

Live to Overcome Sin and Do the Will of God • 1 Peter 4:1-6

Sin is addictive. Even though we know sin is bad for us and those around us, we keep thinking and doing bad things. We want to be loving and kind and generous and just and moral but we turn around and say and do unloving, unkind, greedy, unjust and immoral things.

As Christians we know that to get right with God for eternity we must commit to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord in order to ultimately have our sins forgiven and be guaranteed a place in heaven. But how do we live holy lives here and now?

Think of it this way. During your teens you rebelled against your parents, saying and doing everything that was contrary to what they taught and believed. You resented their love. You ran away from home. You stole their money and rejected their values. You pretty much hated them. You even changed your name so you wouldn't be associated with them any more.

Recently they have reached out to you. They brought you back home again. They paid to have your name legally changed back. They set up a trust fund for you from which you can withdraw significant amounts of money. The relationship is restored. Except last night you fell back into old habits. You found your dad's wallet and stole twenty dollars out of it. Then at 2 o'clock this morning you opened the window, climbed out and ran away from home just like you did before. This is crazy, especially now that you're 52 years old!

Christians sometimes do the same thing. We get right with God through accepting Jesus as Savior. Our sins are eternally forgiven and we are given a trust fund with a deed to heaven secured in it. Yet we start sneaking out on God and returning to old sinful patterns.

St. Peter must have had the same problem. My guess is that it was out of his personal experience that he wrote to us and gave us Number 13 of his 20 principles on successful living in tough times. The principle is this: Live to overcome sin and to

do the will of God. Here is how he explained it in I Peter 4:1-6:

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached, even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.

Start out by adopting the attitude of Jesus. Jesus was really against sin. In fact, he was so much against sin that he was willing to die in order to deal with it. Jesus saw sin for what it is—temporarily appealing but ultimately destructive. Sin is truly bad stuff. It saps our souls, hurts our bodies, destroys relationships, breaks up marriages and alienates us from God. That is why Peter wrote in I Peter 4:1,

“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude (that Jesus had), because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.”

The American people were so offended by the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, that we were willing to pay enormous costs to stop it from happening again. So far it has cost billions of dollars, changed security procedures just about everywhere and cost the lives of American men and women

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soldiers. Our attitude is that we will pay any price and suffer any pain to stop terrorism. We just don't want our lives controlled by terrorism ever again.

Jesus felt even more strongly against sin. He hates sin and hates what sin does to people. He was willing to die on the cross to stop sin. There is no doubt about his attitude toward sin.

If we really want to break a sin habit, the place to start is by hating the sin the way Jesus hates sin. No rationalization. No justification. No calling it by a nicer name. No more excuses. Just call sin "sin" and hate it the way Jesus hates it.

Jesus' attitude led to Jesus' action. He suffered in order to stop sin. When Christians have Jesus' attitude we may suffer as well. In Jesus' case suffering turned out for enormous good. The same thing can happen with us.

The Bible teaches that all suffering in this world is because of sin. Sin is like a virus that has permeated everyone and everything. In computer language, it has corrupted every file and every program in the entire human network.

If there were no sin we wouldn't have wars, racism, injustice, poverty, cancer, divorce, immorality, substance addiction, crime or anything evil in our world. We all suffer every day of our lives because of the pervasive contamination of sin either directly or indirectly.

When we adopt the attitude of Jesus toward sin we are done with it. That doesn't mean we are instantly perfect and stop all sinning. But it does mean that every time we suffer from sin we are more convinced we don't want anything more to do with sin.

When you go through a divorce, are mistreated at work, are the victim of a crime or are in pain from an illness—hate the sin that is behind it all. Just as Jesus' suffering fought against sin, let our suffering shape our attitudes and turn us against sin. The practical side of this isn't easy to say but it is true: Our suffering helps us overcome sin because the more we suffer the more we want nothing to do with the sin that is behind all suffering. It is a positive benefit of suffering.

Some people don't adopt Jesus' attitude toward sin. When they suffer they aren't turned off by sin, they are turned against God. They don't sin less; they sin more. They don't get better; they get worse.

Just as Jesus' suffering fought against sin, may your suffering fight against sin: ". . . *since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.*"

Less sin is good, but it's not good enough. Even if we could get rid of all the bad stuff in our lives—so what? All that does is bring us up to zero and who wants life's total to be zero? The real goal of life should be to do good . . . to do the will of God. So Peter writes in I Peter 4:2, "*As a result, (the Christian) does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.*"

Peter talks about the rest of our earthly lives and raises the question of what we're going to do with them. Recently I read about an internet website that will calculate how long you are going to live. You go to the site and answer a series of questions about age, gender, health and whether or not you smoke, drink, exercise, etc. The site then calculates when you are going to die and provides a countdown service that you can keep running. Of course, the website can't be exact nor does it take into consideration auto accidents, Category 5 tornadoes or undiagnosed diseases. But, you get the idea. I'm told that it is a little disconcerting to watch the remaining minutes, hours and days of your life click away. The truth in this is that we all have a limited amount of time left and need to decide what to do with it.

The New Testament says not to fill what time you have left with living out evil desires. Do something good with whatever you have left. Absence of evil is never enough for Christians. We want to do the will of God. The Old Testament prophet Micah asked and answered the question of what God wants us to do in Micah 6:8: "*And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*" Hooray for those who avoid sin. But never stop there. Do good. Act justly. Love mercy. Be humble before God.

What "good" would God like to have happen in your life? What would please God where you work or go to school? What would be God's will for your neighborhood? If God could have anything happen to the poor people where you live,

what would that be? What is God’s dream and how could you make it come true? Answer those questions and then say, “God, with whatever is left of the reducing number of days and hours that are mine I will commit to do what you want done.” As the clock of life ticks down, the Christian “*does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.*”

Peter writes on, tackling a problem faced by every biblical writer, and that is dealing with the tension between stating the principle and giving specifics. If only the principle is stated then some people ignore it. If specifics are listed some people get legalistic and argumentative. Let me give you some examples.

From the beginning of the Bible God taught a Sabbath principle of one day of rest. Many people ignored it and worked seven days a week, so God gave a commandment (one of the top Ten) to keep the Sabbath day holy. Then people want to know if that’s midnight-to-midnight or sunset-to-sunset. And, what if your cow gets sick? Is it okay to help your cow on our day off? So, Jesus didn’t ratify the Sabbath commandment in the New Testament. Then people started working seven days a week again. The argument moved away from the principle to the specific.

The same thing happened with money. God blessed us and he wants us to be generous in blessing others. God wants us to give money to him and his cause. Legalists wanted to know how much and God said 10%. Then they insisted on knowing if that is 10% of the gross or the net. Come on! Let’s just be generous to God!

Then there is the topic of sex. God wants us to enjoy sexual relations within a marriage relationship. The principle of morality is clear and powerful. But we want to know exactly how far we can go without getting married. Is significant physical intimacy okay or do we have to limit it to holding hands? God wants us to have a heart for him and his will that causes us to pursue sexual purity that pleases God. It’s not all that hard to figure out.

Peter fleshes out the principle of living to overcome sin and do the will of God in I Peter 4:3-6:

For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.

So Peter gets specific. But don’t read this like a legal contract or a criminal code. He is telling his readers that many of them used to live like pagans. They remembered it well. They went to lots of parties where they were drunk, sexually promiscuous and totally wild. They were out of control. The term “detestable” refers to behavior that was illegal even under Roman law and Roman laws could be pretty loose when it came to sex, alcohol and violence.

Peter is telling us not to live like that. Just don’t be like that. Stay sober. Be moral. Quit the wild stuff. Most of his readers then and most Christians now know exactly what he meant.

But what about the old party buddies, those we used to do all this with? They are going to think something is wrong with us. To them it is strange not to lust and drink and run wild. Who do you

think you are? Don’t you want to be cool? Don’t you want to have fun?

Pagan friends can actually get abusive. They say mean things, play dirty practical jokes and start rumors because they can’t stand the idea of someone adopting a different lifestyle from theirs. And this hurts us. We feel rejected. We want to be friends. After all, they may be our lifelong bud-

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dies, our relatives and friends, our fraternity brothers and sorority sisters, our co-workers. These are people we want to like us.

After a long hard day at a business conference, after a hot summer softball game, at the end of a hard-fought election, on prom night or after commencement—we don't want to be left out when our gang goes partying. So we must decide what we are going to do. Peter tells us we should live to overcome sin and do the will of God.

We are all going to be held accountable for what we decide and what we do. Someday God will make a judgment on us all—pagans and Christians alike. For some, it is in the here and now—quick and swift and obvious. For others it may not come until the end of a lifetime. But one thing is for sure and that is that God judges us all.

Peter finishes this principle by remembering Christians who have already died because they stood for what was right and sought to overcome sin and do the will of God. This was a sensitive subject in the first century church because there were Christians who chose against sin and for God's will who were killed as a consequence. But this wasn't just for the first century.

It was my privilege to moderate a symposium in Washington, D.C., on the persecution of Christians in North Korea and the Sudan. There were many presenters including a half dozen members of Congress, specialists on human rights violations and a representative of the White House who read a letter signed by the President of the United States.

Approximately 2.1 million people have died in the Sudan, most of them simply because of their Christian faith. The government shoots them from helicopters and stops food supplies so they starve to death by the hundreds of thousands.

In North Korea, Christians are tortured so badly that some of them have tried to escape by crossing the border into China. But Chinese soldiers hunt down these Christians. They put wires

through their noses and pull them back across the border into North Korea where they are sentenced to a minimum of seven years in terrible concentration camps for re-education to purge them of their Christianity. Many die.

So, the words of I Peter 4:6 are not just words for a long time ago in the first century, they are words for the twenty-first century, too: "*For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.*" God isn't going to let the persecutors get away with these things. God isn't going to let martyrs go unrewarded. God is going to judge us all, the living and the dead, those who heard the gospel and believed and those who didn't.

Don't buy into the deception that people don't have a choice. We all have a choice on what we believe and how we behave. Pagans chose to sin. Christians choose not to sin.

Live like a Christian. As the clock of your life ticks off seven more days this week, live to overcome sin and do the will of God.

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