

Getting Particular

In this chapter, we continue in Romans 8. We have been talking about fighting sin in general. And I think it is incredibly important this day and age that we talk about fighting *sexual* sin in particular. I believe that Paul, when he talks about sex in the Bible, is using euphemisms, because he's writing letters to a church that does not have a fully developed nursery program, and they're reading those letters in public. We don't want to be perverted, but we also don't want to be prudish. Both of those are wrong, sinful, and unbiblical. So don't worry, I will be using euphemisms.

However, everything I say in this chapter can be applied to your particular fight with sin, whether it's with sexual temptation, the lust for power, the need for control, the need for other people's approval, or your own pride that demands to be recognized and to be given an outlet to show everyone how talented you really are. Whatever your besetting sin is, everything I say in this chapter can be applied to that.

But if you're wrestling with sexual temptation in particular, read carefully. In the last chapter, we looked at Solomon and learned from him that you must be killing sin or it will kill your legacy and everything that you ever worked for, as it did in Solomon's life. We also looked at Samson, and we saw that because he didn't guard his eyes, sin gouged them out. Sin will kill your body. Sin will take your life. Sin is currently plotting your destruction, and therefore you must fight sin diligently.

Now, in this chapter, we will talk not so much about strategies—we're going to get to that—but we will talk about the proper attitude of one who would kill sin successfully. If you don't have the right attitude, you have no choice but to lose. If you have the right attitude, you have no choice but to win.

Think about Joseph from the Old Testament. He was a handsome devil, as they say, and that's really an understatement. Joseph had it going on, and Joseph's boss's wife noticed him (Genesis 39). She was the quintessential desperate housewife: too much time on her hands, too much busybodying—too much Facebook time. Her job description wasn't fleshed out enough. She was idle, lazy, indulgent, etc.

And in an environment of laziness and "time on your hands"—and indulgence and leisure and money—there's always a problem with sexual temptation. (That's why it's in our society so bad.) Potiphar's wife has that problem, and she sets her eyes on Joseph. She sets her *appetite* and *ego* on Joseph. And Joseph, like "a good Christian young man," begins to employ strategies—successful strategies of avoiding sexual temptation. One of the most important ones is avoiding those individuals who are after you.

So he changes his routine. He doesn't walk down particular hallways; he certainly doesn't do it at certain times of day or night. He follows all the rules you might think of. He has developed a fully fleshed out courting system or dating system (or "dorting" system). He's done everything he possibly can to not be in a place where Potiphar's

wife can get him, but in the course of his job, she grabs a hold of him. And he employs the number-one tactic in resisting sexual temptation—the retreat.

There is no shame in retreating; the Bible says to flee sexual immorality. And he flees. He runs, and she runs after him so fast, she's able to get his robe off of him. So now she's got "evidence." It's always about ego, and because he insulted hers, she lies about him; she makes a false accusation.

That's the kind of church I want to be: a church of Joseph's, where sin has nothing on us but to lie about us. And sin is going to lie about us; the accuser of the brethren still lurks about. We need to be the kind of church fighting sin so successfully that we are above reproach; that we are not being killed and dominated by sin; that sin has nothing on us but to lie about us. But what is Joseph's strategy? Where does he get that sort of fortitude and power?

All in the Attitude

That's what this chapter is about: finding Joseph's key to success. And I believe it's in Joseph's attitude. It's in his mental framework, you might say. It's in his perspective of himself, others, and God. It's about attitude. In Romans 8:13, Paul talks about attitude.

Scene: The boxer comes into the stadium. What's playing on the radio? Maybe *Eye of the Tiger*. Perhaps a Phil Collins drum solo. What's playing on the radio as the boxer comes into the stadium? It's never something sweet and gentle. It's always something that pumps him up, right? His coach is pep-talking him, the radio announcer is pumping up the crowd, and the crowd's cheering. What's all this about?

It's about using external stimuli to come into his heart and change his attitude. It's about making him feel like a champ and not a chump. Because you know, if you play sports, that if you go into the ring or onto the field or court with a defeated attitude, you will be defeated. It's all about psyching yourself up and psyching your opponent out.

I believe that's analogous to our fight against sin. We're not just ginning up our emotional state, but we do need our perspectives changed by external stimuli. Paul talks about it starting in Romans 8:13-14: "For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the *Spirit* (that is, by the power of God residing inside of you and by all the privileges that come to you by the gospel of Jesus Christ, especially the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit), you put to death (kill, mortify) the deeds of the body, you will live. *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*"

"For" is the reason you can fight sin and win. "For you did not receive the *spirit* of slavery to fall back into fear." You didn't receive that when you got saved. Instead, "you have received the *Spirit* of adoption as sons, by whom we call '*Abba, Father!*'" (v.15). To get a little technical, you will see that the translators sometimes use capital S and

sometimes use little s for the same word: “spirit.” It’s the same word in Greek—*pneuma*, from which we get the word “pneumatic.”

The word *pneuma* in scripture, which is translated as “spirit,” can also be translated “breath,” “wind,” “Holy Spirit,” “your own spirit” or “attitude.” In other words, when we say that someone has a “gentle spirit,” we don’t mean that they have a demon or a “ghost of gentleness” inside of them; we mean that they have a gentle attitude.

Now, if we have the right understanding of the Holy Spirit, we know that the Holy Spirit is a gift from God for all those who are believers who comes into our hearts and begins to produce fruits of the Spirit. One of those fruits of the Spirit is gentleness. So when we say that a believer has a gentle spirit, what we mean is that they have the Holy Spirit, which has gone into their heart and has produced a spirit of gentleness—a gentle attitude, a gentle demeanor, a gentle approach to other people.

In Romans 8:15, Paul’s talking about two different demeanors. One is called “a spirit of slavery.” That means it’s an attitude like that of one who is a slave. It’s an attitude that is prone to falling back into fear. However, the attitude that comes from the Holy Spirit is “the spirit of adoption.” It’s like the attitude that a son has with a father. He doesn’t cower in fear but is rather bold and cries out “Daddy! *Abba!*”

The Mindset of a Son

So we have two different perspectives, or two different mindsets. If you have the wrong mindset, you have no choice but to lose in your battle against sin. If you have the right mindset, you have no choice but to win. Two people can be doing exactly the same thing externally, but the one with the spirit of slavery loses, and the one with the spirit of adoption wins. It’s all about the right attitude. In other words, Paul says, “Don’t ‘fight like a man.’ Fight like a *son*.”

We talked about “Why kill sin?” in the last chapter. In the next chapter, we’ll talk about strategies for killing sin. But it’s so very important (this is the crux of Christianity’s method of killing sin, as opposed to all other religions) that you kill it from the right perspective. You have to kill it with the right attitude or you won’t ever get any headway; you won’t ever win. If you miss this, you could be practicing what you think is Christianity but is really false religion.

Let’s talk about baseball for a bit. What’s the point? Ego, right? No, we’re not talking about high school baseball. I just mean *baseball*. Money? Not the major leagues. What’s the spirit of *baseball*? Think of the nostalgic pictures of kids playing in the streets. You play baseball for fun! It’s just a game. Why is your ego all wrapped up in it? Why is your identity all wrapped up in it? Why are you crushed? Why are you practicing so much that you sacrifice your life to it?

Imagine a boy named Johnny who's playing baseball. He's approaching the home plate to bat, and he's got it all down pat. He's got the stance, he's got his elbows the way they're supposed to be. He's knocking the mud off his cleats, he's spitting. And he looks back over his shoulder before he steps up to the bat, and he makes sure his dad is watching in the stands. He gets up to bat and his first pitch comes. *Bang!* Home run!

His head is held high. He's running slow. He's making sure everyone notices him. His eyes are lifted up. He's comparing himself with everyone else. He's running around all the bases. High fives. Then he goes up to the fence and grabs it, screaming at his dad: "Did you see that, Dad?! I hope you were watching this time. You know that birthday present you got me last week? Consider us even!"

The dad looks at him and he's confused. Most kids wouldn't say that out loud, but there is a perspective to that. That child is missing the point of what it means to be a son. The dad is bewildered, insulted, and embarrassed in front of the other parents, because, apparently, their relationship is quite messed up.

Now consider the next boy, Billy. He comes up to the plate, and he doesn't have all the swagger. He does not expect a good outcome. The pitch comes, and guess what: strike one, strike two, strike three. He holds his head down in despair and he walks up to his dad and says, "Okay, you can drop me off at the orphanage."

Once again, the kid doesn't know what it means to be a son. His relationship with his father, his belonging in the family, his sense of "home" and acceptance and everything that has to do with being father and son has nothing to do with how well he bats. He's missing the point of baseball. He's kind of ruining it. And he doesn't understand what it means to be a son. He has the wrong frame of mind. He has the wrong attitude.

And you can imagine that as each boy goes up to bat, one is filled with pride and arrogance and the other is filled with anxiety and fear. The way Paul describes these real feelings that we all have is with an analogy of slavery. He's not talking about the kind of slavery we had. He's talking about debt slavery. When you owed a debt you couldn't pay, you became someone's slave until you paid the debt. For us, the correlation might be employment. You have a *spirit* of employment. And it always fall into fear.

What's an employee afraid of? He's afraid of being terminated. Fired. In a sense, he's afraid of being disowned. So there is a feeling that we all have of being in a state of indebtedness to God, in a state of being estranged to him, of being illegitimate, and when we do well, it makes us put God in a corner as though he owes us. And when we do poorly, we are filled with anxiety and self-pity, and we turn from God in shame, all from a spirit of employment, a spirit of slavery.

This is the heart of all religions in this world except biblical Christianity. Every other religion feeds off of that fear and estrangement and feeling of illegitimacy. And it gives you a list of things to do to "get right with God" or it gives you the "path to take," "the

example to follow,” “the ladder to climb,” “the eightfold path,” or “the seven steps.” If you do it, things will go well, and God will owe you. If you don’t, you’re in trouble. And of course you can’t! Who can keep up with Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, or Buddha? No one, not morally or ethically.

Who can follow these saintly examples without feeling a little condemned? And so you try and you try harder. Those who do well are filled with arrogance and pride—Phariseeism—and look down on those who don’t do so well. And those who do poorly are filled with more and more fear. It feeds off that fear, that spirit of illegitimacy, and builds upon it a whole power structure.

But Paul says when you received Jesus Christ and were born again through the Holy Spirit, you didn’t get *that*. You were removed from that spirit of slavery. You were given a spirit or an attitude that is characterized by the type of attitude a son has toward a father. Into that spirit of fear comes the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were told not to do one thing. They weren’t told to abstain from that tree so that God would approve of them. They were told because God already approved of them. He loved them; he gave them the whole world. Then the devil came to them and fed them lies that God didn’t really have their best interests at heart and they couldn’t trust him, and they sinned. And immediately they felt in their heart shame, defilement, and estrangement, and they began to run from God.

God followed them down that trail of shame, and when he caught them, Adam said he hid himself because he was afraid. He was filled with the spirit of indebtedness, which falls back into fear. There is a broad highway in this world filled with souls all running away from God, filled with anxiety and fear. All like little employees afraid to be terminated. And God’s chasing them, saying, “You don’t have to be afraid.”

What did he tell Adam and Eve? He brought them back into his presence and killed an animal and covered their shame with the skin of that animal. What does an animal have to do with it? How can an animal pay the penalty for sin? God can’t just forget about it; he is a just and holy judge. Well, when he was killing the animal and shedding its blood and covering them with its body, he was also saying, “A man is going to be born of a woman and he’s going to put things right again.”

The Trail of a Son

And as you flip through the pages of the Old Testament, you learn that this man is going to be born in the lineage of Seth, of Noah, of Shem, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. You learn that he’s going to be a firstborn son and an only begotten son. You learn later as you flip through that he’s going to be born in Bethlehem and he’s going to be God with us, Emmanuel.

And finally you flip over to the New Testament, and here he is, the lamb who has come to take away the sins of the world. And he bats a thousand. Home runs every time. Perfect performance. A-plus. Fulfills the law of God in every way. And then what does God do? Does he pat him on the back or give him a high-five or a “well done”? No. He executes him on the cross.

Are you understanding what is happening here? Everything that you are afraid of receiving from God was already received by Jesus. He was terminated so that you might be kept. He was executed so that you might live. He was disowned so that you might be adopted. He became our substitute. What does that mean for us? It means that God can say to you, “Come back home.”

All that is necessary to bring you back into his family has been paid for on the cross of Christ. It means that when you sin or make a mistake, he doesn't disown you. You're a son! He's given you his most precious possession. Why would he not give you anything else that is necessary and good, and why would he ever disown you (Matthew 7:11, James 1:17, Romans 8:32)?

When that message of the gospel of Jesus Christ gets into your heart—and it takes time—when you don't just see it but you receive it, when you don't just hear it but you believe it, when you don't just eat it but you begin to taste it, it puts inside of you the spirit of adoption. You can begin to say, “Oh, he loves me *not* because of my performance but because I'm his *son!*”

It begins to change your whole perspective. It changes your mindset. It changes your attitude. As you read the Bible in your daily devotions, and as you come to church on Sunday and hear someone telling you that you've sinned but can be affirmed and loved in God according to what Jesus Christ has done, you're reminded of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And as you see a representation of the body and the blood of Christ in the Lord's supper every week, you're reminded of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It goes into your heart and by the spirit of God it begins to produce an attitude of sonship, an attitude of affirmation and approval. And it is only in that framework that you can actually have any victory over sin. As long as the spirit of condemnation and fear is in your heart, you can't win. You have no choice but to lose.

But if the gospel comes in and convinces you that he's on your side, you have no choice but to win. As it comes into your heart, when you're sitting alone in the dark and you are going down those same paths and are in the same habits and afraid of God watching you, you can begin to be filled with the joy of God being with you. Sin can't stand up to that.

You used to have legal motives for fighting sin. You didn't want to go to hell or for God to punish you; you wanted God to owe you your “best life.” But now you have familial motives. You don't want to grieve your dad. You don't want to just not break his *rules*; you don't want to break his *heart*. It begins to change your perspective.

The struggle that used to look like ginning up willpower and trying to stare down sin turns into asking God, your father, for help. Your concern for external compliance begins to evolve into a concern for internal compliance as well. An anxiety begins to lift, because you're not afraid of being fired or sent to hell or swatted or cursed. He's on your side.

And when you feel so affirmed, when another person accuses you of doing something wrong, you can admit to it and not be upset or offended because God affirms you. When dad gives you instruction, you don't respond with defensiveness but with teachableness. You're open to criticism.

And when you do well, you're not so puffed up and condescending to others. And when you see others not doing so well, you don't look down on them; you see yourself in them. And your attitude goes from, "Thank you, God, that I'm not one of them," to "Have mercy on me, Lord, a sinner."

As the love of God is communicated to you through the gospel of Jesus Christ, that love compels you. The love of Christ compels you, not fear, indebtedness, or anxiety. You learn that the goodness of God leads men to repentance. And the goodness of God warms your heart.

You learn that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, transformation, and sanctification. When Potiphar's wife tempted Joseph, he said, "Behold, because of me, my master has no concern about anything in his house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am nor has he kept back anything from me except you."

Does that sound familiar to you? That's how Adam and Eve should have responded. "Serpent, what do you mean, not to trust God? He's given me everything but this one thing. How then, according to all that God had done for me, can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?"

Our concern is God's heart. Because we *like* God. This is the difference between Christianity and every other religion. We have a relationship that is characterized by a relationship between a father and a child. A relationship that is characterized by really *liking* the almighty, divine one—the all-holy one, our creator and sustainer. We have an affection for him, a love for him, because he's brought us in and adopted us when we didn't deserve to be.

The Secret of a Son

When you fight like a son, sin stands no chance. That's Joseph's secret. Even David, who went off the ledge in sin, when he repented, said, "Against you and you only have I sinned" (Psalm 51:4). Once again, it was the motives of a relationship with God that drove him to repentance.

The key for all of us is that we constantly have and cultivate an attitude of adoption, which is like a son. The only way it comes is with the gospel, so how do we cultivate that attitude? How do we turn on the music? How do we get that external stimuli of the gospel of Jesus Christ into our hearts so we can fight like a champ and not like a chump?

One way is you go to a church that preaches the gospel—one that preaches not out of an attitude of slavery that comes from fear—so that every week you're reminded of the love and affirmation of God found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. You weekly need to be reminded of that.

The idea that we move past the gospel into some “higher territory” is foolishness. It's a shallow view of the gospel and a misunderstanding of how people grow in sanctification. We must be in a church family that is gospel-centric, Christ-centric. As you communicate in community groups, as you communicate in your own family, as you take the Lord's supper and are reminded of his sacrifice, you position yourself under the means of grace through which God sends the gospel into your heart.

Reading the Bible is also key. The Bible is God's memoir of a father to a son. There's history and truth in there, but it also communicates God's feelings toward us. The more we read our Bible, the more the gospel gets inside of us—if we're reading it rightly. It gets inside of us and produces in us the spirit of adoption and gives us the tools necessary for fighting sin. You read the memoir of your father and no matter how old you are, you can feel like a kid again (or perhaps for the first time), loved and affirmed.

Attending to the teaching of the Bible—dwelling on it, reflecting on it, praying it—is very important. But here, in our text, we have something incredibly powerful in the fight against sin. It's called the “witness of the Spirit.” Read carefully: This is not an objective thing; this is a subjective thing, where the objective gospel, which happened in time and space, is taken by the Holy Spirit of God and is subjectively put inside of you. The Holy Spirit witnesses with our spirit; he testifies over and over again that we are affirmed, approved, adopted, loved, etc.

Now how does it happen? How can you get it? How can you go after it? The Spirit uses a sword, and the sword is the word of God. As it is preached and read and meditated on and reflected on, every so often the Holy Spirit will stab you with it. Has that ever happened to you?

He'll plunge it deep into your heart, not to kill you, but to kill sin. Not to kill you but to kill the “self,” the counterfeit Christ in your life—that ever-hungry, all-consuming, greedy little brat in your heart. As you read, “For God so loved the world,” know that he loves *you*, too.

He gave his son to you! How could he withhold anything? When he plunges that into your heart, you feel like a child again. He's been with you all along as your daddy, but in those moments, he picks you up and he looks into your eyes and says, “I love you.” And

you are filled with warmth and affection and your desire for him is so much greater in those moments than your desire for sin.

And the desire for sin becomes like a candle in the light of the desire for God. Those moments don't last forever (yet); but when they do, they are very powerful for killing sin. If you've never experienced that, I encourage you to pursue it through reading, meditating, and praying on scripture and through attending faithfully to the teaching of scripture. You want to stand in the place where the Holy Spirit can do his work. You want to make sure that he has the sword so that he might plunge it into the self.

Let's ask the Lord for help in all these things:

"Father, we ask that in spite of our sin, in spite of our feelings of defilement and pollution, in spite of the fact that we oftentimes feel estranged from you and we can't pray because we know we are sin, we would return to you, knowing that you would open up your arms.

"Would we know that Christ has died and the penalty has been paid! The pathway to God has been opened up; we don't have to run down the broad path of fear. We can run to you to be adopted. We could belong with you. May we be affirmed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. May that love and affection begin to overshadow the love and desire and affection we have for sin. We ask this in Jesus Christ's name. Amen."