

# Waging War on Sin

## February 14, 2007

### James 4:6b-12

“God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (Proverbs 3:34)

<sup>7</sup>Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

<sup>8</sup>Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup>Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup>Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

<sup>11</sup>Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. <sup>12</sup>There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

To speak of sin at all is often viewed as being vitriolic, self-righteous, ignorant, and un-American. My opinion is that such attitudes are the natural responses that thinking people have developed toward the concept of sin because of it having been minimized and trivialized by churches.

For example, the view of sin that I grew up hearing about from people that went to church (I was not among that group) was:

- It's sin to go to the movies...any of them.
- It's sinful to listen to music, or play it, unless it's "Christian" music, and wrong even then if the beat's too fast (because the "Rock & Roll" beat originated from the godless pagans of Africa's bushmen, and listening to them will open your spirit to demonic possession), or if it includes too many dance hall instruments.
- It's certainly a sin to actually go to a dance or to dance at all regardless of where you are.
- It's a sin to smoke, i.e. the "Sin Tax" on cigarettes.
- It's a sin to drink anything that contains alcohol, unless you have a cold, then it's okay...
- It's a sin to go swimming.
- It's a sin for women to wear pants, or for anyone to wear shorts.
- It's a sin for a man to have long hair and for women to have short hair.
- It's sin to play cards, play pool, or to play anything that resembles having fun.

I heard very little from these churched people, in fact nothing, about sin being an act of volitional aggression against the goodness of God and the welfare of my fellow man. Therefore...

- Being prejudice wasn't a sin.
- Making fun of people that didn't believe as you did wasn't a sin.
- Spewing hateful sentiments at non-believers wasn't a sin.

- Failing to love your brother wasn't a sin.
- Failing to interpret the Scripture intelligently, with fair-mindedness scholarship wasn't a sin.
- Failing to apply the teachings of Scripture wasn't a sin.
- Devotion to crusty tradition over God's word wasn't a sin.

The concept of sin, therefore, has become something that we joke about, laugh at, or slough off, but not a thing we take seriously as a society.

Sin, because it's been minimized, has become marginalized as a useless relic left over from our Puritanical past. And I don't disagree.

I will not devote my life to a cause or a creed that's so small and trivial as to major on what I wear, what I drink, or the kind of music I like. It's got to be a lot bigger than that to get my attention, earn my respect and gain my devotion. And it is...

I am the glad servant of Jesus Christ, a willing believer in his call on my life to personal holiness, and as an ever-learning disciple, more than happy to make every effort I can to avoid any sin that would derail my pilgrimage.

Because of the dissemination of misinformation about the concept of sin, a couple of things happened to us...things we need to correct.

### **MOST OF THE TIME WE THINK OF SIN AS SWEET AND RESISTING AS SOUR.**

I'm not saying that's what we always think or feel or act on, but in all honesty most of the people I've had deep, personal talks with about their own spiritual development, or lack thereof, this seems to be a common issue...

- We associate obedience to God as being:
  - Hard to achieve.
  - Unduly restrictive of their personal need to express and experience life in a rewarding and fulfilling manner.
  - And as an unreasonable expectation on God's part.
- On the other hand, more often than not, they associate cooperation with God in regard to avoiding sin as:
  - Something to fear or avoid, or at least postpone until old age kicks in.
  - Because being obedient to the will and way of God is going to keep them from being happy, and turn them into some joyless prude or meek and mild puritan.
- Nothing could be further from the truth.
  - Granted, living the way some people choose to interpret faith will certainly do that, i.e. issues of personal prejudice and legalistic tendencies.
  - But to develop a healthy attitude that associates obedience to God with life at its best and disobedience to God with life as something a lot less, would be a lesson well-learned.

## REPENTANCE LOSES ITS ABILITY TO TRANSFORM WHEN WE REPENT FOR WHAT WE'VE DONE RATHER THAN FOR WHAT WE ARE.

If all sin is about is the fact that I like to dance or smoke a cigar, then there's really nothing to confess about my character or my nature, because it's just not that big a deal. But if sin has more to do with my heart, the way I think about myself, other people and God, then I have a lot to confess.

Maybe it's splitting hairs, but it means more when I confess to God that I am by nature and inclination a selfish man with a deceitful heart than to confess that I listened to George Strait singing about Adeliah, pretty little Cajun Queen, which, by the way, I did do last year in Oklahoma City, and will confess to you that I enjoyed immensely.

### DISCUSSION

1. Were you taught about sin at home or church growing up?
2. What kinds of things did you learn about sin that you have carried from your past to your present?
3. Is it a part of your conscious thought to avoid sin each day?
4. What helps you to do so?

### I. Every Man's Battle—Sin Verses Obedience.

#### James 4:6b

God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

God doesn't want us to spend any time waging war against each other because of our selfishness or our misguided passion which we talked about last week (James 4:1-6). But he does want us to engage in a battle against sin—and not so much a battle against the sins that are around us at this point as the sins that are within us. There's a time and place and a way to confront and correct our culture, but that always comes after, maybe way after, we've confronted and corrected our own behavior.

- I don't like it when politicians tell me to be more charitable with my taxes then grant themselves personal tax breaks the rest of us don't get.
- I don't respect policemen who pass me when I'm already going to speed limit.
- Overweight, out-of-shape, cardiologists are hard for me to listen to as well.
- So I don't blame anyone for viewing the Christian community with suspicion and thinking we hypocrites for coming on so strong about the sins of our world if we don't deal with personal sin first...

1. The first step in defeating personal sin is submission to God.

#### James 4:7a

Submit yourselves...to God.

- The command is aorist action—implies a once and forever made decision.

- It's a word they used to describe joining the army.
  - You signed up, and you're going to be there until you've completed your tour of duty.
- There has to be a volitional and unconditional concession to God's authority before any of us stands a chance at winning this war against personal sin...

### **Romans 6:12-18**

Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. <sup>13</sup>Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. <sup>14</sup>For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. <sup>15</sup>What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! <sup>16</sup>Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? <sup>17</sup>But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. <sup>18</sup>You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

### **QUOTE**

“Purity of heart is to will one thing.” (Soren Kierkegaard).

## 2. The second step is resisting Satan.

### **James 4:7b**

Resist the devil...

- This is also an aorist verb in the imperative mood, that the ancients used as a call to arms against the enemy.
- The imperative mood conveys a sense of urgency.
- Two things come to mind.
  - Avoid overestimating Satan's power—it's only the power of deception.
  - Avoid underestimating that power as well—though it's only the power of deception it isn't imaginary power...it's real and it's potent.

## 1. The third step is Repentance of personal sin.

### **James 4:8-9**

Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup>Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom.

## **ILLUSTRATION**

**W.T. Conner** is remembered for many thoughtful insights both in his writing as well as through his teaching as a professor at Southwestern Seminary. One statement he made more than 30 years ago that has stayed with me as though it was a question on a test—it wasn't—was: "The deepest repentance of the Christian life comes after conversion."

To me that's significant, because most of the time people view repentance as something you do in order to become a Christian far more than something you do after you've become one.

It's sort of like an onion...peel one layer off, and there's another waiting for you to peel it off. A couple of thoughts to get us going...

## **REPENTANCE IS NOT SORROW... REPENTANCE IS CHANGE...**

- Repentance in the Old Testament
  - The word that expresses the biblical concept of repentance in the Old Testament is *sub*.
  - It's used over a thousand times in the Old Testament in a variety of ways.
    - But in each of the 164 uses of this word in covenant context, it describes a person turning from personal sin and turning instead toward obedience to God's commands—never an exception.
    - *Sub* is a commitment to a faith and way of life that involves turning *from* a previous choice of behavior and turning *to* a new choice of behavior.
    - This, and this alone, is "repentance" in the Old Testament.
  - There is no doubt that such change is preceded by agonizing conviction of and sorrow for sin.
  - But repentance itself is always and essentially an "about-face" of a new commitment to obey God.
- Repentance in the New Testament.
  - The Greek or New Testament term that translates "to repent" is *metanoeo*.
  - *Metanoeo* is used in the same way as *sub* in the Old Testament—emphasizing a change of mind and attitude and behavior.
    - To repent, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, is to make a decision that changes the total direction of a person's life.
    - That explains James's language in verses 8 and 9...about washing your hands, purifying your heart, grieving, mourning and changing...

**YOU HAVE NEVER REPENTED OF ANY SIN THAT YOU HAVE NOT FORSAKEN.**

2. The fourth step is Humility.

**James 4:10a, 11-12**

Humble yourselves before the Lord....

<sup>11</sup>Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. <sup>12</sup>There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?

Have you ever noticed that the biggest sin is someone else's? One of the basic tenets of our faith is the need we have to keep our eyes on our own sin, and less on the sins of other people. It's also a lot harder to do.

As is the case with so many other things in life, humility has a lot more to do with obedience than it does with anything else... While some are humble by nature and inclination, and some are not, we can all be humble...if we choose to obey God.

**QUOTE**

Dr. Strictland, the best teacher of theology I ever studied with, used to warn us against what she called “theatrical humility,” which she defined as anyone that “was humble and proud of it.”

- The verb is reflexive...implying our simple recognition of the facts that separate us from God:
  - He is God Almighty; we are not.
  - He is the creator; we are the created.
  - He makes the rules; we do not.
  - He is sinless; we are sinful.
  - His way is perfect; ours is suspect.
  - He can't deceive; we can and we do.
  - His motives are always pure; ours are often otherwise.
  
- The reflexive action is to act in accordance with that knowledge.

**ILLUSTRATION**

I heard a story about Van Cliburn, a world-class pianist from Kilgore, Texas of all places. In the city where he was to play a concert they'd taken him to a museum where Ludwig Van Beethoven's personal piano was on display, and, very unexpectedly pulled back the bench, raised the lid, and invited him to play his favorite piece on Ludwig Van Beethoven's own piano. When asked what piece he decided on he replied, “I wouldn't even touch it, much less dared to have played a single note.”

**QUOTE**

“It is God's nature to make something out of nothing, that is why he cannot make anything out of him who is not yet nothing.” (Martin Luther)

## **QUOTE**

“For those who would learn God’s ways humility is the first thing, humility is the second thing, and humility is the third.” (Saint Augustine)

## **DISCUSSION**

1. How necessary is it for men like us to become more acquainted with the issue of personal submission to God?
2. Is the command for humility at the root of our need?
3. How can we combine the demands that business days make on us with the command for obedience and repentance that God makes on us into an effective lifestyle?

## **II. The final step is Victory.**

### **James 4:7b,10**

<sup>7b</sup>He (Satan) will flee from you... (eventually)

<sup>10b</sup>And he (God) will lift you up... (ultimately)

- Satan will flee...but he’ll come back for a rematch...

### **Luke 4:13**

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

- God’s promise to lift you up won’t always come when you want to come, and it won’t always be in the form you’d like it, but it will happen, and it will happen at the right time and in the right manner.

Remember, you can do this if you will do this. Any Christian can.