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Putting Sin to Death

PUT TO DEATH, THEREFORE,
WHATEVER BELONGS TO
YOUR EARTHLY NATURE:
SEXUAL IMMORALITY,
IMPURITY, LUST, EVIL DESIRES,
AND GREED, WHICH IS
IDOLATRY.

Colossians 3:5

The New Testament leaves no doubt that holiness is our responsibility. If we are to pursue holiness, we must take some decisive action. I once discussed a particular sin problem with a person who said, "I've been praying that God would motivate me to stop." Motivate him to stop? What this person was saying in effect was that God had not done enough. It is so easy to ask God to do something more because that postpones facing up to our own responsibility.

The action we are to take is to put to death the misdeeds of the body (Romans 8:13). Paul uses the same expression in another book: "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature" (Colossians 3:5). What does the expression *put to death* mean? The *King James Version* uses the term

mortify. According to the dictionary, mortify means "to destroy the strength, vitality, or functioning of; to subdue or deaden."¹ To put to death the misdeeds of the body, then, is to destroy the strength and vitality of sin as it tries to reign in our bodies.

It must be clear to us that mortification, though it is something we do, cannot be carried out in our own strength. Well did the Puritan John Owen say, "Mortification from a self-strength, carried on by ways of self-invention, unto the end of a self-righteousness is the soul and substance of all false religion."² Mortification must be done by the strength and under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Owen says further, "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."³

But though mortification must be done by the strength and under the direction of the Holy Spirit, it is nevertheless a work which we must do. Without the Holy Spirit's strength there will be no mortification, but without our working in His strength there will also be no mortification.

The crucial question then is, "How do we destroy the strength and vitality of sin?" If we are to work at this difficult task, we must first have *conviction*. We must be persuaded that a holy life of God's will for every Christian is important. We must believe that the pursuit of holiness is worth the effort and pain required to mortify the misdeeds of the body. We must be convinced that "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14).

Not only must we develop conviction for living a holy life in general, but we must also develop convictions in specific areas of obedience.

These convictions are developed through exposure to the Word of God. Our minds have far too long been accustomed to the world's values. Even after we become Christians, the world around us constantly seeks to conform us to its value system. We are bombarded on every hand by temptations to indulge our sinful natures. That is why Paul said, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remake you so that your whole attitude of mind is changed" (Romans 12:2, PH).

Only through God's Word are our minds remolded and our values renewed. When giving instructions for future kings of Israel, God said that a copy of 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). The king was to read God's law all the days of his life to learn to fear the Lord. In that way he could learn the necessity of holiness, and how he might know God's specific will in various situations.

Jesus said, "Whoever has My commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves Me" (John 14:21). Obedience is the pathway to holiness, but it is only as we *have* His 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. One of

the most effective ways of influencing our minds is through memorizing Scripture. David said, "Thy word I have treasured in my heart that I may not sin against Thee" (Psalm 119:11).

To memorize Scripture effectively, you must have a plan. The plan should include a selection of well-chosen verses, a practical system for learning those verses, a systematic means of reviewing them to keep them fresh in your memory, and simple rules for continuing Scripture memory on your own.

I know from personal experience how important such a plan is. I instinctively realized the importance of God's Word for my life as a young Christian at college, but I did not know what to do about it. I memorized a few verses in a spasmodic and haphazard fashion, but they were of little profit to me. Then one day I was introduced to *The Navigators Topical Memory System*, and began a plan of regular Scripture memorization. Twenty-eight years later, I am still profiting from this simple but effective plan for hiding God's Word in my heart.⁴

Of course, the goal of memorization is application of the Scripture to one's daily life. It is through the application of Scripture to specific life situations that we develop the kind of conviction to see us through the temptations that trip us up so easily.

A number of years ago my wife and I lived in Kansas City, Missouri, while I worked across the river in Kansas City, Kansas. As an employee working in Kansas, I was subject to Kansas state

income tax, but as a resident of Missouri I did not have to pay the tax till the end of the year. We moved to Colorado in July of one year, and at the end of the year I realized that I owed Kansas for seven months of income tax. My first thought was to forget it; after all, the amount was fairly small and they wouldn't come all the way to Colorado to collect. But then the Holy Spirit brought to my mind a verse I had previously memorized, "Give everyone what you owe him; if you owe taxes, pay taxes" (Romans 13:7). God brought conviction to my heart that I must pay the State of Kansas the tax I owed out of obedience to God. God gave *conviction* that day regarding the payment of taxes, and this conviction has influenced and governed my actions ever since.

This is the way we develop conviction — by bringing God's Word to bear on specific situations that arise in our lives and determining God's will in that situation from the Word.

Many issues of life are clearly addressed in the Bible, and we would do well to memorize verses that speak to those issues. For example, God's will concerning honesty is plainly spelled out: "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor. . . . He who has been stealing must steal no longer" (Ephesians 4:25,28). His will concerning abstinence from sexual immorality also is described clearly: "It is God's will that you should be holy; that you should avoid sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). These are clearly stated issues where we should have no difficulty developing convictions as to God's will if

we are willing to obey His Word.

But what about issues that are not specifically mentioned in the Scriptures — how do we determine God's will and develop conviction in those areas?

Years ago a friend gave me what he called his "Formula: How to Know Right from Wrong." The formula asks four questions based on three verses in 1 Corinthians:

- "Everything is permissible for me' — but not everything is beneficial" (1 Corinthians 6:12). *Question 1:* Is it helpful — physically, spiritually, and mentally?

- "Everything is permissible for me' — but I will not be mastered by anything" (1 Corinthians 6:12). *Question 2:* Does it bring me under its power?

- "Therefore, if what I eat causes my 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 3:* Does it hurt others?

- "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). *Question 4:* Does it glorify God?

As simple as this formula may appear, it is powerful in developing conviction — if we are willing to use it. These questions can get rather searching. But they must be asked if we are to pursue holiness as a total way of life.

Let's apply these principles to some typical situations. Take the television programs you watch, for example. Are they helpful — physically, spiritually, or mentally? For some programs the answer may be yes, but for those to which you must honestly answer no, you should consider not viewing them.

What about the question, "Does it bring me under its power?" You may instantly apply that question to such habits as drinking, taking drugs, or smoking, and feel it doesn't apply to you. But again, what about the television set? Have certain programs "grabbed" you so that you just cannot miss them? If so, they have brought you under their power. For another example, I know a Christian woman who as a teenager was a national junior tennis champion. She was so caught up in tennis that it was her whole life, even though she was a Christian. When she began to consider the claims of Christian discipleship seriously, she realized tennis held a certain power over her which was keeping her from wholly following Christ. She then made a decision to hang up her tennis racket to break that power. Not till a number of years later, when the pull was totally gone, did she begin to play tennis again solely for recreational value, and with freedom of conscience.

This illustration of the tennis player emphasizes an important fact. It may not be the activity itself that determines whether something is sinful for us, but rather our response to that activity. Certainly the game of tennis is morally neutral and, under the right conditions, physically beneficial.

But because this woman had made it an idol in her life, it had become sinful for her.

Let's examine the next question, "Does it hurt others?" with this same story of my tennis-playing friend. Suppose another Christian who enjoyed playing tennis purely for recreational value had insisted to this woman that there's nothing wrong with tennis. Technically that person would be correct, but he would be insisting on a view that would likely be harmful to the young woman's spiritual life. Many 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 do not have that immoral association must be considerate of these people lest we cause them to slip back into an activity that is sinful for them.

But what about those areas in which Christians differ in their convictions as to God's will? Paul speaks to this question in Romans 14, where he takes up the problem of eating certain food. He lays down three general principles to guide us. The first is that we should not judge those whose convictions are different from ours (verses 1-4). The second principle is that whatever our convictions are, they must be "to the Lord," that is, developed out of a sense of obedience to Him (verses 5-8). The third principle is that whatever convictions we have developed as "to the Lord," we must be true to them (verse 23). If we go against our convictions, we are sinning, even though others may have perfect freedom in that particular thing.

For several years I struggled with the question

of how my family and I should observe Sunday as the Lord's Day. Early in my Christian life I was taught that Sunday was a sacred day and that its activities should be governed accordingly. I soon came to realize, however, that there is genuine disagreement among sincere Christians as to how Sunday is to be observed. Applying the principles of Romans 14 to this question, then, I must first of all not judge those who observe Sunday differently than I do. Second, whatever my own convictions, they must be out of a sincere response of obedience to how God is leading *me*. And then, having developed my own convictions, I must be careful not to violate them, regardless of what other Christians may do.

The question we must 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.

This leads us to the second quality we must develop if we are to put to death the misdeeds of the body. That quality is *commitment*. Jesus said, "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:33). We must honestly face the question, "Am I willing to give up a certain practice or habit that is keeping me from holiness?" It is 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 the 'just one more time' syndrome. We will take just one more lustful look, eat just one more rich dessert before starting our diet, watch just one more television program before sitting down to our Bible study. In all of this we are postponing the day of commitment, the day when we say to sin, "Enough!"

I well recall when God spoke to me about indulging my sweet tooth. It wasn't that I was overweight; it was just that I couldn't resist any dessert that came along. I was the one who always went back for seconds at the church pie socials! Then one morning right in the middle of the Christmas festivities, when all the fudge and cookies and fruitcake were so plentiful, God spoke to my heart about this problem. My initial response was, "Lord, wait till after Christmas and I will deal with it." I wasn't willing that day to make a commitment.

Solomon tells us that the eyes of man are never satisfied (Proverbs 27:20). One more lustful look or one more piece of pie never satisfies. In fact, quite the opposite takes place. Every time we say yes to temptation, we make it harder to say no the next time.

We must recognize that we have developed habit patterns of sin. We have developed the habit of shading the facts a little bit when it is to our advantage. We have developed the habit of giving in to the inertia that refuses to let us get up in the morning. These habits must be broken, but they never will till we make a basic commitment to a life of holiness without exceptions.

The Apostle 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 letter, he says, is that we *not* sin. 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 your 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, one of the great preachers of early American history, used to make resolutions. One of his was, "Resolved, never to do anything which I would be afraid to do if it were the last hour of my life."³ Dare we 20th-century Christians make such a resolution? Are we willing to commit ourselves to the practice of holiness without exceptions? There is no point in praying for victory over temptation if we are not willing to make a commitment to say no to it.

It is only by learning to deny temptation that

we will ever put to death the misdeeds of the body. Learning this is usually a slow and painful process, fraught with much failure. Our old desires and our sinful habits are not easily dislodged. To break them requires persistence, often in the face of little success. But this is the path we must tread, painful though it may be.

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- NOTES: 1. By permission. From *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* © 1977 by G.&C. Merriam Co., Publishers of the Merriam-Webster Dictionaries, page 750.
2. John Owen, *Temptation and Sin*, page 7.
 3. Owen, *Temptation and Sin*, page 16. Author's paraphrase.
 4. The Navigators *Topical Memory System* may be obtained from your local Christian bookstore.
 5. *Jonathan Edwards — Representative Selections, with Introduction, Bibliography, and Notes*, Clarence H. Faust and Thomas H. Johnson, editors (revised edition, New York: Hill and Wang, 1962), page 38.