

Surviving Sin

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Introduction.

- A. Sin is a word that has been written out of our cultural dictionary. Americans are not at all comfortable with the notion that they will be held accountable for the times when they violate divine law, so they ignore it and hope that it will go away. Indeed, our nation has evolved a number of coping strategies for minimizing sin.
- B. Of course, with the help of the Bible, we recognize that all of these coping strategies are short-sighted and self-destructive. The problems associated with the practice of sin don't magically go away when we ignore them, which means that the unrestrained sinner suffers terrible consequences both in this life and the next. As Christians, we understand this and devote ourselves to a lifelong struggle against sin.
- C. Sadly, this struggle doesn't always go the way we want it to. Sooner or later, after we have given ourselves over to Christ, we will sin again. As Paul says in Romans 7, we end up doing exactly the thing we don't want to do. We feel guilty about what we have done, and rightfully so, but sometimes, this guilt is even more destructive to our relationship with God than the sin was in the first place. We start listening to the devil, we allow him to convince us that we are worthless, wretched people who can never be pleasing to God, and we let him discourage us from even trying to serve God. Because Satan has won one battle, we surrender the war.
- D. As Christians, this is precisely the opposite of the position we must take. We can't let Satan win forever just because he won once. Instead, we must choose to keep fighting, and in this struggle, we have God's counsel and help. God never approves of sin, of course, but He is determined to keep His people close to Him, even after they stumble. Let's turn to His word, then, to see what our Father has to tell us about surviving sin.

I. Repent

- A. When it comes to sin, the first thing that we must do as Christians is repent. God will always have us back if we're willing to come back, but if we reject His law through willful sin, He will also reject us. However, repentance is not just something we do for the sake of our relationship with God. It's something we do for our own sakes also. The fact of the matter is, sin is MISERABLE, and one of the worst things about sin is our own awareness that we have done evil. The only way to change that awareness is to bring our sin before God, as David did in Psalm 32:3-5. Before he sought the Lord's forgiveness, David was consumed by his guilt. He only found release when he acknowledged his sin to God and received forgiveness.
- B. Repentance, however, involves more than just seeking forgiveness from God. It also involves seeking forgiveness from any on earth whom we have wronged and doing what we can to make up for the offense we have committed. Sometimes, we struggle. Even when we know we've done wrong, we don't want to face the consequences. It reminds me of something my little sister, Susan, did a long time ago, when she was maybe three or four. She and I had been cutting up, and spanking time had come. My mother grabbed me first—I was the oldest, so I always got to go first—and gave me a hearty spanking. Susan fled, and after my mother was through with me, she went to track her down. I trailed along behind, eager to see the carnage. We got to Susan's bedroom, and there she was, crammed into the hole between her dresser and the wall, howling with all her might. My mother pried her out of the crack, only to discover Susan's second line of defense. She had taken a pillow from her bed and stuffed it down the backside of her pants. Upon seeing that, my mother started laughing so hard she was incapable of spanking Susan, who once again unfairly got off scot-free. Now, Susan's problem wasn't that she didn't know she'd done wrong. It was that she didn't want the consequences.
- C. We need to do better, and we see an example of active repentance in the story of the tax collector, Zaccheus. Our kids sing about the first half of this story all the time. However, the most important part of this story isn't Jesus telling Zaccheus that He will eat with him. It's what happens after that invitation. When some of the bystanders realized that Jesus was actually going to eat with this loathsome, greedy tax collector, they raised a fuss. We see Zaccheus' response to the hullabaloo in Luke 19:8-9. He pledged not only to give half his possessions to the poor, but also to repay fourfold everyone he had wronged. Zaccheus knew that his greed was the biggest obstacle between him and the kingdom of heaven, so he not only repented of his greedy heart, but also did everything he could to make himself square with the people he'd hurt. Zaccheus' actions show that he repented sincerely, and upon seeing it, Jesus proclaims his salvation. We need to do the same.

II. Forget.

- A. In addition to our repentance, we also need to forget our sin. Once we have obtained God's forgiveness, we need to leave that sin in the past where it belongs. Consider the apostle Paul's words in Philippians 3:13-14. Before Paul came to the Lord, he had been a persecutor of the church, and after he came to Jesus, he recognized the greatness of his sin. Paul could have let that become a spiritual ball and chain. He could have

let it drag him down forever, but he didn't do that. Instead, he forgot what was behind and looked only to what was ahead. He let the past stay in the past so that it didn't destroy his future.

- B. A lot of folks struggle with this. In our common, everyday speech, it's not unusual to hear someone discussing the difficulty they have with "forgiving themselves". We need to make sure that this idea of forgiving ourselves doesn't become part of our spiritual framework. It's just not an idea that's in the Bible. The Bible talks about God's forgiveness, it talks about the forgiveness we can extend to others, but it never once says that we're supposed to forgive ourselves. Here's why: when someone forgives, he gives up the resentment and right of retribution that he has against someone who has wronged him. When we sin against God or someone else, that's not a right we have. It would be like if we bought a car on credit from a car dealership and decided not to make payments on the note because we'd forgiven ourselves the loan. It just doesn't make sense. When we try to forgive ourselves, we're trying to do the impossible.
- C. Here's the way that we need to think about it: whenever we sin and are forgiven by God for our sin, that forgiveness remakes us. We become new people because of the grace of Christ. The consequences of our sin may continue, but the sin itself does not. It stays in the past. Consider Paul's description of the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. Some of the people in that church had been pretty rough characters, everything from thieves to homosexuals, but Paul says, "Such WERE some of you." Were, past tense. Once they repented of their sin, they ceased to be those evil people. They could forget their sins because those sins had died with Christ on the cross. Today, we can do the same.

III. Learn.

- A. As important as it is to forget, though, we also need to learn from our sin. If we don't, we're at risk of repeating it. This thought is responsible for one of the grossest images in the Bible, the image of the dog returning to its own vomit in 2 Peter 2:20, 22. If you've ever been around a dog or other housepet who liked to do this, you recognize that it's about the dumbest thing imaginable. The dog ate the whatever-it-was once, got sick, and threw it up, so apparently the logical conclusion to the canine mind is to eat it again in hopes that things will go differently. We recognize what a bad idea this is when we see Fido doing it, but too often, we do the same things ourselves. We engage in some sin, get torn up by it, reject it, then forget about how bad the sin was for us and go right back to it six months later. Sometimes, God just has to be shaking his head.
- B. Instead, we need to learn from our sin, and sometimes, the consequences of sin teach us a lesson we won't learn any other way. Look at the example of the wicked king Manasseh, who flouted God's law for 55 years. 2 Chronicles 33:10-13 tells the rest of the story. Manasseh's hardships were so great that even he repented of his evil and began to serve God. When the carrot didn't work with Manasseh, God got through to him with the stick. Sometimes, God is forced to speak to us in the same way. We don't listen, and we don't listen, and we don't listen until God smacks us up the side of the head and says, "Now will you listen?" Friends, we need to pay attention to the lessons we get from the school of hard knocks. It's often the last chance we get.

IV. Strive.

- A. However, as important as it is to repent, forget, and learn, none of these things do any good unless they are paired in us with the determination to strive to serve God. When we sin, we have to tell the devil, "OK, you may have won that battle, but you won't win the war." We need to take for ourselves the attitude expressed in Micah 7:8-9. We can admit that we have wronged God while still trusting in God's ultimate salvation.
- B. This is critical because the road to success so often leads through failure. Consider Abraham Lincoln's efforts to capture the Confederate capital of Richmond during the Civil War. It was only a couple hundred miles away from the U. S.' capital of Washington D. C. In 1861, Lincoln sent an army commanded by General McDowell to capture it. McDowell lost the battle, so Lincoln fired him and replaced him with General McClellan. In 1862, McClellan attacked Richmond and was defeated. Lincoln replaced him with General Pope, who, several months later, attacked Richmond and was defeated. The next general in line was General Burnside, who attacked in December 1862 and lost. Lincoln fired Burnside and replaced him with General Hooker, who attacked Richmond in 1863 and was defeated. Hooker's replacement was General Meade, who never really tried attacking Richmond at all. Now, at this point, just about anybody would have given up. Lincoln had tried six generals in three years, and they all had failed him. What set Lincoln apart from just anybody, though, was that he didn't give up. He tried a seventh general, General Grant, and in 1865, Grant finally took Richmond. Lincoln's perseverance helped save our nation.
- C. We need to show the same measure of perseverance in pursuit of our main goal: heaven. Consider what the Hebrews writer says in Hebrews 6:11-12. He's urging us to inherit the promises, and to do so, we don't need anything we can't get. We don't have to have the eloquence of Apollos, the bravery of Daniel, or the loving heart of John to make it to heaven. We just have to have faith and patience. Time is on our side. As long as we keep on striving for God until we die, we win, and there's nothing the devil can do about it.

Conclusion. However, if you aren't faithful to the Lord now, time isn't on your side. Repent, and return to Him today.