



## Pursuing Holiness: Putting Sin to Death

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May 24, 2009 – Ascension Sunday

Last Sunday evening we looked at how the New Testament makes it clear that while God gives us his Holy Spirit to enable us to pursue holiness, each of us still has the duty to put up a fight. Sitting around and praying for victory won't make us holy. Waiting for God to put an end to sin in our lives, won't make us holy. We have to take personal responsibility for the sin in our lives and put it to death – as St. Paul says in Roman 8:13: put to death the misdeeds of the body. He uses the same expression in Colossians 3:5: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature." If it's part of your fallen nature and sinful, *kill it* – destroy its strength and its vitality so that it can no longer have control over you.

Again, the key is that we have to do it, but we do it only by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. We can't do it on our own. John Owen wrote: "Mortification from self-strength, carried on by ways of self-invention, unto the end of a self-righteousness is in the soul and substance of all false religion." Putting sin to death is done with the strength of the Spirit and under his direction. Owen went on to say, "The Spirit alone is sufficient for this work. All ways and means without Him are useless. He is the great efficient. He is the One who gives life and strength to our efforts."

So we put sin to death by the Spirit, but it's also a work that we have to do. Without the Spirit, there's no mortification of sin, but without our working in his strength, there's also no mortification of sin. So the question we need to answer is this: How do we destroy the strength and vitality of sin in our lives?

First, *we need to have convictions*. We have to be convinced that a holy life is God's will for every Christian. We have to believe that the pursuit of holiness is worth the effort and pain required to mortify the misdeeds of the body. We

have to be convinced that "without holiness no one will see the Lord," as Hebrews says (Hebrews 12:14).

And we need to zero in on specifics with our convictions – we need to have convictions about specific areas of obedience. We do that as we expose ourselves to God's Word. Remember, we were born sinners and we've spent our lives exposed to the world and we've trained ourselves into sinful habits. Our values are not God's values. Even after we become Christians, those habits, influences, and values are still with us. We're still bombarded by the world around us. That's why St. Paul says in Romans 12:2: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remake you so that your whole attitude of mind is changed" (Philips).

It's only through God's Word that our minds are remoulded and our values renewed. Consider this: when God gave the Israelites instructions for their future kings, he said that a copy his law "shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes" (Deuteronomy 17:19 NASB). The king was to spend day and night immersed in God's Word. Why? So that he would learn to fear the Lord; so that he would learn the necessity of holiness; and so that he would know God's specific will in the situations of life.

Think about it. Jesus said, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me" (John 14:21). Obedience is the way to holiness, *but* it's only as we have God's commands that we can obey them. God's Word must be so strongly fixed in our minds that it becomes the dominant influence in our thoughts, our attitudes, and our actions. We need to be in his Word "day and night" like the king. But let me also add, that one of the most effective ways of letting Scripture influence our minds is by memorising it. Remember that David, the king, said, "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11).

If you want to memorise Scripture, you need to have a plan and you need to start with some well-chosen verses and then learn a practical system that you can keep up. In the past I've recommended *The Navigator's Topical Scripture Memory*

*System* as a great starting place. You can pick up a copy at any Christian bookstore or online. Years ago I figured out I needed to memorise Scripture, but I never had much success doing it haphazardly, but this system fixed that. I urge you to at least check it out. It worked for me and I know lots of others for whom it really worked.

But you have to remember that the point is to make practical application of what you memorise to daily life. It's as you make that application to life situations that you start to develop convictions. That's why when people come to me for counselling, one of the things I do most frequently is to give them some Scriptures to memorise *and apply* to the situations that cause them to struggle. When we do that, each instance of temptation, instead of being an opportunity for disobedience and defeat, become an opportunity to build conviction and to practice obedience as we remember what God's Word says about that sin.

That how we develop convictions: by bring God's Word to bear on specific situations that come up in our lives and by determining God's will in that situation from his Word.

Now there are lots of life issues and sins that are clearly and directly addressed in the Bible. It's a good thing to memorise verses that clearly spell out God's expectations about honesty, for example. You could memorise Ephesians 4:25, 28: "Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor... Let the thief no longer steal." God's will about abstinence and sexual immorality is clear from passages like 1 Thessalonians 4:3: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality." These are things that Scripture makes plain and obvious and we shouldn't have any difficulty developing convictions about God's will when it comes to them.

But what about issues that aren't specifically or directly addressed in the Bible? How do we learn God's will in these areas? Let me give you a little "Formula to Know Right from Wrong." You need to ask four questions that are based on three verses from 1 Corinthians:

1. "Everything is permissible for me—but not everything is beneficial" (1 Corinthians 6:12). *Question:* Is it

helpful—physically, spiritually, and mentally?

2. “Everything is permissible for me—but I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Corinthians 6:12).

*Question:* Does it bring me under its power?

3. “Therefore, if what I eat causes a brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall” (1 Corinthians 8:13).

*Question:* Does it hurt others?

4. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

*Question:* Does it glorify God?

The formula is simple, but powerful if you’re willing to use it. The questions can be very searching and convicting, but they have to be asked if we want to pursue holiness as a way of life.

Let’s apply it to some pretty common situations. Think about the TV shows you watch. Are they helpful—physically, spiritually, or mentally? In some cases that may be a plain “yes,” but for the ones where the honest answer is “no,” you should really consider turning them off. What about the question, “Does it bring me under its power?” We’re not talking only about chemically addictive things like drugs or alcohol. What about the TV? Are there shows that have so great a hold on you that you just can’t miss the next episode? If that’s true, the TV may have you under its power.

Jerry Bridges gives the example of a woman he knows who was a national junior tennis champion. She was a Christian, but her entire life was caught up in playing tennis. As she started to consider the claims of Christian discipleship seriously, she realised that tennis held a power over her that was keeping her from wholly following Christ. She made a decision to hang up her tennis racket to break that power. It wasn’t until years later, when the pull was totally gone, that she started playing tennis again just for recreational value and with freedom of conscience.

I think the illustration of the tennis player emphasises an important fact. The problem may not be the activity itself that is sinful, but instead our response to that activity. There’s nothing inherently wrong or sinful with tennis. In fact, under

the right conditions, it’s physically and mentally beneficial, but because this woman had made it an idol in her life, it had become sinful for her.

Next question: “Does it hurt others?”

Let’s go back to the champion tennis player. Suppose another Christian friend who liked tennis purely for recreational value had insisted to this woman that there’s nothing wrong with tennis. Technically, they’d be correct, but they’d be insisting on a view that would likely be harmful to the young woman’s spiritual life. Lots of activities, strictly speaking, are morally neutral, but because of some immoral associations in a person’s past may be detrimental to that person, at least for a time. Those of us who don’t have that immoral association need to be considerate of those who do, lest we cause them to slip back into an activity that is sinful for them.

How about those areas in which Christians have different convictions as to what God’s will is? St. Paul talks about this in Romans 14, where he takes up the problem of eating certain food. He gives us three general principles to guide us. First: we shouldn’t judge those whose convictions are different from ours (verses 1-4). Second: whatever our conviction are, they must be “to the Lord,” that means that they must be developed out of a sense of obedience to him (verses 5-8). And third: whatever convictions we have developed as “to the Lord,” we must be true to them (verse 23). I think it’s wise for us to be willing to listen to the opposing conviction our brother might have and be willing to admit that we might possibly be wrong – that we may need biblical correction – but that aside, we must be true to our convictions. If we go against our convictions, we are sinning, even though others may have perfect freedom in that particular thing.

The question we need to ask in a serious pursuit of holiness is this: “Am I willing to develop convictions from the Scriptures, and to live by these convictions?” This is often where the rub comes. We hesitate to face up to God’s standard of holiness in a specific area of life. We know that to do so will require obedience that we are unwilling to give.

And this leads us to the second quality we have to develop if we’re going to put to

death the misdeeds of the body. First we need convictions, but second, we need *commitment*. Jesus said, “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). We have to honestly face the question, “Am I willing to give up a certain practice or habit that is keeping me from holiness?” It’s at this point of commitment that most of us fail. We prefer to dally with sin, to try to play with it a little without getting too deeply involved.

We have a “just one more time syndrome. Or we want to push the limit. How close can I come to sinning, without actually sinning. I had a friend in high school who would sit on a big rock by the entrance of the school and watch all the girls get off the bus in the morning. One day he said, “The Bible says not to look at a woman twice, so I’m making the first look count.” He’d never pick up a Playboy, but he’d spend his lunch break in the library pouring over the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue. And he’d say, it’s okay, because they’re not naked. He kind of missed the point. God says not to lust after someone who isn’t your spouse. It really doesn’t matter how many looks you take or if the person you’re looking at is clothed or not – it’s a matter of what’s in the heart.

But that’s our problem: we don’t want to give up our sin. We compromise on it or we keep giving it chances. Just one more look, just one more desert before the diet, just one more episode of my favourite TV show before I give it up. What we’re doing is postponing the day of commitment, the day when we say to sin, “Enough!”

I know that what we eat isn’t necessarily a sin issue, but dieting does illustrate the point. Think of all the times Christmas and New Years have been coming and you know you shouldn’t eat all the goodies that are coming, but you postpone the dieting until the new year. How often does that kind of resolution last? For most people, not long. Postponing just allowed the old pattern a foothold to keep going.

King Solomon said that the eyes of a man are never satisfied (Proverbs 27:20). One more lustful look or one more piece of pie never satisfies. In fact it usually does the opposite. Every time we say “yes” to

temptation, we make it harder to say “no” the next time.

Remember that we’ve developed habit patterns of sin. We’ve developed the habit of shading facts a little bit to our advantage. We’ve developed the habit of giving in to the inertia that refuses to get up in the morning. These habits have to be broken, but they never will until we make a basic commitment to a life of holiness *without exceptions*.

St. John said, “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin” (1 John 2:1). The whole purpose of John’s epistle, he says, is that we *not* sin. Jerry Bridges writes about this saying:

“One day as I was studying this chapter I realized that my personal life’s objective regarding holiness was less than that of John’s. He was saying, in effect, “Make it you aim *not* to sin.” As I thought about this, I realized that deep within my heart my real aim was not to sin *very much*. I found it difficult to say, “Yes, Lord, from here on I will make it my aim not to sin.” I realized God was calling me that day to a deeper level of commitment to holiness than I had previously been willing to make.

“Can you imagine a soldier going into battle with the aim of “not getting hit very much”? The very suggestion is ridiculous. His aim is not to get hit at all! Yet if we have not made a commitment to holiness without exception, we are like a soldier going into battle with the aim of not getting hit very much. We can be sure if that is our aim, we will be hit—not with bullets, but with temptation over and over again.”

Jonathan Edwards was known for making resolutions. One of his was this, “Resolved, never to do anything which I would be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life.” Dare we make that kind of resolution? Are we willing to commit ourselves to the practice of holiness without exceptions? There’s no point in praying for victory over temptation if we’re not willing to make a commitment to say “no” to it.

Its only by learning to deny temptation that we will ever put to death the misdeeds of the body. It’s usually a long and slow – and often painful – process and we fail

frequently. Our old desires and our sinful habits are not easy to shake free of. To break them requires persistence, often in the face of little success. But this is the path we have to take. Again, Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me.”