

I Was Just Wondering...How Do I Deal with Sin?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 8:1-13, Ephesians 4:17-24

So today's "I was Just Wondering" question is, How Do I Deal with Sin? How do I keep from being hardened by sin? This is such a good and central question, and let me begin answering it by saying, if you and I want to be good at fighting sin, if we want to be people who stay in God's life giving ways, and stay away from actions and attitudes that hurt ourselves and others, we've got to understand the two different ways the Bible talks about sin.

Do you know the two different ways the Bible talks about sin? You young people, you less-young people, do you know the two ways the Bible talks about sin? Because if you want to defeat the enemy, you've got to understand the enemy. The two different ways the Bible talks about sin, these two different ways of talking about sin show up in the two passages I'll be meditating on this morning, Ephesians 4 which Kristy read earlier and Romans 8 which I read a moment ago.

Let's start with the first way the Bible talks about sin, which is also probably the default way most people think about sin. Often, the Bible talks about sin as individual acts of wrongdoing. A sin is an individual thought or action that goes against God's will. So God says, 'do not lie,' and then I lie to my parents about where I was Friday night. That's a sin. That's an individual act of wrongdoing. God says, 'do not gossip,' and you participate in a nasty conversation that tears down a classmate, that's a sin; an individual act of wrongdoing. That's the primary sense of sin behind the ten commandments. When the commandments say, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not commit adultery, it's warning us against individual acts of wrongdoing. That's also the primary sense of Ephesians 4:17-24. In the passage Kristy read, Paul warns generally about committing these individual acts of wrongdoing, and then in the rest of chapter 4 he goes on to warn against specific sins: foul language, excessive anger, stealing, etc.

How do we fight against these kinds of sin? Paul also suggests that the key to this has to do with sensitivity. Verse 19: when sin gets the better of people, they have lost all sensitivity and have given themselves over to sensuality.

Paul's language there makes me think of leprosy. It makes me think of what people used to call leprosy, but now is called Hansen's disease. Leprosy is a horrible disease because it leads to the loss of body parts. Lepers would lose fingers and toes and hands and feet. They would get horrible sores on their bodies. Until relatively recently, people didn't understand why. Now we know that lepers' bodies become disfigured because they've lost all sensitivity. Literally, lepers have lost the ability to feel pain. You may not like feeling pain, but your ability to feel pain is a great gift. If you were washing dishes and you put your hand into a sudsy sink and felt your hand jabbed by a sharp knife, what do you do? You pull your hand back and check it. If it's cut, you treat it. A person with Hansen's disease reaches in and grips the knife without flinching and ends up cutting themselves severely. They do this over and over again until their hands and feet are worn away by cuts and infections and broken bones.

Something similar can happen to us in the area of our moral life. We all have a moral nervous system. We sometimes call that our conscience. It's a sense we have about what is right and what is wrong. When it's working properly that moral sense warns us against sin. You don't shoplift from the store even when you know nobody is looking. Why? Because it doesn't feel right. You would feel terrible if you did that. You would feel guilty. That's a sign that your moral nervous system is working.

Because sin is in the world and because sin is in us from the moment we are born, our moral nervous system is damaged. It's not completely busted! We are not totally numb. Just about every human being has some sense of right and wrong. But it's definitely not functioning at a hundred percent. Paul's words here tell us that, depending on the choices we make, we can make our moral nervous system either more sensitive, or less sensitive. We can do things to make our conscience more attuned to right and wrong, or we can do things that

make us more and more numb. We can heighten our moral sensitivity, or we can abandon all sensitivity and give ourselves over to sensuality; a state where we just want what we want without any moral discernment.

Paul says that as Christians, with the Holy Spirit's help, we can improve our moral nervous system. We can improve our moral sensitivity so that we love what God loves, and want what God wants. In our passage Paul suggests two ways to do that: education and habits. Paul suggests that you can educate your moral nervous system. The Bible does this sort of education all over the place. The Ten Commandments educate our conscience. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus educates our conscience. Paul educates our moral nervous system when he lists the fruit of the Spirit. All these passages are teaching us right from wrong. They are making you more morally sensitive, so that you lean towards compassion and gentleness, and develop an aversion to rage and deception.

This kind of moral education is really important. I think many of you may have a kind of general sense that you know right from wrong. You might think, 'I know the 10 Commandments, I'm good.' But when you get out there in the world, at school, in the workplace, things can get murky. So, for example, one of your college friends says, "Hey, I believe in freedom! I think people should be able to do whatever they want so long as it doesn't hurt anyone else." Can you agree with that statement? Will that rule produce a godly life? Why or why not? Or what about if someone says, "I think it's really important to stay angry. None of the injustices of history have ever been addressed without angry people who were willing to take forceful action. You can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs." Do you know how to respond to those? Can you accept these statements as a Christian? Moral reasoning is hard. It takes education. It takes sensitivity. So in the Old Testament Law and in the teachings of Jesus and in passages like this from Paul, the Holy Spirit develops our moral sense through teaching.

But Paul doesn't just want you to know the difference between right and wrong in your mind; he wants you to know it in your body. He wants you to develop moral habits. In verse 22 Paul says, put off the old self. In verse 24 Paul says put on the new self. This is a kind of instruction Paul has in other places. In Colossians 3 Paul says take off the old self and its practices and clothe yourself in compassion, kindness, humility and gentleness. When you do this putting on and putting off over and over again, you are developing moral habits, a rhythm to your moral life.

Some habits are putting off habits. You don't look at your phone Sunday until after 5 pm so that you have a social media Sabbath. You voluntarily put a filter on your computer and your phone as a way to reduce the temptation to look at porn. When your friends say, hey let's go do this, you start to say no, because you don't like who you become in that place with those people. Some of these habits are putting on habits. You always make a double meal on Thursday night and put half of it in the freezer so that you can have a meal to share with someone when there is a need. You don't watch TV on Wednesday night; instead you devote it to reading something edifying. You decide to volunteer at the shelter on the 3rd Monday of the month, because you know you're not supposed to give to the panhandlers, but you want to do something for those folk.

Combine these habits and moral education and you have a program for improving your moral sensitivity, improving your moral nervous system. And that will help you avoid the first kind of sin. That will help you combat these individual acts of wrongdoing.

But that program is not nearly so helpful in combatting the second type of sin. There is another way the Bible talks about sin. It's much less understood. Everyone knows the sense of sin as an individual act of wrongdoing; fewer people understand this second sense. I would say that this sense of sin is more important, more foundational. And the way we fight this sin is very different.

This second way of talking about sin is the way Paul talks about it in Romans 8. Romans 8 does not talk about sin as individual acts of wrongdoing. In Romans 8, sin is much more than bad things people do. In Romans 8 sin is a dark force, an evil presence that menaces you and enslaves you. Verse 2, the Holy Spirit sets you free from the law of sin and death. Sin held you captive and you needed to be set free. Verse 8, sin is a realm that can govern you, that holds you captive, and when a person is in that realm you cannot keep God's law and you cannot please him. Paul's way of talking about being enslaved by sin is to say that you are in the realm of the flesh. When Paul talks about being in the flesh, he's not talking about you having a body; what Paul means is that in a place that is deeper than your habits, in a place that is deeper than your mind, sin takes you captive.

This second sense of sin is not defeated by a person who practices good moral habits; this second sense of sin is defeated by Jesus coming to the world and destroying death's power through his death and resurrection. "For what the law was powerless to do, because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his son in the likeness of human flesh to be a sin offering. He thereby condemned sin in the flesh." You can hear how different this sin talk is. It's not individual acts. It's a malignant power.

This deeper and darker sense of sin is all through the Bible. How well do you remember the story of Cain and Abel? Cain is bitter and brooding because his offering wasn't accepted while Abel's was. He's jealous. So God comes to Cain and do you remember what he says? "Watch out. Sin is crouching at your door and it desires to have you." Sin isn't just an act; it's an animal that wants to devour you. That's the second sense of sin.

I spent some time reading and listening to testimonies of porn addicts this week. Why did I do that? Well, because porn addiction is a pretty good example of how the two kinds of sin function in the lives of people. Most of these porn addicts testified that they started young. 9 years old. 10 years old. I heard a testimony from a young girl who said she started at 6. Regardless of when they started all the stories had a similar trajectory. The addicts started with occasional use of porn, but then things changed. They went deeper and started looking at more graphic images and they started to do it more often. And they got to a point where they wanted to stop by they couldn't. It enslaved them. A young woman named Liz who was a student at a local college in Grand Rapids talked about lying in bed and feeling like something was clawing at her. Another man described it as a beast or a dragon that he was fighting.

Can you hear how both kinds of sins are present in these stories? When they first started to look at porn they were committing individual acts of wrongdoing, which was bad enough. But soon they found themselves in the grip of something far bigger and darker; they were in the claws of a beast, something stronger than them; something that they simply could not overcome.

Now this side of sin sounds terrifying, and it is terrifying. Heaven knows, we should all have a healthy respect for the power of sin in the world. But let me ask you this, is Romans 8 a dark warning? Is Romans 8 a fearful caution about the evil one and his power. No! It's the opposite. It's a joyful proclamation of the gospel. It's one of the brightest and most hopeful gospel proclamations around. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus for through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit which gives life has set us free from the law of sin and death!" Jesus has broken death's hold on you! You are not in sin's realm; you are in his realm! You are his child!

Do you see how fighting this kind of sin is a completely different undertaking? You don't fight this through more knowledge and better habits, you fight this through worship. You fight this power by surrendering yourself to the saving power of Christ. If you read the testimonies of the addicts above, that's how they were finally liberated from their misery. It began with helpless surrender. It began with them giving themselves over to God and then God breaking the power of the sin. Then on top of all that came the habits and the education. The beast needed to be defeated by Christ before you could do the moral education project.

So young people, the most important thing you need to know in your fight against sin is not a rule or a habit, it is that you are a broken sinner saved by the amazing grace of Jesus. So even though sin will menace you and sometimes reduce you to tears, it cannot have you, because you belong to Jesus, you've been washed in his blood, and as Paul says in his transcendent end to this chapter. "Neither life nor death, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus your Lord." ©Rev. Peter Jonker