

Never Give Up

By Alan P. Medinger

Last month, we started our main article with the Apostle Paul's lament in **Romans 7:15**, "*For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*" Paul was talking about the sin which still dwelt in him—and still dwells in us.

We discussed how, even after conversion, something called sin lives in us; and although we are changed and changing people, we will continue to sin in certain ways. The good news, however, is that the Holy Spirit also lives in us, and we can choose to live in the power of the Spirit. We can live lives that are pleasing to the Lord even as the sin nature, that shadow of our old selves, survives. Furthermore, we don't have to be defined by the old man, but we can live as children of the Father.

This month, I want to approach our tendency to sin from another perspective. Although we acknowledge that sin lives in us, and we will sin from time to time, this does not give us *license* to sin. In fact, we must never give up the struggle against sin.

God's standards are clear: "*You must, therefore, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" (**Matthew 5:48**) With Jesus having raised the ante on sexual sin—looking on a woman with lust is the equivalent of adultery (**Matthew 5:27-28**)—there is little doubt as to how we should live sexually. "*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God . . .*" Scripture instructs us in **Romans 12:1**.

In the larger picture of our lives, obedience and loving the Lord are inextricably tied together. "*If you love me, you will keep my word.*" (**John 14:15**). In **1 John 1:5**, we are told, "*. . . but whoever keeps His word, in him truly love for God is perfected.*" How do we reconcile these passages with the reality that we continue to sin? I suggest two ways.

First, we remember grace; God's wonderful grace that bridges the gap between God's perfect standards and the reality of our lives. The chasm of sin in us has been bridged by the precious

blood of Jesus. The eternal consequences of our sin have already been assumed by our Savior.

Second, we remember that God looks to the heart. Usually, when we think of Jesus looking to our hearts, what comes to mind are His words that, "*. . . out of the heart come every evil thought, murder, adultery, fornication, etc.*" (**Matthew 5:19**), but I believe that we can also say that out of the heart comes the desire to be obedient. Our calling is to seek to be obedient, and this seeking is a matter of the heart.

If we truly desire to be obedient, but the sin living in us causes us to fail from time to time, I believe that, because of Jesus, God will look more to our hearts than at our actions.

Having said this, I have to admit that this thought doesn't give me great consolation in the case of my specific sins. Every time I sin, I find myself saying, "If only I had tried a little harder, I would not have done that." Or, perhaps, "If I loved the Lord more and myself less, I wouldn't have done this thing." Is this self-admonition valid? Who can say? The heart is indeed deceitful. I simply am not in a position to judge my own heart. Only God can do that.

But the one thing I can do is to keep on trying: Repent every time I am aware that I have sinned, and then try once again to do better. This is all I can do. Perhaps never giving up is the best indicator as to where our hearts really are.

When I was in school, teachers often took into consideration how much effort we put into our studies when grading our work. A student might be bumped up one grade if the teacher felt that the child was really trying. There is something a bit presumptuous in this. Who can say with true knowledge, "She did the best she could," or more dangerously, "I did the best I could." We can never make these judgments with any certainty because, unlike God, we cannot judge the heart.

So we keep on trying, and we never give up repenting when we fail. Doing this, we don't have to judge our own hearts, and in doing this,

because obedience and love are so closely linked, we will come to love the Lord more. And ultimately, it is our love for Him that brings us into obedience.

Does the fact that sin continues to dwell in us, and yet at the same time our relationship with God requires that we never stop trying to be obedient, mean that certain struggles may go on for the rest of our lives? Yes, it does. But this is not all bad news. The very struggle itself can produce great blessings. Each of us had far to go on our journey from conversion to glory, and each of us is required to “. . . *work out our own salvation*” (**Philippians 2:12**), so why not try to find the good in this? It is there. The process of struggle against sin can bring great benefits to us in at least three areas.

First, we are regularly reminded of our great need for God. Every man and woman needs God all of the time, but some don't know it. This is probably why it is so difficult for the rich man to get into heaven and why those who are poor in spirit experience the kingdom of heaven. We know that we are poor and needy—our struggles remind us of it every day—so we know that we need the Lord every day. It is in these struggles—the victories and the defeats—that we truly learn of the grace of God.

I have asked people in our groups if they consider their struggle against homo-sexuality to have been a positive or a negative factor in their lives. The majority of those who have been in the battle for any length of time will say that it was positive; it drew them closer to the Lord.

Second, our struggles cause us to examine the root causes of the sin in our lives. Many people who have come to Regeneration have found a blessed freedom from homosexuality, but they will tell you that the greater blessing came in being set free from areas of sin and brokenness that directed and empowered their homosexual struggle. Many experience true healing of childhood trauma. Many uncover sins that are deeper than their sexual sin, or they are convicted of great areas of unforgiveness that have kept them in bondage. It was their struggle with sexual sin that drove them to uncover the darker areas of their souls, thereby creating the opening whereby the light of Jesus might enter in.

Third, our struggle with sexual sin can keep us humble. In Jesus' time, it appears that the besetting sin of religious people was self-righteousness. This hasn't changed too much. When we look at the world around us and the terrible shape it is in and when we look at the stupid, destructive things that non-believers are doing, it is so easy to say, “Thank God I am not like them.” Then the sting of our sin hits us, and we are brought back to reality. How much we share with the world. Only Jesus makes the difference.

Thinking of the benefits we gain from the struggle with sin might lead us to ask like Paul, “*Are we to continue in sin so that grace may abound?*” (**Romans 6:1**) Of course not. Sin always has the capacity to bring about hurtful consequences to us, to others, and most importantly, to the heart of the Lord Who loves us and Who wants us to be His free and whole sons and daughters.

At the same time, thinking this way, accepting the fact that we and all Christians will have some struggle with sin throughout our lives, can help keep us from one of the most insidious sins of all, one that is very common among homosexual overcomers—self-pity. The attitude that it's “not fair” that I should have to deal with this problem fades away as we accept the truth that most believers struggle with some kind of sin, and that God can and does bring good out of such struggles. All things can work together for good for those who love God and are called to His purpose—even our struggle with sexual sin.

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. (**Romans 5:3-5**)

Keep on trying. It's the only way!

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