

Keeping Sin Down

We will be discussing two different passages (two sides of one coin) in this chapter: 1 Corinthians 6:18 and Romans 13:14. As you turn there, let me ask you this: Do you sense inside of your life, inside of your heart, a powerful, indwelling sin that repeatedly re-emerges in your life to take away your joy, rob you of your intimacy with Jesus Christ, defile your conscience, and eliminate all spiritual vitality that you might have previously had?

If your answer to that is yes, then you are a typical human—in fact, a typical Christian. We call these “besetting sins”: the sins that haunt us week in and week out; the sins that we were dealing with in high school and are still dealing with today. This sermon series is all about dealing with these besetting sins.

And if you're a thinking person, you may have observed that in this society and in this day and age, it would be a rarity if your besetting sins weren't to some degree sexual. This sermon series has been about fighting sin in general but fighting sexual temptation in particular.

We call this series “Mortify the Flesh: Be killing sin before it kills you.” Some inspiration for this comes from the book named *The Mortification of Sin* by an old Puritan named John Owen. I strongly encourage you to read a modernized version (because the original language may be hard to get through). I have been greatly helped by it, and the next few things that I say are pulled right out of it.

To mortify sin does not mean disguising sin. We are not talking about giving some sort of external show to prove that we have conquered sin, while inwardly still burning. That's not mortification of sin. We're not talking about diverting sin either. There are plenty of people who live sensual lifestyles who come into the church, take on the dynamics of the church community, and become self-righteous, arrogant, and moralistic.

We're not talking about going from one style to the other style of sin. And we're also not talking about developing inside of your heart a “sweet, gentle, and nice” demeanor. Plenty of people are born with gentle, timid, quiet temperaments. And God bless them for it.

But then there are other people who are born with abrasive, rough, type-A, bulldozer, grumpy temperaments, and they're always going to deal with that. And what I do not mean—and what the Bible does not mean—by “mortification of sin” is for all the “grumpy” people to cultivate inside of them a “demeanor of niceness.” It's much deeper than that.

We're not talking about temperament. It's great if you have a leg up on everybody else when it comes to being nice to others because of your personality. But there are individuals who have grumpy, abrasive temperaments and are fighting and mortifying

sin and they are closer to Jesus than those who were born with “nice” temperaments but are not fighting. We’re not talking about cultivating a “nice church lady” demeanor.

We’re also not talking about destroying sin utterly. That is prophesied in the scriptures to occur when Jesus Christ makes his presence directly known on earth. It is at that moment, when Jesus slams down on this earth, splitting the sky, that sin will flee and all wrongs will be righted. Sin will be utterly annihilated at that point, and no sooner than that.

What we are talking about—and this is important to remember—is weakening sin, weakening and subduing the flesh—keeping it in bondage. They say to never kick a man when he is down. But because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the flesh—that old man—is down.

But he’s not yet *utterly* dead; he has not yet breathed his last. And our job is to kick him while he’s down, every day. You don’t owe him anything else. You don’t owe him food, shelter, a shoulder to cry on, or an opportunity to express himself. You owe him a kick in the ribs.

When we talk about the mortification of sin, we’re talking about keeping sin in a weak state so that you can enjoy fellowship with Jesus Christ *in this life*—keeping it so subdued that you can enjoy a clean conscience, a pure heart and an assurance and confidence in your salvation, even in this dark world, which the light has dawned on.

You can enjoy those things in this dark world, even before sin is utterly destroyed, if you will daily mortify sin. And we’re talking in this chapter about finding a particular, practical strategy for doing that. The Bible gives us strategies for kicking, fighting, subduing, enslaving, and weakening the flesh. And we’ve looked at quite a few.

We’ve even looked at *how* we’re to go about fighting. We’re supposed to fight not like a man, but like a son. We’re to fight based off of the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And in this chapter we’re going to get a strategy that we’ll pursue as a church. And it’s a two-sided coin of a strategy.

The Coin of Strategy

One side is in 1 Corinthians 6:18 where Paul says to “flee sexual immorality.” You flip that coin over and you find in Romans 13:14, “Make no provision for the flesh.” If we put these two things together, what we have is a strategy of “Don’t *feed* the flesh; rather, *flee*.” *Flee* the sexual immorality; don’t *feed* sexual immorality.

So first we start with *fleeing*. In 1 Corinthians 6:18, Paul is encouraging us to make use of the age-old military tactic of retreat. A retreat is not hands in the air, willy nilly, helter skelter, screaming, every man for himself. That’s a bloodbath; that’s a slaughter. Instead, a retreat is something that an army practices.

In fact, in a retreat, an army has a predetermined fallback position that has previously been fortified. When they call the retreat, the army retreats in an organized, strategic manner to preserve as much life as possible, so that they can live to fight another day. And when we are engaging battle in this world, sexual temptation in particular, the spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:41).

And the power of sexual temptation is immense. It is more immense than other temptations, because it is not only spiritual or psychological; it involves your body chemistry, your very biology. And Paul knows it is so strong that the only tactic that can conquer it is the retreat.

You win by fleeing; you win victory and conquer by disengaging and withdrawing when it comes to sexual temptation. But that disengagement is a strategic one. It's not an immature, "Sex is gross, TMI." It is a strategic, systematic, planned, community-predetermined at times, individually practiced and rehearsed strategy of retreat.

I'm going to try to walk you through that. The things that I'm going to say cannot be applied in every situation exactly the same. While I'm giving the strategy, you're going to think, "Well, what about this? What about that?" Because we're all sinners. But you cannot make the logical fallacy of rejecting the general truth because you have thought of some specific situation where that general truth does not apply.

We're getting the general principle here; how it is applied in specific circumstances—that's why you're in a community group, right? That's why you're in a church and you faithfully participate in the body, so that you know how to apply this in every particular situation.

Right now I'm giving you the general strategy. We have to start with going back into our pasts. The first thing we are going to do is gather intel on the enemy and how it attacks and where it has proven to be exceedingly strong in your life and where it has proven to be exceedingly weak. In other words, in the past, where have you fallen? Where have you been defeated?

Now, this can be dangerous, because to remember your past can be a source of condemnation and accusation. But remember that we are fighting like sons. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). If he has begun a work in you, he will finish it (Philippians 1:6). He will never leave you or forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6). There's nothing that can stand between him and his love for you (Romans 8:31-39).

So I want you to remember just for a moment when, where, how and in what circumstances—and under the influence of what substances, maybe—you have fallen prey to sexual temptation. Where in your personal past has sin and sexual temptation proven to be exceedingly strong and you proven to be exceedingly weak?

Do you have those moments in your mind? It probably wasn't 10am on a Monday morning while you were faithfully engaged in your vocation. It was probably more like on the weekend when you were in a circle of friends, smoking pot, or something like that. Where have you fallen prey to sin in the past?

We're going to put that on our map. Any time an army invades an enemy's territory, they find out through reconnaissance where the enemy is the strongest. And they put that on the map and develop a strategy with that information. So have you put it on your map—where you've fallen, where you've been strong?

Now what you're going to do is predetermine (while it's safe and you're in friendly territory) that you're going to avoid those strongholds. It's that simple. You're going to look into the future and see a particular set of circumstances colliding. In the past when that particular set of circumstances materialized, you have sinned. So you're going to do something revolutionary; you're going to *not* do that. You're not going to go there. You're not going to allow that set of circumstances to materialize in your life again.

Is that complicated? No. You might say, "But that's not very spiritual." Well, then, you have the wrong definition of "spiritual." That is a plan that takes into consideration the weakness of the flesh and the immense power of sexual temptation. You're going to be accused of being a legalist; I guarantee it. You may be accusing me of that right now.

You're going to be accused of being a religious fanatic, but you're going to say for your own self, "I've gathered some research; I've gathered some intel, and when I allow that particular set of circumstances, 9 times out of 10 I sin against Jesus. So I'm going to avoid that." That is so practical. But I think sometimes we don't do this because we love our sin, so we allow the opportunity for it.

And if it's a particular person that happens to be that "set of circumstances" to avoid, who maybe brings out the worst in you, you might say, "But don't they need Jesus, too?" First of all, please don't use Jesus as an excuse for you to entertain sin. Secondly, just give their phone number or address to someone else, and let them take it from there.

There are other ways to reach out to someone than to put yourself in their presence at 1am on a Friday morning with two glasses of wine. There are other ways to engage them with Jesus. There are some revolutionary wisdom principles that we'll be discussing regarding that.

Predetermined Reflexive Response

But after having said that, even if you do the very best you can in your life to avoid all the known dangers of sexual temptation, it's going to get you. It's not going to kill you, necessarily, but you will be tempted. The Bible says clearly that temptations must come. Jesus himself was tempted. God uses temptation in our lives to make us stronger.

For example, it's going to happen no matter how many building codes you follow, no matter how many fire marshal expectations you get, no matter how much study you have done, no matter how great your builder is, etc.; no matter what, if you operate a school, you still have to participate in what is called a fire drill. "But I've been approved by the fire marshal, and I had the world's greatest electrician. I've avoided all known fire hazards." You still have to perform fire drills because lightning can strike.

No matter how much intel you gather, no matter how much you avoid particular circumstances happening in your life, no matter how much you avoid sexual temptation, you will be surprised by it. And therefore you must have predetermined—that means *before* it happens—a reflexive response so that when it does occur you know exactly what to do right in that moment.

Athletes practice to gain muscle memory so that in the heat of contest they know exactly what to do. They don't even have to think about it; it just happens. The same thing can be said of soldiers; they have to know how respond in high pressure situations. It becomes second nature to them; it's a reflexive response.

Schools have escape routes; they're on the doors. Every quarter they drill; when the alarm is pulled, in case of an emergency fire, everyone stands, files out, goes out the predetermined doors and into the predetermined fallback positions, which are safe from fire, and do other predetermined things like take roll and make sure everyone is alive.

And they practice this every quarter so that when a fire happens and everyone's under panic and they're surprised by it, just by reflex, by muscle memory, they immediately know what to do and where to go so that they don't fall—so that they don't die. This implicates your neck muscles, men—the neck muscles that can control where your gaze is.

"But this is not very spiritual, Pastor. You're supposed to talk about our hearts." Well, you have the wrong definition of spirituality, first of all. The Christian life is about the heart *and* about neck muscles. And we are to take these neck muscles, which belong to Jesus Christ and have been purchased by his blood, and make them a living sacrifice by disciplining them and subduing them with a predetermined reflexive response, so that if and when we look once, we don't look twice. Just by muscle memory.

We have this predetermined reflexive response so that when the temptation comes, we probably won't even know about it. It will be second nature to not look twice. We must discipline our eyeballs. So many men are lackadaisical and sloppy about this. "Let the goods time roll" is not a good philosophy when it comes to disciplining your eyeballs and your neck.

If you tell your eyeballs and neck, "Let the good times roll," you're going to be in for defeat. You must bring to that *laissez faire* philosophy a touch of sobriety—a touch of wartime mentality—that says to the neck, "You *will* not look a second time"; that says to

the eyeballs, “No, eyeballs, we have a drill. When the alarm is sounded, we look this way, not that way.”

And we practice that. We train in that. We discipline our bodies. We mortify them. How do you apply this to your own life? I’m not sure, exactly. I’ll tell you one predetermined reflexive response that I’ve cultivated in my own life, and perhaps that can give you an idea about what you can do in yours.

I get a lot of friend requests from strangers. As a pastor, people like to go to my Facebook page to “scope out the church.” And that’s fine. Though I will click accept and let them come see what the church is all about through my wall, sometimes I’ll get a friend request from someone who, lo and behold, doesn’t have any female friends. And their account was just opened last week and their name is “Sugar Spice” or something like that.

Muscle memory. Click. Ignore. Defriend. Don’t scroll. Defriend. It has to be reflexive. It has to be a predetermined reflexive response so that in the heat of the moment you’ll automatically know what to do. And you might cut out some good people, but it’s worth it.

Have a predetermined reflexive response so that when the surprise temptation comes, you can flee. This is what it means to flee sexual immorality. We flee by identifying strongholds in our lives, where the enemy has proven to be strong and we’ve proven to be weak, and we avoid those and live to fight another day.

And we develop a predetermined reflexive response so that when the surprise comes we know exactly what to do. Joseph was a great example of this, wasn’t he? Remember Potiphar’s wife? He avoided a particular person. He didn’t feel the need to “evangelistically date” Potiphar’s wife. He didn’t feel the need to “talk to her about Jesus.” He gave her phone number to his pastor. (Not really, but you get it.) He changed his routine. He avoided the temptress. He avoided any unnecessary temptation.

But in the course of his vocation, being a righteous young man, he was surprised by temptation. But he had a predetermined reflexive response so that he immediately knew what to do, and he fled. He ran away so fast that all Potiphar’s wife could do was grab a hold of his cloak.

All sin had on Joseph was false accusation; that’s where we need to be. Imagine the church that is pure and chaste. I’m not talking about the church that has been pure and chaste since birth. I’m talking about the ones whose grievous sins have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ who have actually come out of that darkness and had victory over those sins.

And now they are disciplining their eyeballs, their necks, their fingers, their legs, and their feet so that they don’t fall back into that temptation. Imagine the church that is generous with their money and greedy with their beds. *That* is a church that can be a

“community within a community”—a city on a hill in this world that is dominated by the sexual revolution.

Pity the Fool

In Proverbs 7:6-9, Solomons says almost the exact same thing (have a predetermined reflexive response) to his sons. Solomon had fallen prey to sexual temptation and he learned from it and lived to be a wise man, regarding his good advice. He says, “For at the window of my house, I have looked out through my lattice...” (v.6).

And you know what Solomon saw, looking out of his window? “And I have seen among the simple...” (v.7). That means among the “stupid.” The naive. Those who think that their flesh is invincible. This is the young man who drives about 120 mph on his motorcycle without a helmet.

He’s “invincible.” But really, he’s simple. He’s naive. He thinks he’s immortal, but he’s a dumb ox. Solomon is looking outside of his window and he sees this “dumb ox,” this young man among the simple, and says, “I have perceived among the youths a young man lacking sense” (v.7). And you know what it means to be a young man who lacks sense, to be stupid, to be a dumb ox, to be a fool, to be naive? This is what it looks like. He is “passing along the street near her corner” (v.8).

He’s not saying, “I have perceived a simple man who keeps sleeping with prostitutes.” Of course that would be obviously wrong. He’s saying, “I perceive a simple man who keeps walking by her door. Down her street. What a fool!” He does not yet know the power of sexual immorality. He does not yet know the weakness of his own flesh. He hasn’t yet experienced it; he’s a fool.

He apparently will not learn from others’ bad examples; he apparently has to learn the hard way for himself. He is passing on the street near her corner, taking the road to her house at night, in darkness (v.9). Wrong place, wrong time, at night, down a particular street. (You may say, “But this is not very spiritual, Pastor!” No, it *is* spiritual.)

And then he says, “Oh, son, listen to me and be attentive to the words of my mouth. Let not your heart turn aside to her ways” (Proverbs 7:24-25). “Okay, Pastor, now, that’s what I’m talking about. What we want to do is get into the heart and make sure our heart’s not turned to her ways. Now *that’s* spiritual.”

True, we want to make sure of that. But look at the very next line of verse 25: “Do not stray into her paths.” That is very material and practical. He’s saying one of the means to not letting your heart stray is to not walk down that particular road, to not go by that particular door, to not go by that corner, and to not do it at that time of night. It’s very practical. Think about where sin might be proven exceedingly strong and you exceedingly weak and avoid those places. Very practical.

In Proverbs 5:8 he says, “Keep your way far from her.” Give her phone number to someone else. Don’t feel the need to “evangelistically date” her; don’t use Jesus as an excuse to give opportunity to the flesh. “Keep your way far from her.” She doesn’t need you; she needs Jesus.

Quit being her counterfeit savior, and quit letting her be your counterfeit savior. “Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house” (Proverbs 5:8). He doesn’t say what many of the church say, in trying not to be “legalistic,” “Just don’t sleep with each other.” No, he says, “Don’t go near the door of her house. There’s a cliff there, simpleton, and you need to have a few railings before you go living on the edge or you’re destined to fall.”

Now the other side of this coin is found in Romans 13:14, and it is to “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” So on one hand, Paul is saying, “Flee sexual immorality” (1 Corinthians 6:18), but on the other hand, he’s saying, “Don’t provide for it, either. Don’t feed it.”

So the strategy is, “Flee it, don’t feed it.” Don’t provide it room and board; don’t give it a shoulder to cry on. Don’t give it an opportunity to express itself or to actualize itself. You don’t owe it anything; don’t provide for it. Don’t give it an opportunity. When you establish certain protocols and strategies and disciplines in your life—certain habits, predetermined reflexive responses, and schedules and routines—you’re going to be called a legalist; you’re going to be called a fanatic.

And I’d love to talk to you more about that. But you know for *you*, it’s not legalism. You’re not trying to earn anything from God in this; you know your penalty has been paid on the cross. These certain protocols and strategies are how you express loving devotion to God, knowing full well your flesh’s weakness and sin’s power.

Need for a System

In particular, there is a stage between “single” and “married,” and it is crucial to have a strategy for getting from point A to point B, especially because the universal Church does not have a united front on this. What do we even call that stage of in between single and married?

Not engagement. That’s the season between saying that you want to be married and getting married. No, I mean that stage where two people say, “I think that one day in the future we could get married—share a home, share a bed, have children together.” You know what the problem is? The church doesn’t have a unified name for it.

There’s no system or universal strategy for moving people from single to married. We used to, a long time ago, but the church inside a world that is enslaved to the sexual revolution doesn’t have a system. We don’t know what a boy and a girl should do to get from point A to point B without indulging the flesh.

We don't know what strategies they should take. We don't know what predetermined reflexive responses they should engage in. We don't know how to practice or train. We don't know what to call it. We don't have a system. And so because evangelicalism as a whole does not have a united system for moving singles to marriage in a faithful, pure way, you had better come up with one with the help of your parents, pastors, and community group.

You had better set some protocols, engage in some strategies, train yourself in predetermined reflexive responses and mark on the map the strongholds that you must avoid if you're going to flee sexual immorality and not feed it. Call it "dating," call it "courting," call it "dourting"—call it "cating." But you better have something. If you just respond with immature, willy-nilly running for the hills, you're toast.

But you might say, "I don't want to be a legalist. I want to walk on the edge." Well, you're a simpleton. You're a fool. As a father of a teenage girl—who does not own a shotgun—I don't want to *have* to own a shotgun—what I want is for her to be able to observe when suitors are trying to lead her astray.

I want her to be able to see that her suitor has planned a date in a private, comfortable location that is perfect for horizontal activity and has set up a playlist of soft love songs—when normally he listens to heavy metal or something—and has flowers and perfume in the air and has planned it perfectly around the full moon, etc.

I want her to be able to see through that and say, "You know we're not married, right? I want her to be able to see that he's planning foolishly and providing an opportunity for the flesh, even at the risk of sounding like a legalist or religious zealot. I wouldn't need a shotgun. She would have just shotgunned that right there.

I want her to be able to see that not only is he not fleeing from sexual immorality but he's providing an opportunity for the flesh. I want her to be able to see that he's giving it an opportunity to actualize and express itself in their lives and how foolish that is and say, "Let's not go there."

Come on, get wise. I wish evangelicalism had a set system we could all agree on and we knew what it was called and exactly what to do and it worked, but unfortunately, we live in a world that is dominated by the sexual revolution. Half the church is embroiled in the sexual revolution themselves and the other half is afraid to say anything because they don't want to offend anyone. Maybe our church will come up with something one day that can be applied gracefully and not legalistically. It is tough, but maybe one day.

Run for Dear Life

Finally, you say, "Pastor, I hear what you're saying. We're going to flee sexual temptation and we're not going to feed it. But don't we have to, at some point in time, face it? Go toe to toe and kill it? How is retreat a winning strategy? In any other military

situation, if all we ever do is run, eventually we are going to be caught. We can run, but we can't hide, Pastor!"

Well, you're wrong about that. You *can* run away indefinitely and not get caught. And let me tell you why. Romans 6:6(a) says this: "We know that our old self [that likes to embrace immorality] *was crucified* with Jesus." Notice the past tense. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ and hold onto the hope that is found in the gospel of Jesus Christ, then your old self, with all of its proclivities and tendencies, was—past tense—in some way nailed to the cross.

I do believe Paul is speaking here by analogy, that he's saying, "When you became a Christian, when you were converted, when the Holy Spirit came into your life, something happened inside of you spiritually, mysteriously. Something happened with your heart and your desires and your mind that took 'self' and put it on a cross. It was crucified there."

Why? "In order that the body of sin *might be brought* to nothing" (Romans 6:6b). Future tense. In order that the body of sin might one day be brought to nothing, annihilated, utterly destroyed. Why do you put someone on a cross? So that in about three to seven days, they die.

Why do you put someone on a cross? So that ultimately, they will be killed. But it takes time for them to bleed out and breath their last. In fact, in a crucifixion, people die of thirst or starvation before they die of anything else. When you put something on the cross, it doesn't immediately die.

"So that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Romans 6:6c). If it's on a cross, it can't bully you. It can't enslave you. It can't dominate you. And if you run, it can't catch you. You can run and you *can* hide and that *is* a winning strategy because the old self is nailed up on a cross, as by analogy.

He is bleeding out; he is down. The ref is counting. All you have to do is not let him back up. All you have to do is run; don't feed. Don't get him down from that cross. Don't nurse his wounds; don't bring him back to health. Don't give him room and board and a shoulder to cry on. Leave him on that cross, and every day you crucify the flesh.

If and when you do that, in light of the fact that Jesus Christ initiated your salvation by crucifying your flesh, and you daily live in that, continuing to participate in that crucifixion of the self, one day it will breathe its last, and it will presently be so weak that it won't ruin your joy, defile your conscience, or get in between your intimacy with Jesus Christ.

There's a promise in the gospel of Jesus Christ that if you will participate in what Jesus Christ has begun, he will finish it in the end. Don't feed it; flee it. And it will one day breathe its last. And it will presently be too weak to subdue and ruin you. And you won't have to be afraid.

What this also means is that if you're *not* in Jesus Christ, you can run, but you can't hide, because the chains haven't been broken. Your old self hasn't been nailed to the

cross; it's still strong and filled with spiritual vigor and can still dominate you. Don't believe the lie that you have to clean yourself up *before* you go to Jesus; no, we go to Jesus in order that we might be cleaned up.

Don't believe the lie that you have to somehow dominate the self and all its sinful tendencies and proclivities *before* you go to Christ; no, we go to Christ so that he might take it by the power of the Spirit and all the privileges of the gospel and nail it to the cross, and *then* you stand a fighting chance. So the thing for all of us to do is to turn to Christ, to be initially delivered or to be continually delivered from the power of the self.

Let's ask God for help with this:

"Jesus, we ask simply that you would give us grace and strength to implement these things that we've talked about. We have been told to gather intel on the enemy by seeing where we have been weak in the past and to avoid those circumstances. We pray that we would leave this chapter and actually do that. May we not be hearers of the word only, but doers.

"We pray, Father, that since we have heard that we must discipline our bodies to avoid certain circumstances and to develop reflexive responses so that when temptation comes, we don't fall, that we would actually do that. That we wouldn't let lunchtime fill our tummies and cloud our minds and our hearts and continue on in our "Let the good times roll" mentality.

"Many of us are planning and strategizing our parties and how we're going to eat and drink and what people we're going to hang out with and how we're going to 'make the most' of the weekend, and we're just making a whole lot of opportunity for the flesh. Rather, would we put that energy into planning and strategizing how we might *avoid* temptation, rather than providing it an opportunity?

"Would we add to our 'Good times roll' mentality a touch of sobriety, knowing that there is still darkness in this world and that the enemy still roams about, seeking whom he may devour? But may we also maintain joy and hope in the struggle, knowing that the light has already dawned, knowing that the time is already at hand, that you will finish what you have started, knowing that we are truly the ones that can say 'One day the good times *will* roll,' but not just yet. We ask this in Jesus Christ' name. Amen."