

THE REMNANTS OF SIN IN THE SOUL

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Introduction:

The Apostle Paul described the wonder and beauty of the new life of the believer in Christ when he wrote, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold all things have become new”. He would say of himself, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me”, and he taught in his letter to the Romans “that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin”¹. And so it would seem the new life of the Christian is entirely free of all that characterized the old fallen Adamic life of sin. The Apostle John seems to reinforce this understanding with, “Whoever has been born of God does not sin”².

However, John, clearly writing to Christians, also wrote, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us”, adding the comfort of knowing that “if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”. Likewise, Paul’s experience as a Christian was such that he wrote, “I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good”³. And so it is that although the true Christian is indeed a new creature in Christ, he still sins! This new life is no longer characterized as being in the bondage of sin, but there yet remains inherent to the believer the indwelling corruption of sin.

In describing the believer undergoing sanctification, the Savoy Declaration of Faith says of him,

“there abides still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence arises a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh”⁴.

Dr. Doug Vickers has succinctly described this doctrine of remaining corruption or indwelling sin in the believer by noting that “the faculties of soul have been endowed with new abilities. But the faculties have not yet been made perfect in holiness... the faculties of soul that jointly determine individual action in the way we have seen are still in this world in a state of lesser or greater degrees of development towards the

¹ 2 Corinthians 5.17; Galatians 2.20; Romans 6.6

² 1 John 3.9

³ 1 John 1.8, 2.1; Romans 7.21

⁴ Chapter XIII, *Of Sanctification*, Paragraph II

perfection that they will at last enjoy. They are accordingly still capable of being deceived by sin, by the allurements of the world, and by the subtleties of the devil and his angels". There is an "implantation within the soul of a new disposition or principle of action" by the Holy Spirit which "does not prevail completely, though the prevalency of the old principle of action is, in the course of the believer's sanctification, progressively diminished" ⁵.

It is not so much the purpose of this paper to demonstrate the existence of this indwelling sin as it is to examine the practical implications of its presence for the believer undergoing sanctification in this life.

The Character of the Remnants of Sin:

It's helpful in understanding the nature of these remnants of sin in the soul to first briefly explore the nature of sin itself. The ancient saint Job in discoursing on the wicked described them as ones who say to God, "Depart from us, for we do not desire the knowledge of Your ways"⁶. This inclination characterized Adam and Eve in their departure from obedience to God and it may be said to be at the very root of sin. It is "enmity against God"⁷, a severing of the creature's dependence upon and obedience to his Creator, and "every act of sin is a fruit of being weary of God"⁸. Thus to sin is to not only give way to one's propensity to gratify the flesh, but it is to strike out at God. It is an echo of Pharaoh's defiance to God's Word when he arrogantly asked, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice...?"⁹

And so the remnants of sin in the believer are of no less a degree of enmity or defiance against God than the sin in which he in his unregenerate state was once in bondage to. These remnants are constantly present and result in a real indwelling inclination or principle which the Apostle calls, "a law in my members, warring against the law of my mind" which influences in a way contrary to the dispositions and inclinations of the new nature, or "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus"¹⁰. The believer, therefore, experiences a kind of tension or contradiction in his mind and heart arising from contrary dispositions and principles. But it needs to be emphasized that the believer does not possess two distinct warring natures. He is now a new creature, with new desires and affections and one will. The old man is dead. He is now under the prevailing influence of these new godly inclinations, but he still has resident in him those remnants of sin or corruption which continue to influence ultimately his will. When a skunk is dead, it still stinks!

⁵ "When God Converts a Sinner...", Douglas Vickers, p.11

⁶ Job 21.14

⁷ Romans 8.7

⁸ Owen, VI, p.179

⁹ Exodus 5.2

¹⁰ Romans 7.23; 8.2

Just like the dead skunk, this indwelling sin exerts a powerful influence in the Christian's experience. Sinclair Ferguson has written that, "In the Christian, the law of sin may yet have a real *domination* while its *dominion* has come to an end"¹¹. It continues to powerfully present to the mind seeming rewards for indulgence in sin. This power to coerce and persuade often overcomes even when the believer finds this sin ultimately to be abhorrent. The enticement of the "pleasures of sin" can be dominant at the moment even though they are "passing" or temporary¹². In this way, the influences of the remnants of sin in the soul are very much like the harlot portrayed in Proverbs. There we read of the young man and the woman who met him, "with the attire of a harlot, and a crafty heart... with her enticing speech she caused him to yield, with her flattering lips she seduced him. Immediately he went after her, as an ox goes to the slaughter... he did not know it would cost his life"¹³. Paul gave expression to this conflict within himself when he wrote, "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do"¹⁴. A clear indicator of the power of these remnants of sin is demonstrated in the determined resistance given to God's law. Paul, again describing his own experience wrote, "I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died"¹⁵. The law provides no restraint to the power of sin, but instead further empowers it. Through the law one may see more of the true character of sin, may come under conviction, be made fearful of its consequences, and yet the power of sin, rather than being subdued, is in fact invigorated by the law.

John Owen also observed that sin not only presents rewards, but powerfully uses the argument of punishments as a means of inducement. He wrote, "Whatever evil, trouble, or danger in the world, attends gospel obedience, - whatever hardship or violence is to be offered to the sensual part of our natures in a strict course of mortification, - sin makes use of, as if they were punishments attending the neglect of its commands"¹⁶. One can experience this powerful influence in the simple struggle that arises when one rationalizes in their mind the neglect of assembling together on the Lord's Day when that would deprive one of the pleasure of "sleeping-in". In this way, that abiding enmity is expressed, representing the worship of God as a kind of punishment.

This indwelling sin also operates with a remarkable effortlessness in that it "so easily ensnares us"¹⁷. All that is needed to exercise its influence is already resident within the believer. The mind, the will and the affections of the believer have not yet been brought into the fullness of their renewal which is reserved for the life to come. Owen therefore wrote regarding indwelling sin's use of the resident faculties of the new creature in Christ, "Is the understanding or the *mind* to be applied to anything? - there it is, in ignorance, darkness, vanity, folly, madness. Is the *will* to be engaged? - there it is also, in spiritual deadness, stubbornness, and the roots of obstinacy. Is the heart and

¹¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen and the Christian Life*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995, p.131

¹² Hebrews 11.25

¹³ Proverbs 7.10, 21-23

¹⁴ Romans 7.15

¹⁵ vs. 9

¹⁶ Owen, VI, p.164

¹⁷ Hebrews 12.2

affections to be set on work? – there it is, in inclinations to the world and present things, and sensuality, with proneness to all manner of defilements. Hence it is easy for it to insinuate itself into all that we do, and to hinder all that is good, and to further all sin and wickedness. It hath an intimacy, an inwardness with the soul; therefore in all that we do, doth easily beset us”¹⁸. It can be seen therefore that these remnants of sin reside in the very soul of man, which is comprised of his mind, will and affections. There is no faculty of his being where they are absent. It is truly the enemy within, acting powerfully and deceitfully to thwart the new life in Christ.

These remnants of sin never change in their character. Sin in whatever degree or manifestation is always enmity against God. There is no reforming of it or reconciliation with it. Owen wrote, “Mortification abates of its *force*, but doth not change its *nature*. Grace changeth the nature of man, but nothing can change the nature of sin. Whatever effect be wrought upon it, there is no effect wrought in it, but that is enmity still, sin still”¹⁹. Sin and its remnants remain steadfastly at war with God Himself working within the believer ultimately against the workings of the Spirit “for the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish”²⁰. One is reminded of the time just prior to World War II when Neville Chamberlain pitifully exclaimed “Peace in our time” as he waved in his hand what he thought was a binding treaty insuring a cessation of Hitler’s lust for power and dominion. Indeed, what a useless scrap of paper it turned out to be as the Nazis continued to gobble up the surrounding helpless nations. Just so, the remnants of sin can be no more appeased by giving up ground than Hitler was by allowing him to keep what he had already conquered.

Some Subtleties of the Remnants of Sin in the Believer:

Because sin is the essence of enmity against God, it constantly works in the believer to keep him from communion with God and from obedience to the duties of the Christian life. One characteristic subtlety of this operation of sin is to make these duties seem to be *wearisome*. The apostle Paul recognized this constant war within and wrote, “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection”²¹. We are exhorted as Christians to pray without ceasing, redeem the time, do all to the glory of God, exercise our gifts, and not forsake assembling together. But for many believers, the remnants of sin rise up to argue for the weariness of this constant devotion and attention to duty. The believer is tempted to rationalize that this level of commitment is reserved for ministers, or super Christians like Paul. This line of thinking is exacerbated when the believer looks at unbelievers in their seeming peace, pleasure and prosperity. They are tempted to echo the sentiments of the Psalmist who found himself in a similar situation and protested, “Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain”²². God complained regarding His people, “you

¹⁸ Owen, VI, p.167

¹⁹ Owen, VI, p.177

²⁰ Galatians 5.17

²¹ 1 Corinthians 9.27

²² Psalm 73.13

have been weary of Me, O Israel!”²³ In the parable of the talents, the man who received just one talent justified to his master his ill use of the talent by stating, “Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed”²⁴. This man was ultimately condemned, but even for true believers this mindset can readily develop. Charles Spurgeon, in commenting on this passage said about the servant, “He judged his lord to be one who expected more of his servants than he had any right to look for”, further noting that it can happen for some that “their religion is their labour, not their delight; their God is their dread, not their joy”²⁵.

Another subtle manifestation of this sin is a lulling of the believer into a kind of *complacency*, or a sense of “having arrived” in his Christian experience. This was remarkably illustrated in the life of David. In his days of being pursued by Saul, he was presented with a golden opportunity to kill him. Saul had come into the cave where David and his men were hiding in order to relieve himself. And we read that David’s men encouraged him to seize the opportunity by saying, “This is the day of which the Lord said to you, ‘Behold I will deliver your enemy into your hand, that you may do to him as it seems good to you’”. And David responded by cutting off the corner of Saul’s robe, but “it happened afterward that David’s heart troubled him because he had cut Saul’s robe”²⁶. Indeed, what an extraordinarily tender conscience he possessed at that time to be so troubled for having only touched Saul’s garment. The reality that this man was anointed by God as king so overwhelmed him, that he could not dare take matters into his own hands. And yet, later, after Saul was gone and David had received the kingship of all Israel as well as having established himself in Jerusalem, we see David as a complacent man gazing from his rooftop upon a woman bathing. It would seem that now that his major battles had been won, during which time he was so actively dependent upon God, he had then entered into a state of having arrived, and he easily slipped into terrible sin. Perhaps David had this danger of complacency in mind when he penned, “Now in my prosperity I said, ‘I shall never be shaken’”²⁷. Jonah may very well have rationalized in his mind that his disobedience was acceptable when he so easily discovered and booked passage on a ship bound for Tarshish. There he was, fast asleep in the hold, the man sent to awaken Nineveh and yet he would be the one in need of being awakened by the pagan captain!

There is another subtle working of sin in its influencing the believer into a kind of *formality*. Religion becomes no longer the outworking of a love relationship with God, but an organized structure or systematic set of doctrines, rules and regulations. Like the Pharisees, they are deceived into thinking they can “tithe mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass by justice and the love of God”. They speak with the tongues of men and of angels, have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, have all faith to remove mountains, bestow all their goods to feed the poor, and give their bodies to be burned, and yet have no love²⁸. It is this cooling of love mixed with

²³ Isaiah 43.22

²⁴ Matthew 25.24

²⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, *Miracles and Parables of Our Lord*, Baker Book House, 1993, Volume 3, p.119

²⁶ 1 Samuel 24.4,5

²⁷ Psalm 30.6

²⁸ Luke 11.42; 1 Corinthians 13.1-3

religious knowledge which results in this terrible state of formality. This seems to have been the snare into which the church at Ephesus fell. Jesus' message to them was, "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love"²⁹. By all outward standards, they appeared to be contending earnestly for the faith, but there had developed an inner coolness or indifference to grace which manifested itself in a lack of love. This lack of love begins with a lack of love for God which is that old enmity coming forth from the remnants of sin. There still exists faithfulness, diligence and even zeal for the duties of the Christian life. As such one can be deceived into measuring their spiritual health by their attention to these things. This only further highlights the subtlety of this working of sin in the believer. He regularly goes to church, gives of his time, money and talents and yet all is ultimately formality.

A further subtle working of the remnants of sin comes in the form of *compromise*. The mind is sometimes persuaded to reason that a little enclave of sin is somehow acceptable in the life of the believer. After all, seeming due diligence is being prayerfully applied in all other known areas of experience. A little indulgence in one small matter shouldn't matter. But this is to give the enemy a foothold. The Canaanites who were not driven out of the land in the days of the conquest of the land under Joshua's leadership became a snare to the people as they intermarried and adopted pagan idolatry and worship³⁰. Similarly, Saul was seduced in his pride to spare king Agag of the Amalekites as a kind of war trophy. This was common practice among the other kings of the day and Saul too wanted to share in this exalting of his victory. He also kept back some of the plunder of sheep and oxen which were designated by God for destruction. He insisted that he had been obedient, but what resulted was Samuel's piercing question, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?", and Samuel's hacking to death of Agag³¹. The Christian is commanded to "reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin... therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin"³². This speaks of an all encompassing assault upon sin, and the subtlety of sin is such that the believer can become convinced that somehow this doesn't apply to him, or it's a form of exaggeration and extremism which is unreasonable.

²⁹ Revelation 2.2-4

³⁰ "They took their daughters to be their wives, and gave their daughters to their sons; and they served their gods", Judges 3.6

³¹ 1 Samuel 15

³² Romans 6.11, 12-13

The Working of this Subtlety through Deceit:

The Apostle writes of the “deceitfulness of sin”, “deceitful lusts”, and “...the woman being deceived”³³. It is through the mechanism of deceit that the subtle nature of sin is worked in those remnants of sin in the believer. Owen noted that the devil himself chiefly uses deceit as the means of exciting enmity against God in the hearts of men. He wrote, “It were utterly impossible men should be prevailed on to abide in his service, acting his designs to their eternal, and sometimes their temporal ruin, were they not exceedingly deceived”³⁴. He went on to observe that this working of deceit begins in the mind. It is the mind that acts as the governor of the soul and ultimately exercises its sovereignty over the affections and the will. Owen wrote regarding the regenerate man, “the mind or understanding is the leading faculty of the soul, and what that fixes on, the will and the affections rush after, being capable of no consideration but what that presents unto them”³⁵. It is here that we find the letter of James to be helpful where he wrote, “Each is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death”³⁶. This drawing away, as Owen understood it, occurs first in the mind where sinful behavior is deceitfully presented in a light which seems to be favorable. This is exactly the stratagem the serpent employed against Eve when he lied to her regarding the consequences of eating the fruit of the tree. The “You shall not surely die”, was followed with the deceitfully presented benefit of becoming like God. The sad irony of this temptation was that she and Adam were already like God, being created in His image. But in their minds, they became convinced that their happiness and welfare was not in being like God in their perfect reflection of His character, but in their being like God in their supposed moral autonomy. And so the subtlety of sin worked firstly in their minds through this deceit of considering the satisfaction of eating from the tree as more beneficial than obedience to God. In this way, the understanding of the danger and vileness of sin was radically lessened in their minds. Circumstances and consequences appeared to them as being other than what they really were. Furthermore, it was accomplished in a way where the deceit was not presented to them all at once. Before the outright lie of “You will not surely die” was presented, the serpent introduced doubt with, “Has God really said...?”³⁷ Thus temptation was worked progressively in their minds to produce the result of being convinced that eating from the tree was a good thing to do. We read that “the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise”³⁸. As regards the mind, Paul described fallen men who walk “in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them”³⁹. The remnants of this futility and darkness of the mind is present in the believer and subtly, deceitfully and persistently works to present sin as desirable.

³³ Hebrews 3.13; Ephesians 4.22; 1 Timothy 2.13

³⁴ Owen, VI, p.213

³⁵ *Ibid*

³⁶ James 1.14-15

³⁷ Genesis 3.1,4

³⁸ verse 6

³⁹ Ephesians 4.17-18

When the deceit of sin conquered the minds of Adam and Eve, the door was opened for the polluting and corrupting of their affections and will. Their soul's governing faculty, the mind, was deceived into relinquishing its work of preserving the pure moral inclinations of the affections and the will. They chose to listen to the lie of their enemy rather than to rely solely and utterly upon the spoken word of God. They were drawn off from considering that their general welfare and good could only come from their Creator who was already meeting every one of their needs and desires. Satan attempted the same ploy against Jesus in the wilderness. God the Father publicly proclaimed regarding Jesus, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased", to which Satan uttered the equivalent of "Has God really said?" with "If you are the Son of God..." This attempt to progressively deceive was soundly thwarted when Jesus countered by saying, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God'"⁴⁰. Clearly, the key to the warding off and subduing of this deceitful influence of the remnants of sin in the mind is found in the absolute dependence upon and believing in the Word of God. Otherwise, once the mind is no longer utterly convinced that one lives only by dependence upon every word of God, then it becomes open to all that is false and the remnants of sin are given a free pass to work havoc in the affections and will of the believer.

How critical an issue this is today can be found by simply observing how little the mind is addressed in much of present day teaching and preaching, and in the books which are written. Iain Murray, in analyzing the influence on the present day church of the German pastor Friedrich Schleiermacher of some 200 years ago, wrote that "faith, as he (*Schleiermacher*) understood it, does not arise from truth and knowledge received from without; it springs rather from man's intuition, from his own consciousness. To have faith, therefore requires no revealed truths, no authoritative Bible... true religion belongs essentially to the realm of experience – religion is a matter of a well disposed heart and devout feelings"⁴¹. But the question arises as to how does the heart remain well disposed and the feelings devout if they are not regularly nurtured by the truth of God's word as it is taken in by the mind and then presented to the affections and will. Schleiermacher essentially advocated for the shelving of the mind and the turning over of the governance of the soul to the affections and the will. The result is that emotions and experience become the criteria against which one's spirituality is measured. In this way, the understanding of the vileness, danger and evil of sin is progressively subdued, opening the door to temptation and ruin. Owen wrote, "If the soul take not care to fix a deep sense of sin on the mind and judgment, thereby perpetually to affect the heart and affections, it will decay. And here the deceit of the law of sin interposeth itself. It suffers a sense of sin to decay in the affections, and diverts the mind from entertaining a due, constant, fixed consideration of it... No sinner like him that hath sinned away his convictions of sin. What is the reason of this? Sense of sin was in their convictions, fixed on their affections. As it decayed in them, they took no care to have it deeply and graciously fixed in their minds"⁴². This he used to describe those who never progressed

⁴⁰ Luke 3.22; 4.3-4

⁴¹ Iain Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000, p.7, parentheses insert mine

⁴² Owen, VI, p.222

beyond initial conviction, but he also applied this deceitful working of the remnants of sin in some measure to believers. And as the seriousness of sin and the corresponding immeasurable love and grace of God towards sinners as it is presented by the mind to the affections and will is reduced, then the zeal and love of the believer in the performance of grateful obedient service is dangerously cooled.

The importance of the mind as the governor of the soul was underscored in Jesus telling those whom he taught to “take heed how you hear”⁴³. The Apostle Paul’s exhortations regarding the believer’s fight against the flesh often were focused on cultivating the mind. He exhorted the Ephesians to, “...put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your *mind*”. In his prayer for them he asked, “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the *knowledge* of Him, the eyes of your *understanding* being enlightened; that you may *know* what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power...”. His exhortation to the Philippians of, “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”⁴⁴, deals with the discipline of the mind in the control of the will and affections in the exercise of faith. Clearly, the chief work of resisting and warding off the subtle deceit of sin starts with the progressive renovation of the mind. The believer is commanded to “not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of (his) mind”⁴⁵. In this way, the will and the affections progressively incline more and more towards God and set themselves further and further against the residual enmity towards God that still resides in the soul.

Paul described the use of the mind in fighting the remnants of sin when he wrote, “For the death that He (Christ) died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord”⁴⁶. Charles Hodge wrote concerning these verses, “The believer dies to sin in one sense, Christ in another. In both cases the idea of separation is expressed... believers are to look upon themselves in their true light, viz., *as dead to sin*, freed from its penalty and dominion”⁴⁷. This reckoning is essentially the governing activity of the mind, reminding oneself that they are a new creature in Christ that has been freed from the bondage of sin. Sin is then seen as inconsistent with that new life. The believer is called to reason that for him, now joined to Christ and part of a royal priesthood, to sin would be as out of step with his new character and standing as it would be for an earthly prince to put on rags, get drunk and lie in the gutter. The serious contemplation of this reality is to be used to reinforce the inclinations of the will and affections to resist temptation.

⁴³ Luke 8.18

⁴⁴ Ephesians 4.22-23; 1.17-19, Philippians 4.8, *italics mine*

⁴⁵ Romans 12.2

⁴⁶ Romans 6.10-11

⁴⁷ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary On Romans*, Geneva Series of Commentaries, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997, pages 200-201

However, if the mind becomes ineffective in this mental watchfulness over the soul through the deceitfulness of sin, then the affections are easily “enticed”. Owen likened this enticing to being entangled like a fish caught on a hook through the use of bait. He wrote, “the affections are certainly entangled when *they stir up frequent imaginations* about a proposed object which this deceit of sin leadeth and enticeth towards. When sin prevails, and the affections are gone fully after it, it fills the imagination with it, possessing it with images, likenesses, appearances of it continually”⁴⁸. This progression of the subtle deceitfulness of sin after the mind has been disarmed is exactly what happened to Eve. Having first been “drawn away” in her mind in that “the woman saw that the tree was good for food”, we then read that to her the tree “was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise”⁴⁹. As such, through the medium of her eyes, her imagination was stirred and became fixated on the anticipated pleasure and satisfaction in eating the fruit. All reason of the mind had taken leave and the affections and ultimately the will became engaged in leading to the actual act of sin. The same occurred to Achan who first “saw” the Babylonian garment, silver and gold, then “coveted” them, and finally “took them”⁵⁰. When this progression towards sin happens, it is the affections which then begin to govern the mind. The mind, now coming under the influence of the affections, serves only to further reinforce the sinful inclinations of the affections by presenting what are now perverse and vain thoughts and judgments.

Job understood this connection between these faculties of the soul and the channel of the senses. In defending himself against the accusations of his friends, he asserted, “I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman?”⁵¹ In this he demonstrated that he understood that there was what Paul would later call “a law, that evil is present” within him which warred against his desire to do good. He knew he was susceptible to the temptation of lusting after a beautiful young woman, and he knew and believed this to be contrary to God’s law. As such, his mind, armed with the truth about sin served to guard his soul by cutting off the avenue of temptation through his eyes to his affections. He knew that if this channel remained open, his imagination would come alive with lustful thoughts. The same can be said of Joseph in his countering the temptation of Potiphar’s wife. He knew his vulnerability to her wiles, but he was armed with God’s word firmly fixed in his mind. This kept the other faculties of his soul in check and he was able to tell her, “How can I then do this great wickedness, and sin against God?”⁵², finally fleeing from her presence.

The Believer’s Duty and God’s Gracious Provision:

Clearly, the Christian experience in this life is by no means passive as regards sin. Paul, speaking of himself, wrote, “I run... I fight... I discipline my body and bring it into subjection”, “not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on... I

⁴⁸ Owen, VI, p.245

⁴⁹ Genesis 3.6

⁵⁰ Joshua 7.21

⁵¹ Job 31.1

⁵² Genesis 39.9

do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal...”, and generally he wrote, “let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us”. We’re further commanded to “put on the new man” and “to put to death the deeds of the body”⁵³. This active warfare against indwelling sin is the responsibility of every Christian. It is to be carried out unceasingly and relentlessly for the duration of our earthly sojourn. It’s a daily pursuit as “the inward man is being renewed day by day”⁵⁴. Owen likened any relaxing of this conflict with the remnants of sin to a boxer who puts down his arms and receives blow after blow from his opponent until he finally goes down. And if sin, strong, ever present, working to kill our souls, is still present in the soul, can the believer be so foolish, careless, negligent and lazy as to neglect this vital working out of his salvation with fear and trembling?⁵⁵ The apostle John found himself enraptured with the reality of the lavish love of God towards believers in that they were now children of God. However, this new standing as children of God was not only one of legal adoption in justification, but the taking on of a new nature consistent with that new family identification. Therefore John wrote that, “Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure”⁵⁶. If in fact this ongoing “putting to death the deeds of the flesh” is not present in some measure in the professor, then the genuineness of his profession is in grave doubt. And the ultimate result as Paul makes very clear is death!

Owen saw two immediate dangers to carelessness in this Christian duty.⁵⁷ *Firstly*, if one believed himself to be a recipient of mercy in the forgiveness of sins and yet was able to sin without fear, sorrow or indignation, then they were in great danger of being hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. Essentially they were turning the grace of our God into lewdness⁵⁸. Indeed, if Christ’s blood was shed to cleanse, if He was raised from the dead and exalted “to give repentance”⁵⁹, and if we have been given the doctrines of grace in the Scriptures “teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age”⁶⁰, then to neglect the subduing of indwelling sin is utter rebellion and potentially evidence of no true new birth. *Secondly*, Owen saw this neglect in believers as contributing to the hardening of hearts of those who observe the behavior of professing Christians. They are in danger of concluding from what they see of a professor’s polluted life that that’s all they need attain to. They deduce that it’s acceptable to live mostly for self, to claim communion with God, but to be still mostly conformed to this world and to claim forgiveness for themselves, but to never forgive others.

⁵³ I Corinthians 9.26,27; Philippians 3.12-14; Hebrews 12.1 (*I take Paul as the author of the letter to the Hebrews*), Colossians 3.10, Romans 8.13

⁵⁴ 2 Corinthians 4.16

⁵⁵ Philippians 2.12

⁵⁶ 1 John 3.3

⁵⁷ Owen, VI, 15-16

⁵⁸ Jude 4

⁵⁹ Acts 5.31

⁶⁰ Titus 2.12

But given the nature of these powerful, unrelenting, subtle and deceitful remnants of sin in the soul, how is the Christian ever to fight the fight, run the race in this life, or to put to death the deeds of the flesh? The good news is that God has graciously provided all we need in order to effectively combat the influence of the remnants of sin in the soul. We're told that the flesh lusts against the Spirit, but we also are told that the Spirit lusts against the flesh⁶¹. The putting to death the deeds of the flesh is to be done "by the Spirit", and the working out of one's salvation is only possible because "it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure"⁶². Thus, the true believer is actively enabled by the Holy Spirit to respond to His gracious initiatives. The believer responds to these divine initiatives because he has been given a new nature which is no longer at enmity with God, but is now disposed to trust and obey God. It's not a "Let go and let God", but a vigorous pursuit of spiritual warfare in order to "walk in the Spirit"⁶³.

But there's more. God not only indwells the believer, enabling and making him willing to trust and obey, He has also provided means to that end. Peter reminded his readers that God's "divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust"⁶⁴. Clearly the emphasis here is on the nurturing of the mind with truth, and as Jesus said regarding His Father's word, "Your word is truth"⁶⁵. As previously discussed, the believer's duty and privilege is to be constantly under the sanctifying influence of the Word as it is preached, taught, read, mediated upon and prayed over. In this way the mind is strengthened in its operation of influencing the other faculties of the soul. As God's word is acted upon, the believer sees, experiences and proves that God's will is "good and acceptable and perfect"⁶⁶. And so the will and affections become more deeply inclined to believe and obey.

God has also graciously provided the sacraments as a means of subduing sin in that these visible sermons confirm the truths of the gospel to the believer. In this way the true believer is helped in his being convinced of his standing with God, resulting in a greater desire to please his Savior who has been so merciful to him. As such, the sacraments not only function as signs of God's intentions in His covenant of grace, but they also act as seals to the believer's faith. All the faculties of the soul are powerfully influenced and strengthened in order to fight the good fight.

Additionally, disciplined prayer serves to keep the believer in communion with God, as he offers up sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving, presents his petitions and keeps short accounts with God through confession of sin. In this way, the mind stays focused and is progressively transformed such that "we have the mind of Christ"⁶⁷. Furthermore, the

⁶¹ Galatians 5.17

⁶² Romans 8.13, Philippians 2.13

⁶³ Galatians 5.25

⁶⁴ 2 Peter 1.3-4

⁶⁵ John 17.17

⁶⁶ Romans 12.2

⁶⁷ 1 Corinthians 2.16

regular assembling together of the saints is also used by God “in order to stir up love and good works”⁶⁸. This mutual support amongst believers serves as a tremendous source of encouragement in the fight against sin, as Christians watch out for one another.

Conclusion:

The presence of indwelling sin is a very real aspect of the Christian life. These remnants of sin are never gone in this life and the believer must daily “put to death the deeds of the body”. This influence should never be underestimated and should be seen for what it is, outright enmity against God Himself. There is no improvement of it, no reconciling with it, no pacifying of it, only the crucifying of it with its passions and desires⁶⁹. Owen wrote that this “mortification is the soul’s vigorous opposition to self”⁷⁰. And it is a sober and proper understanding of the power, ease, and subtlety of the operation of this indwelling sin, and its pervasive presence that should stir the believer to more than ever use God’s means of grace in subduing its influence and power.

But the true believer should be encouraged to know and experience that God’s chief means of the subduing of these remnants of sin in the soul is the Holy Spirit, God himself. He is the divine, powerful, and great Agent of change for God’s people. Having given the believer new understandings, a new will and new affections, “He works *in us* and *with us*, not *against us* or *without us*”⁷¹. And we are assured that “God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work”⁷².

⁶⁸ Hebrews 10.24-25

⁶⁹ Galatians 5.24

⁷⁰ Owen, VI, p.24

⁷¹ P.20

⁷² 2 Corinthians 9.8