

## How to Put Sin to Death

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### Introduction

What helps us take up this battle with sin to the death? Note how my question is phrased. It is a very intense matter. We have to fight battles. There are casualties. Death will occur. In this light, here are some helps for the battle. Let us discuss some helps and "how tos" under the title of "How to Put Sin to Death."

1A. We need to ponder the consequence of sin, which is death.

Contemplating our sinfulness and imminent death sets a sober tone. It is also very realistic. Here is a bottom line that should instill within us a serious, earnest, and diligent spirit: if you live according to the flesh, you will die (Rom. 8:13). Whenever we sin, we step onto the pathway that leads to one end only, death.

The death referred to is eternal death under the wrath and anger of God. In Romans 2, Paul comments on the storing up of wrath for the day of God's wrath (v. 5; it is part of the righteousness that is set in relief by our sinfulness). It involves trouble and distress that is fearfully eternal, especially in contrast to eternal life (vs. 7-9; cf. Matt. 25:46). I know of no more sobering and difficult theme in Scripture than the theme of the eternal punishment of sinners, sinners no different from you and me, who are no more worthy of judgment than each of us is.

One thing that will help us do battle with sin is to consider that when we sin we do that which merits eternal punishment, wrath, anger, trouble, and distress. This is how Jesus instructs us regarding temptation when He spoke graphically about cutting off or gouging out members of your body if your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away-this is better than losing your whole body in hell(Matt. 5:29-30). The Lord pictures temptation as the tempting eye or the tempting hand. What should you do? Cut it off and cast it aside because by this means you preserve your whole body from hell. "Hell" is a very dark term even with the figurative references to fire: it is a place of darkness (Matt. 25:30) where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 13:50).

A sober look at the entailments of sin and the ultimate entailment, eternal punishment, will cause us to put sin on the chopping block, to put it to death, to set it aside, to put it off like an old, dirty, and worthless garment.

One more twist can be given to this point. It has to do with a correct view of sin and death in light of the death of Christ. Consider the hymn that says, "Ye who think of sin but lightly nor suppose the evil great, here may view its nature rightly, here its guilt may estimate. Mark the sacrifice appointed, see who bears the awful load, tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed, Son of Man and Son of God" (*Trinity Hymnal*, 192, v. 3). When think that our sins, the sins we do battle with, led to the unthinkable consequence of the death of Christ, then its luster fades and its evil darkens. He gave His life; He suffered, to protect me from these sins. I can surely give chase and do battle.

## 2A. We need to identify the enemy, which is sin

I tend to revert repeatedly to the warfare analogy because of the call to put sin to death in your members. We are to put the actions of the flesh to death (again body is used here synonymously with flesh, so the neutral "acts" can be translated "misdeeds" that we perform as flesh and blood human beings, hence, "put to death the misdeeds that manifest themselves in the wholeness of our beings and thus in our bodies.").

Therefore, we need to identify the misdeeds of the body. Some of the lists given in Scripture help, though they are not exhaustive (Rom. 1:28-32, note what is associated with murder: envy, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, God-hating, arrogance, disobedience to parents, cf. Gal. 5:19-20; Col. 3:5-11).

One way to do battle with sin in our lives is to identify the enemy by comparing our conduct in various contexts and relationships (work, home, to boss, to spouse, etc) with these catalogues of sin. We have to do this with a spirit and intent in mind, not just the letter (as the Pharisees who lowered the standard to prove their self-righteousness).

Why should we be confident in facing all these possible failures and sins in ourselves? It is because we have righteousness that is not our own; it is God's, and given to us as our own (Rom. 8:10). Because of the righteousness of Christ, we have the life giving Spirit, and it is to Him that we have this obligation to identify the misdeeds of the flesh so we can do careful surgery. It is not a sickle in the garden but the surgeon's knife or sword, the word of God, which we use to fight sin to its death. Actually, it is "fight *sins* to their death." One after another, they attack in various waves. There are different ranks of anger. For example, one may curb his anger at work but let loose at home (likewise with envy, etc.). Sins are sneaky, subtle, and deceptive. We need clear identification that avoids self-justification and rationalization. There is a healthy self-criticism for us to perform in light of the biblical catalogues of sin.

We all have difficulty with being criticized by others and with self-criticism as well. It is truly hard to be true "to thine own self." In this connection, I think of a saying I once heard: we all know what man is when we look at others, but when we look at ourselves man is something that no one knows."

I know of people who separate *doctrinal error* from sin as if there is no ethical dimension to our knowledge. But ignorance is itself a sin (cf. sins of ignorance in Lev. 4-5) and it is wrong for us to accept error as if it were truth. Furthermore, it is not owning responsibility if we divert attention to our finiteness. That is just excuse making, not owning up to our sins, and not facing ourselves squarely and self-critically.

Granted, there are many different views on all biblical subjects (and we do make mistakes in our finitude). We can wonder who has the truth. This is difficult to be sure, but it is ethically right to believe the truth and ethically wrong to believe error as truth. This fact calls us from a slumber of sloth regarding differences among Christians. We cannot just sit back and say, "Well, there are so many views; everyone can simply hold what they want." That is a sinful posture to begin with. We may not say it but we convey the idea that truth does not really matter. Instead, we have to say to ourselves that our pursuit of truth and our coming to know the truth is a matter of godliness. It is ungodly to wallow in a Christian pluralism where every view is acceptable, especially views that contradict each other.

Of course, it is sinful to quarrel with people who differ with us. It is sinful to fail to show respect for them as brothers and sisters if they are professing Christians. Many sins show up in controversy over truth. Believing error is a sin that should be put to death. Moreover, in the context of the body of Christ, it is sinful to stiff-arm others and refuse to dialogue long term with open-minded humility. With sins of false doctrine, there are many other sins that tag along and that violate the virtues of Christian holiness.

In summary, we must acknowledge our sins (own up to them). As we identify what sin is and thus, what our sins are, we can put them to death, cut them off, and set them aside like filthy garments.

3A. We need to aim at the goal, which is persistence in doing good

The way to eternal life, according to Romans 2, is by righteous living (v. 7). This is not a reversion to merit righteousness or justification by good works. Doing good is not the *ground* of justification. The ground is the work of Christ. But the way or *pathway* of the justified is the narrow path of righteous living that leads to life at the end of the journey.

We are put on the path of life in the first place by the divine act of the new birth which gives us the faith by which we are justified. So we enter eternal life when God brings us from darkness to light by His creative command (2 Cor. 4:6). Nevertheless, we enter eternal life in a consummate sense at the end of our journey, and this journey *must* be along the pathway of doing good (otherwise the end is death, 8:13a).

This is where the best defense against sin is a good offense by taking up godly qualities that are not characterized by self-seeking, rejecting the truth, and following of evil (Rom. 2:8). Therefore, as we put sin to death we look beyond the enemy to the goal of embracing goodness as our friend. Like our Lord, we should aim at going about doing good.

Paul stressed this in the positive part of the Romans 6 direct exhortation: "now offer them [the parts of your body] in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness" (v. 19). Having been freed from the former slavery to impurity and ever-increasing wickedness, now present yourselves to God as His *slaves for righteous service*.

We need to voice this presentation. It is a prayer as much as it is an ongoing action. As a part of our prayer life, we ought to make offering of ourselves to the Lord as slaves to righteousness. As we face difficulties, tensions, trials, inter-personal conflicts, difficulties in being responsible in this or that, we need to present ourselves, *right then and there*, to righteousness unto our God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Look unto Him and not become weary in doing good (Heb. 12:3; Gal. 6:9, to all people and especially to those of the household of faith; we are not excused from righteous conduct by the sins of those outside the faith).

4A. We need to focus the standard, which is God's law.

We were in bondage to sin. It was bondage to the law, but specifically bondage to the law of sin and death. Formerly, we were in bondage to the law of God as that which gave strength to sin (1 Cor. 15:56, causing us to sin more fully, Rom. 5:20; 7:8). And sin gave death its sting (1 Cor.

15:56). Sin makes an improper use of the law that leads to the condemnation of eternal death (Rom. 7:11). The law is also used improperly when it serves as a resource for meriting justification (justification is apart from law, Rom. 3:21).

However, *there is a proper use of the law*. It is holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12). It makes us aware of the exceeding sinfulness of sin (7:13, we need this in the battle with sin). It is for a proper use of the law that we have been set freed from the law of sin and death (from the law in its condemning function due to sin). That proper use involves "the righteous requirements of the law" being "fully met in us" (Rom. 8:4).

Therefore, as we put sin aside by killing it, we are to fill the void with conduct defined by the law (this negative and positive as part of the same whole-put off and put on). This is exactly how Jesus described good works that glorify the Father in heaven. Following the call to let the light of your good works shine (Matt. 5:17) is an extended discussion of the abiding validity of the law of God summarized in the Ten Commandments (cf. especially Matt. 5:18-19).

The law is properly pursued when it is interpreted and applied in terms of its true spirit and intent, not just according to the letter. Some "how tos" here are: 1) Season your life with all the commandments, we cannot pick and choose. Use the "Green Book" and study the commandments in the Westminster Confession and catechisms. 2) With all the changes from OT to NT, look for continuity in the application of the unique 10 words. 3) Look for the positive implied by the negative cast of most of the commandments. That you should not murder entails that you should promote the life and well being of your neighbor. 4) Consider each command as one grape that represents a cluster of righteous duties. For example, the command against adultery represents all sexual sins, and murder entails anger. To fill out the implications regarding the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment (do not murder), note that it requires the curbing of anger in yourself and in others (you will seek to do things that help others restrain their anger toward you, toward situations, and toward other people). We focus forgiving those who wrong us by remembering the providence of God, and this restrains our anger. We help others by instructing them in the principles of providence in relation to suffering from people and circumstances.

5A. Then having done all, we need to stress our dependence, and trust the Holy Spirit to do His effectual work. We trust His leading (Rom. 8:14) as we walk and work. Even in times where we appear "on hold" we wait with patience and hope.

## Conclusion

So how do we put sin to death? We do so by at least five steps. 1) Ponder the consequence of sin which is death, eternal death endured by Christ, 2) Identify your enemies, the sins of the flesh that surface in ranks and waves, 3) Aim persistently at the goal of doing good to all men but especially to those of the household of faith, 4) Focus the standard of God's holy law, all of Scripture summarized in the ten words written by the finger of God, and 5) By faith we do our work, walking each step in the steps of the Spirit, and waiting patiently in hopeful expectation of the Spirit's efficacious work in our spiritual renewal.