

## OCTOBER, 2007, NEWSLETTER

### HOW TO LIVE A SINLESS LIFE

\_\_\_Isn't that a preposterous title? It is sort of like, HOW YOU CAN BE PERFECT, LIKE ME. But I made the case last month that the New Testament states Christians should live lives of holiness, denying worldly lusts, overcoming temptations, etc. Some of the verses I quoted were:

*Whoever is born of God does not commit sin. Whoever sins is the slave (or servant) of sin. If you abide in My word (obey Me), you are my disciples indeed. Do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey its lusts. We were slaves of sin, now we are slaves of righteousness. When you are tempted, (God) will provide a way out."* This list could be extended on and on.

In his book, The Life You've Always Wanted, John Ortberg is refreshingly honest about his shortcomings. He says, "I am disappointed with myself...not so much with things I have done as with who I have become...I know some of this disappointment is simply the fruit of self-absorption. I am disappointed that I still love God so little and sin so much. I am capable of dismaying amounts of jealousy if someone succeeds more visibly than I do. I am disappointed at my capacity to be small and petty. I can't pray for very long without my mind drifting into some fantasy of revenge or some grandiose fantasy of achievement. I am deeply concerned with what others think of me and guard my conversations carefully so that I will appear in the best light. I can convince people I'm busy and productive and yet waste large amounts of time watching television. I have other, darker, disappointments that I'm not ready to commit to paper. Even writing these words is a little misleading, because it makes me sound more sensitive to my fallenness than I really am. Although I am aware of how far I fall short, sometimes it doesn't bother me very much, and I am disappointed with that."

I can identify with most everything he says and could add a list of my own. It is not only that there much about the Christian faith I don't seem to understand, the problem is I don't nearly live up to what I do understand. And yet I want to! Perhaps you have some of these feelings. But the Bible is so black and white in stating that Christians "*Have been translated from darkness to light,*" that "*Those born of God do not sin,*" and Jesus even said, "*Be perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect.*" We read that exhortation and think, "Yeah, right!" So we decide that maybe we have not really been born again, or we (the church) start inventing new doctrines to get us off the hook. But Paul says he warns and teaches every man, "*That we may present every man perfect in Jesus Christ.*"(Col. 2:28) Consider the following:

First, as I understand it, "perfect" does not mean morally perfect, as God is. It means "mature, obedient, humble, leading a life marked by love." Think about that word, "mature." That means a Christian has achieved the level where he should be at that point in his life. A two year old baby drools and has accidents, but is perfect in his parents' eyes. If he did that at age twelve, there would be a different reaction. Spiritual babies drink milk before they can eat meat. First John makes a distinction between "children, young men, and fathers"(1 John 2:12-14). There is not a timeline of expected maturity for everyone, because what each of us brings to the table when we become Christians is

so varied. One person is raised in a Christian home; another is raised with abuse, drugs, rejection, and abandonment. Our IQ's, personalities, cultural heritage, etc., vary tremendously and only God knows everything about each of us. *"To whom much is given, much is required."* Salvation and maturity are a lifelong process: *"Work out your salvation with fear and trembling," "Be transformed by the renewal of your mind." "Repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance."*

Second, although we become a "new creation," and "all things become new," when we are born again, our fallen nature, our "flesh," is not removed nor is it transformed. It is just as ugly as ever, always agreeing with the world and the devil, and warring against the spirit (or Spirit) within us. *"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." "Nothing good dwells in my flesh." "Abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul."* The flesh, or lower nature, can never be redeemed, but must be put to death. "Crucify the flesh!" God will not do this work for us. We must do it - not by striving, but by faith, trust, and surrender to Christ. *"Work out your salvation...."* This is the crucial point, I believe, where the modern church has largely bailed out. Denying yourself and crucifying the flesh is not a popular topic. How many sermons have you heard on this subject? The good news is: resurrection follows crucifixion. The bad news is: there is no crown without the cross.

Third, it follows from the second point that every one of us is involved in a civil war. The devil is not our problem, our "flesh," our "fallen nature," our unredeemed heart, is our problem. Jesus said, (The devil) *"has nothing in me."* You and I can't say that. The devil simply walks around and surveys our carcass until he sees a vulnerable point. He says, "Ah ha!" and sticks his pitchfork in. *"Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed."*(Jas.1:14) This is not a game, and there are real consequences, eternal consequences, to our response to these temptations: *"When desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death."*(Jas.1:15) *"Blessed is the man who endures temptation.....he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him."*(Jas.1:12)

Examples:

- The photo of a sweet-looking little grandmother who lives in Fruita just appeared in our local paper. She had been the treasurer of the Fruita Fire-Protection District for 34 years and had embezzled over \$300,000. She will spend her golden years in prison.
- In the last couple of months, three respected spiritual leaders, at the apex of their honored and successful ministries, spectacularly and publicly fell into sin and disgrace. Two of them admitted the root of the problem was pride, arrogance, and self-glory, and they have started the painful process of repentance. One of them insists everything is cool with God and is going right ahead with his ministry. We never can kick back and coast the rest of the way. *"He who endures to the end will be saved."*
- NPR interviewed former professional athletes and other insiders concerning the widespread use of steroids. One man told how his involvement with these drugs destroyed his career, reputation, and health. Our children who are student athletes may even now be struggling with temptation in this area.

Fourth, the way to please God first, last, and always, is through faith. What we believe in our hearts about God, and about ourselves, determines whether we stand or fall. *"As a*

*man thinks in his heart, so is he.*" *"Out of the heart come the issues of life."* Are we grasshoppers before our enemies, or mighty men of valor? Is God really good, or is that wishful thinking? Moses brought the Hebrews out of Egypt, but there was no way he could get Egypt out of the Hebrews, so they walked around in circles till they perished in the wilderness. Jesus brought us out of bondage with a mighty deliverance, but if we will not press on and get the wounds, sins, and lies out of our hearts, we will remain in the wilderness.

I have to believe the Bible when it tells us consistently that we can lead holy lives, lives without sin. David prayed, *"Search me, O God, and know my heart, and see if there be any wicked way in me."*(Ps. 139) *"Cleanse me from hidden/secret sins* (those sins and lies hidden in the heart which are the strongholds which we must pull down in order to walk in victory) *and keep me back from presumptuous/willful sins."*(Ps. 19) The lifetime process of sanctification means that the Holy Spirit will search our hearts and bring to the surface hidden jealousy, resentment, self-condemnation, greed, self-absorption, all the things John Ortberg confessed he periodically discovered in his own fallen nature. At that point, we again confess our sins and pray that God will continue to cleanse us (John 1:9). The Christian life means we have a lifestyle of repentance; it is by no means all accomplished at the beginning of our Christian walk.

We must take this process seriously. *"Work out your salvation with fear and trembling."* Remind yourself that at the end of Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6, and 7), the most demanding sermon ever preached, Jesus made those sobering statements about building your house on the rock or on the sand, and He said that not the people who **hear** His teachings, but those who **do** his teachings, will enter the kingdom of heaven.

## **IS GOD GOOD?**

I have raised this issue before and, without apology, raise it again. (I suggest you take a time-out, close your eyes, and ask the question, "In my heart, do I really believe that God is good?")

The first temptation that came to man, actually to woman, was this very question. The serpent slithered up to her and insinuated into her mind this idea: "God is holding out on you! Why won't He permit you to eat from this particular tree? Don't you realize that if you eat this fruit you will become like God, knowing good and evil? God is not really your friend. Don't be a fool! Make up your own mind what is right and wrong." She decided in that moment that God was not really good. Adam agreed with her. Their decision led to considerable trouble.

Most people, even most Christians, have deep, if unspoken, questions about the goodness of God. The church has taken scriptures, distorted them (in my opinion), and concluded that the sovereignty of God, which is a scriptural concept, means that everything that happens is God's will. The morning paper had a story about kidnapping and torture: Four years ago, a 40 year old man, Michael Devlin, of Potosi, Missouri, stole a 9 year old boy from his home, raped and tortured him fiendishly for 4 years before being arrested. This event would be explained as follows by some Christians: "Of course, we can't understand such things, but God is sovereign, so that means this was God's will. In some mysterious way, God will be glorified through this event." Then God was complicit in this horror, and that makes God more of a monster than Michael

Devlin. How could that little boy, Shawn Hornbeck, or his parents, or you and I, ever love and trust God if it is true that God willed that experience?

Do you believe the Bible is the revelation of the true God? The Bible says God is not the author of sin. Why did God give us the Ten Commandments if it is His will that we murder, rape, lie, and steal? Did you ever break one of the Commandments? Did you then say, "Well, I couldn't help myself. God overwhelmed me and forced me to do it." But the Bible says, "*He who says, I know Him, and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.*" (1 John 2:3) The Bible also says, "*God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.*" (1 John 1:5) Darkness represents everything evil in the Bible. John tells us that there is no evil - none, not any - in God. The Bible says the devil came to steal, kill, and destroy; not God! The Bible says, "*Every good and perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*" Then why did God allow the Holocaust? Why did God permit that kidnapping and rape? If He is all-powerful, why didn't He stop the awful things that have happened in your life, or in the life of those you love?

Because He could not. God gave dominion of the earth to man. God gave freedom of will to man. Because of His self-limitation, He cannot take back our freedom of choice. God grieved, He suffered, with that little boy. And the Son of God said, "For those who hurt these little ones, it would be better for them to have a millstone tied around their necks and be drowned in the sea." It was not God's will. The Holocaust was not His will, nor the bad things that were done to you, or that you did to others.

Though God was in no way responsible for these evil things, nor for our evil choices, He has chosen to redeem and rescue us from them. Only if we can believe that "*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself,*" can we settle this question of the goodness of God.

Maybe someone needs to repent for your harsh judgments of God, for blaming Him, hating Him in your heart - or at least feeling ambivalent toward Him. "Lord, forgive us for believing the devil, the liar, when he whispers to us that You are source of all the evil in the world. We repent. Give us hearts to believe that You are like Jesus. Amen."

## **THE SPIRIT OF SUICIDE**

Art Mathias teaches that the ultimate expression of self-condemnation is suicide. He received a phone call from another state. A lady said, "I am going to kill myself if you can't help me!" He asked her, "Why do you hate yourself so much?" She told him she had an abortion in the past and could not forgive herself. (Art says abortion is a common cause of much self-hatred and suicide.) He led her through steps of forgiving others and forgiving herself. He says many people cannot say, "I forgive myself." He also explained that self-rejection and self-hatred is sin, and he led her to repent. He had her renounce spirits of suicide and death, and she was set free from the immediate danger of suicide. But he pointed out that she needs a great deal more ministry to get where she needs to be.

A lady who is visiting her friend in Grand Junction just dropped in on my Wednesday night seminar at my local church. She is one of the refugees from New Orleans who was displaced by Hurricane Katrina and now lives in Houston. Her story was all too typical: she never knew her father, was blamed by her mother and family for being born, so she

developed a shame-based identity, married a terribly abusive man, and felt that dying was the only thing that could bring her freedom. I led her through steps of ministry and then looked in her eyes and told her: "I give you permission to leave that man until and unless he repents and changes." She said, "Oh, thank you," and started weeping. Then I learned that when she was a young woman she had been a member of a cult that forced her to marry a man, and that relationship had also been a disaster. I led her through forgiveness, broke the ungodly soul-ties to that man and that cult, and there was a strong manifestation as the spirits left her. Glory to God! Our compassion for people is not going to help them unless we know that Christ has also given us His power and authority to set them free.

### QUOTES

- "One of the names or titles of Jesus is, "Desire of the Nations." He is what the nations need and desire, they just don't know it."
- "Jesus Christ is the exact image of the Father. Any doctrine or theology you believe about God that doesn't line up with the character and teaching of Jesus must be questioned."
- "The Kingdom of God is within you. What is real inside us is released and transforms the world around us. Thus, Jesus calmed the storm because of the peace in His heart. Peter's shadow healed people."
- "125 times in the Psalms, David said, 'I will.' 'I will arise,' 'I will praise God,' 'I will humble myself,' etc. We give never-ending commands to little children: 'Don't touch that,' 'Don't run in the street,' 'Don't put that in your mouth.' As the child matures, we trust their wisdom more and more. God is not going to tell us every decision to make. 'Don't drink that,' 'Don't watch that,' 'Go and do that.' He stands back and watches us say, 'I will obey what I know is right in this situation.' Yes, we must listen to the Spirit, but God didn't give us free will so that we could be puppets."
- "When Jesus says we live by every word that comes from the mouth of God, He is not talking about every word that came from the mouth of God. Jesus also said, 'My sheep know my voice.' Only the living Word can rightly interpret the written Word. The letter without the Spirit is dead."

### PASSION

Bill Johnson said Christianity is supposed to be known by its passion, not its discipline. The prophet told the King of Judah to strike the ground with a handful of arrows (a prophetic action relating to the coming battle with ancient enemies). The King struck the ground only three times instead of five or six times, and the prophet was angry. He said, "Because of your action, your army will have only a little success in the battle, and your enemies will arise and attack you in coming days." Because of the King's lack of passion, it cost the entire nation (the congregation) a great victory! A sobering word for pastors, presidents, governors, generals, bosses, principals, and fathers.

Christ's suffering and sacrifice has long been known as His "passion." That word denotes His amazing love for the Father, and for you and me. That, of course, is what

Mel Gibson titled his movie, The Passion of the Christ. What Christ did certainly appeared foolish to most men.

Passion causes people to burn in unreasonable ways. A certain woman came, weeping, to Jesus. She had in hand a bottle of perfume worth a year's wages. She poured in out on His head and feet! Irrational! Stupid! The disciples were incensed. Jesus did not reprove her. He bragged on her! You can't have passion and the respect of men.

I just met my friends, Mike and Edith Wuertenberg, at McDonald's a few mornings ago. They consider themselves to be average Christians. I have known Edith for 25 years or more, and I met Mike when he was assistant chaplain at the prison in Delta about 10 years ago. Mike then moved to Rollins, Wyoming, where he was a prison chaplain and had a small church. Edith's husband of many years died. After some time she met Mike, and eventually they married. About 2 years ago, Edith heard the Lord say, "I did not call Mike to be a chaplain and pastor, I called him to be a missionary." She told Mike what she heard. Her words confirmed the call in his own heart. He resigned his jobs, they sold their home and gave the money to the poor, and in 6 weeks they were in Uganda, Africa! Just average Christians. But they have passion! They are back in Colorado for the time being, having run out of money, waiting for God's orders and provision.

The actions of Mike and Edith were totally irrational, don't you agree? Bill Johnson said, "If you're cautious, everyone around you will call you wise, you just won't move many mountains." Mike and Edith saw God save scores of Ugandans, saw people healed and set free, and their missionary life has just started. They are going through a test at this time, but they are totally at peace. They will see God move in amazing ways, and they will move mountains! I believe it with all my heart.

The church at Laodicea offended the Lord mightily because they had lost their first love. If a man fell passionately in love with a woman, but she treated him with coldness and indifference, that would pretty much end the relationship. The Lord loves you passionately. How are you treating Him?