

Besetting Sins

Open up your Bibles to the book of Romans. We will be in chapter eight, verse 13. We begin a new series—a touchy, controversial, difficult series. But I hope that you would expect nothing less from me. I know a little bit about what the Bible says about the human condition, though I'm not an expert. God is clear in the scriptures, and we know from personal experience, that we all deal with besetting sins—those sins that daily haunt you.

If you're anything like me, you're still dealing with the sins that you were dealing with in high school or the sins that you wrestled with as a kid—the envy, perhaps, or the inordinate love of money, or a lust for control and power, or the desire for other people's approval. You've always dealt with them, and you're going to continue to deal with them. They're called besetting sins.

In fact, as you look back over your life, there have perhaps been moments when you settled down for a little rest and relaxation. You thought things were secure. You felt quite assured of your relationship with Jesus. You felt you had some level of victory over this sin. It hadn't emerged in quite some time. You pulled your troops out, and then there it came again. It slithered out from underneath the rocks. It came out from behind the women and children, where it's been evading your detection.

They're the incessant sins in the soul that never seem to go away. As soon as you think things are safe, here they are to take away any sense of security or assurance you might have previously had, to steal from you dignity and humanity, to shame you and embarrass you on live television.

You've dealt with these before. You're dealing with them now—the besetting sins in the soul. What if I were to tell you that God has revealed to us in the scriptures a strategy for dealing with these incessant sins in the soul? Would that be something you'd want to hear about? I would hope so. It's in Romans 8:13, in a general way, and we'll be looking at it for the next five weeks or so—God's strategy for dealing with the incessant sins in the soul—those sins that haunt us, humiliate us, and never seem to go away.

You would agree, I believe, that our society is rather debauched. You want to know what a society is like? You want to know about a culture? Listen to its music. Look at its television. You get a bird's eye view of what a culture is like. It's hard to turn on the radio these days without hearing some form of sexual perversion.

When I was a child, they used innuendo and euphemisms on the radio. Mom and Dad knew what they were talking about, but of course the kids didn't know, and we just sang along to it. It was fun and catchy. But today on the radio and television, they're not using innuendo or euphemisms anymore. They're just flat-out saying perversities. They're

flat-out showing it on television. There's no suggestiveness; it's happening right there before your eyes.

And it's in the church; it's in Christians' heads. You have a hard drive of pornography in your head. You would admit that growing up in this culture, most of us deal with the besetting sexual sin of the eyes, of the ears, and, as Jesus says, of the hands. I would say that most of us are dealing with that on a daily basis, and if you're not dealing with it, you should be.

So that's what I want to talk about specifically in this series. Generally you will be able to apply everything you learn to your personal besetting sin—envy, love of money, lust for power, the need for everyone's approval—whatever it might be—jealousy, contention, anger—whatever your proclivity is. But I would imagine most us are dealing with sexual temptations.

Promise for a Lifetime

The strategy for dealing with sexual temptations is found in Romans 8:13: "For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the Spirit"—that is, by the power of the Spirit of God inside of you and all the privileges that come to you as a child of God—by the new birth, being a new creature, and the Spirit of the omnipotent, gracious God inside of you—if by that Spirit "you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

This is a promise! This is not the promise that you can be forgiven for your sin. That's a great promise; that's not this promise. This is not the promise that Jesus Christ died on the cross to pay the penalty of your sin. That's a great promise; that's not this promise.

This promise is that you can be saved from not just the penalty of sin, but the power of your sin in your life currently and presently; that Jesus Christ came to this world and lived and died and sent his Spirit to you that you might not just be delivered from the punishment of sin, but that you might be delivered from sin itself as it acts out in your life; that you might be saved from the incessant sins of the soul; that you might be changed.

Now that's good news. That's the *gospel* good news, that you can be changed. And the strategy, Paul says, is "putting to death." The old King James uses the word "mortify." I like that because to mortify sin is to embarrass it, to humiliate it. It has embarrassed and humiliated you enough. It's time for us to turn the tables, to embarrass, humiliate, subdue, discipline, and suppress sin.

To kill it. To execute it. To put it to death. To keep it in the caves where it belongs. To keep it underneath those rocks, keep it in hiding, keep it on the run, that we might live. Paul says there's a hope for it, and he wants to give us that hope. He doesn't say

exactly how to mortify here other than “by the Spirit,” which we’ll talk about in the next chapter.

But God does tell us in the rest of the scriptures other strategies for mortifying sin. If you deal with sin—and I hope you’re dealing with it—then you can live. And the Bible tells you how to deal with it. Now who would like to hear that? I would. I need it. If you don’t need it, I need it. But I think you need it, too.

In this chapter, we ask the question, “Why kill sin?” This is definitely the hardest sermon of all of them—perhaps the most prone to misunderstanding or the most in which I’m putting myself out there. This is the most politically insensitive or offensive, perhaps, but I think we can get through it.

Crouching at the Door

Why kill sin? Why fight it? Why mortify it? And the answer that Paul gives is, “If you don’t mortify it, it’s going to kill you.” I’d like to dwell on this for a moment. I’d like to meditate on what this means a little while. The reason you must be every day and day to day killing sin is because sin is currently plotting to kill you. It’s got you on a 20-year plan. It’s plotting to take you out.

Consider what a plot is. A plot has multiple characteristics, but one is that a plot always involves a cover-up. That’s because a plot always starts small. If you let your future victim know that you’re plotting against them, they’ll kill you before you’re strong enough to fight. So a plot always begins with a cover-up, camouflaging itself, hiding underground, and making plans and conspiring in smoke-filled rooms.

You’re underestimating it. You don’t see it as a threat because it’s covering itself up. The Bible talks about sin in this way often. It says to Cain, “Sin is crouching at the door.” That is, sin is like a tiger that crouches to make itself seem small and hides in the grass so that you continue to underestimate it, until at an opportune time, it destroys you.

Sin is plotting; that means it’s covering itself up, appearing to look small so that you continue to make concessions for it and justify it, and so that you don’t see it as the threat it really is. But Paul says in Romans 8:13—and in this whole sermon series, the attempt is to say, “Hey, guys, it may look small, but it’s eyeballing you. It’s plotting against you.”

Maybe you’ve sensed that. You’ve been toying with some little sins in your life, and you’ve thought, maybe, deep down, “This is kind of fun, but I think that this could really blow up.” It will! “This is fun, but I could see how if I continue down this path, it could destroy me.”

It’s eyeballing you. It’s plotting against you. There’s a cover-up involved. The reason they cover up plots is so that they can grow. You need time to grow a formidable force. You need time to add numbers to your agenda. If you’re just one guy plotting against

the government, you're a crazy person. You call in to the late-night talk shows, and everyone knows you're crazy.

But if there are two guys or three or four, some people with influence, it can grow and grow and grow, and eventually it's a plot. "Cover up. Time to grow." Sin is doing that to you as well. It's covering itself up. You're not considering it a threat. Perhaps you're even feeding it a little bit, because it's enjoyable.

Sin's Agenda

It's growing and growing, and now, for it to be a plot, there has to be an agenda. And the agenda of sin is your life, your soul. The agenda of sin is to kill you. Paul's exposing sin for what it is. He's saying, "You better start killing it now. You better be killing sin day to day and every day, because if you don't, one day you are going to die at its hands."

It's like the neighbor, who is a normal, nice guy with a great smile and plays with his kids out in the yard—he's got a chocolate lab, of all things. He's a good old American guy. He waters his flowers in the afternoon. He goes to work at eight and comes back from work at five. And he checks his mail in his slippers. All the standard stuff. You see him from across the fence, thinking, "What a nice guy! Maybe I should go get to know him one day."

But behind the scenes, he's working on his pilot license. Behind the scenes he's conspiring. Behind the scenes he's hiding a deep hatred for you and everything that you stand for. And when you least expect it, when you lay your head down for a little rest and relaxation, when you think you're safe, he—bam—takes out your towers, and that's it.

It's sin, plotting to kill you. Now, my analogy breaks down. It's partially true, but it's not totally true. It breaks down because the Bible is not mostly concerned with foreign threats. The Bible is mostly concerned with homegrown threats. The Bible is not so concerned about the snakes out in the woods; it's concerned about the snake you have for a pet. That's the one it's concerned about, and you should be too. (No offense to those of you with snakes.)

The Puritans used to speak of the heart of man as a nest of baby vipers. Their culture was more agricultural, and so they dealt with snakes probably more often than most of us do. But I like that analogy: The heart is a nest of baby vipers. They come wriggling out daily, and they seem so cute, so non-threatening, but they're just as deadly. And if you don't daily stomp them, eventually they grow into a dragon. Eventually they grow so big that one day they bite the hand that feeds them.

One day the pet becomes the predator and you're the prey. Sin is plotting to kill you. It starts in your heart, it grows over a period of time, and then one day, when you're sleeping and not being watchful, it sneaks up on you. It wraps its coils around you and

takes away what little breath you have left and then swallows you. You look back and say, “How did that happen? Where did that come from?”

Paul wants you to wake up right now, look around your heart—look around the living room of your heart—see that guy in the corner with his slithering little forked tongue eyeballing you and plotting against you, and take him out while he’s small. Don’t keep feeding him every day.

Don’t Learn the Hard Way

Now, let’s talk about this a little bit more. I want to go into the question of “What does it mean when the Bible says sin will kill you?” We have a lot of examples in the Bible. Think Old Testament Bible characters that when you look at their life, it pretty much says, “Hey, Christ Church, why don’t you learn from my lesson? Learn the easy way. Why make your own mistakes when you can learn from mine?”

David is a Bible character in the Old Testament who dealt with sexual sin and it destroyed him, in a sense. David was toying with idleness. He should have been off at battle with his men. He should have been fighting on the front with Uriah, but instead, he was at the palace living in the lap of luxury, taking long naps, spending lots of time in indulgences, and eating dates and pomegranates and various Middle Eastern luxuries.

David was idle. And he developed this habit: It seems to me, as you read the text, that this wasn’t a one-time thing. He didn’t just go up on the rooftop and see Bathsheba and instantly choke, like the first time you smoke a cigarette. No, this was something that he had in his daily schedule, something that he knew was about to take place, and he kinda went up there and he fed it, day in and day out.

He didn’t guard the inlets of his soul, he didn’t guard his eyes; he let it go into his eyes and eventually it got down to his heart. Every day he fed it and it grew and grew, until David, a man after God’s own heart, finally killed for it. David, a Christian, a believer—he saw that ring to rule all other rings and over a period of time, he got uglier and uglier and uglier. (That’s a Golem reference, by the way.)

David didn’t fight sin day to day and every day; he got lazy. He began to make concessions and justify it until finally it took his family from him. Do you know the story? His own baby boy was killed. Because David had lost moral authority and credibility, his kingdom was up in ruins, and his own son, Absalom, tried to usurp him and was killed and executed.

And David spent the rest of his life shedding many tears. Sin killed him in a sense; it killed his family literally. It took away his joy. Now, David was saved, because God had sent Nathan to him to warn him, just as God is sending you a prophet in Romans 8:13

to warn you. David himself is a warning to us. He says to us, “Why learn from your own mistakes when you can learn from mine?”

What about Solomon? One of the wisest men that ever lived was also clearly one of the most foolish. The Bible says clearly in the book of Genesis that one man, the husband, shall leave his mother and father and cleave to his wife. Have you heard that passage before? One man is to leave and cleave to his wife—that’s a covenantal bond—and the two shall become one flesh.

This is our opening passage concerning marriage. God says it’s two. God says it’s male and female. And God says within the cleaving, within the covenantal bonds of marriage, there is to be sex. These are the parameters that God has placed on his created and designed gift to us.

But Solomon completely disregarded God’s commandment of two: one man, one woman, leaving and cleaving. He had a whole harem of women, a thousand wives. He’s just doing what he heard on the radio. He’s just acting what he saw on television. He’s just living just like everyone lives. He’s doing what all the other kings are doing.

His authority in that moment was not the word of God; his authority in that moment was culture, or society. Perhaps he justified it and said, “Well, I’m not harming anyone else.” Perhaps he justified it and said, “This is just who I am.” He made concessions and he justified and eventually his heart was pulled away from the Lord.

He also disregarded what God said about marrying unbelievers. He took to himself pagan, unbelieving wives—the problem wasn’t that they were foreign—and it got so bad that he built pagan shrines for them. He worshipped, at a time in his life, at the pagan shrines. This is Solomon, the king, the son of peace. His life says to us, “Why make your own mistakes when you can learn from mine?”

Not only did he lose his family later, he lost his kingdom. The whole kingdom was rent in two because of his sin. All that he had worked for as a young man—listen to me men—all that he worked for as a young man was ruined, because he would not put himself within the bounds of scripture.

All because he wouldn’t kill and mortify sin in his everyday life. He lost it all. He went down like a politician, like one of those phony pastors on television. He went down in shame. Now, we do know Solomon learned his lesson in the end. You can read it the books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs and see that he learned things the hard way. But it’s given to us that we might learn things the easy way.

How about Samson? What a story! I’m going to talk about all these guys later, but Samson looked out at the Philistines and he saw something that he liked. Not a person’s character, not their faith, not their true beauty that comes from the Lord, but he saw and he wanted her body. Her name was Delilah. That’s trouble. And he toyed with trouble.

He told his mom and dad, "I want that. Go and get it for me." And he toyed with it day in and day out; he didn't take it seriously. And then one day when he was napping, he was shorn of his power. He wouldn't guard the inlets of his soul; he didn't take proper steps to kill sin. And sin gouged out his eyes. It'll do that to you. And in Samson's case, literally. It chained him up like a wild beast, and he grinded at the mill for the rest of his adult life. No dignity, all shame. What a picture for us! Kill sin before it kills you, before it takes away your family, before it takes away your legacy, before it takes away your dignity.

A Bigger Warning

Now, I imagine there's perhaps someone reading that's considering Christianity—you're not sure. You don't believe that God created sex; perhaps you believe something else. You don't believe that God has the prerogative to mandate certain things regarding sex. You don't believe the Bible is authoritative for your life and practice. That's okay. I want you to keep reading because I want to move you in that direction. That's my agenda.

But listen, even if you don't hold to the authority of scripture for your life and practice, you can admit to me this day that you know that other people's sexual deviancy has cost you and has hurt you. Hasn't it? And your deviancy has hurt others. Your sins and others' sins have brought into your life heartbreak; it's brought into families chaos. Look at what it's doing in our society, as it rends the families apart, as it perpetuates our plague of fatherlessness.

You can look out and just with common sense see that because people are not putting themselves under God's authority, because people are saying, "This is *my* body to do with as I please, and no one's going to tell me otherwise. I'm going to do it with it how I want and when I want," that has unleashed chaos on our society. You don't have to be a Christian to see that. You don't even have to believe the Bible to see that.

God is telling you. He's showing you a little red flag and saying, "If it's unleashed this much chaos on society, just imagine what it will do to your soul for all eternity. If it's unleashed this much heartbreak on you, just imagine what it's doing to me, the author and creator. Imagine the heartbreak that it's causing me."

It's just a little sign, a little warning, that that seemingly innocent pet is plotting against you and will one day take you out. Paul says it clearly: "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart. Encourage one another day after day, as long as it's still called today, so that none of you will be hardened by the

deceitfulness of sin. It's lying to you. It's tricking you. Make sure you watch out for it. Don't be deceived. Don't be tricked. Don't be killed!"

But Paul has something even bigger, and this is where it gets a little tricky for me. Paul has something bigger in his mind when he says, "If you don't kill sin, it'll kill you." He's not talking about death to your legacy or death to your dignity or death to your family or even death to your body. He's talking about the death that comes to your soul. Eternal death. And we know this because he's explicitly clear in many other passages.

Galatians 5:19: "Now, the works of the flesh"—those are the things we've got to kill, the things that are plotting against us—"are evident. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality..." He lists all the various types of sexual sins. Hand, eyes, ears, heart, body. But he doesn't only list sexual sins—and please don't accuse me of saying that these sins are deserving of more wrath, that for people who are trapped in sexual sins, there is no hope—because he adds, "Idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these."

Listen to me, Church, this is your Nathan moment. Do you know who he's writing to? Is he writing to the world or the church? He's talking to the church, and he says, "Don't be deceived. Those who practice those things, that continue to willfully and impenitently pursue unrepentant sin—idolatry, sorcery, envy, jealousy, dissension, and all sorts of sexual sin—shall not inherit the kingdom of God. Even if you are sitting in a church. Even if you do warm the pew every Sunday. Don't be deceived.

Colossians 3:5: "Put to death what is earthly in you. Sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desires, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Put it to death, on account of this: The wrath of God is coming." Once again, he talks to Christians. He's talking to the Church. And it doesn't matter where you sit on Sunday morning. If you continue to willfully indulge in sexual sin, if you do not turn and forsake it and pursue Christ, the one who can deliver you, then you are storing up for yourself wrath on the day of judgment.

Warning in Love

This is not death to dignity. It's so much more. This is not death to the body. It's so much more. It's not death to your family. It's so much more. It's death to your soul eternally. It told you this is a hard one. More gentle words cannot suffice. As a pastor, I can't—I dare not—be ambiguous with this one. I dare not one day stand before Jesus Christ and he says, "You were not clear enough, Brandon. You were too ambiguous; you rounded the edges."

We must draw sharp lines, sharp corners, on this one. It's too important. It involves your eternal destiny. If you willfully and impenitently pursue fornication, adultery, lust,

homosexuality, and sexual immorality of all types and do not turn to Christ—if you do not go to him with your chains clanking all around you—you will be barred from heaven.

I can't be more gentle, or else I would be dangerously ambiguous. But don't hear me being hateful. Let me tell you what hate would be. Hate would be to let you fly off the cliff. Hate would just be indifferent. That's what hate is. "You're supposed to be tolerant." No father is tolerant of their child as they run into the street! They cry out, "Stop!" They do all that is necessary for them so that they don't bring about their own destruction.

Love warns. Love begs. Love pleads. Hate is indifferent. This is not hate speech. I get nothing out of this. I only put crosshairs on my own back when I say this. I know some of you are not fighting hard enough and you're in trouble. That's why we're having this sermon series. And I know some of you are fighting, but you're desperate. That's why we're having this sermon series.

This is not hate, this is love. Maybe this will help for you: I and many here at Christ Church believe that the Bible is authoritative. We do not determine what is right and wrong based on what society says, based on what popular opinion is, based on the majority vote, or based on what can harm others or not. We determine what is right and wrong based on scripture.

What that means is that I believe fully and totally in the authority of scripture and in the inerrancy of scripture. And so believing that, I must then warn you of what it says. Hate would be indifferent; it would just let you go. That would be the easy thing, but love warns.

Responding to the Warning

And let me get this out in the open: When I read these things, these sins, and I hope when you read them, it isn't "Father, this is about those people. This isn't about me." And when you read these passages, you better not say, "Father, thank you that I'm not like these people." You had better say, "Father, have mercy on me, a sinner." You read it through that filter.

"Pastor, I have committed these sins, not only in thought and in heart, but in actual deed. And not only have I committed them, but I am currently committing them. And I don't know what else to do. This is how I cope. This is how I've always coped. This is how I deal with life. Is there any hope for me?"

Look at the passage, Romans 8:13: "But if by the Spirit, you mortify the deeds of the flesh, you shall live." That's hope. We've got a lot of time to talk about it in the next chapters, but what this means is that if you have a hard drive of pornography in your brain, you can be delivered. By the Holy Spirit of God and his almighty power and grace in your life, you can have some victory. You can keep those incessant sins of the soul down in the caves where they belong. There's hope for that.

The gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't just promise for you to be saved from the penalty of sin; it promises that you can be transformed; that you can be changed; that you can have a day-to-day victory over the struggle; that you do not have to be dominated by this sin. This means that if as a young child you were exploited and you have a hard time seeing sexuality as a good gift from God, you can be delivered. You can be free. You can be transformed. You can fight. And by the Spirit of God, you can win. You can put your sins on the run instead of vice versa.

What this also means is that there is time. Why else would Paul tell us this? Why else would the Holy Spirit of God ordain that you be here in this moment to be told, to be warned, and to be shown the hope in Jesus Christ if he wasn't giving you time? Revelations 2 speaks of Jezebel, a woman in the church. God says, "I gave her time to repent of her fornications, but she would not." There's no hope for her anymore. She's dead and gone. Her time is up. But he gave her time.

But she said, "I'll do what I want with my body." She stomped her foot, she shook her fist at God, and her time ran out. But today, you and I have time. We're given time to turn. Take it. Cease the moment while it's here. God from heaven is speaking to us from his word, through the teaching of his word, that you can have victory and you need to cease the moment today. Let's pray and ask for help:

"Father, we ask specifically that we might be given as a church victory over sexual sin. I don't mean total and absolute perfection. But we can keep sin hiding in the cave where it belongs down in the dirt and filth. We can keep it under the rocks. We don't have to let it dominate us. We don't have to let it come out and humiliate us. We can fight it by the Spirit of Almighty God, by you, Father.

"So we ask for your help. May we be known as a church that is killing sin. Father, I can only imagine what sort of community that would look like. What a blessed community! Day to day fighting individually and fighting together in community groups and fighting in our prayer closets and fighting in secret devotion and public prayer and worship, doing battle against the incessant sins in our soul by your grace and Spirit. What a community we would be!

"We ask for that. Father, would you do that for us? Father, I pray for the soul who is sitting there thinking, 'This pastor is talking to me directly.' I pray that you would give them the forethought and the strength and the wisdom to continue to read. The moment is right now, but as time goes on, we will be distracted. The desire to fight sin will die down. And I pray that you would keep our hunger alive that we might continue to hear about your strategy for killing the besetting sin in our hearts. I ask this in Jesus Christ's name, amen."