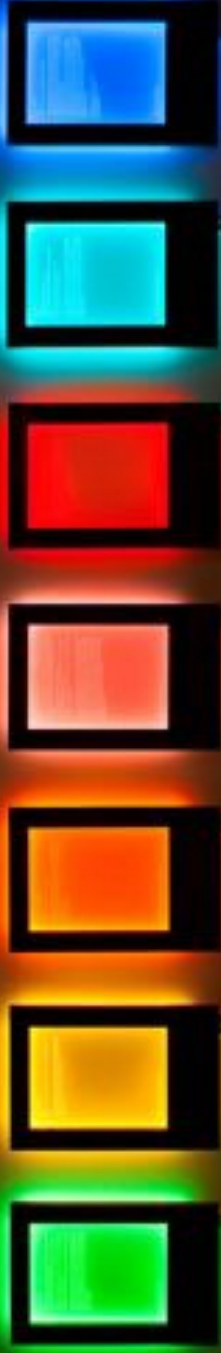


WHY IS SIN SO ATTRACTIVE



INTRODUCTION

The problem with spiritual formation is that we've already got one by the time we get around to thinking about it! Why do the activities which turn out to be sins seem so attractive? Actually sin isn't attractive at all! Satan didn't say to Eve, "Can I interest you in some attractive sins?"

We want to be able to lay aside the weights and sins that so easily cling to us so that we can run our life race with perseverance. How? Fix our eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2).

1. Examples of Sins

The world is full of evil doing, even in nice places that we can think of. This is sin. Sins are the activities that turn out to be hurtful to us and others and offensive to God.

Jesus gives us a list of sins that come from the heart in Mark 7:20-23 (ESV):

"What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

This list doesn't look attractive! So why do these things flood our environment?

Galatians 5:19 and 1 Peter 2:1 also give lists of sins.

Imagine what TV news would be like without malice and guile! Genuine respect and love for one another would eliminate all these sins.

a. Two Types of Sins

Many people think of the Bible as written by a bunch of fisherman and shepherds who weren't very bright. Actually, the Bible has the best things to say about the most

important things in life, your life today. Paul, for instance, was analytical as he looked at the world around him, like a social scientist, as well as a theologian. Generally there are two types of sins (which can't really be separated but it helps our understanding to distinguish them):

b. Sins of the heart and mind.

Like envy. (Envy seems to make all the sin lists in the Bible.) Love is the response to overcome envy, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15).

Another example is coveting, which is idolatry. Who is the idol when we covet? Me. I should get what I want!

2. Sins of the body.

The body begins to take on a life of it's own and doesn't need help from the mind. In ordinary human affairs the body runs ahead of the mind, which is how God made us. When you're driving your car you want that. If the driver doesn't have some good bodily habits for driving and you're a passenger then you want to get out of the car!

But when sin resides in our bodily members we've got a big problem! Now we're ready to sin given the right situation of temptation. We want to get to the place where we are able to direct our mind and body under the care of God.

3. Differentiating Desire and the Will

Desire is an impulse toward a particular object or activity. You never want just one thing, but lots of things that are conflictual. Desires are obsessive, they hold onto you. They promise happiness if they just get what they want, but it's never true. Desire is not the same thing as our will. The primary function of the human will is to trust God, to bring desire into a proper subordination to God. The source of all sin is desire ungoverned by subjection to what is good.

A primary tactic of Satan is to get us to think that what is good is whatever we desire. If you equate what is good with desire then you have no place to go. Your will is to direct your desires to what is good. Like the guard at the gate. The function of the will is to deliberate, to consider desires but also to consider the wider picture, to be freed from obsession. Okay I know about that, but is it good? Is it best? To consider alternatives. If you allow your will to be dominated by desires then you will no longer be able to deliberate. You'll say, "I have to have this!" That is almost never true. An addict is a person who has surrendered their will to desire. You become imprisoned by desire.

4. Desire, Not Governed by God, is the Cause of Sin

Mark 4:19. Jesus says, the word of the kingdom gets crowded out by desires. James 1:13-15. James says that sin comes from desire, intense desire. Lust is obsessive, intense, overriding desire. Lust carries you away. When conceived it gives birth to sin, sin to death—you are uprooted and pulled away from God, the source of life.

The person who cannot say no to themselves cannot select what is good. If you can't stop yourself from doing what you don't want to do then you can't succeed as a student, or at anything. If you do everything you want then your life is a mess! Our desires run us amok. But here is God saying, "I'll give you what is good!" The desire to be well known is a big problem. Learn to be humble. Humility is largely about being free of desires. Learn never to pretend, it's a form of lying, of deceit.

5. Sin Gets in our Bodily Members

James 4:1-3. James asks, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?" He explains that sin is in our bodily members. Lust, anger, envy. You have not because you don't ask God or if you do ask God it's with selfish desires. To ask God rightly is to do so in submission to him, letting him decide what is good for you.

Paul says, “Their god is their belly”, meaning those apart from Christ are totally governed by desires that live in their bodies (Philippians 3:19). Plato divided the person into the belly, chest, and mind. But his system didn’t work. Greeks did awful things to each other. They talked of wonderful things but couldn’t do them. They had gods that did things worse than people.

When a sin becomes a habit in your body—a set way of thinking, desiring, and acting—then you are prepared to sin and in a situation of temptation you probably won’t be able to stop yourself.

6. We try to Create Desire

Desire in itself is not a bad thing—it’s good. You wouldn’t want to live without desire—it’s part of our nature; it impels us into action. If action were solely under thought you wouldn’t survive infancy. This is the distinction between the Buddhist and Stoic who tell you to get rid of desire.

Lust gives us pleasure because it thrusts us in a direction and makes us feel alive. We desire to desire. Gratification gives us a sense of completeness and power, at least for the moment, till it leaves us empty or pulls us into addiction. On the other hand, depression is the absence of desire, and it’s a bad place to be. We flirt to create desire, for instance. Or in sports one chooses to desire things that mean nothing! If your team wins you feel you’ve done something good.

Ephesians 4:17-19. Sensuality is thrills on the cheap—sex and violence to hold you till a the next commercial. It’s easy to get people’s attention with that.

7. Unregulated Desire Leads to Addiction

Desire deadens you and you have to get more and more. You can never rest content. The only way to stop the cycle is to subordinate desire to what is good. Desiring what is good won’t deaden you like that. You can rest in what is good. Lust is deceitful because it promises happiness but it never delivers.

Desire will obsess your mind and thoughts if you let it. Bad ideas, habits in your body, and socialized expectations take you over and you become ruled by evil. Why lie? A set of ideas that are ruled by desire get you to lie. John 8:34. We are slaves of sin. Sin blinds you and binds you. The will gets enslaved to sin in many ways: drugs, pornography, getting your own way, etc. That's because, as Paul teaches, sin gets in our bodily members and so we sin without thinking about it. It becomes a grim picture: "The dark places of the earth are filled with violence" (Psalms 74:20)

8. Escape the Corruption of Lust

Peter in his second epistle gives the solution to sin. He's introducing a program of spiritual formation. This is one of the later writings in the New Testament and it reflects in part the experience of transformation in the early church:

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire" (2 Peter 1:3-4, ESV).

Freedom comes as we place ourselves in the larger kingdom of God context with Christ. (But desire ignores this.) Peter says we can escape the corruption that is in the world do to lust. Are you ready to do that? We get cautious at this point. But it sounds like something for us to do. Colossians 3 is the same.

God comes to us with knowledge of himself, us, what is good for us and he sets us free:

"Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray;

I woke; the dungeon flamed with light.

My chains fell off, my heart was free,

I rose, went forth, and followed thee.”

(From Charles Wesley’s hymn, “Can it Be?”.)

The gift of God is to free the will from bondage through the Word and the Spirit. Sins loose their impulsive power to dominate. It’s important to learn why you are tempted by a sin. What you are tempted with is an indicator of where your soul is and what needs to change.

9. You Will Never Thirst Again!

What is your life like if you’re set free from desire? In John 7:37 Jesus says, take my water and you’ll never thirst again. Same in John 4. Jesus is talking about a different kind of water: the presence of God. He says we’ll “Never thirst,” never be driven by obsessive desire again. You will be given an inexhaustible source of satisfaction that will set you free from domination by desire!

This freedom from being ruled by desire is not a new thing. Remember, “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1). Jesus brought a new concreteness and power to the life the Psalmist and prophets spoke of. And little communities formed around him to become like him.

Paul was a jailbird, who knew the inside of more jails than anyone in the Roman empire of his day. Philippians 4: “Rejoice in the Lord...” Where, in the Lord. We thirst for him. The Lord is at hand (same language as Jesus uses, “The Kingdom of the heavens is at hand,” Matthew 4:17) not someplace else, but right where you are. That’s how you grow in kindness, etc.

Let your mind dwell on what is good. Practice. “The God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:9).

Would a person who is content in whatever his circumstances be dominated by desire? No, of course not. (Philippians 4:11-12)

10. See the Larger Kingdom of God Context

What makes sin so attractive? We don’t see it as sin. It comes with a different label than “I’m a sinner” or it won’t capture you. Sin is only attractive if you don’t see it as sin. In order to captivate you it obsesses you. (Of course there are spiritual forces at work also.)

To make sin unattractive you need to see it in the larger context of God’s kingdom so that you can subordinate your desires to what is good. This is what Jesus is all about: surrender your desires when it is appropriate, tell yourself, “I don’t have to have that.”

See sin as the object of Gods displeasure, as what ruins life. When you see sins for what they are then they become unattractive. Find anyplace where people are in trouble and desire has driven them mad.

If you are struggling with a temptation (which is always the result of sin being attractive to you) you have an inclination to do it. To get free of temptation you need to see sin for what it is—when you do it’ll become unattractive, if not disgusting.

11. Be Alive to God, Dead to Sin

Alive to God, dead to sin. What does this mean? Sin is not attractive, that is what it means. Many Christians think it’s impossible for sin to become unattractive. They’ve tried to overcome sin by sheer force of their will and can’t. Willpower is not enough— it never is. The only function of your will is to bring you to the point of trusting God, relying on him and living there.

But when your emotions are turned to what is wrong then you are dead in trespasses and sins, what God says and does doesn't influence you. On the other hand, to be dead to sin (you might think its impossible to be dead to sin, but see Romans 6) is when sin is not interesting to you. Dead to sin, alive to God. Dead to God, alive to sin.

William Law in chapter 3 of A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life talks of the centrality of intention for our growth in holiness. He uses the case of the man who swears and feels guilty. He says he can't stop, but upon further analysis he says he wouldn't swear in the presence of the Sovereign Lord. There's the solution to sin: stay in the presence of the Lord!

Philippians 4:4-9. Beauty is a major source of strength. Beauty is good made manifest to the senses, what art is meant to do for us. We turn our mind to those things that are beautiful and we are drawn away from sin.

12. Renew your Mind in God's Word

Safety from obsessive desire is in recognizing what is good and turning your mind to that. (Always we must be assisted by the grace of God.) Your will basically follows your thoughts. (William James offers the best understanding of how the will works.) On the other hand, what is in your mind comes from your will. Then the emotions, body, and social context get involved.

Peugeot ran an ad: "Pursue happiness in a car that can catch it." That's stupid. We have to work on our thinking!

Psalm 119:99-100: "I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts" (NIV, 1984).

Meditating on the law of God and learning to obey it makes us smarter than all of our teachers! It's the best education you can get. (Joshua 1:8 is another example of this.) The Word will grow in you into movements that are in confluence with the kingdom

of God. You think better, more clearly. You can distinguish between good and bad reasoning.

13. Sin is Unattractive Next to Christ, the King!

Your project is not to wrestle with bad desires and defeat them. You need to develop metadesires, desires about desires. Develop a heart for God—desire to desire Christ.

When you begin to stand free from desire then you have a healthy will that can live in terms of a right ordering of what is good, your choices are for what is good. Desire messes up priorities, always.

Sin is only attractive to a starved will, a manifestation of weakness. The healthy will steps into abundance by using good routines, like Daniel who prayed three times a day and didn't change his pattern even when his enemies came after him for it.

Philippians 3:3-11. Paul lists all the things we put on our resumes and demonstrates that even good flesh looks like dung next to Christ! Sin doesn't look attractive next to the treasure of Christ. We want to get to the place where the ordinary temptations of daily life are uninteresting.

Spiritual disciplines help. Fasting is a great discipline to deal with desire and turn it toward knowing and loving Christ.

QUESTION & ANSWER

1. Aren't unmet needs central to our sin problem?

Yes, we're needy and Satan feeds us lies. Then we become ruled by desires. We have a problem that we mistake our desires for needs. Sometimes we don't desire what we need and we do desire what we don't need. We have to keep these things in the right order.

2. Don't we need to be weak to grow in God's grace?

"When I am weak then I am strong..." (2 Corinthians 12:10) I believe Paul was troubled by his desire for acceptance and recognition. His strength made him turn to God's strength. You have to figure out where is the strength and a where is the weakness in the passage.

3. What are some disciplines to overcome jealousy?

You need to cultivate the sense that you're adequately provided for, looking at the Word and thanking God for his blessings. Cultivate the genuine desire to see other people prosper—that's what Paul is talking about in Philippians 2:1-5. You realize that the prosperity or success of someone else doesn't diminish my blessing.

4. Is penance a good way to deal with desire?

Sometimes it helps them to see that what they desire leads to pain. But I don't think penance is a good approach because often punishment is only safe in God's hands. You have to be very careful if you punish others to do it in a way that it promotes understanding, and not just the idea that it's a bad thing to get caught. I don't like to put discipline in the context of punishment, because discipline is really a way to freedom. Usually there is a better way to learn than punishment.

5. How do you tell the difference between repression of desires and submitting them?

Repression is not helpful. You need to understand your desires. However, restraining desires—controlling them but not denying them—can help you not hurt someone. Repression just relocates the desire—it doesn't deal with it.

Lust and pornography are another example. A guy told me that he gave up pornography because he thought about it and said, “I don’t want my daughters to think of me that way.”

This side of heaven, well all have something to deal with!

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