

“Walking With God in Integrity:
The Historical Witness” Part V

Our studies together took another turn in the last session. From a discussion of some of the positive things we can incorporate into our lives to promote spiritual health, we turned to the negative actions we must undertake to encourage the same end. A biblical text which summarizes the negative side of sanctification is Romans 8:13: “... if you are living according to the flesh [here the meaning is a selfish lifestyle] you must die [here the idea is a fruitless life], but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you shall live”. What I sought to do was to begin a discussion of the second side to a two-fold approach to spiritual progress.

Sanctification has a double aspect. Its positive side is vivification, the growing and maturing of the new man; its negative side is mortification, the weakening and killing of the old man (Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian*).

Using the metaphor of a forest, I tried to illustrate the answer to three questions. These are as follows:

- 1) What does it mean that the dominion of sin has been crushed for the believer?

The Answer: The universal hold of sin over our lives has been put to an end forever. As John Owen, the seventeenth century Puritan, stated so succinctly, “The dominion of sin is present when sin exercises control over the will of a man [person] with no opposition from another principle”.

The Metaphor: Before we were saved, our lives were an unmitigated jungle of trees, vines, and weeds. These “trees, vines, and weeds” was our sinfulness; there were no exceptions to the tangled mess of our lives. The Bible describes our pre-conversion good deeds less than commendably.

- 2) How can the dominion of sin be crushed when the Bible and

experience speaks of indwelling sin?

The Answer: Though the universal grip of sin over us has been demolished, the remnants of sin's once universal reign remain in all of us. Sinclair Ferguson states it well, "The *nature* of sin does not change in regeneration or sanctification, but its *status* in us is radically attired" (*The Life of John Owen*). Romans 7:21, "I find then a principle that evil is present with me, the one who wishes to do good".

The Metaphor: The "forest" of our lives looks differently now that we have come to the Savior. Despite lives still twisted with many "trees and weeds," there are areas in all of our lives that are alive to the Spirit of God. There are marvelous "clearings" in our forest; trees have been uproots!

3) What is the believer's responsibility to indwelling sin?

The Answer: Our responsibility as believers is to take the struggle against sin seriously. In the words of Romans 8:13, we are by the Spirit's help to put to death the deeds of the flesh.

The Metaphor: It is the duty and privilege of every believer to work at cutting the "trees" out of the "forest," rooting up the "weeds," and "cutting limbs" off the remaining trees in our lives.

The Question for the Session:
The Sixty-Four Million Dollar Question

4) How is the believer to put to death the deeds of the flesh?

"To be Spiritually Minded is Life and Peace"(Rom. 8:6).

"Watch and Pray that You Enter not into Temptation" (Matt. 26:41).

We began our study of the spiritual life stating that there are three important ingredients with numerous ramifications: Know your God, Know yourself, and know your situation. Vivification is about the first of these; Mortification is about the latter of these.

- a) Some General Reflections on Sin in our lives.
 - (1) Most people are bothered by the symptoms and consequences of sin, not its causes.
 - (2) Sin is not resolved by avoidance and neglect, nor inadequate, unfruitful remedies.
 - (3) Sin is most often revealed in its fruitful state (i.e., “death” as personal wastefulness), not in its inceptive or casual stage.
 - (4) Sin is rooted in our fallen natures (i.e., disruptive characteristics), but manifested in our social relationships.
 - (5) Sin works in us in subtle and insidious ways. We must become students of ourselves to know how and when we are most liable to it.

- b) Specific Principles for the Mortification of Sin; or, what are some helpful things to do when “sin crouches at the door” of your life.
 - (1) Consider the dangerous consequences of sin (guilt of sin, loss of peace and strength, grieving the spirit, wounding of Christ).
 - (2) Load the conscious with the guilt of sin (consider God’s infinite patience and forbearance).
 - (3) Consider the state of one’s self at all times in total depravity and thoughts of one’s vileness. A common characteristic of the circumstance of sin

in our lives is that contemplated action is seen as having good potential and this will improve us. Remind yourself that sin never pays long-term positive dividends.

- (4) Trace the particular manifestation of sin to its root.

The Meaning: The cause of poor behavior is often hidden. Another way to say it is this: that which bothers us is often a fruit of a deeper cause. To make progress we must search out the underlying causes and deal with them.

“Resolved, whenever I do any conspicuously evil action, to trace it back, till I come to the original cause; and then both carefully endeavor to do so no more, and to fight and pray with all my might against the original of it”. – Jonathan Edwards

“I have concluded to endeavor to work myself into duties by searching and tracing back all the real reasons why I do them not, and narrowly searching out all the subtle subterfuges of my thoughts and answering them to the utmost of my power, that I may know what are the very first originals of my defect, as with respect to want of repentance, love to God, loathing of myself – to do this sometimes in sermons”. – Jonathan Edwards

The Illustration: Add to the forest image another; it is “the river and the canoe” metaphor. When you discover a “tree” in your forest, do not merely deal with it. If you can, try to figure out what triggers this course of action. Imagine the “river” to be your life; the “canoe” the means for searching out your life. Get into your “canoe” and paddle up the “river” of your life and deal with the problem at the deepest cause you can discover. Problems are normally brought to our attention in the fruitful stage, not the causative stage. To root out a

problem is to attack the root, not the fruit.

(a). This is no easy task. It requires hard reflection and honesty.

(b). There are things hidden deep in your mind that you have purposefully hidden to avoid the pain of it. Reflection over time will generally make these known. This is where a skilled counselor can help

(c). When things got hidden in our memory bank as children, we have adopted a non-confrontative approach to dealing with things. That is often all a child can do; however, to employ the same mechanisms as an adult leads to greater problems in handling social relationships.

- (5) Do not hurry to gain relief for your sin. Think about it before you shrug, delight yourself in your forgiveness, and go your way.
- (6) Act quickly against the first temptations toward a sin. Learn by self-study how and when you are susceptible to solicitations. Deal with them immediately; do not delight in them though we all have a natural tendency to do so.
- (7) Allow God to speak peace rather than assuming you have it. A lot of lessons are missed in hurray. Do not claim a verse and claim more than you should have.
- (8) Be attentive to temptation. Learn the circumstances of solicitation. Solicitation is not evil inherently; it is the signal of the approach of what can turn into evil.

To quote a line from Calvin Coolidge, a former president”

“The Lord gave us two ends-
one to sit on
and the other to think with.
Success depends upon which one we
use the most.”

- (9) Ask yourself what you have learned from your failure. Say to yourself, “How did this happen to me?” “What were the circumstances that accompanied this in the first place?”

“Resolved, after afflictions, to inquire, what I am the better for them, what good I have got by them, and what I might have got by them.” —Jonathan Edwards

- (10) Because complexity complicates and simplicity simplifies, take on only one or two trees at a time. Too many “trees” leads to frustration and defeat; too many “canoes” rides in the “river” of your life makes for frustration.

(a) As an individual pick a “tree” and work on it. Search out its roots, learn the circumstances of its troubling present, fight against it with prayer and Bible reading, good company, and resolve.

(b) Pick a tree as a couple and work on it together. Discuss it, find out how it got started in the first place, search for ways to minimize its impact, and hold each other accountable.

(c) At work pick a tree that needs addressing.

Conclusion: A Summary: Vivification and Mortification.

- A. The right weapons in the mental struggle with sin. Though there are things we can do in our walk with the Lord, it seems to me that it can be summarized in the title

of the hymn, “Trust and Obey”. We must fill our minds with good things in order to act correctly before the Lord. Correct doctrine leads to correct behavior; incorrect doctrine leads to license.

1. Whole-hearted trust
2. Faith
3. Obedience
4. The presence of right thoughts; a recognition of some basic truths.
 - (a) God’s sovereignty
 - (b) The effects of sin
 - (c) The love and kindness of God
 - (d) The wonder of Calvary
 - (e) The reality of indwelling sin

B. Thoughts from a fellow “tree” cutter and “canoer”.

1. Progress in spiritual things comes from two realizations: the realization that God has made provision (“if you *by means of the Spirit...*”) and that we must cooperate with Him in the endeavor (“if *you...*”).
2. It is a life-long process; there are no short cuts; it is hard work to talk to yourself.
3. It is the path to a contented life; the struggle with sin is a good one for all of us.
4. I came across a quotation from Calvin Coolidge; it speaks to the issue of perseverance.

“Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.

Talent will not: nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent.

Genius will not: unrewarded genius is almost a proverb.

Education will not: the world is full of educated
derelicts...

C. A life motto.

“Resolved, never to give over, nor in the least to slacken
my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I
may be.” —Jonathan Edwards

D. Final thoughts.

“The road to success is not straight
There is a curve called failure...
A loop called confusion...
Speed bumps called friends...
Red lights called enemies...
You will have flats called jobs

But...

If you have a spare called determination...
An engine called perseverance...
Insurance called faith...
A driver called Jesus..
You will make it to the place called success!”
-Unknown Author

“The Bottom Line”

FACE IT, Nobody owes you a living
What you achieve or fail to achieve in your lifetime
Is directly related to what you do or fail to do.
No one chooses his parents or childhood
But you can choose your direction
Everyone has problems and obstacles to overcome
But that too is relative to each individual
NOTHING IS CARVED IN STONE
You can change anything in your life if you want to
badly enough.
Excuses are losers:

Those who take responsibility for their actions are the
real winners in life.

Winner's meet life's challenges head on

Knowing there are no guarantees and give it all
they've got.

And never think it's too late or too early to begin

Time plays no favorites and will pass whether you act
or not.

TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE

Dare to dream and take risks... compete

If you aren't willing to work for your goals don't expect
others to.

BELIEVE IN YOURSELF.

-Unknown Author