

LED BY THE SPIRIT

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[Continued From The February 2017 Issue]

Even though we do not have to sin and John writes to us that we may not sin; nevertheless, if we do sin, Jesus advocates for us with the Father. The dictionary defines *advocate* as a person who pleads for or on behalf of another; intercessor. It's like this; when I sin and confess it, it is as if Jesus says to God, "David has sinned and has confessed his sin, and he knows that he needs to change and wants to change, which I will help him to do. Therefore, since I have already paid the penalty for that sin, your desire for justice has been provided by Me, and now Your forgiveness can freely flow to him." If that doesn't compel us to want with all of our hearts to live for Him, nothing will. We can exclaim with John, "*Behold (can you believe it?), what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons (children) of God*" (1 John 3:1a). We all long to come to the place where sin has lost all its influence on our lives. God has promised that that day will come, that one day we will be in the image of Christ. However, that day has not arrived yet, at least not so for most of us. This is why we must learn

to be led by the Holy Spirit. Being led by the Spirit is the essence of the process of change in our lives. The fact that we need to be changed implies that there are things in us that are not consistent with the image of Christ. Let us be honest; these are not just minor adjustments that are needed. These changes involve the identification and rooting out of sin in our lives.

I believe that God, through the establishment of the new covenant with us and in our salvation, gave us a new heart. However, it is a heart that we must present to Him daily in order that He may write His laws upon it. God is allowing us to decide if we will give Him our new heart through which He may direct our lives or if we will choose to hold it back from Him so that we may maintain control ourselves.

One of the Jewish scribes came to Jesus at one point and asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?" "*And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:*

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment” (Mark 12:29-30, KJV). Ever since God created man, His chief desire has always been that He would have man’s heart. Sure, He wants us to obey Him, but it goes so much deeper. He wants us to know that behind His rules lies an unfathomable love and an intense desire for our well-being; a desire for us to experience real, true life of the highest quality. In order for God to accomplish in us what He has planned, we must first love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

I believe that being led by the Spirit is allowing the Holy Spirit to help us examine our hearts. This is not always a pleasant process. In this process the question we must all ask ourselves is, “Who or what do we love more than God?” Before you say too quickly there is no one or nothing that you love more than God, let’s ask some more probing questions of ourselves:

Who or what do you think you cannot live without?

Who or what do think you can never be happy or content without?

Who or what occupies much of your thought life during your discretionary time?

Who or what gives you your sense of identity?

What do you take pride in?

In who or what do you turn to for safety, comfort, or escape?

What things do feel you deserve?

What kind of performance in yourself drives and motivates you?

These questions and many more like them make us feel uncomfortable. What do we do when we don’t like our answers to these questions? We have several choices. First we can choose to defend ourselves and in our self-righteousness make excuses for our behavior. We can become discouraged and allow fear and anxiety to overcome us being convinced that meeting God’s demands for change is impossible. Or we can allow the wonderful, magnificent, grace of God to come and do its cleansing work in our lives. However, the grace of God can only be effective when we apply it to specific things in our lives. That is why we must be honest before God when we attempt to answer these probing questions. Often we must allow the Holy Spirit to show us the sinful attitude or deep-seated need that underlies the sinful behavior. What is the sin behind the sin? Although being on guard against the temptations on the outside of us is important, even more important is being aware of the sin that still resides on the inside, in our heart. All sin begins in the heart. Jesus said in Luke 6:43-45, *“For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit.*

For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. A good man out of the treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (NKJV). We can avoid certain situations, places, and relationships, but we cannot escape our hearts. Let us never minimize the horribleness of sin; otherwise we will minimize the grace of God which is the only thing which can rescue us. If we allow the Holy Spirit to deal with what is in our heart, we will have fewer problems with what is in our environment. What idols have we erected in our lives? Sometimes even good things may have become gods in our lives. Our ministry can even become our sense of identity and self-worth such that if it does not seem we have been as appreciated as we think we should be, we become upset. Our identity is in Christ and Him alone. Jesus wants us to say like Paul, *“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me”* (Galatians 2:20, KJV).

We must never be afraid to allow the Holy Spirit to search our hearts. We need to say like David in Psalm 139, *“Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts; And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting”* (Psalm 139:23-24, NKJV).

The same grace by which God saved us is the same grace that He is willing and ready to apply to us on a moment-to-moment basis in our daily lives. The same grace that saved us is the grace that sanctifies us moment-by-moment. If we sin, and likely we will along the way, we have a safe place to go. We must never run from God as Jonah did, but like the “Prodigal” we must run to our Father. I think that if we are aware of our weaknesses and the areas where we have tendencies to give in to temptation, we are more able to deal with the thought through immediate repentance and faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to deliver us before we allow the thought to progress into actual transgression.

Moment-to-moment repentance from sin and faith in the power of Christ in us to strengthen us against the temptation to sin are companion principles. They work hand-in-hand. We can learn a lot from the behavior of the prodigal son.

There was a place where “he came to his senses.” He said, “I will arise and go to my father.” The young man had faith in his father, and he repented of his actions. We can do the same thing but before we actually fall into transgression. The word “repentance” means “turning and going in an opposite direction.” When temptation to accept the things the world offers comes into our thoughts, we can do the same thing the prodigal did but **before** we fall into actual transgression.

With the faith of Christ we can repent (turn from) of those thoughts and crucify them right there in that moment. *“..... casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ”* (2 Corinthians 10:5, NKJV).

As we live out our daily lives, we experience many “thorns in the flesh” so to speak; physical suffering, discouragement, disappointment, failure, discomfort, ill treatment from friends, coworkers, and employers, fear, and trials of many kinds. The world is more than ready to come to our aid with its so-called comforts and solutions to our problems, to anesthetize us from our pain, deceitfully suggesting that we deserve relief from our problems and that we deserve immediate comfort. It offers a wide range of “solutions” uniquely tailored to appeal to a particular person’s flesh at the time. They are such things as excessive entertainment, overeating, alcohol, drugs, pornography, sexual immorality, excessive sleep, off-loading of blame to spouses, children, and friends, excessive emphasis on work, inordinate emphasis on obtaining wealth, etc. The list is endless. The problem is, although these and other such diversions may seem to provide some immediate relief, they are temporary fixes and the long-term result is guilt, shame, damaged or broken relationships and ultimately spiritual stagnation and even death. They do not result in the quality of life that we really want and that God promised. God allows things to come into our lives to see if He truly has our heart. He will ask us the same question as Jesus asked Peter, *“Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs”* (John 21:15, KJV).

We must remember what Jesus said was the second greatest commandment; *“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”* (Mark 12:31, KJV). We cannot keep commandments six through ten until we keep commandments one through four. We cannot feed Christ’s lambs until we love God with all our heart.

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father; but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever” (1 John 2:15-17, KJV).

It is hard for us to imagine being able to live a sin-free life even for a whole day much less the rest of our lives. However, **we can believe for this current moment**. Just as we believed for salvation in that particular moment of our life when our heart was changed forever, we can believe that we can turn from the temptation to sin by the power of the

Holy Spirit in the **current moment**. The grace of God which saved us from our sins in that **moment** that we believed is the grace which will keep us from sin at the **moment** of need. Then we can believe for the next moment. Before we know it, the moments of faith and repentance (trusting in the power of the indwelling Christ and turning from the temptation to sin) will begin to flow together and the result is an ever-increasing obedient life. Before we know it, the gaps of failure between the moments of victory become less and less. Do not let the fear of whether or not you can remain sin-free for the next hour or day or week or year or the rest of your life intimidate and discourage you. Just know that the grace of God that exists as the person of the living Christ within you is sufficient to keep you from sin for the **current moment**.

Whether we like it or not, the fact is that we are in a spiritual warfare. We must always be aware of the weakness of the flesh and its tendency to be attracted to the offerings of the world. That’s why we must be on guard at all times. God has not equipped some to be super Christians and others to be less equipped and therefore to be weak Christians. We are all given the following promise: *“Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, according as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ”* (2 Peter 1:2-8, KJV).

For me being led by the Spirit is more than just receiving direction at various decision points of my life, although it is that too. It is allowing the Holy Spirit to ask me the hard and often uncomfortable questions about the affections of my heart, drilling down to uncover who or what I adore more than Him, who or what causes me to behave as though I cannot not live without it, what good things in my life have become gods or idols that I have placed ahead of Him, what attitudes underlie my non-Christ-like behavior? Do I think I cannot live contently unless the person who has wronged me asks for my forgiveness? Do I feel I cannot be a godly husband (or wife) unless my wife (or husband) fulfills my unmet needs? Do I feel I cannot fulfill my ministry unless the elders fully acknowledge all my gifts? Can I not afford to tithe until I make more money? Is it impossible for me to have patience with my teenage son or daughter until they show me the respect I deserve?

After honestly and prayerfully answering these questions, then rather than becoming defensive or avoiding facing the truth, I will hopefully turn to God and confess my sin knowing *“there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.....”* (Romans 8:1a, KJV). *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9, KJV). Equipped with a cleansed heart and the knowledge of my sinful tendencies and my carnal reactions to the pressures of life, I can allow the grace of God applied through the divine nature that I have partaken of to keep me from sin in my “moment” of temptation. I can turn to the Christ within me who by His grace will empower me to act in a cross-like way. Yes, we never outgrow our need for the working of the cross in our lives. Each moment that we say “no” to the carnal nature and “yes” to the Spirit, there is a bit of progress made in the development of the fruit of the Spirit that can bless others.

Isn't this moment-by-moment exercise of repentance and faith, this moment-by-moment allowing the grace of God to transform us what maturing into sonship is all about?

A few Sundays ago during our service my son who is a student of C.S. Lewis, shared this quote of his. I will close with it.

“The real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not actually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view; letting that other larger, stronger, quieter, life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind.

We can only do it for moments at first. But from those moments the new sort of life will be spreading through our system: because now we are letting Him work at the right part of us. It is the difference between paint, which is merely laid on the surface and a dye or stain which soaks right through. He never talked vague gas. When He said, “Be perfect,” He meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment. It is hard; but the sort of compromise we are all hankering after is harder; in fact it is impossible. It may be hard for an egg to turn into a bird. It would be a jolly sight harder for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg. We are like eggs at present. And you cannot go on indefinitely being just an ordinary, decent egg. We must be hatched or go bad.” C.S. Lewis ✝

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The Sharon Star is a monthly publication and mailed as a free-will offering plan. The articles within are intended for inspiration and information to those who are interested in the unfolding revelation of the Word of God.

Published by:
Global Missions Incorporated in North Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada.

The Sharon Star is found online at:
www.globalmissionsinc.org/the-sharon-star

Publications Mail Agreement 40012206

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