

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: Spiritual Warfare
Number: 22
Text: Psalms 19:12; 141:3, 4; 119:9 - 16
Date: September 5, 2010 (a.m.)

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The Christian's Armor: All Prayer (Part 8) Heart-felt Prayer for Sanctification

Failure, what a harsh word. All of us have experienced failure. Sometimes it was no big deal, but at other times, the failure was overwhelming. Failure in the Christian life can leave us defeated and on the brink of giving up. Each failure is accompanied by a sense of despair and the thought that God's forbearance has run its course only makes matters worse. We begin to entertain thoughts like, "God has given up on me!" A great deal of confusion is at work here. Much of it stems from a failure (there's that word again!) to recognize the difference between *reigning sin* and *remaining sin*. This important distinction is explained by one of my former professors of theology, Sinclair Ferguson, "Before we became Christians we were under the reign of sin. Now Christ reigns over our lives and in our hearts and sin no longer reigns (Rom. 5:21; 6:14). But that does not mean that sin no longer dwells in our hearts, for the Bible distinguishes between the overthrow of the reign of sin, and the destruction of the presence of sin. Sin's reign over you ended when you were united to Christ, yet its presence in you will not be abolished until glory. It is very easy to confuse these two things. We sin and are tempted to conclude, "There I go; sin reigns again." We feel paralyzed; failure seems inevitable, and we despair. But we have confused the continuing presence of sin with the reign of sin. Understand the distinction and we realize that losing one skirmish is not the loss of the war."¹ Actually, the realization of this situation is an important step in Christian maturity. It is not until we come to see the true nature of indwelling sin that we realize our desperate situation. My good friend Sam Storms correctly notes, "The ease of sinning stems from the reason why we sin. Few people I've talked to can explain why they sin. They're clueless. They just do it! But why? Let me begin by telling you why not. People don't sin because they feel morally obligated to do so. No one sins from a sense of duty. Temptation to sin really isn't that hard to understand. Its appeal is actually quite simple. Sin comes to us, taps us on the shoulder, or tugs at our shirttail and whispers in our ear. "You deserve better than what God has provided. He's holding out on you. You deserve to feel good about yourself. I'll affirm you in a way no one else can. Why live in misery any longer? Come to me. I'll give you a sense of power you've never known before. I'll expand your influence. I'll fill your heart with a sense of accomplishment. I'll nourish your soul. You've never had a physical rush like the one I've got in store for you. Obeying God is boring. It's a pain. He's always telling you to do stuff that's difficult and burdensome and inconvenient or ordering you to forsake the few things that really bring you happiness. Come on. You only have one life. Obedience is ugly. My way is fun. My way feels good."² Knowing the treachery of our own hearts (and something of the manifold ways in which sin seeks to disguise itself) is key to growing into maturity. Psalm 19:12 is a prayer for deliverance, not from known sin, but from those that hide in the deep recesses of the heart. "There are," wrote Archibald Alexander, "two kinds of cleansing or purification (1) guilt by expiation and (2) inherent pollution by sanctification."³ In Psalm 141:3, 4 we find the Psalmist mindful of his own proclivity to sin with his speech. The Psalm further alerts us to the danger of absorbing the attitudes and conduct of an evil society—(something we desperately need to be reminded of today). Finally, Psalm 119:9 (a text that most of you already know by heart) teaches us the Word of God is the major factor in dealing with sin (cf. John 17:17).

I. STORED TREASURE: THE WORD OF GOD (Ps. 119:9-11)

"I have hidden your word in my heart," the psalmist writes, "that I might not sin against you" (v. 11). The Hebrew term *imrâ* can be translated appropriately as "word" or "promise". In this context, however, it may mean "saying". The psalmist has carefully learned and meditated on the "saying" of God, the specific truths that are taught in Scriptures. He has "hidden" them, not in the sense of obscuring them, but of knowing what and where they are. What is sometimes overlooked is the fact that the Psalmist is underscoring the importance of doctrinal (as opposed to a devotional) understanding of the Scriptures. The expressions *word*, *commandments*, *statutes*, *judgments*, *testimonies*, and *precepts* are used like synonyms throughout this Psalm to signify the component parts of God's Word. The Word of God is declared to *eternal* (Ps. 119:89) and it is likened unto a *light* (119:30). It is by means of the Word of God that we see sin in its true colors. It is through the Word of God that we grow in wisdom and understanding. Finally, in terms of our sanctification, it is the Scriptures that are God's appointed means to make us wise unto salvation (II Tim. 3:15-16). This includes not only our entry into salvation by believing the Gospel, but also our growth in grace (sanctification). Note: The actual emphasis of Ps. 119:9. It is not "*direct his way*" (this the Word of

God also does cf. 119:105) but “*cleanse his way*” (KJV) or “*keep his way pure*” (NIV). This point is made as well in II Cor. 7:1 where we read, “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.” The Scriptures teach with perfect clarity that our *natural* inclination is to love sin and to hate godliness. “There is no productive principle of holiness in man’s corrupt nature,” wrote William Bates, “but strong aversions from it, and inclinations to what is contrary to it. There is a miserable impotency to all spiritual good, better expressed with tears than words. It is natural and hereditary; more difficultly cured than what is accidental. God is the sole efficient in the regeneration of the soul, and the first infusion of grace, and the principal in the growth and improvement of it. The Holy Spirit does not work grace in us, as the sun forms gold in the earth, without any sense in ourselves of his operations; but we feel them in all our faculties, congruously to their nature, enlightening the mind, exciting the conscience, turning the will, and purifying the affections.”⁴

II. THE WOUNDED BEAST: DEALING WITH REMAINING SIN

Suppose your Biology 101 professor handed you a live wolverine and asked you to dissect it—but you had no anesthetic and no way to tie the beast down. What if you talked nicely to the wolverine; “Now sir, if you just sit still, I’ll try to get this over as quickly as possible”? All you’d see would be bare teeth and flying claws in violent resistance to your experiment. Your flesh won’t sit still for meditation and prayer any more than a wolverine would submit to your surgery. The flesh resists with its last breath anything that smacks of communion with God, because it suffocates in his presence. If you draw close to God in meditation and prayer, adoring God, getting to know him, and calling on him to search your heart, prepare to see the flesh scratch and claw like a wounded wolverine. It will do everything to stop you from meditation and prayer. Here are four claws you can expect to see:

- A. The First Claw Aims at Your Weakness. When they were under attack and in great danger of temptation, just when they should have been praying, Jesus’ disciples were fast asleep. “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak,” Our Lord said (Matthew 26:41). The spiritual flesh takes advantage of the weakness of the natural flesh (the body). “You can’t pray now, you need your rest. If you don’t get some sleep, you won’t be any use to God.” This, in effect, is what Satan hit Jesus with when his body was weakened by forty days of fasting: “You’ve done enough fasting—you’re being downright fanatical. Turn these stones to bread. If you don’t eat, you’ll die, and then how will you save the world!” (Matthew 4:1-3). If you don’t imbed it in your mind that prayer and meditation are indispensable, and seek God’s grace every day to resist the sluggishness of your body, you will hit the snooze button all morning rather than kneel before the throne. And you know the old saying, “If you snooze, you lose.”
- B. The Second Claw Is the Tyranny of the Urgent. No one doubts that we live in a hectic and fast-paced society. There are not enough hours in the day or days in the week to do all the things we need to do—or so the standard line goes. But we actually buy into this way of thinking. If you take this praying and meditating on business too seriously, you won’t be respected on the job as a hard worker, and you won’t have enough time to spend with other people. The twisted logic of the flesh is subtle—or it wouldn’t work. It *sounds* reasonable. It knows that God has called you to work hard at your calling, and to give yourself to other people in love. Of course, the flesh would rather you did nothing noble and pleasing to God; but if it can use your work and social life to undermine your communion with God, it will. But think through this; is it likely that God would call you to do more than he give you time to do? No one who believes God is good and wise could answer yes. So when it seems you don’t have enough time to do your work, care for your family, love your friends, and devote yourself to prayer and meditation, the problem isn’t God’s providence. The problem may be that you’ve taken on yourself more than God intended. Whatever the problem is, the flesh takes advantage of the opportunity: when there isn’t enough time for everything, something has to go. The flesh argues that you can’t let your work go, because you have a responsibility to your employer (and if you don’t do your best you won’t get a raise); you can’t take any time away from your family—God would never want that; and of course you shouldn’t slight your friends, especially if they’re unbelievers, because you may offend them and turn them off to the Gospel. So what gets the axe? That’s right—our fellowship with God. This can happen in a number of subtle ways. One is captured for us in the case of Martha in Luke 10:38-41. Unlike her sister Mary, Martha was so busy serving the Lord that she neglected fellowship with Him. Another way that this is done is in the way we neglect our fellowship with the church in public worship (Heb. 10:25). This should be the highlight of our week. It is something we should anxiously guard and earnestly protect from outside interference.
- C. The Third Claw is the Duty Swap. The desperation of the flesh will argue that if you pray with your family, or if you go to public worship, that’s enough spirituality to hold anyone; you can get by without the private, soul-searching prayer and meditation. If you buy that argument, you’re sunk. We are prone to thinking that simply having good intentions is in itself most commendable. God should be pleased with my effort simply because I am pleased with it. This is another way our hearts serve to deceive us.
- D. The Fourth Claw is the Big Promise. “You can pray and meditate next week, after you get past your physics mid-term (or the year-end report at work, or landscaping your backyard). You’ll be more diligent and faithful then, once you get over this hurdle.” Right. The sin of procrastination is a besetting sin for many of God’s people. This is the cheer of the perennial loser: “We’ll get ‘em next year!”⁵

CONCLUSION: To please God in obedience includes more than simply doing what the Bible commands. The *way* we seek to obey God is equally important (cf. Isa. 1:11-14). *How* we go about obeying is like building a house. There has to

be planning and deliberate steps taken. Simply throwing bricks on top of one another or nailing boards together will not pass muster. In the same way growth in obedience to God is not accomplished by perfunctorily piling up our duties. God wants us to think deeply about our obedience. Here are some ways we can do this.

1. **Obey fully.** Under the Old Testament ceremonial law no animal could be a sacrifice unless it was completely free of spot or defect. Similarly, duties must be complete in all their parts—nothing lacking. When Saul spared Agag, he did not perform his duty in every part (1 Samuel 15). The mind must study to know everything that pleases God (cf. 1 Thess. 4:1). The Puritan Ezekiel Hopkins once wrote, “He only is the mortified man, who labors and endeavors after universal obedience.”⁶
2. **Obey by faith.** Every duty must be done in faith, in the strength from Christ. Apart from him we can do nothing (John 15:5). It isn’t enough for you to be a believer, though that’s the beginning of every good work (Ephesians 2:10—you must also act in faith in every duty. Our whole obedience is “the obedience that comes from faith” (Romans 1:5). So Christ is called “our life” (Colossians 3:4), meaning he is our spiritual life: the spring, Author, and cause of it. No spiritually living act—no duty that is acceptable to God—can be performed but by the actual working of Christ, who is our life. “The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God: (Galatians 2:20).
3. **Obey from the heart.** The mind must watch over the affections in every duty to God. A duty offered to God as an act of mind and will, without the affections, is abominable to God. A duty without spiritual affections is a sacrifice without fire—worthless, unacceptable. “God loves a cheerful giver,” not merely someone who grudgingly drops money in the plate.
4. **Obey God’s way.** Your mind has to make sure you do everything the way and by the means God has commanded. He has commanded us, for example, to worship him. But how? Are we free to make up ways to worship him? No. We must worship him in spirit and in *truth*—according to his directions for worship, which we find in the Word and not in our imagination (John 4:24).

Obey God for God’s goals. Your mind must search out the purpose of every duty, the main goal always being the glory of God in Christ. If your mind sleeps on its watch here, the flesh will try to slip in other motivations for your obedience, such as satisfying your conscience or winning the praise of your peers. If the flesh succeeds, it ruins your obedience. “Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

ENDNOTES

¹ S.B. Ferguson, *Deserted by God?* (Baker, 1993), p. 155.

² S. Storms, *Pleasures Evermore: The Life-Changing Power of Enjoying God* (Nav Press, 2000), p. 26.

³ A. Alexander, *Practical Sermons* (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1850), p. 523.

⁴ *The Complete Works of William Bates II* (rpt. Sprinkle, 1990), p. 298.

⁵ The substance of this section is adapted from John Owen’s *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Reminders of Indwelling Sin in Believers*, vol. VI of *The Works of John Owen* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1967), with apologies to Kris Lundgaard for his analysis as found in his excellent work, *The Enemy Within: Straight Talk About the Power and Defeat of Sin* (P & R, 1998), p. 73.

⁶ *The Works of Ezekiel Hopkins III* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), p. 126.