

SOFT TARGETS FOR SIN

(Sermon Summary)

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Reading: Hebrews 12:1-11 (v12:1)

The illustration of a race is a familiar one in the New Testament. It shows us that there is a prize to win, namely heaven. We are not competing against others for that prize, and it is a case that all do have prizes. We can urge each other on in the race and inspire each other, setting examples and helping with good counsel. In sports, there is a coach who is looking for flaws in the athlete and seeking ways that they can improve. They are there to spot weaknesses, flaws in technique and mental problems like a 'loser's mentality'. A training programme can then be designed to iron out the problems and get the better practices embedded.

God and His word are the instructors to help us in the spiritual race that we are called to run. We look unto the Lord Jesus (v2). We can so easily be put off in our running. We get snared as if caught up in brambles. All this slows us down so that we make little progress and end up discouraged. Some people when they run show, by the grimace on their faces, that it is hard work. Unfortunately, we make ourselves soft targets for sin. We are so easily ensnared. We might say, as we look at ourselves, "too easily ensnared." Like people who are so easily defrauded by conmen, we are ensnared by, for example, besetting sins again and again. So we want to get beyond this sad and sorry state.

1. A hostile lodger.

It is always a big question to ask ourselves, 'Who are we?' And the answer is often 'A chaotic mess.' We are confused and chaotic on the inside. We do not really understand who we are. (See Jeremiah 17:9). Sanctification is the work of God to put us back together properly, to help us be coherent, consistent, and properly functioning. We are in the process of becoming who He wants us to be. How we think, how we feel, what we will is being rehabilitated so that we are always a work in progress. But if we make the work slower by being entangled by sin, then the progress will be less. Who we are meant to be becoming is interfered with by sin.

It is like being in a house with a hostile lodger. He or she is always slamming doors, leaving a mess behind, creating a bad atmosphere, leaving doors unlocked and never paying the rent on time.

This is what it is like in our hearts where we still have our sin to wrestle against us, trying to obstruct our progress. Paul talks about what sin did in his own heart (Romans 7:15-17). Sin was working against his will and his holy desires. It is like the hostile lodger who sets the tone in our own home and makes us feel unhappy and defeated. Like Paul, we are left shocked at what is going on in our own hearts that is contrary to the will of God. The devil is at work in all of this. He knows how to 'push our buttons' and activate our besetting sins. We fail and then slump into a sense of defeat, numbness, apathy, and doubt that we really are Christians. We are so easily ensnared in our sins. We have in the devil an ever-present opponent who knows how to stir up the 'hostile lodger' in our soul. Yet we are often so full of regret that we knew better and yet still made ourselves soft targets for our besetting sins to take over and bully us around. This is liable to happen all the more when we are tired or unwell, when we are under pressure or when someone has said something to us, and we have reacted on the inside.

2. We can welcome it.

Perversely, we can at times welcome the presence of our hostile lodger and put up with his or her bad behaviour. We can fall in too quickly with the suggestion to behave badly, to follow the bad suggestions, the bad plans, and the bad words. Although we are the 'responsible person', the owner of the house, we can be irresponsible and easily give way and be ensnared.

Sin does have its pleasures for a season. Pictures, images, and memories can play back on us to bad effect. They can begin to consume us, call to us, and obsess us. Our peace is gone and there is left behind a sense of shame, guilt, and regret.

We can also aid and abet the process by coming up with justifications why we should humour our sins. We can persuade ourselves that everything is alright and engage in an act of denial. We might say to ourselves, 'I am under a lot of pressure'. Or 'I deserve this'. Or 'They asked for it.' We can engage in a spiritual trade-off where we try to offset our bad behaviour by some act of piety.

Sometimes we welcome something simply by default. We did nothing to stop something happening in our soul. This can be because we neglect prayer and the reading of Scripture. We rob ourselves of spiritual power and so make no progress. Then we wonder why nothing has changed, why we are still seeing the same sights and do not appear to have moved forward in our race.

3. Lay it aside.

We are to deliberately put these things off. We are to lock the hostile lodger up and cast him out. We are to serve notice on our sin. We will not have a final victory until we get to glory, but we can enjoy progress. The troubles can become less and less. They are not so much part of who we are. We get more skilled in recognising them. We get better at wearing the armour of God. We get better at refusing particular trains of thought. We are able to lay them aside. We are able to say 'Not this, not that'. (Ephesians 4:22-24). This is where we are right to kill – to kill our sin.

In this all, we look to the Lord Jesus. This does not mean that we look to His Second Coming. Rather we find Him as a present help to us. We look to Him, where He is now, victorious on the throne of God. Romans 7:24-25 tells us we can change and that we can do things differently.

We look to His power which is immense. He has strong arms. He is able to remove obstacles within us. He can restrain and He is also able to administer rebukes to us. We look to His wisdom. The Bible is a whole book of wisdom. We are able to be wiser than our sins or what our sins seem to offer us. We are able to work out what is happening within us and take steps. Sin tries to destroy and rob us of time. With God's wisdom we are able to discern what is happening, like working out how fraud is being committed.

We especially look at His mercy, seen at the cross. There is the message to us that a fresh start can always be made after failure. Christ is able to lift up the head of the ashamed, the confused and the downcast. We also look at His life which was so humble, so meek, so tender-hearted. The Islamic world calls such characteristics undesirable and many in the world would call it being 'a loser'. But we see in Christ the freest man that ever was – free to love God and neighbour, free to serve and to be fulfilled.

We look around and realize that what we see when we look to Jesus is so much more, so much better, than being entangled in our sins. Sin promises us much but delivers only sadness and ruin. We have joy now and joy to come. This includes the joy of the present moment, seeing things with new eyes, knowing we are in the race and on the way.

So why waste time? Why make ourselves soft targets for our sins when there is something so much better that the Lord offers us?