

A
FIGHT
TO THE
DEATH

Strength for Life

*Down, but Not Out: How to Get Up
When Life Knocks You Down*

Humility: The Forgotten Virtue

A Fight to the Death: Taking Aim at Sin Within

A FIGHT TO THE DEATH

Taking Aim at Sin Within

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With heartfelt appreciation this book is dedicated to Roger and Geraldene Irwin, a brother and sister who have encouraged us in our ministries in numerous ways and who have for many years faithfully fought the good fight of faith described in this book.

We also dedicate this book to Harold Irwin Jr., who has now graduated to glory, but who was the person God used to lay the foundation of solid biblical truth in Wayne Mack's life when he was a young Christian.



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FOREWORD

The title of this valuable book, *A Fight to the Death*, may not typify titles in the popular evangelical literature of our day, but it accurately summarizes one of the most crucial doctrines of Christian living. At first glance, it may seem like a better title for the next action movie than for one of the most helpful books any Christian could read. Furthermore, it is likely that the premises of this book will *not* readily appeal to a great number of readers and churches who have fallen into self-seeking or seeker-driven perspectives. And yet, this book is the very thing that every soul desperately needs. Using passages like Matthew 5:27–30, Romans 8:13, and Colossians 3:5, Dr. Wayne Mack and Joshua Mack highlight and clearly develop the doctrine of *the mortification of sin*. This doctrine may sound scary, but my best advice to you, the reader, is not to let any apprehension deter you from this life-enriching study.

Not understanding and applying God's truth concerning our need to deal forthrightly with our sin nature is disastrous (James 1:12–15). This has been borne out in my own life, as I was influenced in Bible college to just “let go and let God” grow me. I know what it is to struggle with sin and not

see much progress. You see, I was under the erroneous impression that if I could just *surrender* more, I would glide euphorically into godliness. Oh, how wrong I was. Surrendering is only the beginning place for the biblical process of change, growth, and regular victory that God has outlined in His Word (Rom. 12:1–2; cf. 1 Tim. 4:7–9).

As Puritans such as John Owen and Thomas Watson taught many years ago, there is no living the Christian life without a high view of God, a true hatred of sin, and a fervor to subdue the flesh by the grace of God (1 Peter 1:13–16). These writers often humbly let us in on their own battles against sin. They truly understood the Christian life and thus both glorified their God and left us a great pattern to follow. Like them, each one of us relying on the Spirit's empowering must be aware of the battle, get in it, and stay in it if we are to become more like Christ and know His joy.

As I counsel individuals and teach students at the college and seminary level, I see the need for this very type of book to assist in the learning process. After many years of ministering to God's people, I find that there is still a great need to deal with erroneous perspectives of sanctification (becoming more like Christ), such as the one with which I began my own Christian walk. Time and time again I must teach what the Scriptures have to say about the *real* Christian life. Having had the privilege of learning from and ministering together with Wayne, and having Joshua in my classes, I had no doubt that I could count on their book as a resource that I could wholeheartedly recommend to church members, counselees, and students. Not only do Wayne and Joshua present a thoroughly biblical approach to this much-needed teaching, they

build the reader's understanding of this crucial doctrine step by step. The book is divided into two main sections: "Why Fight Sin?" and "How to Put Sin to Death." These sections offer practical help and illustrate the various lessons with examples that apply to everyday life.

If, in picking up this book, you were looking for a major catalyst for the Christian life—you have found it. Maybe you were looking for something to help a friend who is in need of what I have described. Perhaps you picked it up out of sheer curiosity. Whatever the case, may God bless you as you dare to investigate and use the truth found here. It will no doubt ultimately lead to a more strengthened, fruitful, and liberating path heavenward (Ps. 119:45; 2 Peter 1:5–11).

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INTRODUCTION

Were you surprised by the title of this book? Did you think *A Fight to the Death* was a bit melodramatic? If so, we encourage you to read Romans 8:13 because the title of this book is really another way of stating the truth of that verse in a very straightforward way. It is essentially what Paul meant when he said: “If you are living according to the flesh, *you must die*; but if by the Spirit *you are putting to death* the deeds of the body, you will live.” Our title is also a restatement of the truth found in Colossians 3:5, where believers are commanded: “Therefore *consider the members of your earthly body as dead* to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.” Following that command, we are reminded of the importance of obedience and the seriousness of not putting sin to death: “For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience” (Col. 3:6). In other words, failing to put sin to death is serious business. The apostle Paul was saying that either we destroy sin or it will destroy us.

Some time ago, a friend of mine told me about a man who introduced himself to a group as a hired killer. As you

can imagine, the other people in the group were quite shocked (and perhaps a bit uneasy) to have someone in their midst who was so bold in announcing to the world that he was a hired killer. Fortunately, their concern was eliminated as the man went on to explain that he worked for a company that exterminated insect and animal pests.

According to the Bible, every believer should devote himself to being a killer—not of people or animal pests, but of sin. Put sin to death or it will destroy you and others. We write this book out of the biblical conviction that continuing in sin is a serious and dangerous matter. It is a foolish thing to mock or make light of sin (Prov. 14:9). We write this book also out of the conviction that true believers hate sin and want to overcome it (Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:7–11; 3:8). Finally, we write this book out of the conviction that true believers will want to put sin to death.

We understand that killing sin is not a means of earning or winning our salvation, which is always by the grace of God and based solely on the redemption that is freely given us in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24–25; Eph. 1:7; 2:8–9; Titus 3:5–6). Rather, we want to put sin to death because Christ “gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14).

Because of these convictions, in the first part of this book we will explore why sin is so serious and why we should fight against it. In the second part, we will present a biblical method for killing the sin within us.

P a r t 1

W H Y
F I G H T
S I N ?





1

THINK ABOUT THIS

“Hate evil, you who love the LORD. . . .” (Ps. 97:10)

I will always remember a little old grandma who heard that I was studying to be a pastor and wanted to give me a bit of advice before I headed off to serve at my first church. “Whatever you do,” she said, “don’t talk about sin. I used to go to a church where the pastor always talked about sin. It made me miserable. But the pastor of the church I go to now never talks about sin, and I love it.” Sadly, her attitude is not all that unusual. Many people just love not talking about sin.

That is a problem. It is a problem because God’s attitude toward the subject of sin is far different from that little old grandma’s attitude. To God, talking about sin is important. It is so important that if a person does not get what God has to say about sin, he will not get anything else.

I realize that this is blunt, but it is the truth. Understanding what the Bible teaches about sin is essential to under-

standing what the Bible teaches about everything else. And if we do not understand what the Bible teaches about sin, we certainly will not be able to understand God. In particular, we will never be able to figure out what He is so angry about.

I remember during my first year of college that I doubted God as I never had before. I had a difficult time coming to terms with His judgment on sin: a man put out his hand to steady the ark and he was struck dead; Moses got angry and he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land; and Adam and Eve ate some fruit and the whole world was sentenced to judgment. After a year's worth of struggle, I finally figured out what the problem was, and it was not with God. It was with me. I did not think sin was as bad as it really is, and as a result, I could not understand how right God's wrath really is.

Besides not being able to understand God, if we do not understand what the Bible teaches about sin, we will never be able to understand ourselves. If we want to figure out why we get angry, why we are selfish, why we treat people the way we do, why we have problems in our relationships, or why we are depressed, it is not enough to curl up on a couch and have a good cry. We have to understand what the Bible has to say about sin!

To take it a step further, we have to understand what the Bible teaches about sin in order to understand the world itself. Scattered across the globe are scholars, philosophers, and activists who are all trying to identify the source of our problems in the world today. They usually blame the world's problems on circumstances, economic conditions, poor parenting, or a lack of education. After years of research, they tell us things

like: “Want to stop war? Make the nations prosperous.” Or: “Want to wipe out crime in the inner city? Make sure kids get a proper education.” Sorry, but these kinds of solutions do not cut it. They fall far short because they fail to deal with the root of the problem. They do not take into consideration what the Bible teaches about sin.

Quite frankly, the Bible will be one long, confusing book if we do not understand sin. Salvation, God’s judgment, hell, heaven, death, punishment, justification, propitiation, and redemption make no sense apart from sin.

Considering that, what doctrine might Satan want to attack most? It is no surprise that Satan is relentless in his attack on what the Bible teaches about sin. By simply tampering with the doctrine of sin, he is able to make chaos of the Christian faith. If he can get us to think erroneously or even superficially about sin, he has us where he wants us. He knows that if we have a wrong understanding of sin, we will have a wrong understanding of everything else.

I am convinced that many problems in the church today can be traced back to a wrong understanding of sin. Churches are filled with individuals who are self-righteous and who are trusting in their own good works for salvation. Many people believe they are Christians because they are nice people, because they grew up in a Christian family, or because they go to church. Why is this? It is because they do not have any idea of the seriousness of their sin. If they could understand sin’s seriousness, they would also quickly understand the folly of trusting for salvation in being baptized, going to church, or being born into a Christian family.

Our churches are filled with Christians who are not growing spiritually. Show me a Christian who is not growing, and I will show you a person who does not take sin seriously. Many people say that they want to grow, but really do not mean it—at least not enough. Mostly, they just like to say they want to grow. That way they can appear to be holy while continuing to indulge in the very things that keep them from being holy. They like the benefits of a godly life, but they do not want to make the sacrifices required in order to experience those benefits. They want to be godly, but they do not *really* want to be godly. They love their sin too much, and they will not deal with it until they grieve over it.

Although every true Christian has, at one point in his life, at least caught a glimpse of the seriousness of sin, it is easy to forget just how terrible it really is as we continue in our Christian walk. When that begins to happen, we can be sure that we have wandered far from God; for the more we get to know God, the more we will hate sin. When men see God for who He really is, they see themselves for who they really are. And when they see themselves for who they really are, their cry is the same: “Woe is me!”

Think about Paul as he grew in his Christian life. Early on, he wrote: “For I am the least of the apostles . . .” (1 Cor. 15:9). Later, he identified himself as “the very least of all saints” (Eph. 3:8). Finally, toward the very end of his life, he concluded: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all” (1 Tim. 1:15). The closer Paul got to the Light, the more the darkness of his heart was exposed.

It is certainly not the most pleasant experience in the world to have the darkness of our own hearts exposed. If we are willing to turn on the light of God's Word, however, we will see things about Jesus Christ that we have never seen before. When we think of ourselves adoringly, we think of Christ sparingly. But when we stop boasting in ourselves and begin to admit the truth about us, we become smaller in our own eyes and Christ becomes greater and more precious to us.

I appreciate how Charles Spurgeon once put it:

There are some professing Christians who can speak of themselves in terms of admiration; but, from my inmost heart, I loathe such speeches more and more every day that I live. Those who talk in such a boastful fashion must be constituted very differently from me. While they are congratulating themselves, I have to lie humbly at the foot of Christ's Cross, and marvel that I am saved at all, for I know that I am saved. I have to wonder that I do not believe Christ more, and equally wonder that I am privileged to believe in Him at all—to wonder that I do not love Him more, and equally to wonder that I am not holier, and equally to wonder that I have any desire to be holy at all considering what a polluted, debased, depraved nature I find still within my soul, notwithstanding all that divine grace has done in me. If God were ever to allow the fountains of the great deeps of depravity to break up in the best man that lives, he would make as bad a devil as the devil himself is. I care nothing for what these boasters say concerning their own perfections; I feel sure that they do not know themselves, or they

could not talk as they often do. There is tinder enough in the saint who is nearest to heaven to kindle another hell if God should but permit a spark to fall upon it. In the very best of men there is an infernal and well-nigh infinite depth of depravity. Some Christians never seem to find this out. I almost wish that they might not do so, for it is a painful discovery for anyone to make; but it has the beneficial effect of making us cease from trusting in ourselves, and causing us to glory only in the Lord.¹

I hope it is starting to become clear why it is so important for us to take a good, long, hard look at what the Bible teaches about sin. Before we can talk about overcoming it, we must see it for what it is. Doing this will not be easy. It will be uncomfortable. But it will be worth it! For by understanding the seriousness of sin, we will be better able to understand the greatness of God, the wonders of His grace, the beauty of Jesus Christ, and the process of sanctification.

APPLICATION AND DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

1. How would you describe our culture's attitude toward the subject of sin?
2. What are some reasons why it is important to understand what the Bible says about sin?
3. Describe several specific ways that a wrong understanding of sin affects other areas of a person's spiritual life.

4. What can we learn from the apostle Paul's attitude toward his sinfulness as he grew in his Christian life?
5. Why do you think it is easy to forget how terrible sin really is?
6. What happens to us spiritually when we forget how terrible our sin really is? Give specific examples from Scripture.
7. What commitment should you make as a result of what you have learned from this chapter?