

Hacking Agag to Pieces

2 Corinthians 1:12, Romans 6:14-17

80-128

A few moments ago in the service, we read the Psalm of the morning, and it was the 38th Psalm. And that 38th Psalm is filled with the feelings of a guilty conscience. In verse 2 the psalmist says, "For Thine arrows have sunk deep into me. Thy hand has pressed down on me. There is no soundness in my flesh; there is no health in my bones because of my sin for my iniquities are gone over my head. As a heavy burden, they weigh too much for me. My wounds grow foul and fester. Because of my folly, I am bent over and greatly bowed down. I go mourning all day long for my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am benumbed and badly crushed. I groan because of the agitation of my heart." The feelings of a guilty conscience, quite a contrast to what the apostle Paul has said to us in 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 12.

Let's go back to that text this morning because I want to continue to look at this matter of the conscience and sin in the life of the believer. And in 2 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 12, Paul very much at the other end of the spectrum from the psalmist says, "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience that in holiness and godly sincerity. Not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God we have conducted ourselves in the world and especially toward you." Paul was enjoying a clear conscience, a good conscience. The psalmist was feeling the agony of an accusing conscience.

We have been studying in 2 Corinthians chapter 1 this little section from verses 12 through 14, and we have focused on the soul's warning system which is the conscience. As we have learned, the conscience produces guilt, shame, anxiety, restlessness, fear, doubt, physical illness and pain and other depressing experiences when the highest known standard of moral conduct is violated. The conscience is given to us as a gift from God to warn us about what devastates the soul. And the apostle Paul was living a holy life, and thus he had a clear and non-accusing conscience. He wasn't perfect, but he was victorious over the sin in his life.

No Christian can give testimony, honest testimony, to the fact that when he became a Christian sin was erased. It's not so. The tendency to sin is still in our lives. Even though we're saved, we still sin; and worse, we still derive pleasure from our sin. We still struggle with sinful habits, not just sinful isolated acts. And sometimes we fall into shameful, scandalous sins. Our thoughts and our words are not always what they ought to be. Our time is often wasted on frivolous and worldly pursuits. Our minds and our affections are often set on things that will pass away. Our hearts often grow cold to things holy and evangelistic.

And we might ask the question, why is this so? If we go back to Romans chapter 6, we might conclude that everything should be different. Verse 14 of Romans 6 says, "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace." In verse 17 it says, "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching

to which you were committed. And having been freed from sin you became slaves of righteousness.” If indeed sin does not have dominion over us, if indeed we are no longer the slaves of sin, why can’t we live a pure life and enjoy a clear conscience? Why does this battle go on? Well the answer is: there is yet remaining sin within us. We have been saved from the penalty of sin and that Christ took the penalty Himself in dying on the cross, we have been saved from the dominating power of sin in that sin’s powerful mastery over us is broken, and we do not have to obey it. And we have even been saved, to some degree in the present, from the presence of sin for it no longer is with us at all times in all ways. And some day we will be saved from its presence altogether. But though we have been saved, and redeemed, and forgiven, there is still remaining sin within us.

Therein lies the problem. The problem is: if you want to have a pure life and therefore a clear conscience, you have to deal with remaining sin. The question is: how do you deal with it? I want to borrow an illustration from the Old Testament. I think it may help to give us a vivid picture of how to deal with remaining sin in our lives so that we can have a clear conscience. And instead of having the experience of the psalmist, have the experience of Paul. Turn to 1 Samuel chapter 15. First Samuel chapter 15. This great Old Testament story is meant to teach us the seriousness of sin and the righteousness of God’s holy wrath against it. I don’t want to overlook those truths, nor the historic value of this, but I would like to borrow it as a rather graphic illustration of, or analogy of how believers have to deal with sin.

Let’s look at verse 1 in 1 Samuel 15. “Then Samuel said to Saul, The Lord sent me to anoint you as king over His people Israel. Now therefore listen to the words of the Lord.” Now, you’ll remember, that Saul was chosen because he was head and shoulders above other men: he was from the tribe of Benjamin, he was what the people wanted to be their king, and so the Lord agreed to let them have the man they wanted. He was to be anointed but there was a caveat, there was a catch in this. If he was going to step into this role, there was something he had to do and that was listen to the words of the Lord. He would bring himself into a position where he was going to be ruling the people of God and therefore needed to listen to God who was their true sovereign.

And then it gets very specific. Here’s what the Lord has to say and here’s what you’re to listen to and obey, verse 2: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, I will punish Amalek for what he did to Israel. How he set himself against him on the way while he was going up from Egypt. Now, go and strike Amalek, and utterly destroy all that he has and do not spare him, and put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” That’s what’s called genocide, go wipe out a whole race. A whole tribe in this case, not really a race, but a whole tribe of people named for the man Amalek.

God’s command was very clear. Saul was to deal ruthlessly with these Amalekites. He was to kill not only the men but all the women, and all the children, and all the babies, and then he was to kill all their animals. The whole tribe was to be utterly and mercilessly taken out of existence. No hostages were to be taken and the implication here is no spoils either. Now the question immediately arises: why would a God of infinite love, and mercy, and grace mete out such a severe judgment on a pagan tribe?

Let me see if I can’t answer that question for you. The Amalekites were an ancient tribe. They were nomadic; that is, they traveled around. And they occupied southern Canaan. They were descendants of Esau and thus they were out of the line of promise, as Genesis 36:12 indicates. They were the perennial enemies of the Jews once the Jews came into the land of Canaan. In fact, you remember

when the Jews approached the land of Canaan initially they were afraid to go into the land? You remember them at Kadesh-Barnea and they were very hesitant? They did not want to go in to the land. They were fearful because of the frightening ferocity of the Amalekites. In fact, it was there that they balked and disobeyed God because they were so intimidated by this fierce, evil, vicious tribe. They were the same tribe who had, as is alluded to here, attacked Israel at Rephidim. In fact, this was shortly after the Exodus, as it notes, and this was the famous battle recorded in Exodus 17 when Aaron and Hur had to hold up, you remember, the arms of Moses so that victory could come.

And they had engaged in the war against the Israelites in a very cowardly way. What they did, as we'll read about later, is that they attacked the rear of this mass of humanity that were moving out of Egypt from the Exodus into the promised land. They attacked them from the rear, that is, the stragglers. And who would that be? Old people, little children, pregnant women, crippled people, the sick, anybody weak, weary, faint. It was a coward's way from the rear. And so, they had ambushed Israel, massacring all of the stragglers and working their way up until finally the battle was engaged. And that is indicated to us, by the way, in Deuteronomy chapter 25 as I'll read in just a moment. It was an expression of their viciousness, their wickedness, their hatred of God, their hatred of those things which were holy, their savage attitude toward others. And God delivered Israel that day. You remember that story in the holding up of the arms of Moses? The Amalekites fled into hiding. And in the conclusion of the battle, in Exodus 17 and verse 14, God swore to Moses this: "I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." God says: I'll wipe that entire people out.

He was so committed to this that He made this vow a part of the Mosaic Law. It's in the Pentateuch in Deuteronomy 25. Listen to three verses, the last three in chapter 25. "Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, and how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary?" And here's the real key, "And he did not fear God?" Well, because of that, "Therefore, it shall come about when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies after you've settled into the land a while, in the land which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." And then God added this, "You must not forget." This must come to pass. Treacherous, vicious, intimidating, deadly people, the Amalekites, and God's anger burned against them because of their wickedness.

According to Numbers chapter 24 and verse 20, God even called on the corrupt prophet Balaam to prophesy their doom. Judges chapter 6 verses 3 to 5 says that these people like to maraud the Jews. And what they loved to do most of all was to come in and destroy their crops. And, of course, that would be to destroy their livelihood and their food supply. They hated God. They detested the Jews. They delighted in violence. They were vicious sinners. Because of all of this, and because God had made a vow, God was going to destroy the Amalekites. And when you come now to the text that I pointed out to you, 1 Samuel 15, it is here that it is time for this action to take place. And so, God says now that Israel has a king it's time to act. Go now and strike Amalek. Saul and his armies were to be the instrument through which God kept His vow and would carry out this holy execution of a sinister tribe. But Saul's obedience was only partial.

Let's pick it up in 1 Samuel 15 verse 7. "So Saul defeated the Amalekites." And the rest of the verse, "From Havilah as you go to Shur, which is east of Egypt," indicates that it was a crushing, wide-spread, far-reaching and devastating victory. He slaughtered them from pillar to post, from front to back, east to west, north to south, a crushing defeat. But, verse 8, "He captured Agag, the king of the Amalekites, alive and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the

people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, the ox and the fatlings, the lambs, and all that was good, and were not willing to destroy them utterly. But everything despised and worthless, that they utterly destroyed.” Motivated by covetousness, motivated by the love of money, they kept all the best animals, they kept all the best possessions, collected the spoils of victory. They didn’t even do a thorough job, by the way, of executing the Amalekites. A lot of them escaped. And then worst of all, they spared Agag. They spared the king.

Why? Why would Saul be so blatantly disobedient? Well, it wasn’t just materialism; in this case it was pride. Here was a marauding vicious terrorizing monarch of this tribe who was known to everybody as the greatest fighter, and warrior, and victor before whom others crumbled. Saul was going to show his great mighty power, his great force by holding up the trophy Agag and saying, “Look what I have. Look who I defeated.” It was pride and materialism. It was just an evil heart on Saul’s part to flatly and blatantly disobey God. But the sin was so serious, that God immediately deposed Saul and all of his descendants forever from the throne. Look at verse 23. Actually we could start in verse 22, “Samuel said, ‘Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord?’” You remember that Saul had claimed that he kept some of the animals to offer as sacrifices. And God speaking to him through Samuel says, “Do you think I’m interested in burnt offerings? What I want is obedience. Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice and to heed than the fat of rams, for rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry.” And then the deposition of the king, “Because you have rejected the Word of the Lord, He has also rejected you from being king.”

And so, he was dethroned, serious issue. Now go down to verse 32. “Then Samuel said, ‘Bring me Agag, the king of the Amalekites.’” Now, you’ve got to know that of the people of Amalek who had survived, they were probably somehow in contact with their king, and as long as their king was alive they felt their people still had a reason to exist. Their king was still alive, they were still intact, and what was happening behind the scenes was the surviving members were beginning to reinvigorate and revive around the reality of their king. Samuel said, “Bring me Agag, the king of the Amalekites.” And Agag, thinking all is going to well, Saul is off the throne, everything is forgiven, comes in cheerfully. And Agag said, “Surely the bitterness of death is passed.” Well, that’s all over. And Samuel said, “As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women.” Which is another way of saying, “I’m going to kill you.” “And Samuel hewed, or hacked, Agag to pieces before the Lord at Gilgal.”

It’s a rather sickening scene, isn’t it? It was God who commanded it to be done. And Samuel did it before the Lord, and Samuel was no soldier. Samuel was a priest. But here was God sending out divine judgment from holy wrath against sin. Unlike Saul and the rest of the Israelites, Samuel carried out the Lord’s commands. This is a tremendous picture of God’s attitude toward sin. Sadly, however, the battle that was supposed to exterminate the Amalekites, supposed to wipe them out, ended before the goal was accomplished. Apparently the soldiers were so busy collecting the spoils and making sure they were sorting out the good animals from the bad that they never really did the job. And Scripture records that a few years later, the invigorated tribe raided the southern territory and took all the women and children captive.

Turn over to chapter 30 of 1 Samuel. Verse 1, “And it happened when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had made a raid on the Negeb and on Ziklag,” that’s in the southern area where they were still ruminating around. “They had overthrown Ziklag, burned it with fire, they took captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great, without killing

anyone and carried them off and went their way. And when David and his men came to the city, behold it was burned with fire and their wives, and their sons, and their daughters had been taken captive and David and the people who were with him lifted their voices and wept until there was no strength in them to weep. Now, David's two wives had been taken, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite."

So, they come back and this terrible, terrible marauding bunch of Amalekites has done it to them again. Over in verse 16 of 1 Samuel 30 we read, "And when he had brought him down, behold they were spread over all the land, eating and drinking and dancing because of all the great spoil that they had taken from the land of the Philistines and from the land of Judah." This is the Amalekites. "And David slaughtered them from the twilight until the evening of the next day." Just about a 24-hour slaughter. "And not a man of them escaped except 400 young men who rode on camels and fled." Now, some young boys got away, the rest were massacred. "David recovered all that they Amalekites had taken, and rescued his two wives and nothing of theirs was missing, whether small or great, sons or daughters, spoil or anything that they had taken for themselves. David brought it all back. So, David had captured all the sheep and the cattle of which the people drove ahead of the other livestock and they said, 'This is David's spoil.'" David, by God's mercy, rescued those captive women and children and all that spoil from these people, and they disappeared forever after that. Gone, from human history, as God vowed they would be.

As I said, this is a tremendous insight into God's attitude toward sinners, and His holiness and wrath against sin. But I want to use it just as an analogy, if I might, this morning. It is an excellent illustration, analogically, of the sin that remains in the believer's life. When you were saved and I was saved, there was at that moment a crushing defeat of sin, a crushing defeat. From one end to the other, East to West, North to South, our sin was crushed. But, we still have remaining sins. There are some Amalekites running around loose in everybody's life. We all have our Agags. And the problem in our Christian lives is not that sin has not been defeated with a crushing defeat. It has, but there is still remaining sin. There are some loose, iniquitous Amalekites in all of us. And though there was a great and glorious and triumphant defeat at the time of our salvation, there is the necessity that the remaining sins be hacked to pieces. Or, they will revive; they will plunder our hearts and sap our spiritual strength. We cannot be merciful with the Agags of our life. We cannot be merciful with the remaining sins in our life or they will turn and create an insurrection and a rebellion to attempt to destroy us.

In fact, it may well be that like the Amalekites, the remaining sin in us often becomes more fierce, more formidable than even before, because we don't expect it. Certainly, the children of Israel had felt that the Amalekites were a defeated foe. Their king had been hacked to pieces and here they came. Scripture calls on us to deal with our sin like Samuel dealt with Agag, to kill it. There is remaining sin residing in our unredeemed humanness, our flesh, and it has to be killed. It has to be followed up, found and destroyed. And until we do that, we're never going to enjoy what Paul experienced in his bold confidence about a holy and godly sincere conscience.

Look for a moment now at Colossians chapter 3. In Colossians chapter 3 verse 5, you will notice a marginal reading for, if you have any note in your margin in the New American Standard, the text actually reads, verse 5, "Therefore, consider the members of your earthly body as dead." But the marginal reading says: "Put to death the members which are upon the earth." Things like immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed which amounts to idolatry. Kill them. Put them to death. You can't do it partially. You can't do it half-heartedly. You can't just have a remaining Agag and just sort

of leave him in your life somewhere. He'll lead an insurrection. You've got to keep going until the task is complete. Sins, like Amalekites, have a way of escaping the slaughter: breeding, reviving and launching new and unexpected assaults on our most vulnerable areas.

Go back to Romans chapter 8 and verse 12 and 13. Verse 12, Paul says, "So then, brethren, we are under obligation not to the flesh to live according to the flesh." Then in verse 13, "For, 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." Putting to death the deeds of the body is characteristic of somebody who is living. In other words, it is characteristic of a believer to be killing the deeds of the body, to be executing the Amalekites in his or her life and doing it by the power of the Spirit. That's what he's saying there. After declaring victory over sin in Romans 6, he then describes the ongoing battle with sin in Romans 7, and now he describes the triumph and experience that wins the battle and silences the conscience. And he says it is here; it is putting to death the deeds of the body. Killing sin, hacking it to death.

The distinctive behavior of those who are saved and those who are victorious over sin is they are continually putting their evil deeds to death, killing them. As the King James says, "Mortifying sin." Paul is saying that is a characteristic of a true believer: they put to death the deeds of the flesh, they kill sin. A true believer will not act like Saul who wanted to pamper and preserve Agag. But he will act like Samuel who hacked him without mercy into pieces. Beloved, you can't tame the flesh. You can't make it house pet. You can't co-exist with it. You can't say, "Well there's only a few of them out there, let them run around, they're not going to harm anybody." Paul says, you better get after all of them and kill them just as God instructed His people to do with these marauding Amalekites. Dramatic action.

Our Lord spoke of such dramatic action on several occasions, one of them is in Matthew 5:29 and 30 when He said, "If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you, for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you. It is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish than for your whole body to go into hell." He's not calling for self-mutilation; he's calling for mortification. It's a very similar thing. You've got some things in your life you need to kill, and Paul is saying essentially the same thing back in Romans when he's talking about killing sin. Paul never promises a believer immediate freedom from sin's harassment. He doesn't say that in the great triumphant all the Amalekites will die. He says you're going to have to keep putting them to death all through your life. And Paul doesn't say you can solve this problem with a crisis moment, second blessing, second work of grace, instant sanctification experience. Doesn't say that. He doesn't say you can solve it with a passive approach by saying, "Let go and let God. I can't do anything, I won't do anything, I'll just flop. I'll just sit back. I'm not going to get involved in this, I'm going to let God do it all." Paul doesn't say that. And he doesn't suggest some turning point decision of rededication or reconsecration at the end of an invitation after a sermon.

He says what you've got to do is continually, unendingly through all your life as noted by the tense of the verb, be putting to death the deeds of the body. You're moving around killing sins all the time. It's a continuous struggle, persistently putting to death the deeds of the flesh. He's not calling for some kind of life of physical pain. That's not the idea. I remember meeting a man who wore a belt next to his flesh that was filled with little needles because he wanted to rip and tear his flesh all the time, so that he could somehow deal with his sins. He's not talking about that. I know of people in the history of the Catholic Church who put things like tacks and nails and rocks in their shoes in order to inflict

pain on themselves thinking somehow they could mortify sin. Paul is not calling for a life of self-inflicted pain. He is not asking for monastic deprivation. He is not asking for self-mutilation. He wants nothing to do with external self-punishment. He is describing, rather, a way of life that seeks to kill sin, crush it, sap it of its strength, deprive it of its influence and thus yield a clear and a good conscience that brings peace and joy, and rest, security, assurance and hope.

Basically, mortification of sin or the killing of sin involves the cultivation of new habits of godliness combined with the elimination of old habits of sin. On the positive side, you begin to do godly things. On the negative side, you stop doing sinful things. And that is a constant warfare to which we must remain perpetually committed.

Now, Scripture offers us, and I'll just kind of bring the message to a conclusion with some of these things, some practical means by which we can hack up Agag. Practical means by which we can kill the remaining Amalekites in our life. And, none of them is fleshly, none of them is external, none of them is mechanical, none of them is ceremonial, none of them is ritual. They don't have anything to do with candles and ceremonies. They don't have anything to do with any of that kind of thing. John Owen, the great thinker and writer of Puritan times, observed that most of the Roman Catholic religious system consisted of, quote: "Mistaken ways and means of mortification." He said these Catholics are forever trying to mortify sin in their life with mistaken means: vows, orders, fastings, penances. All of that is useless. Sin cannot be annihilated through legalism, or monasticism, or pietism, or asceticism, or Pharisaism, or celibacy, or self-flagellation, or confessional booths, or rosary beads, or Hail Marys, or any other external means. The instrument of mortification is in the heart. It is the power of the Spirit, Romans 8:13, by the Spirit you are putting to death. This is a spiritual thing, not a physical thing. The Spirit is going to be there but we have to be active in it, not passive. All the means of mortification are drawn from simple commands of Scripture to the believer that we must obey.

Let me highlight some of them, all right? Well run through a little flow and sequence. If you want to kill sin in your life, and that's the only way to a clear conscience, if you want to deal with sin in your life, here's how. Step one: abstain from fleshly lusts. Abstain from fleshly lusts. James says, "Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust, when lust is conceived it gives birth to sin." If you're going to kill sin you've got to stop lust. You've got to deal with it with a peremptory strike. First Peter 2:11 and Peter says, and I think it's as simple and direct as you could possibly say it, "I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul." Now, what is he saying? I'll tell you what he's saying. Stop lusting. It's not too mystical. Stop lusting. It's like 1 Corinthians 6:18, "Flee immorality." Do you want to put to death the lusts in your heart? The stop entertaining them. Peter doesn't describe some complex program of therapy, he says quit lusting. Stop it. Put it out of your life. There's no point sitting around waiting for some heavenly power to erase lust. There's no point spending hours and hours or years and years looking for the right formula to chase away the demon of lust. Here's a most simple straight-forward means of killing sin, stop lusting. Stop it. It's kind of like James 4 which says resist the devil and he'll flee from you. Stop lusting and you'll stop sinning.

You say, "But how do you stop lusting?" Well, let's go to Romans 13:14 and here's another very simple command, the end of the verse: "Make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." If you want to stop lusting, then don't provide anything for lust to feed on. You understand that? Don't accommodate your lust. Lust has to be halted before it gets started. I mean, if you struggle with gluttony, don't go to the market with a lot of money, hungry, alone. Go with a little money, full, and

with a spiritual friend. You know what I'm saying? Don't put yourself in that position. If you struggle with gluttony you don't load up on junk food. If you're tempted with sexual desire, don't fill your mind with the images that build that temptation. Don't go to a movie that demonstrates that kind of stuff, or read a novel that's all about that, or watch television along those lines and then wonder why you're always battling lust, and why you always have an accusing conscience. Make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lust. It's kind of like starving it out.

I used to like potato chips. That's not a sin, but a point of illustration. Potato chips aren't good for me, the doctor said. The only way I cannot eat potato chips is for them not to be around. If they're around, I will eat them, in moderation. But if they're not around, I don't have a problem. It's wonderful sometimes when I go to the cupboard, and they aren't there, and I can congratulate myself on my great self-control. To make matters worse, I live two miles from the nearest market. It's a simple thing to remove what furnishes the mind with the means to entertain evil thoughts. Don't make preparations for the possibility of sin and you can slay it before it breeds. So if you're going to abstain from fleshly lust, then make no provision for them.

There's a third step in the flow here. We're backing up. Fix your heart on Christ. This same verse, verse 14, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, pursue Christ's likeness. Don't be satisfied; don't be content until you awaken in His likeness. As the psalmist said, or to borrow the words of Paul, he said, I am in travail, or bearing birth pains until Christ is fully formed in you. Pursue being like Christ. First John 3:3, "He that has this hope in him purifies himself even as He is pure." Fix your heart on Christ and Christ's likeness and ask yourself what Christ would do. You know, it is an exorable spiritual law that you become like the object of your worship. Really is.

I see this in athletics. You know, you can go into any shopping mall anywhere in the country and they'll have one, two, three, four, five or half a dozen stores where you can go and buy pictures of the athletic heroes of our culture, or their shirts or jerseys or jackets or hats. I mean, it's endless. Sometime back I went to a Kings game with a friend who plays for the Vancouver Canucks, and he was playing that night. And we had some fellowship. He knows and loves the Lord. And when I went in I hadn't been in a long time, and I was amazed and astounded to see all of these overweight, under-exercised men wearing Wayne Gretzky's jersey, or Kelly Rudy's jersey, or Luc Robitaille's jersey, or somebody else's jersey. They were all in the stance and they had this number and the guy's name on their back and they were endeavoring to become like their hero, their god. And, of course, we know they could probably barely skate from end to the other, but there was a certain hero worship that resulted in them taking on the inimitable characteristics that identify their god, their athletic hero.

It's that way. Psalm 135 even identifies that. It says the idols of the nations are but silver and gold, the work of man's hands. They have mouths, they do not speak; they have eyes, they do not see; they have ears, they do not hear; nor is there any breath at all in their mouths. Those who make them will be like them. I mean it is an exorable spiritual law that you become like whatever you worship. The heathen become like their gods, be they idols or be they athletes. How much more will Christians become like Christ when we make Him the focus of our life, because we are not just becoming like Him on our own but by the work of the Holy Spirit who is transforming us from one level of glory to the next into the image of Jesus Christ? As you fix your heart on Christ you will become like Christ. As you become like Christ you will not choose those things which make provision for your lust and therefore you will abstain from fleshly lust.

Backing up one more step to a fourth command, Psalm 119 verse 11, a very familiar, you know it well. Psalm 119:11, "Thy Word have I treasured in my heart that I may not sin against Thee." Meditate on God's Word. Joshua 1:8 says the same thing, that we should take the book of the law, not let it depart from us, meditate on it day and night, observe to do all things that are written in it and we'll make our way prosperous and have success. Jesus prayed to the Father, "Sanctify them by Thy truth, Thy Word is truth." Paul said, "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly." And when the Word fills you, and the Word dominates you, and the Word overpowers your thinking and your life and you're saturated by the Word, that is what leads you to a Christ-centered focus. As you gaze into the glory of the Lord revealed in the Word, you're transformed into the image of Christ. As you're transformed into the image of Christ, you will make no provision for the lust of the flesh. You will abstain from fleshly lust, you'll kill sin. In fact, you will discover the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God and that's the sword with which you hack up sin. It's the most effective weapon we have.

There's a fifth spiritual means that must be noted: meditating on God's Word leads to focus on Christ, which leads to making no provision for the flesh, which leads to abstaining from lust. But there's something else that is absolutely essential, and that is to pray, to be constantly in prayer. You remember that when Jesus' disciple said, "How shall we pray?" Jesus, among the things that He taught them said this, "When you pray, pray like this, Lead us not into," what? "Temptation, but deliver us from evil." It's a matter of prayer. It's a matter of asking the Lord. You remember both Matthew 26:41 and I think it's Luke 22:40, we have a note there, Jesus said, "Watch and pray lest you enter in to," what? "Temptation." Prayer is an absolutely crucial component as we ask the Lord for strength.

The psalmist in Psalm 19 said this, "Lord, keep back Thy servant from presumptuous sins." Stop me from sinning, a very direct prayer. It's really that that I think is in the heart of the writer of Hebrews when he writes in Hebrews chapter 4 and verse 16 and says, "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need." I think the time of need there is the time of temptation, the battle of the believer against sin. That's when we need grace, that's when we need mercy, that's when He provides it. All of this, beloved, prayer, time in the Word, focus on Christ, not feeding lust and abstaining from its impulses. All of this is a part of developing self-control in your life. In 1 Corinthians chapter 9 I would just draw your attention to this text. In 1 Corinthians chapter 9 and you know the text well, Paul says, "Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things." You've got to harness your prayer life, get it under control, your time in the Word, your focus on Christ, saying no to the things that feed your lust if you're going to be a winner. And Paul says the people who compete in the games exercise self-control in all things. They control their diet. They control their exercise plan, their training program, their sleep. I mean, you know that a great athlete is somebody who has got his life under control. And they do it, he says, to receive a perishable wreath, but we, an imperishable.

So, Paul in verse 27 says, "I buffet my body," *hupopiazō*, literally to strike under the eye. I punch my body. I discipline it to bring it into control, to make it submit. That's why Paul had a clear conscience. He had a clear conscience because he dealt with sin. He got his body under control, a watchful self-discipline, a self-discipline that is a child of constant prayer and constant meditation on the Word. It's that kind of thing of which Luke 21:34 speaks when it says be on guard that your hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation, and drunkenness, and the worries of life. Paul disciplined himself to lift himself above that. It's just self-discipline. It's Philippians 2 really: work out your own salvation and

fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you to will and to do of His own good pleasure. You've got to be committed to it, work hard at it, self-discipline.

But on the other hand, it's God who is doing it. And that's right back to Romans 8:13, isn't it? "By the Spirit." It is the Spirit's power working in us that slays sin, but not without our involvement. You can't just sit back, as I said earlier, and expect that the Amalekites and the Agags of your life are just going to go away. You can't co-exist. You've got to be aggressive and active in prayer, meditating on the Word, fixing your heart on Jesus Christ, and putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, avoiding everything that feeds your lust, and abstaining from lust in that way.

You know, the New Testament has some other duties, some other duties that will kill sin, like clothing oneself with humility, 1 Peter 5:5; like having the mind of Christ, Philippians 2:5; like putting away vengeful feelings toward others, Ephesians 4:31 and 32; like putting on the armor of God, Ephesians 6; like laying aside sinful attitudes, Colossians 3:8 and 9; adding the graces of spiritual growth, 2 Peter 1:5 to 7. But basically, the sum of it is prayer, the Word, Christ's likeness, avoiding the kinds of things that feed lust, and therefore we stop lusting, we stop sinning. Summing it all up, in the very letter we're studying, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Paul says, "Beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." That is to say, it's our responsibility to do this. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit, that's the mysterious part. But my part, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement, get rid of it, kill it. Lest it come back in devastating fashion as did the Amalekites.

Flesh is subtle, flesh is deceptive, it may leave you alone for a little while, make you think you're rid of it, and then it will come back with a hellish fury. Sin, you see, is a stalker and you can never rest, it's always lurking. When Agag comes to you cheerfully and says, "Surely the bitterness of death is past," which is another way of saying, "Well the war is over, you're saved, you're on your way, I'm defeated. Don't worry about me." When Agag and his Amalekite friends want to make friends with you and declare an end to hostilities, that's when you grab your sword and hack them to pieces. We are not ignorant of Satan's devices. We better not be ignorant of our weapons. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, we thank You again this morning for this wonderful time of worship. We thank You for the practicality of this text. We thank You for the great story of the Amalekites and Agag, and we thank You for the way in which it reveals to us Your justice, Your judgment, Your holy wrath, Your hatred of sin. And, Lord, we have found that that tremendous historical event of Samuel hacking him to pieces provides for us an apt analogy for how we have to deal with sin in our lives. May we be people of prayer who meditate on the Word, who fix our hearts on Christ, who provide no opportunity for the flesh, and therefore who stop lusting, stop our evil thoughts, stop our evil words, our evil deeds, our evil desires. And may we be killing sin in our lives and therefore enjoying a bold and confident conscience, one that is holy and godly in its sincerity like Paul's. I thank You for those in our midst this morning who can say that their conscience is clear. Perhaps even this morning their sins were fully confessed and in these days of worshiping you, in this season of the year perhaps their hearts have been set on You in a special way and the conscience is clear. But Lord, there are others here who feel more like the psalmist, and the wound is deep, and the pain is real, and they feel a certain physical illness from time to time and shame, guilt, anxiety, fear, doubt, loss of joy, and it's because Your hand is heavy on them through their conscience, because they're not dealing with the Amalekites in their life. May we, Lord, be always putting to death the deeds of the flesh so that we might enjoy a pure life, cleansed from all filthiness of the flesh and defilement, perfecting holiness in the fear of God and thus enjoying the blessing and the benefit of an affirming conscience. We seek

that, and thank You for making it available to us by Your Spirit who alone can accomplish it in us, as we are made willing. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

I was thinking after I finished the message this morning how crucial, how utterly important it was to deal with this matter of mortifying sin, how essential it is in our lives. And I was reminded again of the fact that I can try my best on a Sunday morning to teach you that truth, knowing full well that you can comprehend it, you can understand it, you can affirm it, you can agree with it, you can believe it, you can set out to apply it, but that doesn't end the battle. And that is why we have to come back, and go over it again, and again, and again, week in and week out because we have to sustain that level of accountability with truth, we have to confront, constantly, week after week after week, the sins of the people so that they are brought to account before a holy God again and again and again. It's amazing that the things we know can get pushed back in our minds and sin can rise to the surface again and be entertained.

I almost think that living in the world that we live in today where sin is sold to us through a very advanced media process, it's hardly enough to make it from Sunday to Sunday and you better be exposing yourself more often than just Sunday to Sunday, or you're going to find your life going down a slide of tolerance of sin. The same time that the culture has worsened, good Christian tapes and books have increased and proliferated and Christian radio is there and there are resources. The point is not just to give you information; we can give you information and you can know the information, believe it. You might even be good enough to teach it. The point is to stimulate you to love and good works; that's the reason we gather, as Hebrews 10 reminds us, and to put you at another level of accountability, having worshiped the Lord and come before Him in prayer and come to His table. This, too, is a point of accountability. It isn't just information; it is repetition that is necessary because we default on what we know so easily. And so I'm here not only to give you new information or old information in new packaging, but to remind you over and over and over because the battle wages on and on.

It's so very important for people to be faithful to worship the Lord Sunday after Sunday after Sunday without missing, because you fall into patterns of tolerance in your life when you're not brought to accountability, when you're not sitting under the straight-forward preaching of the Word of God. That's why I worry so much about people who sit in churches where the goal of the message is to make unbelievers feel comfortable. Because what's going to happen ultimately, is the believer is going to be feeling very comfortable about his sin because it's never confronted, it's never really faced. And so, you're going to have a happy bunch of unbelievers who are well-entertained and a miserable bunch of believers who are losing the battle to sin.

It's crucial that when the church gathers together, it confronts itself with this need for holiness. That's why we do what we do on the Lord's day. And I just wanted to add that as a footnote this morning because I think it's so very important for you to understand that my role is not just to give you new information but to hold you accountable to the old information, the old truth, the life-changing truth. And we fail so repeatedly and so regularly that we need to be brought back to that accountability again and again. And to bring it home with a sting to your conscience is part of the role of the preacher. And certainly, it is the role of the Lord's table to confront our failures, and our sins, and our transgressions, and our accusing conscience.

So tonight, before we come to the Lord's table, which we'll do in just a few moments, I would like to remind you of a few things that I didn't get to say this morning. And by way of reminder, and

somewhat of a footnote I want to add to the message this morning, some final helps in this process of killing sin. Remember now, Romans 8:13 says that if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. It is in the power of the Holy Spirit that we kill remaining sin. And we must be busy taking the sword of the Spirit, as it were, in the power of the Holy Spirit and killing the remaining sins in our life.

In the process of doing that, you'll remember we noted you must abstain from fleshly lusts, you must make no provision for the flesh, you must put on the Lord Jesus Christ, you must meditate on the Word, hiding it in your heart that you might not sin, you must watch and pray lest you enter into temptation. We looked at all of those commands. We noted also that you must be filled with the Holy Spirit for He is the power that makes it happen, and you must discipline yourself unto self-control, buffet your body so that you will not become disqualified. And we added some other duties that come alongside, like pursuing humility and things like that.

But let me just give you some final little reminders: as you engage to apply all of those principles in your life, there are some things you need to know. And I'll give you a handful of them before we come to the Lord's table.

Number one, sin is not killed when it is merely covered up. Sin is not killed when it is merely covered up. You may be very successful at covering your sin as far as others can tell, you may be very successful at hiding it from everybody around you. That is not killing it. If a sin has simply been covered over with some veneer, if it has been papered over like some bad paint job on a wall, that is hypocrisy and hypocrisy is just another sin. If conscience has somehow been sugar-coated, you're in a much more dangerous state than you were before. Successfully covering your sin doesn't kill your sin, it makes it even more alive because it's not exposed; it's hiding. And in Proverbs 28:13 we read this, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper. But, he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion." You have not done your duty with regard to killing sin until you have confessed it and forsaken it. Covering it only makes it worse.

Secondly, in helping you to apply this necessary duty of killing sin, you need to be reminded that sin is not killed when it is only internalized. Sin is not killed when it is only internalized. Someone might think that there was a certain sin which they practiced in some way, sins of their mouth, their tongue, sins committed with their body, their hands, their eyes, their ears, whatever. And then when they stop doing it, forsaking the outward practice of that evil, they imagine that they have therefore killed it, when the fact of the matter is they are ruminating on the pleasures of that sin in their own mind. You may find yourself coming to the place in your Christian experience where you say I'm not going to entertain myself by going to movies which parade immorality. And so, you stop. But the vivid imagery of those experiences of seeing those movies you allow to come back into your mind and you entertain them again and again. You have not killed the sin at all. Sin is not killed when it is only internalized. It isn't dead if you can still ruminate on the pleasures of it. You may have moved it from the outside to the inside, and you may have moved it into the privacy of your imagination where it is known only to you and to God, but that sin is not dead. If anything, it has become more deadly because now, it is married to pretended righteousness. If anything it is uglier than ever to God. It was that very kind of thing for which Jesus rebuked the Pharisees. They avoided murder, but they tolerated hate. They avoided fornication and adultery, but they tolerated looking after a woman to lust. And Jesus declared them worthy of eternal hell. Sin is not killed when it is merely covered with hypocrisy. It is not killed when it is internalized. In both those cases it may even be more dangerous.

Thirdly, and this too is a very practical thing to consider, sin is not killed when it is exchanged for a different sin. Some people imagine that because they have forsaken one sin and replaced it with another, they have really done some mortifying work in their life. What good is it to trade the lust of the flesh for the lust of the eyes? Or the lust of the eyes for the pride of life? And the lust is just changed forms. Replacing fornication with covetousness gets you no place. That kind of tactic endangers you because it puts you in a position of being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. You forsake some sin and choose some other, and imagine because you are deceived that that is spiritual progress. It is not.

Sin, fourthly, is not killed when it is repressed. You say, "How do people repress sin?" I'll tell you how: some people do it with alcohol; they just drink themselves into oblivion. They would rather experience pink elephants than guilt. Some people drown their guilt with entertainment and other distractions. Some people go to other counselors and other folks who will elevate their self-esteem, and thus they imagine that their guilt is gone, when it is only repressed under the deception of unwise counsel.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones once wrote, "If you merely repress a temptation or this first motion of sin within you, it will probably come up again more strongly. To that extent I agree with the modern psychologist, repression is always bad. 'Well, what do you do?' asks someone. I answer, 'When you feel that first motion of sin, just pull yourself up and say, of course, I am not having any dealings with this at all. Expose the thing and say: this is evil, this is vileness, this is the thing that drove the first man out of paradise, pull it out, look at it, denounce it, hate it for what it is. Then you've really dealt with it.' You must not merely push it back in a spirit of fear or in a timorous manner," he says. "Bring it out, expose it, analyze it, then denounce it for what it is until you hate it." End quote. That's good advice. We deal with our sin courageously when we strike it at the head. Subduing it a little bit isn't enough. We need to exterminate it, as we learned about the case of Agag, by hacking it to pieces. That life-long task.

So, just kind of covering it every way we can cover it: sin is not killed when it is merely covered up. It is not killed when it is only internalized. Sin is not killed when it is simply exchanged for a different sin. And, sin is not killed when it is merely repressed.

And one final thought, which takes us back to where we started in this discussion this morning. Sin is not killed until the conscience is quiet. Sin is not killed until the conscience has been appeased. The goal in all of our warfare against sin is identified in 1 Timothy 1:5, the goal is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. As long as conscience is still plaguing us, as long as conscience remains defiled, sin is not killed. In 1 Peter 3, listen to verses 15 and 16, "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, let with gentleness and reverence. And keep a good conscience." Have an answer for what you believe; that's the first polemic.

The second one is a pure life that yields a good conscience. You want to have an impact on the world? You want to silence the critics, the people who slander the faith? You want to make a difference? You want to see people come to Christ? Do two things: have an answer, and have a good conscience. The first polemic is to be able to defend the faith, the second polemic is to be able to defend your devotion to the faith. It's one thing to stand up and say, "I believe in Christianity, I believe in the Christian faith, I'm committed to the Christian faith, I'm committed to the Lord Jesus Christ, I'm committed to the fact that He is God in human flesh, died on the cross, rose again for me,

I'm completely committed to the Bible." And then have somebody ask you, "Well, why are you living in sin?" What level of commitment are you committed to? So there is a double polemic in that text. The first one is to know the answer for the reason of the hope that is in you, and the second is to maintain a pure life which yields a good conscience so that they not only cannot slander what you believe, but they can't slander how deeply and devotedly you believe it.

Part of the process of true mortification, or the killing of sin is working through the issue of guilt. If you want to know where in your life sin hasn't been dealt with, just listen to your conscience. That's very contrary, by the way, to the popular wisdom of our day. The popular wisdom of our day is very different. Listen to what John Owen wrote, "If you want to kill sin, load your conscience with the guilt of it." Wow.

Most people today would tell you to run from guilt. John Owen said: load your conscience with guilt. He believed the pangs of guilt were a natural and healthy consequence of wrong doing. Be ashamed, he wrote. Be greatly ashamed, for he saw shame as an advantage. Listen to your shamed and guilty conscience. You see, he correctly, that is, John Owen, understood what we should understand what Paul understood when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 7:10: the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret. True godly sorrow will produce repentance. And what produces godly sorrow? A guilty, what? Conscience. Isn't that what we read in Psalm 38? Wasn't Psalm 38 we read this morning a classic illustration of godly sorrow produced by guilt? And it was that shame that brought the psalmist to his great confession. Those people who just give a nod of the head to their guilt claim trivially the promise of forgiveness, quickly reassure themselves, and then think no more of their sin are subjecting themselves to the heart-hardening deceit of sin. Let sorrow do its full work to produce a deep and honest repentance, and those sins will be severely weakened.

Thus, we can kill the Amalekites in our life. Thus, we can hack to pieces the Agag, and we can deal with remaining sin. It's a life-long task. We don't have to do it alone, as we saw this morning. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, Paul said in Philippians 2:12; and then in the next verse said, "For it is God who is at work in you to will and to do of His own good pleasure."

Sin is, it's a serious thing. It is the serious thing that steals our joy. I don't know about you but I would like to come to the place in my Christian experience where it would be routine, it would be routine for me to be able to say the words of Paul back in that first chapter of 2 Corinthians, "Our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world and especially toward you." To be able to all the time say, "My conscience is clear" as he said to the Corinthians. Nothing accusing. Here was a man who was really dealing with sin. He wasn't just covering it up. He wasn't just internalizing it. He wasn't repressing it. He wasn't swapping it for another sin. He was really dealing with it, and his conscience was appeased. Listen to your conscience. It is the soul's warning system. It sends you messages that God wants you to hear.

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