

How To Overcome Sin

by Charles G. Finney
Edited and paraphrased by Keith Green

"They said therefore to Him, 'What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.'" - John 6:28-29

There are multitudes of anxious Christians who are inquiring what they shall do to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil. They overlook the fact that *"this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith" (I John 5:4)* that it is with *"the shield of faith" that they are to "extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one." (Eph. 6:16)* They ask, "why am I overcome by sin? Why can't I get above its power? Why am I the slave of my appetites and passions and the sport of the devil?" They look all around them for the cause of all this spiritual wretchedness and death. Sometimes they think they have discovered the answer in the neglect of one duty, and at another time in the neglect of another duty. Sometimes they imagine they have found the cause of their wretchedness to be that they have yielded to one sin and sometimes in yielding to another. They put forth efforts in this direction and patch up their righteousness on one side, while they make a tear in the other. Thus they spend years running around in a circle, making dams of sand across the current of their own corruptions. Instead of at once purifying their hearts by faith (*Acts 15:9*), they are engaged in trying to stop the overflow of its bitter waters.

"Why do I sin?" they inquire; and looking around for the cause, they come to the same conclusion: "It is because I neglect such and such a duty!" "But how shall I get rid of sin?" Usual answer: "By doing my duty, that is by ceasing from sin." Now the real question should be: Why do they neglect their duty? Why do they commit sin at all? Where is the foundation of all this mischief? But all this only brings us back to the real question again: How are we to overcome this corrupt nature, this wickedness, and our sinful habits? I answer, BY FAITH ALONE. No works of law have the least tendency to overcome our sins, but rather they strengthen the soul in self-righteousness and unbelief.

The great and fundamental sin which is at the foundation of all other sin is unbelief. The first thing to do is to give that up - to believe the Word of God. There is no breaking away from one sin without this. *"Whatever is not from faith is sin." (Rom. 14:23)* *"Without faith it is impossible to please Him." (Heb. 11:6)* Thus we see that the backslider and convicted Christian, when agonizing to overcome sin, will almost always try to use the works of law to obtain faith. They will fast and pray and read and struggle and outwardly reform, and thus endeavor to obtain grace. But all this is in vain and wrong. Do you ask, "Shall we not fast and pray and read and struggle? Shall we do nothing but sit down in cheap security and inaction?" I answer: You must do all that God commands you to do; but begin where He tells you to begin, and do it in the manner in which He commands you to do it. That is - in the exercise of that faith that works by love. (*Gal. 5:6*) Purify your hearts by faith. Believe in the Son of God! (*I John 5:10*)

What Is "Faith"?

The first element of saving faith is realizing the truth of the Bible. But this alone is not saving faith, for Satan also realizes the truth of the Bible, which makes him tremble. (*James 2:19*) But a second element in saving faith is the agreement of the heart (or will) to the truth understood by the mind. It is a cordial trust or resting of the mind in those truths, and yielding up the whole being to their influence. Now it is easy to see that without the consent of the will, there can be nothing but an outward obedience to God. A wife without confidence in her husband can do nothing more than outwardly perform her duty to him. Works of law may be performed without faith, that is, we may serve from fear or hope or some selfish motive, but without the confidence that works by love, obedience from the heart is naturally impossible.

By what I've already said, I mean that to seek the grace of faith by mere human works is an utter abomination. It is as abominable as to attempt to purchase the Holy Ghost with money. (*Acts 8:20*) It is to set aside the testimony of God's Word concerning our utter depravity (helplessness) and attempt to pawn off our unbelieving, heartless works upon an infinitely Holy God. It is an attempt to purchase His favor, instead of accepting grace as His sovereign gift.

To give any other answer to one in unbelief, and to tell him to perform any work with the expectation that by it he shall obtain faith, is to confirm him in self-righteousness, to prolong his rebellion, to lead him to settle down in a self-righteous hope to produce in the end, discouragement and blasphemy.

Because repentance, faith, love, and every other holy exercise both imply and proceed from faith - without confidence in the character and requirements of God, it is impossible to repent. For what is repentance but heartily to justify God and condemn ourselves? So it is equally impossible to exercise a trusting love in God without faith. Submission to God implies the exercise of confidence in God and in His requirements.

Faith is the only exercise that receives Christ with all His powerfully sanctifying influences into the heart. The Bible everywhere represents the sanctified soul as being under the influence of an indwelling Christ. Now the exercise of faith is an opening of the door by which Christ is received to reign in the heart. If this is so, the proper direction plainly is to do that which receives Christ. If this is done, all else will be done. If this is neglected, all else will be neglected, of course!

Some Helpful Remarks

1. You see why the Church is not sanctified. They overlook the office and necessity of faith as that which alone can produce acceptable obedience to God. They are engaged in efforts to obtain faith by works, instead of first exercising that faith which will produce within them a clean heart. And in this way they seek in vain for sanctification. How common it is to see Christians bustling about with outward efforts and works - fasting and praying, giving and doing and struggling - and after all this, they do not have the

fruits of the Spirit: *"love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, against such there is no law."* (Gal. 5:22-23 KJV)

2. You see why the Bible lays so much stress upon faith.

3. You see what the difficulty is for those who are constantly in a complaining state in their walk with the Lord. They seem to know they are wrong, but do not understand what the foundation of their wrong consists of. They sometimes think that a neglect of a certain duty is the grand difficulty, and sometimes their mind fastens upon something else that is the prime difficulty in their case. They set themselves to break off from one sin and another, they practice this self-denial and that duty, and all without that faith that fills the heart with love. Thus they go round and round in a circle and do not see that unbelief is their great, their damning sin, without the removal of which no other sin can be repented of or forgiven. All their efforts are entirely legal, hypocritical, and vain until they exercise faith.

4. If persons without faith, in an unsanctified state, set themselves to obey the commandments of God, their efforts must necessarily be legal, self-righteous, and destructive. To them the directions of the Gospel, as well as the commandments of the law, are a horrible pit of miry clay. And when you cast a man into a horrible pit of miry clay, the more he struggles the deeper he sinks. Every effort at obedience without faith is sin, and as it confirms self-righteousness, is sinking him further and further from God and rational hope. And the more violently he struggles, the more desperate and alarming his case becomes. The clay surrounds him and cleaves to him, suffocates and kills him. Just so the commands of God to an unbelieving heart are a snare and a pit. Without faith, there is ruin and damnation in them.

5. To the careless, unawakened sinner who knows nothing of his lostness, it might be important and proper to direct his attention to the law of God to bring conviction - not with the expectation of promoting holiness in him, but of convicting him of sin. Thus we find Christ requiring the rich young man who is wrapped up in self-righteousness to keep the commandments, bringing out before his mind his supreme love of the world and of things. (Luke 18:18-23)

6. You see how to the Jews and to all unbelievers, the commandments of God are a stumbling block. All outward conformity to them is useless and ruinous. Love without faith is impossible. And consequently, the merciful directions and instructions contained in the dos and don'ts of the Bible are made the food of self-righteousness and the snare of death. But to those whose souls are full of faith and love, the commandments of God are just the instruction which they need when, in their ignorance, they earnestly inquire what they shall do to glorify God. "Do this and avoid that," and the like, are just the things upon which hearts of love will seize as the needed directions of their Heavenly Father.

7. But someone may inquire, "Do not men learn to exercise faith by what you call legal efforts and an obedience to the legal directions?" No. They only learn by experience that all such directions are vain, and that they are totally depraved and dependent, which they

ought to have believed before. They set themselves to pray and read and struggle, expecting at every meeting they attend, with every prayer they make, to obtain grace and faith. But they never do until they are completely discouraged and despair of obtaining help in this way. And the history of every self-righteous sinner's conversion and every anxious Christian's sanctification would develop this truth: that deliverance does not come until their self-righteous efforts are proved by their own experience to be utterly vain, and abandoned as useless - and the whole subject thrown upon the sovereign mercy of God. This submitting a subject to the sovereign mercy of God is that very act of faith which they should have put forth long before, but which they would not exercise until every other means had been tried in vain!

8. But perhaps you will say, "If by this self-righteous struggle they learn their depravity and dependence, and in this matter come to prove by their own experience the truth of God, why not encourage them to make these efforts as at least an indirect way of obtaining faith?" Answer: Blasphemy and drunkenness and any of the most shocking sins may be, and often have been, the means of working conviction which has resulted in conversion. Why not encourage these things to possibly bring about ultimate salvation for some?

The truth is, when a sinner's attention is awakened and he is convicted and puts forth the inquiry, "What shall I do?" and when a Christian, struggling with his remaining corruption, puts forth this same inquiry, why should they be thrown into the horrible pit of which I have spoken? Why not tell them at once, in the language of the text, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent*"? (John 6:29)

9. Let me say to you who would make the inquiry, "How can I overcome sin?" don't wait to fast, read, pray, or anything else - don't expect to break off from anysin in your unbelief! You may break off from the outward commission - you may substitute praying for swearing, reading your Bible for reading magazines, outward employment and honesty for theft and idleness, soberness for drunkenness, and anything you please - but this, without faith, is after all, only exchanging one form of sin for another - it is only varying the mode of your rebellion towards God. For remember that in unbelief, whatever your conduct is, you are still in rebellion against God. Faith would instantly sanctify your heart, sanctify all your doings, and render them in Christ Jesus, acceptable to God.

My dear friend, you inquire whether you shall obtain holiness by reading the Bible, or by prayer, fasting, or by all these together. Now let this sermon answer you and know that by neither nor by all of these, in the absence of faith, are you to grow any better or find any relief. You speak of being in darkness and of being discouraged. No wonder you are so, since you have plainly been seeking sanctification by outward works. You have "*stumbled over the stumbling stone*." (Rom. 9:32) You are in that pit of miry clay. Immediately exercise faith upon the Son of God! It is the first, the only thing you can do to rest your feet upon the Rock - and it will immediately put a new song into your mouth!

This article was originally published under the title "Faith" in the Oberlin Evangelist on January 1, 1839. The article in its original form has been reprinted in a book called "The Promise Of The Spirit" by Charles Finney, edited and compiled by Timothy L. Smith, and is available from Bethany Fellowship, 6820 Auto Club Road, Minneapolis, MN 55438.

We highly recommend this book to anyone seeking more on the subject of holiness.

Except where otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, ©The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1977.