

## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE BATTLE AGAINST SIN

C. J. MAHANEY

In his book titled *A Nation Of Victims: The Decay Of The American Character*, author Charles Sykes makes the following observation: “Over the last half century, the triumph of therapeutic thinking has been so complete that it is frequently taken for granted; what began with Dr. Freud is now the staple of daytime television talk shows, routine in politics, almost reflexive in matters of criminal justice and ethics.”<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not you’ve heard the phrase, you’ve no doubt encountered therapeutic thinking. It shows up in the courtroom when a serial killer’s attorney asks for leniency on the grounds that his client was routinely abused by an alcoholic father. It claims most of us grew up in “dysfunctional” families, thus offering a ready-made explanation and excuse for our behavior. Rather than emphasizing personal responsibility, it stresses the way we’ve been psychologically affected by others or by our environment. As social scientist Dr. James Deese notes, therapeutic thinking “is so ingrained in modern American attitudes as hardly to be challenged.”<sup>2</sup>

Surprisingly, the one institution best equipped to challenge the therapeutic trend has actually contributed to its popularity. I’m speaking of the Church. Rather than expose the errors of psychotherapy, the American Church in most cases has given uncritical acceptance...though there are some outspoken exceptions. In his book *Biblical Medical Ethics*, Dr. Franklin Payne comments, “Psychotherapy, as psychology and psychiatry, needs the most critical and detailed examination by evangelical Christians...Many Christians are influenced more by the concepts of secular psychotherapists than by the Word of God.”<sup>3</sup>

I’ve met many of the Christians Dr. Payne is describing. Not long ago I was asked to speak at a men’s retreat

**Meditate on Colossians 2:8.** How can we protect ourselves from being taken captive?

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“ Evangelical and charismatic Christians have unguarded borders where psychological ideas easily slip over.”

— William Kilpatrick

in another church. At the end of one session I was approached by a man who introduced himself and then began telling me about his difficult situation. He had grown up in a dysfunctional

family. He was a codependent. He suffered from low self-esteem. In the space of the first two minutes he must have used almost every psychological buzz word in existence.

It was an awkward encounter. I wasn't eager to disagree with him or correct him. I had never met the man before, and I wanted him to experience my care and concern. But as he went on and on it seemed obvious he assumed I agreed with him. And I didn't. Why? Though he spoke psychobabble fluently, his diagnosis omitted any reference to the "S" word....

Sin.

Such omissions regrettably are the norm today in popular Christian literature and radio talk shows. We are pursuing a deeper understanding of ourselves (as defined by the recovery movement) rather than a deeper conviction of sin (as defined in Scripture). We have become more concerned about our own needs and feelings than about the character and commands of God. No wonder we aren't maturing as he intends.

**1** What things in Jesus' life might cause a counselor to recommend that he join the "recovery movement"?

## Our Most Serious Problem

Writing a century ago, J.C. Ryle offered a sharp but simple explanation for the deficiencies he observed in the Church: "Dim or indistinct views of sin are the origin of most of the errors, heresies and false doctrines of the present day...I believe that one of the chief wants of the church in the nineteenth century has been, and is, clearer, fuller teaching about sin."<sup>5</sup> If this was accurate during his generation, how much more so today.

But we've gone a step further. Contemporary teaching about self-esteem has replaced the doctrine of sin. Consider this remark from one well-known author:

I don't think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has

“ To say that our first need in life is to learn about sin may sound strange, but in the sense intended it is profoundly true. If you have not learned about sin, you cannot understand yourself, or your fellow-men, or the world you live in, or the Christian faith. And you will not be able to make head or tail of the Bible. For the Bible is an exposition of God’s answer to the problem of human sin, and unless you have that problem clearly before you, you will keep missing the point of what it says...It is clear, therefore, that we need to fix in our minds what our ancestors would have called ‘clear views of sin.’<sup>6</sup>

— J.I. Packer

proven more destructive to human personality, and hence counterproductive to the evangelistic enterprise, than the unchristian, uncouth strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition.<sup>7</sup>

This pastor says that labeling sin as “rebellion against God” is “shallow and insulting to the human being.”<sup>8</sup> His conviction about man’s inherent worth leads him to the remarkable conclusion that a new

“reformation” is in order. Where Martin Luther’s emphasis on salvation by grace through faith transformed the Church in the sixteenth century, he argues, today’s churches must recognize the sacred right of every person to self-esteem.

I do not question the man’s sincerity, but his statements are bogus. They are, in fact, false doctrine. The modern emphasis on self-esteem has become an unacceptable alternative to the biblical doctrines of justification and sanctification.

*Justification.* Jesus did not die on the cross to improve our self-esteem. He died to atone for our sin. And yet the cross *does* teach us a crucial lesson about our worth: We are each worthy of the wrath of God. As a manifestation of God’s unmerited mercy, the cross reveals the depth and seriousness of our sin. Anthony Hoekema points this out:

In today’s world there is little emphasis on the biblical doctrine of sin. But a person with a shallow sense of sin and of the wrath of God against our sin will neither feel the need for nor understand the biblical doctrine of justification. When sin is ignored, minimized or redefined we no longer live aware of our desperate need for Jesus Christ nor appreciative of what he accomplished on the cross for us.<sup>10</sup>

Unless we understand the nature of sin and how offensive

**For Further Study:**

The *NIV Complete Concordance* lists 466 occurrences of the word “sin” (or a derivative) in Scripture. For a biblical understanding of this vital subject...just start reading.

“ I have often heard it said, ‘If I had been the only person on the earth, Jesus would still have died for me.’ Although our Lord could have given his life for just one person, it most certainly would not have been because that person was so valuable, but because God was so gracious. Such an occurrence should hardly, therefore, be regarded as a source of pride or self-esteem. For me to argue that Jesus would have died for me if I were the only person on earth simply indicates that my sins alone, without the rest of you contributing your share, were sufficient to demand the severe punishment Jesus Christ vicariously assumed in my place. When faced with that reality, we ought to weep for the selfless sacrifice of our Lord instead of finding in it one more opportunity for feeling good about ourselves.<sup>9</sup>

— Dan Matzat

**For Further Study:**

Many of the Bible’s references to God’s compassion can be found in the Psalms (9:12,18; 34:18; 147:3) and Isaiah (49:13; 61:1).

it is to God, we’ll never understand why the cross was necessary. We’ll never be amazed by grace.

*Sanctification.* A clear understanding of the doctrine of sin is imperative for sanctification as well. Scripture reveals that our most serious hindrance to growth is sin against God. The recovery movement, on the other hand, insists that unmet needs, pain, damaged emotions, or low self-esteem are the root of our difficulties. The two conclusions are irreconcilably opposed.

I am not denying the reality or severity of the pain we experience when others sin against us. It is critical I not be misunderstood here. The Bible makes numerous

references to those who are afflicted and oppressed. But please understand: *Pain is not our root problem.* Jesus said, “For from *within*, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these evils come from *inside* and make a man ‘unclean’” (Mk 7:21-23, emphasis added; see also Jas 1:14-15).

Too many of us “feel the reality of our wounds more than the fact of our sin.”<sup>11</sup> But if we genuinely want to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, this will have to change. Our freedom and maturity depend on it. The therapeutic model misdiagnoses our root problem, and thus proves incapable of providing an effective solution. But once we recognize sin as the source of our problem, suddenly we have a scriptural solution and biblical hope for change. It’s called the doctrine of sanctification.

**Mowing Your Own Lawn**

Sanctification is a lifelong process of repentance (not recovery) and obedience (not inner healing) that results in

**Meditate on  
Colossians 1:15-20.**

Judging by this description, do you think Jesus is sufficient to regenerate and redeem you?

holiness (not wholeness) for the glory of God (not personal fulfillment). This doctrine is succinctly stated in Colossians 3:1-17. If you haven't already done so, please take a minute to read that passage before you continue.

It's important to see the transition Paul is making in this third chapter. The first two chapters of Colossians emphasize the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. He stresses this again at the beginning of Chapter 3. Paul consciously refrained from teaching the Colossians about sanctification until they had first understood Christ's work for them and within them. Until they grasped what it meant to be reconciled to and regenerated by God, he knew they would not be properly motivated by grace.

Neither will we. This is why the second and third chapters of this book highlight regeneration and our union with Christ. We have also written a book on the doctrine of justification called *This Great Salvation*. Like Paul, we want to motivate by grace. Once that foundation is established, then we can pursue godliness without straying toward legalism or license.

Paul defines the process of sanctification with two striking phrases: We are to "rid ourselves" of sin and "clothe ourselves" with righteousness (Col 3:8,12). It is

“ Though the power for godly character comes from Christ, the responsibility for developing and displaying that character is ours. This principle seems to be one of the most difficult for us to understand and apply. One day we sense our personal responsibility and seek to live a godly life by the strength of our own will power. The next day, realizing the futility of trusting in ourselves, we turn it all over to Christ and abdicate our responsibility which is set forth in the Scriptures. We need to learn that the Bible teaches both total responsibility and total dependence in all aspects of the Christian life.<sup>13</sup> ”

— Jerry Bridges

only because of what Christ has accomplished on the cross and the miracle of regeneration that we are able to obey these commands. And yet those two supernatural imperatives now leave us without excuse. If grace does not result in godliness, then we have not accurately understood grace. God fully expects us to change, grow, and mature. As F.F. Bruce exhorts, "Now be (in actual practice) what you now are (by a divine act)."<sup>12</sup>

Please note that Paul says we are to "rid *ourselves*" and "clothe *ourselves*." We have

the privilege and responsibility of participating in change. Though sanctification is no less a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit than regeneration, there is one fundamental difference: in sanctification we have a critical role to

**For Further Study:**

How would you answer someone who concluded that “all effort is wrong” after reading Zechariah 4:6?

play. “God works in us and with us,” said the great Puritan pastor John Owen, “not against us or without us.”

Statements such as “Stop trying and start trusting” or “Let go and let God” make popular plaques but poor theology. Those who claim “All effort is wrong” are badly mistaken. Actually, the Bible instructs us to “Make *every* effort...to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14, emphasis added). This is grace-motivated effort, of course, but it’s effort nonetheless. God hasn’t told us to pray or simply trust him for godliness; he says “train *yourself* to be godly” (1Ti 4:7, emphasis added). We are to obey in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul clarifies this combination of God’s work and our responsibility when he writes, “Continue to work out (not work *for*) your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Php 2:12-13). Though our effort apart from God’s work would be futile, sanctification cannot be delegated to God. Each of us must mow his own lawn.

What form does our responsibility take? How do we fulfill the biblical command to rid ourselves of sin? Scripture offers a two-part strategy.

## Strategy #1: Attack Sin

I love the offensive posture of the New Testament toward sin. Nowhere is that more evident than in the Apostle Paul’s terse command to the Colossians: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (Col 3:5). In the battle for personal holiness, aggressiveness is both a command and a necessity. We must be ruthless. We must go on the attack.

Paul uses a violent metaphor here not simply to get our

““ We need to cultivate in our own hearts the same hatred of sin God has. Hatred of sin as sin, not just as something disquieting or defeating to ourselves, but as displeasing to God, lies at the root of all holiness.<sup>14</sup> ””

— Jerry Bridges

attention but to underscore a critical aspect of sanctification. We are to kill any and all manifestations of sin in our hearts. We must take the initiative to execute sin daily.

Jesus went so far as to say, “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and

throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell” (Mt 5:29). He also recommended amputating a hand for the

**Meditate on  
2 Corinthians 10:3-5.**

In terms of spiritual warfare, was Paul a “hawk” or a “dove”?

same reason. Was Jesus commanding actual surgery here? I think not, because a hand or eye isn't the root cause. Jesus purposely used vivid imagery to make a point: We must recognize the seriousness of sin and deal decisively with it. Resisting sin when tempted is not sufficient. We must take drastic steps to attack and kill sin in our lives. John Owen exhorts us to pursue “a victory over it, and pursuit of it to a complete conquest...sin will not otherwise die, but by being gradually and constantly weakened; spare it, and it heals its wounds, and recovers strength.”<sup>15</sup>

The spiritual discipline of putting sin to death, otherwise known as mortification, is a neglected area of truth. Most of us are about as familiar with this subject as we are with outhouses. “Our forefathers used to speak of mortifying sin,” notes Sinclair Ferguson.<sup>16</sup> And J.I. Packer laments, “It is a theme on which no contemporary writing of significance seems to be available.”<sup>17</sup> That's not surprising, but it is revealing. Can you imagine a book titled *Put Sin To Death!* as a Christian bestseller?

Mortification is not popular because it tends to be difficult. Ask the person trying to submit cheerfully to a boss who has repeatedly denied a promotion. Ask the recently converted, unmarried couple who must now control sexual urges they have gratified for years. But listen: this is not weekend golf we're playing here. This is war. Holiness and discipleship are war.

Attacking sin isn't complex. And though I want to say

this sensitively, I also want to say it firmly: Your ability to attack sin doesn't depend on your past. We have no acceptable excuse for sinning. It's never to be viewed as an understandable weakness.

Living as a Christian means living in the trenches. Sinclair Ferguson says it as well as anyone could:

What then is this killing of sin? It is the constant battle against sin which we fight daily—the refusal to allow the eye to wander, the mind to contemplate, the affec-

“ We may take comfort about our souls if we know anything of an inward fight and conflict. It is the invariable companion of genuine Christian holiness...Do we find in our heart of hearts a spiritual struggle? Do we feel anything of the flesh lusting against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh...? Are we conscious of two principles within us, contending for the mastery? Do we feel anything of war in our inward man? Well, let us thank God for it! It is a good sign. It is strongly probable evidence of the great work of sanctification...We are evidently no friends of Satan...The very fact that he assaults us should fill our minds with hope.<sup>18</sup>

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— J.C. Ryle

tions to run after anything which will draw us from Christ. It is the deliberate rejection of any sinful thought, suggestion, desire, aspiration, deed, circumstance or provocation at the moment we become conscious of its existence. It is the consistent endeavor to do all in our powers to weaken the grip which sin in general, and its manifestations in our own lives in particular, has. It is not accomplished only by saying 'no' to what is wrong, but by a determined acceptance of all the good and spiritually nourishing disciplines of the gospel.<sup>19</sup>

### **Meditate on Galatians**

**5:16-17.** Why does every genuine Christian experience inner turmoil?

Does this describe your attitude? Toward which end are your energies primarily directed, recreation or righteousness? Self-indulgence or self-control? Are you prepared to do whatever it takes to win the war? If so, what is your strategy for attacking the sin in your life right now?

### **Strategy #2: Avoid Sin**

Attacking sin is not all that's involved in the sanctification process. We must avoid sin as well. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to a lifestyle that is distinct from our surrounding culture: "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" (2Co 7:1). What are these promises that motivate us to purify ourselves and pursue holiness? God's own offer to be uniquely present among his people as we separate ourselves from the world: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people" (2Co 6:16).

### **For Further Study:**

Read James 1:27. Can you list two or three specific ways in which a Christian might be "polluted by the world"?

In a sense it would be easier if God told us to separate ourselves *physically* from the culture. Yet God specifically forbids that (1Co 5:9-10), and instead appoints us as ambassadors (2Co 5:18-20). No ambassador works effectively in isolation. We are to relate to our culture without *reflecting* our culture, always navigating between the secular and the self-righteous.

Our flesh constantly begs to be indulged, yet Paul tells us to "make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Ro 13:14 NAS). That means distancing ourselves from anything that's likely to tempt us to sin. Paul told the Corinthians the same thing in even clearer terms: "Flee immorality" (1Co 6:18 NAS)...don't fight with it.

Though Joseph lived long before the New Testament was written, he exemplifies the way we should avoid sin



**2** When temptation hits, we have two basic responses: fight or flight. Check what you think would be the appropriate response to each of the temptations listed below:

Scenario	Fight	Flight
Sudden fear that someone will rob your home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Curiosity about <i>Playboy's</i> issue on Middle East politics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Urge to "go into hibernation" when friends let you down	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strong sense of anger when child spills your coffee	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Desire to swing by the bar "just to see old friends"	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

(Ge 39:6-20). For some time his master's wife had sought to seduce him. Finally, frustrated by his integrity, she grabbed him by the cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!"

Now Joseph *could* have viewed this as a divine appointment. He could have thought, "This may be the ideal opportunity for me to share with her what God has done in my life." But he didn't flirt with the temptation. He didn't even fight it. He simply fled, leaving Potiphar's wife holding his cloak.

I can imagine one of the servants walking outside the house when suddenly, whoosh! A human-shaped blur flashes out the door at world-class speed.

"What was that?"

Joseph. The man of God. Running for his life.

"Lord!" he pants at the half-mile mark, "help me!"

"I am. Just keep running. You get away from that woman as far and as fast as you can."

It's smart to run from temptation. It's idiotic to stand there and try to stare it down. And yet some would have responded to Joseph's situation this way:

"God, I sense temptation beginning to develop. I call upon you, Lord. Please deliver me from this situation."

"I *am* going to deliver you," God says. "Run!"

"Lord, I'm trusting you for deliverance. Deliver me right now from this feeling of lust."

"That won't happen till I return, and I'm not coming back in the next five minutes. Hit the road, Mr. Potato Head!"

"Lord, I thank you. You've caused me to be born again, and I know your power is at work in me. Greater is he who is in me than he who is in the world."

"Yes, that's right, and the Greater One is saying, 'Move! Move your body and move it now!'"

If you're serious about sanctification, you're not trying

“To labor to be acquainted with the ways, wiles, methods, advantages, and occasions of the success of sin is the beginning to this warfare.”<sup>20</sup>

— John Owen

**Meditate on**

**1 Timothy 6:11.** How long does it take you, on average, to flee from temptation once you've recognized it?

to see how close you can get to the curb. You're prepared to drive on the other side of the street, if necessary, to avoid sin. And in areas where you know you're vulnerable, you're obeying the command of Jesus: "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation" (Mt 26:41).

We need to cultivate the ability to discern where we are most prone to sin. That way we'll be able to develop a strategy for avoiding temptation. Areas of vulnerability will differ, but watching isn't optional for any of us.

In what area(s) do you need to develop a strategy of avoidance? You can probably begin with whatever you've been thinking about as you read this section.

## **A New Set of Clothes**

As we saw earlier in Colossians, ridding ourselves of sin is just half of the equation. Paul exhorts us, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, *clothe yourselves* with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Col 3:12, emphasis added). Not only must we put off sin, but we must put on righteousness (Eph 4:22-24).

"These two factors," writes Jay Adams, "always must be present in order to effect genuine change. Putting off will not be permanent without putting on. Putting on is hypocritical as well as temporary, unless it is accompanied by putting off...Sanctification continues as the believer daily turns *from sin / to righteousness*."<sup>21</sup>

For example, if God has exposed materialism or greed in your heart, repent and then begin systematically to replace it with generosity. Start with faithfulness in tithing to your local church; add to that offerings, and look for opportunities to give secretly as well. Perhaps you tend to criticize others. If so, confess the sin of pride and consciously focus on encouraging and honoring others instead. If selfishness is a recurring theme, place yourself in situations where you are required to serve.

What should immediately be obvious is that character cannot be developed or refined in isolation. To cultivate a righteous and fruitful life we need the context of a local church. For example, I may be the model of patience...as long as I'm alone. I could spend days studying the subject of compassion without ever encountering someone who needed care. Unless I interact with others I'm simply incapable of assessing where I need to grow.

The fact is, there are very few Christ-like traits we can develop apart from relationships in the church. We need

**For Further Study:**

Read Revelation 3:4-6. Can you identify four promises in this passage?

people to practice on! If we're intent on change, we'll commit ourselves to a church where individuals take seriously the biblical exhortations to encourage and correct.

As you've probably perceived by now, battling sin does not happen effortlessly. It involves genuine confession, repentance, obedience to Scripture, accountability to oth-

**3** After reading Colossians 3:12-17, select the Christian character trait mentioned there (humility, forbearance, etc.) that you would most like to develop. In the next week or two, set aside as many as five devotional times to meditate on Scriptures highlighting this area. Also, ask God for specific ways to apply what you learn.

**Character Trait:**

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**Day One:**

Scripture(s)	Insights	Application
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**Day Two:**

Scripture(s)	Insights	Application
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**Day Three:**

Scripture(s)	Insights	Application
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**Day Four:**

Scripture(s)	Insights	Application
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**Day Five:**

Scripture(s)	Insights	Application
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“ It is a part of healthy Christian experience to enjoy a continually increasing degree of deliverance from sins...Few things afford the Christian such relief and encouragement as the memory of sins which once ruled him, but which he has conquered by the power of the Spirit of God.<sup>23</sup> ”

— J.I. Packer

ers, and the consistent practice of the spiritual disciplines. You'll also need courage and perseverance. "There are no quick and easy paths to spiritual maturity," says R.C. Sproul. "The soul that seeks a deeper level of maturity must be prepared for a long, arduous task."<sup>22</sup>

But do you know what it feels like to grow? To sense God's pleasure and presence? To hear his voice? To know you are contributing to the advancement of his kingdom? Nothing compares with that experience. And this is God's amazing reward for all those willing to put off sin and put on righteousness.

Let me impart fresh hope to you. No matter what you have experienced in the past, you—by the grace of God—*can* change. Through a determined strategy to attack and avoid sin and clothe yourself with righteousness, you can be a dramatically different person at this time next year. ■

#### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Imagine you are on the jury trying the serial killer mentioned on page 39. It's clear the man was frequently beaten by his alcoholic father during childhood. How much of a factor would that be in reaching your verdict?
2. "We have become more concerned about our own needs and feelings than about the character and commands of God," says the author. (Page 40) What's an example?
3. What does "self-esteem" mean to you?
4. Does the message of the cross make you more or less secure about your identity?
5. Why is the recovery movement incapable of meeting our deepest needs?
6. Identify the root problem in each of the following scenarios:  
—Since being raped in college, Ann has strongly disliked and distrusted men

—Bill is seeking a divorce because his wife shows him little affection

—When under intense pressure, Mary entertains thoughts of suicide

—Rob, who grew up visiting his father only on weekends, is a workaholic

7. What's the biggest distinction between sanctification and regeneration?

8. Why are relationships in the church so essential for character growth?

9. In what area of your life do you most need a “new set of clothes”?

**RECOMMENDED READING** *The Pursuit of Holiness* by Jerry Bridges (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1978)

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## NOTES

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23. J.I. Packer, *God's Words*, p. 185.