

Ephesians 4:17-24 — How Do I Stop Sinning?

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Good morning CrossWinds. Is there anybody in this room that struggles with sin? For everyone who doesn't have his or her hand up, the reason your hand is not up is because you struggle with the sin of lying. Everyone struggles with sin. Paul wrote in Romans 7, "Why do I do what I don't want to do? The evil I do not want to do is the very thing I keep on doing." Fighting against sin is a lifelong battle for all of us. The very moment we begin to get one sin under control, we find new and creative ways of sinning. This morning's message is very practical. It is about how to stop sinning. This is a message that everyone needs to hear. This may be one of the most pivotal messages in your Christian life.

We are in a series of studies in the book of Ephesians called, "Who Am I?" So far we learned we have a problem. It is called sin. Sin is rebellion against God and those in authority over us. We love to make the rules and live as if God doesn't exist. We love to think we are the center of the universe. Sin is trying to put ourselves in the place of God. The problem is that sin does not lead to happiness. Sin leads to physical and spiritual death. Sin separates us from each other and leads to broken relationships. All the fighting in the Ukraine, the bickering between the Democrats and Republicans in politics and the breakdown in marriages are a side effect of sin.

Sin is so deeply woven into the fabric of our lives there is no way we can fix ourselves. God is our biggest problem, because he promises to punish sin

justly and eternally. It is called the Lake of Fire. Thankfully, in addition to God's justice and wrath against sin, there is his incredible mercy and love for us. He sent his own son who died in our places for our sin and rose from the grave conquering Satan, sin and death, the adversaries lined up against us. When we ask Jesus to forgive our sin and to be in charge of our lives, our sin is taken away. We begin a relationship with God and we find our relationships with one another being restored.

The balance of our lives after Jesus becomes simply enjoying God's amazing love for us that we don't deserve and doing the good works the Bible talks about in Ephesians 2:10, as acts of thankful worship prepared by God in advance for us to do. We are to live lives of gratitude to God for his grace.

The problem is, why don't we experience this kind of life? Why do we still struggle with our addictions to sin and selfishness even after our relationship with Jesus? Today we will find the answer.

The problem is always sin. The answer is always Jesus. Let's read our text.

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

But that is not the way you learned Christ!— assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Ephesians 4:17–24 (ESV)

The first paragraph is about the problem of sin. The second paragraph is how Jesus is the solution to our struggle with sin. Rather than just going through this point by point, to make our study more interesting, I want you to choose the sin you struggle with most. What is the sin that is eating your lunch because you keep falling to it? I know you had a sin pop into mind and you are trying to forget it. You are trying to come up with another. Don't do that. Stick with the sin the Holy Spirit brought to mind. That's the one we need to deal with this morning.

It may be lying or lust. It may be gossiping or gluttony. It may be porn or a lack of patience. I don't know what is your most urgent sin is but let's stick with it. I want to talk with you about it this morning. Ephesians 4 talks about the seriousness of our sin and how it will destroy us. I want to look at what Ephesians 4 says about the sin that is most urgent in your life. I want to do it with a series of questions.

The problem is sin.

Is my sin warping my thinking?

...you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds.
Ephesians 4:17 (ESV)

When we sin, it warps our mind. It twists our thinking. Sin leads to wrong thinking patterns. We start doing things that are blatantly wrong but in our minds we don't see a problem.

I have watched guys flirt with other women even when they are married. When you talk to one about it, he justifies it by saying his wife doesn't mind. He justifies it by saying he is helping a woman in need, so in Christian love they are stepping to the plate. He justifies it by saying his marriage is cold and his wife is

difficult to live with. It is all foolishness and selfishness, but in his mind he doesn't see it as wrong because his mind is twisted. What is obviously wrong to others is fine to him. Why can't he see it? Sin warps the brain.

Maybe one person gets in a fight with her spouse so she starts looking at eHarmony.com or christianmingle.com and in her mind she thinks she is justified because she wants to be ready if her marriage falls apart. You are married. What are you doing? How is this going to help you save your marriage? How is this going to help you protect your kids? Sin makes you do stupid stuff, and you think you are justified to do it. It warps your thinking.

Another way sin warps our minds is we start to blame other people for our sin. It is called blame shifting. It is Adam blaming Eve for his sin in the Garden of Eden. It is the husband blaming his bad attitude on his wife's moodiness. "She is the one that makes me angry." The reason you are angry is because of your own pride and lack of humility, but sin warps the mind so we think it is somebody else's fault.

The ultimate twisting of the mind is found in Satan himself. Did you ever wonder why he continues to rebel against God even though he knows Jesus conquered him on the cross and with the empty tomb? It is because his mind is warped. He thinks there is still a way he can beat God. Satan's brain is warped because sin warps the mind.

Think about your most pressing sin we talked about earlier. How has it warped your thinking? How is it making you think and do stupid things and you can't even see your own stupidity anymore?

Is my sin darkening my mind?

They are darkened in their understanding,... Ephesians 4:18 (ESV)

Not only does sin warp your thinking but it darkens the thoughts of your brain. No one that is in deep sin, like a drug addict, thought he or she would get there. You just started sinning, and sin drags your life into darker and deeper stuff. Soon what you consider normal is not what you would have considered normal only weeks or months before. Sin slides the line between right and wrong in your mind.

One of the best examples I saw of this was when I was in college. Everyone in my friend group knew premarital sex was wrong. One guy had a girlfriend he was dating for most of his freshman year. One night in our conversation, the topic of intimacy came up. He openly admitted he was sexually active with his girlfriend. I remember asking him how he could justify it. His answer was that they were committed in their hearts. They were committed to one another, but they would get to the wedding after graduation. While premarital sex was wrong for others, he now believed it wasn't wrong for him because of the commitment he had in his heart.

A year before that, he wouldn't have thought that way. Once he started down the road of premarital intimacy, he had to figure out a way to justify it. His normal, healthy sexual appetite lead him further and further and darkened his mind. The scale of what was sin slid, and he couldn't see it anymore. His unchecked, healthy, sexual appetite led to an abnormal, lust-controlled, sexual appetite.

Think about the particular sin you wrestle with. How is it darkening your mind? How is it taking you to new and darker levels of sin? How is it taking what you clearly knew was wrong and making it acceptable in your mind? Sin does that. It darkens your thinking.

Is my sin separating me from God?

...alienated from the life of God... Ephesians 4:18 (ESV)

When we sin, it separates us from God. Sin makes God feel distant. When we sin, we tend not to read our Bibles. When we sin, we find excuses to not go to church. When we sin, we try to avoid our Christian friends. When we sin, we are just like Adam and Eve and we hide from God. The more we sin, the more we avoid God.

Is that true of your most urgent sin this morning? Is the sin the Holy Spirit brought to your mind this morning making you run from God? Does God feel distant?

Is my sin blinding me to its consequences?

...God because of the ignorance that is in them... Ephesians 4:18 (ESV)

How has your sin made you ignorant of its consequences? We play this little game where we think we won't reap what we sow. "It won't happen to me." "My girlfriend is pregnant. I have no idea what happened." Sin always has consequences. Every sin will have a consequence. When you sin, you will suffer.

Even hidden sins that nobody but God and yourself know about have consequences. While God forgives us of our sins, we often have trouble forgetting our sins. At the worst time, the sins of our past burst onto the silver

screen of our psyche. Yes, they are forgiven, and even though we didn't suffer direct consequences on the outside of our lives, one of the consequences of sin is wrestling with the psychological consequences of remembering our sin on the inside of our life. They are forgiven but never forgotten because they were burned into our brains.

When we sin, we will suffer. Every sin has consequences built into it. That is why sin is always stupid. The problem is that sin blinds us to its consequences. We only see the sin. We don't see where it is leading. There is always cause and effect. If I am violent and prone to anger, it is because I watch vengeance in entertainment so I role play vengeance in my mind. It will eventually become what I real play in my life. It is simple cause and effect. When you sin by putting violent trash in your mind, you will suffer by your knee-jerk untrained reactions of being violent.

When you watch movies where people are in bed together when they date, you will role-play sleeping together in your mind and it becomes that much more difficult to not real-play that in your dating life. It is simple cause and effect. Meditating on lust will leave you addicted to lust.

Let's think about the sin the Holy Spirit brought to mind this morning. How has that sin made you ignorant of its consequences? Where is it going? Sin blinds you to its end results. Do you see where it is leading?

Is my sin giving me a hard heart toward God and others?

...due to their hardness of heart. Ephesians 4:18 (ESV)

Sin leaves our hearts hard. We become stubborn. We won't listen to others. We become unteachable. We become intoxicated with our own self-importance. We won't forgive others. Sin makes our hearts hard and leaves us unteachable and unrepentant.

No matter what people say to you, you think you know better and don't listen. Your heart is closed. It is a stone. The reason the heart becomes hard is because of sin. Sin leaves us stubborn and unrepentant.

How has the particular sin you are wrestling with this morning hardened your heart toward God and toward others? How has it left you proud and unwilling to repent and ask forgiveness from God and others for how you have hurt them? That is hard-heartedness. It is a byproduct of sin.

Is my sin leaving me insensitive to the pain I am causing God and others?

They have become callous... Ephesians 4:19 (ESV)

Sin makes us callous. The word here literally means we lose the ability to feel pain. When we sin, at first we are heart-broken. We are grief-stricken. We can barely look at ourselves in the mirror. The conviction of the Holy Spirit just dominates our lives as we are broken and wounded. The longer we continue in sin, the duller we become to the Holy Spirit's rebuke. The conviction of the Holy Spirit becomes a minor irritant, rather than a sharp pain.

Sin doesn't just numb us to the pain we cause God but it numbs us to the pain we cause others. We don't care about how we hurt them. We are tired of loving and caring. We are tired of going out of our way for others so we just cut them off. It doesn't matter to us how much we hurt them. All we care about is

ourselves. Sin makes us myopic so all we can see is ourselves, and we can't even feel how we are hurting others.

Look at your urgent sin. Have you become insensitive to the pain you cause God through that sin? How has your sin left you insensitive and uncaring to the pain you are causing others that you love? Sin does that. It leaves us insensitive and uncaring. It is serious stuff.

Has my sin led me to lose control?

...have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. Ephesians 4:19 (ESV)

Have I lost control of my sin? The key word here is sensuality. This word is often used of sexual sins. It means to be controlled by our lusts. It means to lose control of our thoughts and impulses. It means to have no brakes in our lives and to be driven by pure instinct like a wolf licking a hunting knife covered in frozen blood, so that he can't stop licking the knife even when the only blood he is tasting is his own. Sin leads us to lose control of ourselves and to destroy ourselves. Martin Luther called sin the ultimate form of cannibalism. It is consuming yourself to death.

Before we look at how Jesus saves us from sin, let's look at your most urgent sin, the one that came to mind before we started. Is this where it has led you? Are you now controlled by it rather than in control of it? Are you blaming everyone else for your sin? Don't blame it on anyone or anything else. Call it what it is, "my sin." With Jesus, my sin can change.

The solution is Jesus.

But that is not the way you learned Christ! — Ephesians 4:20 (ESV)

To break free from sin, the first thing we need to know is that focusing on breaking free from sin will *not get us free from sin*. It is like trying to not think about pink elephants. Try to not think about a pink elephant right now. What do you see in your mind? A pink elephant. The goal of our lives is *not to avoid sin*. The goal of our lives is to enjoy Jesus. It is to worship Jesus. It is to be satisfied in Jesus. It is to love Jesus.

I didn't say the goal of life is to have lots of information about Jesus. James 2:19 tells us that even the demons have lots of information about Jesus. They have more information about Jesus than we do. They don't submit to Jesus. They don't love Jesus. They don't want to be close with Jesus. The goal of life is not to be informed about Jesus but to be close to Jesus. It changes things.

It changes the way we handle sufferings and trials. To the degree suffering pushes us closer to Jesus, in the end, it is a beautiful thing.

If the goal is to be close to Jesus, then it changes the way we handle our ethical and moral choices. Many times we look in the Bible so we can avoid what the Bible says is wrong. The Bible doesn't directly address a lot of areas. Should I go into debt and if so, how much? What toys should I buy? Rather than approaching the Bible looking for what it specifically says we shouldn't do, when it comes to ethical choices, ask yourself if the choice you are making will help you with the goal of your life. Is incurring debt going to grow me closer to Christ or will it leave me in bondage? Is this debt I want really my worship of material things instead of Jesus? Are the clothes I want to buy things I really need or is it

something I want just because I love nice stuff? When you ask that simple question, things become amazingly clear.

This is also the way you beat sin. You focus on drawing closer to Jesus. The closer you become with Jesus, the less you will think about the pink elephant in the room called sinful pleasures. The amazing part about this is that enjoying Christ, pouring your heart to him in prayer, meditating on the Bible and reading books that honor Christ, serving others as Christ would and enjoying the community of the church become a greater pleasure than the temporary pleasures sin ever offered. You can't travel in two directions at the same time. As you draw close to Jesus, you draw away from sin.



Do not make trying not to sin your goal. It is trying to not think about pink elephants. Replace it by thinking about Jesus, the church, Christian fellowship, doing good to others, making meals for those in need, serving in the community, reading books that make Christ bigger. Head in that direction and you will not be captivated by sin in the other direction. When you find yourself mysteriously attracted to sin, chances are you are tired, weak or drifting in your love for Jesus. If the solution is always Jesus, you have to ask yourself some questions. Let's kick the tires this.

Do I know Jesus?

...assuming that you have heard about him... Ephesians 4:21 (ESV)

Do you know Christ? Have you heard about him? There can be no victory over sin apart from Jesus. If you don't know Christ, the Holy Spirit is not in your heart giving you affections for Christ that can be cultivated. I didn't say, "Do you know a lot about Jesus?" Many people know about Jesus but they don't love him. We are not just talking about information. James 2:19 says even the demons know lots of information about Jesus. They don't love Jesus. They don't enjoy him. We are talking about transformation where the only hope in your life is God's grace through Jesus, not your own morality.

How do you know if you have met Jesus and you aren't just trusting in information you know about Jesus? If you know Jesus, there will be a change in your life when it comes to sin. For some people it is an immediate change. For other people it is a gradual change but there will be a change where you begin having victory over sin because you love Jesus more than you love sin. If there is not change, you need to ask yourself if you just know information about Jesus, like the demons, or if you actually love Jesus.

Am I growing in Jesus?

...and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus... Ephesians 4:21 (ESV)

Are you growing in your love for Jesus? When I first started in ministry as a youth pastor 20 years ago, I remember working with a family that helped in the student ministry. One night, I joined the father in the basement to watch him refurbish heart defibrillators, which was his job. As I watched him, I asked him

about his Bible study and walk with God. I remember him telling me he hadn't read the Bible for years because he knew the stories. Many of us fall into the same category.

If the goal of our lives is to be moral and have the basic information about Jesus, that would not be a bad answer. The goal of our lives is not to be moral. It is to be close to Jesus. Reading God's Word is how we spend time with Jesus. Nobody can plumb the depths of God's Word. We forget things too quickly. We have to read it again and again. When we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit always shows us something new about Jesus that we didn't know before. We read the Bible and the Holy Spirit shows us where we are drifting. We will not beat sin if we just know Jesus. We must always be growing in Jesus. It is not information. It is a relationship.

Am I letting go of my old lifestyle that led me toward sin and replacing it with a new lifestyle that leads me toward Jesus?

...to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Ephesians 4:22–24 (ESV)

This is very important. Too many of us don't connect the dots in this area. As Christians, there is an old lifestyle we need to put off, and a new lifestyle we need to put on. It is like changing clothes. There are grubby clothes with holes and stains in all the wrong places and there are clean clothes we need to put on.

Paul said we have to take off the old ways of thinking, our old habits and practices that led us toward sin and replace them with new thinking habits and a lifestyle that leads us toward Christ. The issue is not just the act of sin, there are

things in our lives that lead us toward sin and things that lead us away from sin. If you want to beat sin, you have to look at those things too.

Maybe one of your issues in your life is self-esteem. In your mind you meditate on your failures. You meditate on your sin. You emotionally kick yourself in the gut because of what you have done in your past. You can hear the voices of your parents and your friends mocking you, telling you that you are a mistake and that you are a failure. Get rid of that thinking pattern. That is not true. You are the most blessed being in all of God's creation through Jesus. The old thinking patterns are leading you toward sin. Replace the old thinking with the right thinking. Memorize Ephesians 1:3 on our identity in Christ and repeat it to yourself.

Maybe one of the sins you struggle with is materialism and your credit card is always full. The answer may be to put your credit card in a plastic jug of water and leave it in the freezer so you don't have it with you for impulse spending. If you have to spend, rather than spending money on yourself, buy what other people need and give it to them as a gift and buy it with cash. Get rid of what is not necessarily sinful but is leading you toward sin and replace it with something that is leading you toward doing the good works God has for you to do.

Maybe you get into trouble on the Internet or television when you stay up late. The answer may be to get off all electronic media by 9 p.m. Don't just sin in your apartment alone. That is like trying to not think about pink elephants. Replace it with something that leads you to Jesus, like reading a God-honoring

paperback from the church library every night at 9 p.m. Set it as a habit in your schedule.

If you struggle with drinking, maybe the answer is not to go back to the bar. Replace it with something that leads you toward Jesus, like helping the youth group.

Some of you have friends that lead you down the wrong path. While the friends aren't wrong, the things they lead you to do are wrong. Get rid of them. Tell them you aren't hanging out with them right now. You don't like the things you start to do when you hang out with them. Don't become a loner. Replace the friends that are tearing you down with friends that will build you up, people who love Jesus. *What you do is you look at the sin you are struggling with and work backward to find the practices or influences in your life that are not necessarily sinful but they are leading you away from Christ. Replace them with something that leads you toward Christ.*

Am I letting go of a lifestyle that leads me toward an ineffective life and replacing it with a lifestyle that leads me toward a productive life for Jesus?

Some things in our lives aren't leading us toward sin but they are leading us to live ineffective and unproductive lives. The Bible tells us to be careful of wasting our lives this way.

...making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Ephesians 5:16 (ESV)

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 1:8 (ESV)

Teenagers, how many of you would like to do better in school, excel in your sport and know Jesus better? If I was to ask you to find more time to study, practice your sport or read your Bible, most of you would tell me you can't do it because there is not enough time in your life. My question is, how many hours a week do you put into video games? How many hours a week do you play Clash of Clans, Angry Birds or Mine Craft? How many hours a week are you texting? Let's be conservative and say 10 hours. If you replaced all that time with Bible study you could read the entire Bible in a month. I didn't say video games are wrong. I didn't say watching television is wrong. The problem is it can become a real waste of your time and lead you to being ineffective and unproductive for Jesus. So many kids come home from school and turn on the television and sit like a vegetable on the couch wasting their lives. *If Satan can't get you to sin, he will try to neutralize you by getting you to waste your time. His mission is accomplished.*

How many of us would like to lose a few pounds and have more energy? We all know we need to eat less and exercise more. What is the key? Don't buy Oreos. Don't even walk down the cookie aisle at Walmart. Oreos lead you in the wrong direction. The problem is even if we avoid the cookie aisle in Walmart, we come home with money in our pocket and our cart half empty because we didn't buy cookies. That isn't good. We need to replace the old unwise food and eating habits with wise choices. Buy lots of fruits, vegetables and salads. If we avoid buying Oreos but don't replace it with something healthy, when we are hungry at night we will make a late night run to Dairy Queen because the money is still in

our pocket and we will be worse off in the end than if we bought the Oreos in the beginning.

It is the same with friends. We talked about cutting out of our lives the friends that lead you to sin. Maybe we need to cut out of our lives friends that don't lead us to sin but lead us to waste our time and money. Replace them with people who lead us to make wiser choices.

God gave each of us 24 hours. He gives us the time and the money we need to accomplish the good works of Ephesians 2:10 that he has planned for us to do. The problem is that we often fail to put off the lifestyle choices that cause us to waste our time and money and become unproductive for Jesus. We fail to replace the things that waste our time with the things that are good investments of our time toward the good works God calls us to do.

Conclusion

Let's go back to that most pressing sin that the Holy Spirit brought to your mind this morning. How do I beat the sin that is killing me, that is warping my mind and making me into the ultimate cannibal that eats himself to death? It is not by trying to stop thinking about your sin. That is like trying to not think about pink elephants.

1. It is not trying to live a moral life. It is trying to know and enjoy Jesus.

He is the truth that will set us free. We can't pursue sin and Christ and the same time. Heading toward enjoying Jesus, the church and our Christian friends will always take us away from the joy of sin.

2. **It is changing my lifestyle that leads me toward sin to a lifestyle that leads me toward Jesus.** Am I letting go of the things that lead me away from Jesus and replace them with things that lead me toward Jesus? I need to look at my struggles with sin and see what is leading me toward my sin and replace it with things that leads me toward honoring Christ.
3. **It changing my lifestyle from things that lead me to be ineffective and unproductive to things that help me do the good works God prepared in advance for me to do.** What do I need to let go of that is leading me to waste my time and my life and not be productive for Jesus? Replace it with things that are leading me toward the good works he planned in advance for me to do.



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