

12 Keys to Spiritual Maturity:

Putting Sin to Death – #3

By **Derek Thomas**

Colossians 3:5-11:

Suppose a man to be a true believer, and yet finds in himself a powerful indwelling sin, leading him captive to the law of it, consuming his heart with trouble, perplexing his thoughts, weakening his soul as to duties of communion with God, disquieting him as to peace, and perhaps defiling his conscience and exposing him to hardening through the deceitfulness of sin, --what shall he do? what shall he take and insist on for the mortification of this sin, lust, distemper or corruption.

Thus wrote the puritan, John Owen, in the middle of the seventeenth century. His audience? Fifteen year-old boys then away from home at Oxford University (where Owen was Vice-Chancellor) and, so Owen thought, with hormones coming out of their ears! The volume in which these words can now be found (Volume 6 of his collected writings) has justly remained a classic treatment of sin, and I vividly recall reading for the first time over twenty-five years ago. I have found nothing else that quite faces down the evil of indwelling sin with as much vigor as Owen does. Too many books and sermons (of the latter I include my own, of course) only touch the surface of the problem, failing to become too specific for a host of reasons. But, conquering sinful habits (and *habits* are what they become) is a mark of spiritual maturity. There can be no growth without it. Dilly-dally here and the result will be something so fragile, so insipid that ruin is bound to be the eventual result.

We have already looked at the importance of a *desire* for spiritual maturity. It starts there. If we have no desire to grow, *we will not grow!* If the heart is wrong, everything else that proceeds from it will be wrong, as Jesus told the Pharisees again and again. In addition, we have seen how important it is to *think* properly and accurately as to what it means to become a Christian and be a Christian. For this we have looked at something Paul tells the Colossians in chapter three. There he insists that there are two things about ourselves we need to know and reckon with, if we are Christians: we died with Christ and have been raised with Christ. As a consequence, we are to seek those things which are above where Christ sits at God's right hand. We are to live with our heads *above* the clouds beholding something of the glory and majesty of Jesus. We are to know who we are and what is true of us. This is the positive aspect of sanctification's path that

Paul would have us utilize.

But there is also a negative side. There is a power to negative thinking, Norman Vincent Peal notwithstanding! Paul wants us to appreciate that unless we know what NOT to do, there is no use in telling us what we should do! There's a power in negative thinking as much as there is positive thinking. The key word here is *mortification*. It's an old word, long known and loved by readers of the King James Version of the Bible, but one which needs to be reintroduced into our vocabulary. It means putting sin to death. Every Christian must be engaged in the duty (yes, it is a duty) of putting sin to death. "Kill a sin, or a part of a sin every day" was Owen's advice. "Kill sin, or it will kill you," he added, suggesting as he did so something of the seriousness of the issue. What is it that Paul tells us here in Colossians 3 that we need to do? Three things:

1. He exposes the reality of what we are
2. He identifies for us in detail what needs to be dealt with
3. Practical indications as to how we go about this

1. He exposes the reality of what we are.

There is a general point that needs to be made if we are going to be serious about dealing with indwelling sin. We need to say, "I need to face up to the reality of ongoing sin." We have been delivered from sin's reign but not we have as yet not been freed from the presence of sin. A constant struggle ensues within us as the flesh lusts wages war) with the soul. There is a spiritual opposition that is war-like taking place in the innermost part of our beings. There is a need, therefore, to look sin (personal and particular sin) in the eye.

We rush on in reading these verses, don't we. We note the "up close and personal" way Paul lists two sets of five sins, and we find ourselves asking what they mean. But we need to stop and reflect for a moment on the appropriateness of all this talk about sin. J. C. Ryle's justly famous volume, *Holiness*, begins with a statement to this effect: "He would make great strides in holiness must first consider the greatness of sin." Ryle, writing at the end of nineteenth century was merely reflecting what Anselm of Canterbury had written in the early middle-ages. Attempting to answer the question, Why did God become man (*Cur Deus Homo*), Anselm has a famous line put to one character (aptly called *Boso*) which goes like this: *Nondum considerasti quantum ponderis sit peccatum*. Roughly translated that means, "You have not yet considered the gravity of sin." Boso's inability to see the necessity for the Lord Jesus Christ to become incarnate in order to save His people lay in his reluctance to place sufficient emphasis upon our *need* of salvation. Our problem is sin. It has been so since the Garden of Eden; and it remains so to this day.

What Anselm, Owen, and Ryle are saying is that we need to allow our hearts to

be exposed by God's Holy Spirit to reveal the extent of sin's ravages upon us. It is, in effect, something like what happens whenever a machine scans the inner organs and tissues of our bodies. It can show up not only what is healthy, but what is cancerous and unwanted. It can see what the outer eye cannot.

When you get bitten by a snake, one of the best things you can do is to bring its body with you (you will need to kill it first!) so that the poison can be recognized, and the relevant antidote prescribed. It is the same with sin. Unless we can identify (name) the poisons we will not know what the remedy will be. It is not enough to be vague and general about our sins. Sins have names, and we will do well to learn what they are. It will be a point of progress whenever we can identify what those sins are that prevail in our lives. And before we can do that, we will need to acknowledge that there is the need to do it. Sin has got a hold of us in ways that we sometimes refuse to acknowledge. We may be in some kind of denial about it. The point of inception is to face sin down.

Robert Murray McCheyne, the nineteenth century Scottish Presbyterian minister whose life was extinguished before he reached thirty, wrote in his posthumously published *Diary*: "I have begun to realize that the seeds of every known sin still linger in my heart." This is a point of *advance*. Knowing this means that our eyes have been opened. Just like when a doctor diagnoses what's wrong and we come to appreciate the real need that exists. Imagine a doctor saying to you: "Yes, there's something going on inside you, but we will not worry about that! Let's look on the bright side, shall we. Isn't it a beautiful day!" What would you think of that? Even if that satisfied your need for denial in the short term, I doubt that you would ever visit that doctor again! Most of us, when things get serious, want to know the truth, even if it hurts. And hurt it will, make no mistake about that.

2. He identifies for us in detail what needs to be dealt with.

There is a translation issue with our text that needs to be looked at briefly. The *New American Standard Version* renders verse 5 this way: "Consider the members of your earthly body as dead to..." That sounds like something Paul says in Romans 6. There is a time to "reckon ourselves to be dead to sin." In Christ, the great change has already taken place. But it is doubtful if that is Paul's intention here. Hence the *New International Version* renders it this way: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature". This is better, but it, too, disguises rather than clarifies what Paul intends here. Let me go back to *King James Version* for a minute: "Put to death, therefore *your members which are on the earth*". Probably the *NIV* translates it that way lest we think that Paul is suggesting some sort of self-mutilation. The Colossians *were* about to make that very mistake. But we do need to appreciate that the way sin operates in our lives is via the *members* of our body!

Your members! Christians need a *physical* holiness. New Testament holiness transforms what we do with our bodies. It has eyes and hands and feet.

In fact, sin in the Christian life has the potency to destroy the individual as well as others.

The first list of five sins moves from external acts to internal motivations. It is staggering to think that the first thing Paul mentions is *sexual immorality*. The word he uses covers all forms of prostitution, every illegitimate sexual deviance, both heterosexual and homosexual or even bestial. He links with it the attitude of the heart: *impurity*. By this he means us to consider that what the mind will linger on in secret the body will do externally. Then comes *lust*, that is, passions that come and master us, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. *Desire* is the next word by which he means something which is out of control. And he ends the list by suggesting that all sexual deviance is a form of *greed*, which is a form of *idolatry*. These sins are selfish at their heart. They show, as Calvin wrote in his 1559 edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: "Man's mind is a perpetual factory of idols." You have lost your mind when you think that life is about satisfying what brings pleasure to you, and you alone! You have made yourself like God when you think that way. You are bowing down to the god of *self*.

Paul's day was so remarkably like our own. It was day when sexual immorality abounded. Homosexuality was as prevalent then as it is now. Paul's words here seem particularly pertinent for us today. Holiness, true holiness, demands total sexual purity. Sin has distorted what God intended to be a beautiful thing.

Perhaps this touches us very personally! Nobody else knows about it. Maybe, that's just as well. It would certainly make this sanctuary a very ugly place if sexual sins were to be recited. Affairs, business trips, magazines, internet pornography, the list of possible areas that affect us endless.

Put these sins to death! It will destroy you if you don't. "Because of these things the wrath of God is coming," Paul adds. Frightening, isn't it! Do you notice that Paul has several motives for ethical living and not just positive ones! In verses 1-4 the motive was positive. It is because of who we are, of what we have become in Christ. We have died and have been raised with Christ. Our lives are hidden with Christ in God. But here, the motive is altogether negative. The wrath of God is coming on those who do not repent. Turn or burn, is what Paul is suggesting, blunt and harsh as that may sound.

Sin also has a potential to destroy others. In verse 8, in what is another list of five sins, Paul moves from internal emotions to external actions, doing the opposite (or mirror image) of what he had done in verses 5-7. The five sins mentioned are: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. He begins with *anger*: that spirit of being opposed in a hostile way to things that God desires for our lives. There is a righteous anger that is perfectly proper and in accord with

the highest reaches of holiness. But that is not what Paul has in mind here. To understand what he means he adds, *rage!* We hear of road rage, and the rage of a husband towards his wife. A seething cauldron of rage. (One commentator suggests it can be translated as "exasperation"). We sometimes regard exasperation as a virtue! We say, "I don't suffer fools gladly." Flying off the handle. Then comes *malice*, a refusal to forgive, and allied to cynicism. The comes *slander*: defaming someone's character or character assassination. It would be wonderful to say the church was free from this kind of thing, but it is not. Paul is calling Christians to be different from the world. Not to wag their tongues. If you cannot think of something good to say about other people's character, then say nothing at all!

Jonathan Edwards had a daughter with an ungovernable temper. A young man asked Edwards if he could marry her. "No!" he replied. Upon asking for the reason, Edwards went on: "Because she is not worthy of you!" adding, "the grace of God can live with some people with whom no one else can live!"

Sex and speech, these are the features of life that are most out of control. You will never grow until you bring the surgeon's knife of God's Word at these points in your life. Maybe you are where Augustine was, praying: "Give me chastity, but not yet!" And God is saying to you: I want it, *now!*

But there is one more thing that Paul seems eager to say. Sin cannot always be dealt with privately. In verse 9 he urges the Colossians not to lie. He is not simply calling for truthfulness, but rather honesty and accountability. Don't pretend, he seems to be saying. If I am going to be able to function in this fellowship, then I had better stop pretending that I am better than I am. We need to be able to say to each other: "I need your help, counsel, wisdom. I am struggling to Zion, rather than marching to it."

The way of pretence is a way that leads to failure in fellowship and Christian living.

3. Practical indications as to how we go about this.

There are two verbs which Paul employs in the passage that need to be engraved upon our hearts: "put to death" (v.5) and "rid yourselves" (v.8). They bring to mind the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount that urge us to pluck out right eyes and sever right hands.

"Let not that Christian think that he makes any progress in true holiness who is not prepared to walk over the bellies of his lusts" wrote Owen in his uncompromising way.

It may sound to you like legalism. That is a convenient word that some Christians

employ to shirk the task of painful self-examination and change. They use this when some application sounds as though it will hurt. But it is not legalism to want to be as holy as Jesus. It is the only sensible thing to desire. Anything less is compromise and unworthy.

Without getting too technical, the tense of the verb (aorist imperative) has in mind the whole action. Paul is concerned not simply with the resolve to mortify sin, but the desire to be rid of it altogether. It is as if he was saying: "Lay your hands on this sin's throat and don't release the pressure until it stops breathing."

What will that mean? It will begin with an honest owning up to the gravity of our condition. It will mean facing sin down and pursuing its destruction at whatever cost to ourselves. It will mean going before the Lord and saying: "Lord, I have this besetting sin. And I am so sorry. I fly off the handle, or I trash people, or I gossip all the time. I rejoice when others fall because it makes me feel better about myself." It will mean changing habits and lifestyle, determined that our members be used for that which is holy and not that which is pandering to self-gratification at the expense of God's Word and God's ways.

Will you pursue this task? Without it, we will always be less than what God wants us to be.

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