

February 3, 2008 AM  
#1362

Confessions of a Pastor  
*I Struggle With the Same Sins Over and Over*

How many of you were able to make it to the Atheism vs. Theism debate last Sunday evening? We had a good group. About 125 people attended. If you missed it you missed one of the most stark contrasts I think I have ever seen in a debate format.

Christopher Hitchens, who spoke for atheism, was arrogant, rude, crude, and wouldn't stick to the topic which was Atheism vs. Theism and the Scientific Evidence of Intelligent Design. He leveled ad hominem attacks against Dr. Jay Richards and just about every one else he felt like insulting.

On the other hand, Dr. Richards very graciously and carefully laid out the case for theism without ever once resorting to name calling or slander. He refused to get off topic and follow Hitchens down rabbit trails.

If you've ever seen Christopher Hitchens on CNN or FOX you'll know he's always like this. I would love to know what happened in the past that has produced all of his anger.

What's been interesting to me is that Hitchens isn't the only angry atheist out there.

When you read Richard Dawkins or Victor Stenger or most of the other popular atheist authors of our day you get these little glimpses of bitterness.

But the thing that has been very telling for me when I listen to and read atheists was summed up in a statement Hitchens made Sunday night. I have to paraphrase since I don't have a transcript of the debate but it went something like this: "I don't want a dictator ruling over me."

And in the final analysis, I honestly believe that's what drives most atheists. I don't want God telling me how to live my life so I'll just solve the problem by denying His existence.

The fact of the matter is, none of us come into the world wanting God to rule over us. And we deal with that in different ways.

An atheist might just deny God's existence. A theist might believe in God but try to

ignore Him. That's what I did for part of my life. I knew there was a God but I wanted to call all the shots in my life.

People even get religious to avoid obeying God. That might sound like a contradiction, but a lot of people gravitate toward religions that define God the way they want Him to be rather than the way He really is.

But then we come into biblical Christianity from these different backgrounds and find new life in Jesus Christ.

We find life in Him because He is the author and source of life. Genesis says that God made *every living thing that moves on the earth* but only human beings were made in God's image.

Only human beings could communicate with God. But human beings were given an opportunity for choice. Humans could choose to obey God or disobey Him.

In the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve made the same choice we would have all made if we'd have been there. They chose disobedience. The results were spiritual death and separation from God.

That's why we need a Savior. Only God could bring separated ones back to Himself. Only He could do it because only He could take on humanity and be the perfect substitutionary sacrifice for sinful people.

That's why there's over 150 verses in the Bible that say that eternal life comes by faith.

Listen to the beginning of Romans 4

*Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What did he discover about being made right with God? If his good deeds had made him acceptable to God, he would have had something to boast about. But that was not God's way. For the Scriptures tell us, "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith."*

*When people work, their wages are not a gift, but something they have earned. But people are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners.*

*David also spoke of this when he described the happiness of those who are declared righteous without working for it: "Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sins are put out of sight." Romans 4:1-8 NLT*

We need a Savior so that we can be forgiven and united back to God. When we trust Christ as Savior our disobedience is forgiven. In an eternal sense, our sins are put of sight, as far as the East is from the West.

But here's a truth that isn't always explained like it should be.

*I. Much Of The New Testament Is A Challenge To Christians To Stop Sinning And To Start Obeying God*

**Turn to Ephesians 4 page 1040**

As we read this I want you to notice how many times believers are told to stop practicing sinful behaviors and to make a positive change to godly obedience.

**Read verses 25-32**

Christians still sin! People who have put their trust in Christ still face temptation and the allurements of sin. Christians are vulnerable, just like anyone else, to the deceptions of sin.

We're in week number 1 of a 4 week series we're calling "Confessions of a Pastor." In the next few weeks I just want to openly share my heart with you. I want to be real with you.

A number of years ago Sandy and I attended a church in Hollywood, Florida. The pastor was also a college professor at Florida Bible College and I had had him for a couple of classes.

What turned out to be very interesting was, I didn't really enjoy his classes. And when it was announced that he was going to take over the church we attended I was thinking, "Oh no." But when he got in the pulpit all my concerns faded out. He turned out to be a fantastic pastor.

Almost every week when he'd open up the Bible and I felt like he was speaking directly to me. I was beginning to get suspicious. Was he living in my house? Did he have a private eye following me? How did he know what I was wrestling with in my life that very week?

Then one Sunday he said something I've never forgotten. He said, "People ask me how do you preach sermons every week that always seem to hit home?"

This is what he said, "I just look at my own life and see what areas I need help and then I preach on those. I figure if I'm having trouble and struggling with some area of life, so are lots of other people."

Over the years I've tried to follow his example and I've found that he was absolutely right.

I've watched it happen over and over. The sermons that get the most response from the congregation, the ones that have people saying, "Wow Ed, you were talking right to me today," are the sermons that touch a need, a weakness, a sin area, in my life.

Now obviously that has some very important implications like, I fight many of the same battles you do, I have spiritual struggles just like you do.

Some pastors are afraid to say that. Craig Groeschel, senior pastor at Life Church in Oklahoma writes this about his seminary days.

He says, one of my professors in a practical ministry class taught what he called 'the pastor's mystique.' It was to be guarded at all costs. The professor said, "People think they want their pastors to be normal, everyday people, but they really don't."

"They want to see you as a superhuman, better than average person. Church members want to believe that your marriage is always strong, your faith never falters, and you are virtually without sin."

Groeschel writes, "Week after week, my professor returned to his warning. Keep your guard up, he'd say. Don't let them know the real you. Always dress the part. Always talk the part. You're a pastor now. And you can never let them into your life, or you'll regret it."

Then he writes this, "Somewhere on my journey I forgot that God called me, not to be like a pastor, but to be like Christ. I came to the realization that I had become a full-time minister and a part-time follower of Jesus."

Groeschel had gotten some well meaning advice, but it was just plain wrong.

The Christian life is a journey. In fact, a better word would be an adventure. It starts by faith and it's lived by faith. The Bible goes so far as to say, *...without faith it is impossible to please God...* Hebrews 11:6

God's not impressed by whoever can hold up the best mask and pretend they're godly. God rejoices over humble people who know that without Him they can do nothing. That it's faith in the God who is everything that makes them something.

God's not interested in my glory or your glory. He's only interested in His.

Here's what I've found. If people can't relate to the pastor. If he's some guy who lives on a different spiritual plane than everybody else then when he opens up the Bible and says, "Here's God's standards for life," there's a lot of people listening who say, "Yea, but that's not for me."

"That's just for people off in some ivory tower somewhere or people like the pastor who doesn't live in the real world and have the same temptations and weaknesses and struggles that I do."

It's like when people say a Biblical writer like Paul just was super-spiritual and didn't live the way we do.

I'll never forget being in Belgium many years ago on a missions trip and leading a Bible study on Ephesians 4, that we just looked at. And we went through the whole thing, looked at it in detail and at the end a woman says, "That's nice, but nobody lives that way."

What she was saying was, "That's not for the average person. That may be for the pastor or some religious leader, but the average Christian doesn't live that way."

I want to suggest to you today that what we read in their Bible is intended for all of us.

Here's the claim of the Bible about itself. *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.* II Timothy 3:16-17

It wasn't the religious leaders of Israel that listened to Jesus. He spoke to the average people on the streets of villages and towns. His words were meant for them.

The New Testament letters like Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians were written to church members, most of whom were fairly new believers, not to seminary professors and theologians.

The Bible is written to everyday people to call us to believe in and follow Jesus Christ.

*I. Much Of The New Testament Is A Challenge To Christians To Stop Sinning And To Start Obeying God*

*II. There Is A Spiritual Battle That Takes Place In Believers While We Live On Earth*

**Turn to Galatians 5 page 1037 Read verse 16-17**

The New Living Translation puts it this way: *The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions.*

I hear a lot of mixed messages and confusing teaching in Christian circles. I attended a counseling conference not long ago that was totally dedicated to how to apply the Bible to life's problems. It was excellent in so many ways and then one of the keynote speakers gets up and preaches a whole sermon on the fact that if a person is really saved they won't practice sin.

Hello! If Christians didn't practice sin we wouldn't need counseling conferences!

The Bible is clear. There is a battle that goes on in a believers life.

We're born into the world with what the Bible calls the sinful nature or the old nature. We inherited it from Adam and it doesn't leave us when we put our trust in Christ as Savior.

When we believe, the Bible says we have a new birth, a new nature. God the Spirit lives within us. Ephesians calls it, *the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.*

The old nature and the new nature battle it out for control of our life. Who do you think wins? The strongest.

Think about all the things in our culture that feed that old man. All the things that tells us we don't need God. We're in control.

Success in living for God comes when we feed and strengthen the new man. That comes as we read the Bible, pray, communicate with God, and grow in Him.

We have a new power in our life. We're told to *put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.* Ephesians 4:22-24

The victory's been won by Jesus Christ. He defeated death and hell. He defeated Satan and rose from the dead. His strength is our strength now.

But the battle never fully goes away until we're free from these bodies. Romans 8:22-13 puts it this way:

*For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.*

And here's what Christians need to understand. Don't be shocked when sin tries to get the upper hand in your life.

If we tell new Christians that a real believer doesn't practice sin and they see temptations and sinful desires coming back repeatedly to grab their life, what's the first thing they're going to think?

Their going to think, "I understood I was a sinner and I trusted Christ for forgiveness, but I must not really be saved because I fell to that temptation again."

What they really should be asking is "What does the Bible say about how to deal with sin? How do I grow in my walk with God? How can I change Biblically?"

The spiritual battle is always going to be there. In fact the Bible gives this absolutely crucial warning: *Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.* I Corinthians 10:12

If you think you've got it all together some temptation can't attract you, watch out.

I titled this message: *I Struggle With the Same Sins Over and Over.* Let me explain what I mean by that.

The day I said to God as a believer in Jesus, "I submit my life to you. Take me I want to serve you." there was a change. I didn't realize it at first but one day I thought to myself, "Wow. My language is radically different. I'm not swearing and using God's name in vain like I used to. It's a miracle."

I didn't even need to consciously think it through and develop a habit pattern of changing my speech. It was totally a God thing. He gets all the credit. I did nothing.

But there are other things. Responses to people, and thoughts, and areas of temptation that never went away. And in those areas I've had to pray and to focus on God and the Bible. I've had to take conscious steps to avoid those things.

And at times I've said to God, "Please take that away from me like you changed me in other areas. Just take it all away."

Now I didn't hear God's voice answering me, but I might as well have it's that real to me. He said, "Ed, if I do that you won't trust Me. If I take it all away you won't have to depend on Me and I want you to always depend on Me."

It's a lot like the answer God gave to the Apostle Paul when Paul prayed that a serious limitation be removed from him. Let's look at God's answer.

**Turn to II Corinthians 12 page 1032 Read verses 7-10**

I can just hear Paul praying, "Oh God please take this thing from me. I could do so much more for you if I didn't have this."

And God says, "Man, you got that one backwards. If I take your limitations away then you won't need me in the same way. Paul, you'll be strongest when you admit your weakness and then draw your strength from Me."

This is my take on why God just removes some temptation from our lives but not all. Because if He took it all we wouldn't know what it is to cry out to Him and cling to Him for His strength.

Not only that but we wouldn't have compassion for other people facing temptation.

I know a guy who was a rip roaring, down in the gutter drunk. When he trusted Christ as Savior it was just amazing. God completely removed all desire for alcohol from his life.

That's amazing and I praise God for it. But one time I heard him tell his story to the guys at the Baltimore Rescue mission. And the way he told it the implication was it should be that way for everybody. If you're really a Christian you'll never have a problem with that area of your life again.

Now you have to understand that there are some Christians at the mission who are doing real well. But there are some that are still struggling with drinking.

Every day they're faced with the temptation and they're learning how to deal with it. Sometimes they fail. Not because they're really not saved but because they're still in the learning and growing process.

If you haven't had to trust God in dealing with sin issues you're not going to have

empathy and compassion on others who are overtaken in a fault.

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*II. There Is A Spiritual Battle That Takes Place In Believers While We Live On Earth*

*III. God Has Given Us Wisdom In The Bible For Responding To Temptation*

Let me give you a plan today for facing temptation and not falling to it. Here's a biblical response to temptation.

1.) Recognize and acknowledge temptation at it's earliest stages. The better you know what the Bible says, the more aware of temptation you'll become and the easier it will be to see it before it grabs you.

Romans 13:14 says: *Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.* NIV

2.) Quickly ask God for help. *I sought the LORD, and He heard me, And delivered me from all my fears.*

*This poor man cried out, and the LORD heard him, And saved him out of all his troubles.* Psalm 34:4&6

The very act of prayer is expressing to God that you recognize how much you need Him.

3.) If possible, remove yourself from the temptation. I Thessalonians 5:22 *Abstain from every form of evil.*

If you have a problem with drinking, stay away from the bar. If it's drugs, stay away from drug dealers. If it's internet porn, put up some safeguards for accountability.

4.) Identify the idol of your heart that you're trying to serve through the sin. What is it about that sin that's appealing? Do you think you'll get joy, peace, satisfaction? What is it that God's not able to supply for you?

5.) Quote and meditate on the Bible. Psalm 119:9-11 *How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments. Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You!*

The Word of God is alive and powerful.

6.) Remind yourself of God's presence, power, and promises. **Turn to I Corinthians 10 page 1019. Read verses 12-14**

It's God's presence with us that's going to make us see sin differently.

It's God's power that's going to strengthen us, and it's God's promises that we can hold onto like an anchor in the storms of life.

7.) Reflect on Jesus' death. Galatians 6:14 *But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

I Peter 2:24 *who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed.*

As believers we've died with Christ and been raised to a new life. Because of Jesus' finished work on the cross we can say "no" to sin.

8.) Make a commitment to do the godly thing.

9.) Get busy with mind-engaging godly activity. Philippians 4:8 *Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy--meditate on these things.*

10.) Call a godly friend and ask for help. The Bible says we're to encourage, admonish, and restore one another. That's why the church, the Body of Christ, is so important. Just like we need God, we need one another.

The truth is, I still struggle with some of the same sins over and over. And so do you.

But God hasn't said, "Do this and don't do that," and then just left us out there to falter and fail. God's not setting us up to fail, He's teaching through life how to succeed.

You know what God wants for His children? The very same thing that all good parents want for their children. He wants to see us grow and mature. He wants to see us learn how to walk the Christian walk. He wants to see His children grow up just like their dad.

Are you a believer in Christ today? Have you trusted Christ for the forgiveness of your sin?

If so, are you growing in Him? Are you able to see life through God's eyes? Can you say with Jesus when He was tempted by Satan, "It is written," and then go to the appropriate passage in the Bible for dealing with that temptation? Are you learning what it means to trust Him more and more?