

ACBC Annual Conference Workshop
Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA October 7, 2014

“Straight Talk about Preventing and Overcoming Sexual Sin”

Introduction:

I originally prepared this session as part 2 of a workshop on the topic of temptation, and specifically, *Understanding How Temptation Works*, from James 1:12-15. In part one we consider John Owen’s counsel from *Of Temptation* where he said:

“He that would indeed get the conquest over any sin must consider his temptations to it, and strike at that root; without deliverance from thence, he will not be healed.”

–John Owen

That’s a very helpful directive for us as biblical counselors. The point is, if we want to overcome sin and help others do the same, we must get serious about not only the sin itself but also with the temptation that led to it. In other words, we must give attention to sin’s *prevention* and as well as to sin’s *removal*.

We’re going to try to do just that in this session. We’re going to move to a more specific area that confronts us regularly in our own lives and in our ministries with people. The title sums it up, *“Straight Talk about Preventing and Overcoming Sexual Sin.”*

A topic that’s hard to talk about... Yet Paul did, and with new believers (Eph 5:1-4).

A topic that’s essential to talk about...especially in today’s society.

We’re going to talk about both elements in this session, *prevention* and *removal*, with emphasis on the former.

I. Identifying the Question: *How can we prevent and overcome sexual sin?*

We must believe (and we must help those with whom we are ministering to believe) four things...

A. We must believe that sexual sin is an abuse of God’s good gift of sex (Gen. 2:25).

Sex itself is just that, a good and wonderful gift from the Creator God to His creatures, to be enjoyed of course within the bond of the marriage relationship. As did Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:25, “The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”

Story about men in lifeboat stranded at sea, dying of thirst, looking at water all around them, beckoning, inviting a drink. One man did drink. But his thirst did not go away. The more he drank the more he wanted. Indeed, he hastened his death by drinking the salt water. The problem wasn’t the water, but taking in water that wasn’t pure.

If we’re going to prevent sexual sin and resist it at the temptation level, we must believe that sexual sin is indeed an abuse of a very good gift from God.

B. We must believe that sexual sin is unacceptable (Eph. 5:3).

There is the “it’s what a healthy man does” mentality all around us. You know, sure a guy should be committed to purity, but there’s nothing wrong with enjoying a look now and then, is there? That’s not what God’s Word says...

Ephesians 5:3 “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people.”

Matthew 5:27-28 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

C. We must believe that sexual sin can be prevented and overcome by the power of Christ and His cross (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

We are not the first generation to face and struggle with sexual sin. Consider Corinth...

Here’s what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, “Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”

Through Christ we can overcome sexual sin and remain pure. Through Christ the person who has fallen into sexual sin can change and become pure and an instrument in the hands of the Redeemer.

But not only can those in Christ overcome sexual sin, they can resist it at the temptation level, too. That’s what Paul told the Corinthians in the familiar 1 Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

We must believe that. We must affirm that sexual sin can be prevented as well as overcome.

I find great encouragement in the story of John Newton. John Piper has written an excellent biography of Newton’s life that I commend to you. He begins, “John Newton was born July 24, 1725 in London to a godly mother and an irreligious, sea-faring father. His mother died when he was six. Left mainly to himself, Newton became a debauched sailor—a miserable outcast on the coast of West Africa for two years; a slave-trading sea-captain until an epileptic seizure ended his career.”¹

Newton was a slave to sin, and I mean a *slave* to sin. Can a man who is enslaved to his passions change? Can he overcome sexual sin, and then, can he resist further temptation in the future? Yes he can!

Concerning John Newton Piper writes, “At the end of his life he is still marveling that he was saved and called to preach the gospel of grace. From his last will and testament we read: ‘I commit my soul to my gracious God and Savior, who mercifully spared and preserved me, when I was an apostate, a blasphemer, and an infidel, and delivered me from the state of misery on the coast of Africa

¹http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Biographies/1485_John_Newton_The_Tough_Roots_of_His_Habitual_Tenderness/

into which my obstinate wickedness had plunged me; and who has been pleased to admit me (though most unworthy) to preach his glorious gospel.”

D. We must believe that God intends to use us to help our brothers and sisters prevent and overcome sexual sin (Gal. 6:1).

Not because we've arrived, but because that's His strategy. He uses those who have experienced grace to minister to those in need of grace.

And that's a true friend will do if his brother needs help, right? He'll get involved. He'll be an instrument of restoration! So says Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."

And if the help is to be lasting, he will attention to prevention, the winning the battle with sexual sin at the temptation level, *before* it bears its ugly fruit.

E.g.—

II. Identifying the Question behind the Question: *How can we prevent and overcome any sin that is presently enslaving us?*

For starters, we must beware of something...

A. Beware of faulty views about how we prevent and overcome sin.

Let me review with you three unbiblical yet quite common perspectives on how a person deals with sin.

1. *The "Holy Zap" view*

This approach agrees that God is the solution for sin, but suggests that the ability to prevent and overcome sin occurs instantaneously, the moment God *zaps* you. It might sound like this...

**Walk an aisle, pray a prayer, get the Spirit...and you'll overcome sin.

And if you don't overcome sin it's because you didn't get the zap—or the zap wore off. The solution? Go forward again, pray harder, and then you'll change.

2. *The "Let go and let God" view*

**This view says it's all up to God.

So if you really want to kick some habit, you need to turn it over to God and get out of the way. Let go and God will take over. Then you'll be victorious.

Without a doubt we need to submit ourselves to God. However, the problem with this view is that it leaves out the rest of the story. Overcoming sin certainly begins "by letting go and letting God," but it doesn't end there. We're also commanded to "work out your salvation..." and "Put off the old man and put on the new man," passages that emphasize that change involves a *process* in which we have ongoing responsibility.

3. *The "Pull up your bootstraps" view*

Contrary to the "Let go and let God" approach...

**This view says it's all up to me.

This is the view that permeates our culture. You'll hear it on the self-help talk shows. You'll read it in the pop psychology best sellers. "If you're going to kick

that habit, you must believe in yourself. Show some self-respect. You've got what it takes within yourself, now make it happen. YOU can do it."

What's wrong with this view? Yes, I have responsibility when it comes to change. Yes, I must do something if I am going to change. But no, I cannot change in *my strength*. Jesus said, "Without me you can do nothing (John 15:5)."

B. Understand that overcoming sin is like a walk. It's not a zap, but a step by step path we tread as we learn to walk in the light (1 John 1:6).

This is the image the Bible presents again and again, as in 1 John 1:6, "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth." Notice that word "walk." That's what the Christian life is, a walk, a step by step walk. And that's how change occurs, not typically in leaps but one step at a time (and sometimes with backward stumbling along the way—remember Peter? And David? And John Mark? And on and on the biblical list goes of men just like us who stumbled in their walk with God, but by His grace got up and kept walking!). That's what we're after.

My friend, there are no quick fixes when it comes to holiness. I love the following poetic testimonial by John Newton.

*I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek, more earnestly, His face.*

*'Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
And He, I trust, has answered prayer!
But it has been in such a way,
As almost drove me to despair.*

*I hoped that in some favored hour,
At once He'd answer my request;
And by His love's constraining pow'r,
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.*

*Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in every part.*

*Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.*

*Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?*

*“’Tis in this way, the Lord replied,
I answer prayer for grace and faith.*

*These inward trials I employ,
From self, and pride, to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may’st find thy all in Me.*

III. Identifying God’s Prescription for Preventing and Overcoming Sexual Sin: *We must take the gospel seriously by following the pattern God gives us in the book of Ephesians.*

That statement is key. It’s *the gospel* we must take seriously, the good news about what God has done for sinners through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Lasting transformation is gospel-based, and consequently, God-glorifying.

What do I mean by taking the gospel seriously in helping people prevent and overcome sin? How do we do that? Like the writers of the epistles did, particularly Paul. I have chosen Ephesians as a pattern for us to follow, for in Ephesians Paul is helping Christians experience the life-transforming power of the gospel. He talks about sexual purity, but not until chapter four. There’s a platform he lays first, and so must we.

A. Step One: Deal with positional matters first (Ephesians 1-3).

That’s what Ephesians 1-3 are all about. The key phrase is “in Christ.” Which means...

1. *If a person is not in Christ, he cannot prevent and overcome sin in ways that please God.*

On the other hand...

2. *If a person is in Christ, he can and must overcome sin (1:3-4).*

Notice the provision for change in 1:3...

And God’s purpose for change in 1:4...

B. Step Two: Deal with practical implications next (Ephesians 4-6).

Now let’s get specific about preventing and overcoming sexual sin in our own lives, and helping our brothers and sisters, and sons and daughters, do the same. According to the flow of Ephesians, we must get serious about seven issues. Let’s walk through the text and we’ll see them.

1. *Get serious about your theology, particularly the theology of progressive sanctification (Eph 4:20-21).*

Ephesians 4:20-21 “You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.”

Paul is going to get specific in a moment about nitty gritty real life issues, but he starts by reminding the Ephesian believers of what happened at their conversion. They were taught (he should know for he taught them) “in him in accordance with the truth.” Theology matters. What we believe about God and particularly the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, matters.

What did Paul teach these new Christians when he first disciplined them? He reminds them in verse 22 that he taught them “to put off the old self,” and in verse 24 “to put on the new self.” That’s critical to see. Sanctification is a process and it happens progressively as we take steps of obedience in dependence upon God’s gracious provisions in Christ.

If you don’t understand that, you’re in trouble for you’re in for a life of constant frustration, even as a Christian. “Why do I keep struggling with this sin? I asked Jesus to save me! What’s wrong? Maybe I’m not cut out to be a Christian!”

What’s wrong is your expectation. Paul let those he disciplined know from the outset about progressive sanctification.

2. *Get serious about your responsibility to put off and put on (Eph 4:22-24).*

Ephesians 4:22-24 “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

What’s involved in the put off/put on assignment?

a. This involves our thinking and desires.

Behavior, too, but it starts in the heart and mind (see verse 23).

b. This involves living by God’s Word rather than our feelings.

Those who live a feeling-oriented life are in for a roller-coaster life. Our friend needs to live a Word-driven rather than feeling-driven life.

3. *Get serious about dealing with the specifics of life (Eph 4:25-5:7).*

And specifics is precisely what Paul addresses in this section. It’s helpful to chart some of the specifics Paul addressed from Ephesians 4:25 through 5:7. He identifies something specific that we must *put off* and then something specific that we must *put on* in its place.

	Put Off	Put On
25	Falsehood	Speak the truth
26-27	Lingering anger	Resolve problems God’s way today
28	Being a taker	Work, save, and give
29	Words that tear down	Words that build up
30-32	Things that grieve the Spirit	Christlike kindness, compassion, & forgiveness
5:1-7	Every hint of sexual sin	Thanksgiving

What needs to go? Every hint of sexual sin. What’s that mean? Every hint. We’ll come back to the specific of putting on thanksgiving in a moment, but the next statement is key...

Key: When dealing with sexual sin, what’s required is **radical amputation** (See Matt. 5:27-30). That means we need to make it as difficult as possible for the person to commit the sin that has enslaved him.

E.g. If a man struggles with pornography, he needs to cut up the DVD rental cards, get rid of the library card, put the computer in a public place in the house, etc. He must fight the battle at the temptation stage.

E.g.-- If a woman has been involved in an adulterous relationship, she needs to remove the telephone numbers of the other man from the cell phone memory, burn the letters and pictures, no more contact, etc. She must take seriously the implications of, "Lead us not into temptation."

4. *Get serious about putting on thanksgiving (Eph 5:3-4).*

This step is critical. Again lasting change involves more than just *ceasing* the sinful activity. It requires putting on the God-pleasing replacement, in this case, *thanksgiving*. Discuss: Why is thanksgiving the replacement for sexual sin?

a. It's what a person engaged in sexual sin isn't doing (Eph. 5:3-4a; Rom. 1:21).

He is self-focused and self-absorbed. She uses sex for self-gratification. Self, self, self.

b. It's what a person who wants to get rid of sexual sin must do (Eph 5:4).

He needs to engage in the activity of giving thanks to the Lord. That's the opposite of self-focused sexual sin. For what should he give thanks? The person who's been involved in sexual sin will need help here because that person may feel he has nothing for which to give thanks (due to his mind-numbing sexual sin). Let me begin the list...

-Express thanks for the beauty of Christ and His cross.

-Express thanks for your spouse (if married).

-Express thanks for your position (if single).

We must put off every hint of sexual sin (including thinking about it in ways that feed your lust for it). Paul says even joking about it must go (5:3-4). In place of sexual sin we must put on thanksgiving, that is, being thankful to God for the spouse He has given us, or one day may give us if we are not yet married, or for the gift of singleness should it not be His will for us to marry. When I'm putting on thankfulness I'm free from the bondage of sexual sin.

**The bottom line: We need to put off every aspect of sexual sin (in word, thought, desire, and action) and put on the practice of thanksgiving.

5. *Get serious about the fact that the battle doesn't end until we see the Lord (5:8-20).*

That's what the following, present tense commands indicate...

Verse 8—"Live as children of light."

Verse 10—"Find out what pleases the Lord."

Verse 15—"Be very careful how you live."

These commands make it clear that the process of change isn't over yet, and it won't be over until we see Christ.

6. *Get serious about Christ-exalting, cross-centered, grace-motivated worship (Eph 5:18-20).*

Notice the next segment of exhortations Paul gives in the letter in Ephesians 5:18-20, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and

make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Does that have anything to do with preventing and overcoming sexual sin? Yes! How so?

Key: At its core, sexual sin reveals a **worship problem**. When we engage in sexual sin we are worshipping the creature rather than the Creator.

It’s true. The person who is engaging in sexual sin is worshipping the creature (it could be an actual person or a fantasy person on a screen) rather than the Creator. So if we’re serious about overcoming sexual sin, we must get serious about Christ-exalting, cross-centered, grace-motivated worship. Each of those modifiers is important. Christ-exalting, cross-centered, and grace-motivated worship.

It’s vital that we spend time regularly pondering the cross and worshipping our Savior for His cross. Here’s another poem by John Newton. It’s his testimony and it illustrates the power of the cross to transform a man enslaved to sin. It’s entitled, “*In Evil Long I Took Delight:*”

*In evil long I took delight,
Unawed by shame or fear,
Till a new object struck my sight,
And stopped my wild career.*

*I saw One hanging on a tree,
In agony and blood,
Who fixed His languid eyes on me,
As near His cross I stood.*

*Sure, never to my latest breath,
Can I forget that look;
It seemed to charge me with His death,
Though not a word He spoke.*

*My conscience felt and owned the guilt,
And plunged me in despair,
I saw my sins His blood had spilt,
And helped to nail Him there.*

*A second look He gave, which said,
“I freely all forgive;
This blood is for thy ransom paid;
I die that thou mayst live.”*

*Thus, while His death my sin displays
In all its blackest hue,
Such is the mystery of grace,
It seals my pardon too.*

*With pleasing grief, and mournful joy,
My spirit now is fill'd,
That I should such a life destroy,
Yet live by Him I kill'd!*

Thankfully, we don't have to fight this battle alone. When God saves us He places us in a community that is intended to assist us in the change process.

7. *Get serious about the local church, for it is the God-ordained environment for lasting change (5:21).*

Notice Ephesians 5:21, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." Is that a significant exhortation for a person who's struggling with sexual sin? Absolutely. Why?

For starters, he needs what God intends the church to provide, including accountability and encouragement. But to benefit from these blessings of the church he must *submit* himself to his brothers. He must "place himself under" their care (i.e. 'submit').

What's more, having put off sexual sin he now needs to develop the kinds of God-honoring relationships in his family described in Ephesians 5:22-6:4 (note the instruction given to husbands, wives, children, and parents).

This will take time and effort. A person who has been trapped in sexual sin often lacks meaningful relationships. But by God's grace he can begin to cultivate God-pleasing relationships with his spouse and children and brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ.

E.g.—The church is God's intended support group!

IV. Getting Intentional: Some Homework Assignments for Putting On Thanksgiving

Since *thanksgiving* is the key replacement for sexual sin, we need to get to work on helping our friend (and us) cultivate this activity. Here are some ways to do just that...

1. *Make a list of 50 blessings God has given you and express thanks to Him for each every day.*
2. *Memorize and meditate on a verse about the cross every month.*
Suggestions: Galatians 6:14; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24; Isaiah 53:6
3. *Listen to cross-centered teaching and music during your commute time.*
4. *Sing a song about the cross every day.*
5. *Make corporate worship a priority every week.*
6. *Since sexual sin is self-focused, do something to serve someone else every day for the honor of Christ.*

Remember John Owen's counsel? "He that would indeed get the conquest over any sin must consider his temptations to it, and strike at that root; without deliverance from thence, he will not be healed." By using assignments like these, we are helping a counselee to not only overcome sexual sin, but *prevent* it in the future.

V. Some Helpful Resources

By the way, just reading a book on holiness doesn't insulate you from sexual sin. For that matter, neither does writing one. Sad to say as I was preparing this talk I read the endorsements of one of the following books and noticed the name of a man who is no longer in the ministry due to moral failure. But for the grace of God that could be me and you. Let's be doers of the Word and not hearers only (James 1:22).

Jerry Bridges, *The Pursuit of Holiness*

C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness*

C. J. Mahaney, *The Cross Centered Life*

C. J. Mahaney, *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God*

David Powlison, *Pornography: Slaying the Dragon*

Jeffrey S. Black, *Sexual Sin: Combatting the Drifting and Cheating*

Kris Lundgaard, *The Enemy Within*

Steve Gallagher, *At the Altar of Sexual Idolatry*

Jeff Colon, *From Ashes to Beauty: Spiritual Truths for Rebuilding & Revitalizing Your Marriage*

Brad Brandt, *Lead Us Not Into Temptation* sermon series,
transcripts at www.wheelersburgbaptist.com

Q & A Time to follow...

What questions does this raise for you?