as you think you’ve dealt with everything, he ups the power and focuses in on new sins you didn’t even know were there. My hope and prayer is that this series of sermons on our so-called “respectable” sins will help us all to identify some of the sins we need to deal with.

*Fifth.* We need to apply Scripture to our sins. This really goes for every aspect of the Christian life. David wrote in Psalm 119:11, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” This is some of the best advice in the entire Bible, yet it seems to be the least followed. People tell me that they don’t feel like they know God. They tell me that they don’t know what his will is for their lives. They tell me that they’re not always sure how they should deal with situations that come up in life. And more often than not, these are the same people who tell me they don’t regularly read and study their Bible. The bottom line is that you can never know God if you haven’t read his Holy Word and read what he tells us about himself. You can’t know God’s will if you haven’t read and studied the very book in which he tells us his will. And you can’t very well live the Christian life if you haven’t read the divinely given instruction manual! People tell me they don’t have time to study the Bible. The fact is, you don’t have time not to! We need to read and study it on a regular and hopefully daily basis to get a general idea of what Holy Scripture tells us. But we also need to memorise it. It’s not always possible to get out your concordance and lookup a topic when life throws something at you or when temptation comes. You need to have as much Scripture as you can stored away.

You all remember “Y2K.” People were afraid of what might happen when the clock rolled over to January 1, 2000, because too many computer systems weren’t properly programmed to deal with the date. Unless they were upgraded, all the computers, we were told (except Macintosh!) would suddenly think it was 1900 and the entire world would virtually come to an end. And in the end it was a hiccup that we barely noticed. But there were lots of people who were really panicked by it. I knew a guy that bought some remote property in northern Idaho, built a fence around it, cashed in his bank account in exchange for Gold Eagles and silver dimes, armed himself to the teeth and *stored up* a five year supply of food and ammunition. As crazy as that might sound – and at the time it really didn’t sound *that* crazy. That’s what it means to store up. We need to store up God’s word in our heart, so that when the hard spiritual times come, it’s there for us to draw on.

But memorising a lot of Bible verses isn’t the end goal. There’s a reason for it. We need to then *apply* those verses to our lives. Part of what the Holy Spirit does is to bring that Scripture to mind so that you can apply it in specific situations. If you struggle with anger, store away Scriptures that deal with anger and how to deal with it righteously. If you struggle with lust, store away Scriptures that talk about how to overcome lust. You get the idea.

*Sixth.* As important as Scripture is in overcoming sin, we also need to confront it prayerfully. It’s through prayer that we consciously acknowledge our need of the Holy Spirit, and it’s through prayer that we acknowledge the persistent presence of sin and sinful patterns in our lives. This is why I love the Prayer Book so much, because all this is right there. The invitation to confession reminds us saying, “Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us, in sundry places, to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should not dissemble nor cloak them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly Father, but confess them with an humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart...” And in the absolution the priest declares, “Wherefore let us beseech him to grant us true repentance, and his Holy Spirit, that those things may please him which we do at this present; and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy...”

We need to come before God daily, asking him to reveal our sins to us, and then asking him for the grace and power to overcome them. In Romans 12, St. Paul appeals us to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices. That means offering our lives up to him. It means daily climbing onto his altar. The problem with a living sacrifice is that it tends to climb back off the altar. Consciously come to God every morning and prayerfully place yourself on his altar, and ask him to keep you there with his loving hands. But don’t leave it there – be prayerful throughout the day too. With the help of the Spirit, cultivate a life in which you respond to situations, especially the ones that tempt you to sin, with prayer.

*Seventh* and last. We need to be accountable. There are a lot of reasons why God never calls us to be loner Christians and this is one of them. As we walk with God we need to do so holding the hands of our brothers and sisters. We need to establish relationships with each other in which we can not only exhort and encourage one another, but in which we can also be open and honest about our struggles with sin – even specific sins. One of the greatest barriers to true holiness often comes as a result of not having this openness. If we don’t know about each other’s struggles with sin, we can’t pray for each other and give the support we need. If we aren’t open about our sin, and I think this is maybe even more dangerous, we create a church culture in which everyone looks at everyone else and thinks, “Wow, I bet those other people don’t struggle with what I’m struggling with.” It’s an easy way to inadvertently cultivate a holier-than-thou group mentality in which those who do struggle with sin are afraid to bring it up for fear of being looked down up. It inadvertently establishes a culture in which some people are made out to be “super” Christians and others somehow feel like they’re lacking something,

when in fact, we’re all in the same boat, all struggling with sin.

Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to life him up!” (Eccles 4:9-10). This is part of why God had put us in fellowship with one another – so that we can provide mutual support as we follow Christ.

And that’s what it’s all about: following Christ. He’s redeemed us by the shedding of his precious blood and that should move us to follow him, conforming to his image and doing those things that please him, out of gratitude for what he has done. We were his enemies, yet he loved us so much that he was willing to die the death that we deserved so that we could be reconciled with the Father. We just need to remember that we don’t do it on our own, he’s given us his Word, he’s opened up for us a clear and direct channel to the Father as we pray, he’s given us his Spirit to empower us, and he’s placed us in fellowship with other believers, who are here to give us support and to pick us up when we fall. I want to close with St. Paul’s words to the Philippians: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me!” (Phil. 4:13).

Please pray with me: Gracious Father, we acknowledge that it is through your Son, Jesus Christ, that we come to you. We thank you that you have applied his perfect righteousness to us. Give us the grace to offer ourselves to you each day, as living sacrifices, and remind us that you are there beside us with your loving hands to keep us from falling off your altar. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

### Directions for Dealing with Sin

1. Apply the Gospel
2. Depend on the Holy Spirit
3. Recongnise your responsibility
4. Identify specific sins and sinful patterns
5. Memorise and apply appropriate Scripture
6. Cultivate the practice of prayer
7. Involve one or a few other believers with you