

How we are to weaken the power of indwelling sin

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
at Poplar Baptist Church, on 8th January 2017

¹²So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”
Romans 8.12 – 13, (ESV)

Introduction

We return this morning to these verses that we started thinking about a few weeks ago. These verses are speaking about what is known as the doctrine of sanctification, how God makes us holy in our lives.

We saw then a number of things from these verses:

1. We owe it to God to put sin to death. “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh to live according to it”, verse 12. We are in debt. Not to the flesh to live according to it, but to God, to live according to the Spirit. God has done so much for us, we are under a moral obligation to him to express our gratitude to him by conquering sin in our lives.
2. If we do not overcome sin, we shall die. “For if you live according to the flesh you will die,” verse 13a. We can take this in two senses. Firstly, in the sense that if we have never been converted, if we live according to the flesh, which of course we all do, we will die eternally in hell. Secondly, in the sense that, if we are converted, if we live according to the flesh, our spiritual life will atrophy. If you are a true Christian, you are not in danger of going to hell, even if you do fall into living according to the flesh for a while. If you are truly in Christ, you are justified for ever. But if you allow sin to run amok in your life, your spiritual life will die down and suffer greatly.

3. If we do overcome sin, we shall live. The second half of verse 13: "but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live". This is not salvation by works. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone. But as we conquer sin by the power of the Holy Spirit our experience of God's life will be richer. We will know abundant life.
4. It is our responsibility to overcome sin in our lives. "But if *you*, by the Spirit, put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live." Becoming holy is not effortless. It is not something we receive passively by faith. It is something we have to *do*. There is nothing automatic or passive about killing off sin in our lives. It is something that we have to do, day by day, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I said last time I spoke from these verses that my plan was to speak some more today about practical steps that we can take to put sin to death in our lives. How do we "put to death the deeds of the body"?

The first thing to say right at the outset is that is essential for us to be truly born again. The verse says, "If you *by the Spirit* put to death the misdeeds of the body you will live."

True holiness is impossible without the work of the Spirit to make us born again.

It is not that the person who is not born again cannot deal with specific sins. He might, with a great deal of effort overcome certain sins. For example, a person who was a heavy drinker might give up alcohol. A person who was sexually immoral might become chaste. A person who was a drug user might become clean.

But apart from the work of the Spirit, sin itself will not be dealt with. Sin in one form will be replaced by another, perhaps more subtle, sin. For example, a man might give up certain gross and outward sins, and then become proud, self-righteous and hypocritical.

In some religious traditions people will go to enormous lengths to try to overcome sin. They will make solemn vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, and enter a monastery. They will undergo punishing fasts, they will whip themselves, or ask others to whip them, to try to conquer their sins. But all this is useless if it does not spring from the knowledge of Christ. The only way to deal with sin is to deal with its root, which is that our hearts which are corrupt. Our hearts need to be changed by the Holy Spirit giving new life.

So before we go any further, I must ask you to ask yourself this question: have I been born again? What should you do if the answer is “No”, or “Not sure”? Go to Christ. Ask him to save you. Ask him to give you eternal life. Confess your sin to God. Turn away from sin. God promises that the Holy Spirit will be given to all who truly come to Christ in repentance and faith.

But if you are a Christian, if you have been born again, how do you go about killing sin in your life? You have a new heart, but there is still this tendency to sin that lives in you, in your flesh. What can you do to kill off this sin?

What is needed is a two-pronged attack. Remember that there is a battle inside every Christian between the flesh and the Spirit. The flesh wants us to sin, and the Spirit wants us to serve God. So, what we need to do is to seek to weaken the flesh and to strengthen the Spirit. As we do so, over time the flesh will be greatly weakened, and the Spirit greatly strengthened, and we will become far more holy. We will never be 100% perfect in this life, but we can and should strive to be far more holy than we were as unbelievers.

So we need a “two-pronged attack”. We need to reduce the “resources” that indwelling sin has at its disposal, and at the same time do all we can to strengthen the life of the Holy Spirit in us.

Today I am going to think about steps we can take to weaken the power of flesh, that is the tendency sin that lives in us. Next time, God willing, I will consider how we can strengthen the life of the Spirit.

There is much that could be said about things we need to do to reduce the power of sin. Today I want to speak about seven things that we need to do:

1. We need to examine ourselves regularly

Psalms 139 is a magnificent Psalm about how God knows everything about all people and things. At the end of it, the Psalmist says, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

This is a good prayer for us to pray every day. It is good for us to look back over the previous day and say, “Lord, is there any way in which I have sinned? Is there any action that I have done which has been offensive to you? Is there any way that I have behaved that has broken

your holy law? Is there anything which I should have done which I have failed to do? Is there any word which has come from my mouth which has been unloving, or untrue, or boastful, or in any way offensive to you? Has there been any lustful look, any greed in my heart, any idol secretly loved? We should examine ourselves carefully and search out, with reference to God's pure and holy law, any sin which we may have committed.

Some people say that we should not do this. They say that self-examination will only make you depressed. It is true that self-examination can be overdone. Robert Murray McCheyne said that for every one time we look at self we should look at Christ ten times. This is undoubtedly true. If we only examine ourselves we will become morbid and introspective, and depressed. But if we never examine ourselves, it will be very hard to realise our sin, and turn from it. We do need to examine ourselves so that we can identify sin in our lives.

2. We need to confess our sins

This self-examination should lead us to the second thing, which is confession of sin. If we become aware of ANY sin, however small it might seem, we should confess it to God.

Jeremiah says in Lamentations chapter 3 and verses 40 to 42, "Let us examine our ways and test them," – there is self-examination again – "and let us return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and our hands to God in heaven, and say: "We have sinned and rebelled and you have not forgiven" ". "But surely", says the Christian, "all our sins have been forgiven once and for all when we trusted in Christ as our Saviour". Yes, in the sense that when a person becomes a true Christian, he is, as far as his eternal standing before God is concerned, for ever right with God. But when we sin, a cloud comes into our relationship with God. We are still his children. We are still going to heaven, but we are not going to experience his love in the way that we should. So we need to come to God afresh and seek his forgiveness for our sins, on a daily basis. Remember that the Lord said to us that we should pray "Forgive us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors"

The wonderful thing is, if we do confess our sins to God we will know his forgiveness and cleansing. The apostle John says in his first letter, chapter 1 and verses 8 and 9, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful

and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

Sometimes, out of pride, we are slow to admit that we have done wrong. If we are slow to confess sin, it will greatly weaken our Christian lives, and perhaps weaken us physically as well. In Psalm 32, in verses 1 and 2, David speaks about the wonderful blessing of forgiveness. He says, “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.” But for a period of time David did not experience God’s forgiveness. He had sinned, and he did not confess his sins to God. He says, in verses 3 and 4, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.” As long as he did not confess his sins he experienced God’s hand of discipline upon his life. But then, in verse 5, he speaks about how he confessed his sins to God, and then knew God’s forgiveness. He says, “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord” — and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” Here is a salutary lesson for us: if we are to know God’s forgiveness and blessing we need to confess our sins quickly to him.

Something that we are tempted to sometimes when we are guilty of sin is to project guilt onto others. We are guilty of hurting others, yet we say others have hurt us. This is a form of self-deception. Psychologists call it deflection. We need to come clean with God and with ourselves, and admit that we are the ones who have done wrong, not others.

Sometimes the devil tries to say to us something like this, “You cannot go back to God just like that, so soon after sinning. That would be taking God’s forgiveness for granted. You need to have a period of time away from God’s grace before you can come back.” But no, God wants us to come to him and seek and find his forgiveness as soon as we become aware of sin. Nothing is gained by keeping away from his grace.

3. We need to repent

Confession leads to the next thing: repentance. God requires us not just to admit sin and to ask for forgiveness. He calls us to turn away from it. We are to renounce it in our mind. We are to determine that we will stop it now, and that we will never, by God’s grace ever do it again.

Repentance is not just something we do when we become Christians. It is something we have to keep on doing every day of our lives. We will sin every day, until our dying day. So we will need to repent every day.

We need to watch out for a stubbornness which can grow up in us which leads us to refuse to repent. The writer to the Hebrews writes in chapter 3 of that letter, 12 and 13, "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." Instead of turning away from God, we need to turn to him. We need to have soft hearts, which respond quickly to the convicting of the Holy Spirit. The alternative is an awful deadening and hardening which can be terribly destructive to our spiritual lives.

Instead of being stubborn and unyielding, we need to develop an attitude of humility and a willingness to hear the rebuke of others, and to heed discipline by God. Proverbs 15.32 says, "He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding."

God promises through the prophet Hosea great blessing if we will return to him. Hosea says in chapter 6 of his prophecy, verses 1 and 2, "Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will restore us, that we may live in his presence."

4. We need to put God's Word into practice

Having realized our sin, and having confessed it and repented, we need then to start to positively obey God in the area about which we have been convicted. James says in chapter 1 of his letter, verses 22 – 25: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does."

Obedience is a great aid to memory. If we immediately put into practice what we have learned, we are likely to continue in the knowledge of

what we have learned. If we fail to obey what we have heard, we are likely to forget it quickly.

5. We need to be careful about the company we keep

Paul says in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and verse 33, "Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character." " If we keep bad company, we are likely to pick up the thought patterns and behaviour of those that we spend time with.

Proverbs 13.20 says, "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm."

We do need to interact with this world, in order to live our daily lives, and in order to tell people about Christ. But we need to watch out, because if we spend too much time in the company of godless people we will become godless ourselves.

In these days of TV, video web sites, and social media, you can spend hours and hours in godless company without even leaving your home. Watch out. If you do so you are likely to become like those in whose virtual company you are spending so much time.

6. We need to avoid places of temptation

Sixthly, in our fight against sin we need to avoid places of temptation. When writing to his son, Solomon wrote in Proverbs chapter 5 and verses 1 – 14 words of great wisdom about avoiding the place where a prostitute lives. What he said is relevant for all places of temptation:

My son, pay attention to my wisdom, listen well to my words of insight, that you may maintain discretion and your lips may preserve knowledge. For the lips of an adulteress drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as gall, sharp as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave. She gives no thought to the way of life; her paths are crooked, but she knows it not. Now then, my sons, listen to me; do not turn aside from what I say. Keep to a path far from her, do not go near the door of her house, lest you give your best strength to others and your years to one who is cruel, lest strangers feast on your wealth and your toil enrich another man's house. At the end of your life you will

groan, when your flesh and body are spent. You will say, "How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction! I would not obey my teachers or listen to my instructors. I have come to the brink of utter ruin in the midst of the whole assembly."

Keep to a path far from her door, says Solomon. What is your place of temptation? Is it a pub? Is it a night club? Is it your computer screen late at night? Is it your old non-Christian friends? Avoid these places like the plague.

7. We need to be on constant alert

Seventhly, we need to remain on constant high alert.

Sin is so destructive. A temptation can come upon us "out of the blue" when we were least expecting it. Just when we thought we were making some progress in our Christian lives, the devil comes at us from a fresh angle, and down we go.

There are numerous exhortations in Scripture for us to keep alert. Jesus said to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Watch and pray that you will not fall into temptation."

Later in this letter Paul says, in chapter 13 verses 11 – 14,

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

That last phrase that is translated "do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" is literally translated, "make no provision for the flesh". We need to watch out for the first stirrings of sin within us, the first inkling in our minds. We need to immediately confess it and repent, before it grows into speech and action.

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 and verses 6 – 8, the apostle says, "So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-

controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.”

We must always be on the alert. The devil takes no holidays. He is always looking for opportunities to bring us into sin, with all the miserable results that flow from that. Let us be constantly alert.

Conclusion

Let me quickly run through these seven things we need to do to weaken the power of the flesh:

1. We need to examine ourselves regularly
2. We need to confess our sins
3. We need to repent
4. We need to put God’s Word into practice
5. We need to be careful about the company we keep
6. We need to avoid places of temptation
7. We need to be on constant alert

“Oh,” you might say, “This sounds like hard work”. Yes, it is. Overcoming sin is very hard work. But it is worth it, because sin is so terribly damaging. If you follow this pattern consistently you will see sin being drastically reduced in power in your life, and your life will know God’s blessing.

What should you do? If you are not a Christian, come to Christ for salvation. If you are a Christian and have been backsliding, come back to God. If you are a Christian and have been walking with God, keep on doing so. Do not be complacent. Do not let up until you are finally in glory.

Now, as I mentioned earlier, this is one half of a two-pronged attack on sin. It is about how we seek to reduce the strength of sin in our lives. The other thing we need to do is to seek to strengthen the life of the Spirit in us. I hope, God willing, to speak of this next week.

This booklet is produced by Poplar Baptist Church, Zetland Street, London E14 6RB, from where further copies may be obtained. Our services on Sunday are at 10.30 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.. You will be very welcome to attend these. The church building is situated on the corner of Zetland Street and the Blackwall Tunnel Approach Road. It is ½ mile south of Bromley-by-Bow underground station, and ¼ mile from Langdon Park DLR station, and the 309 and D8 buses pass the door. If you would like to discuss any spiritual matter arising from this booklet, feel free to contact our Pastor, Henry Dixon, on 020 7001 7776, or enquiries@poplarbaptistchurch.org

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

Copyright © 2017 Henry Dixon. This booklet may be reproduced, as long as it is reproduced in full, and the author and this copyright notice is also reproduced in full. For all other reproduction, please refer to Henry Dixon