

How to Stop Sinning and Keep Growing

Adapted from James Rutz

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Most new Christians stop maturing within two or three years—usually because they don't know how to handle the entrenched sin in their lives.

Prof. J. Robert Clinton, in his 1988 book, The Making of a Leader (NavPress), announced the findings of his study of the over 400 leaders whose lives we know from the Bible: About 80 of them finished well. Yes, you should feel distressed about that. Although God continued to use many of the remaining 320 who did not finish well, their lives suffered:

One thinks of Moses, after leading Israel out of Egypt, who assumed the posture of God at the waters of Meribath-Kadesh and so was denied the privilege of entering the Promised Land.

One thinks of David, the “man after God’s own heart,” who bungled his way into the Bathsheba-Uriah disaster with his eyes wide open.

One thinks of Solomon, with his unparalleled wisdom and legendary accomplishments, who wound up collecting women like toys—and following other gods.

The list goes on *ad nauseum*.

Examples from Our Day

Howard McGlamery gives us a priceless contrast between three Christian leaders in our day:

“It was in 1945 that Billy Graham seemingly came out of nowhere and began filling auditoriums across America, preaching to as many as thirty thousand per night. But in 1945 there were two other preachers that were packing auditoriums.

Their names were Chuck Templeton and Bron Clifford. Both were accomplishing the same thing as Billy Graham and even more.

“One seminary president, after hearing Templeton preach to an audience of thousands, called him ‘the most gifted and talented young man in America today for preaching.’ In 1946, the National Association of Evangelicals published an article on men who were ‘best used of God’ in that organization’s five year existence. The article highlighted the ministry of Chuck Templeton. Billy Graham was not even mentioned.

“Bron Clifford was a twenty-five year old fireball. In 1945, many believed Clifford was the most gifted preacher the church had seen in centuries. That same year, Clifford preached to a packed auditorium in Miami, Florida. People lined up ten deep outside the auditorium trying to get in. One wrote, ‘At the age of twenty-five young Clifford touched more lives, influenced more leaders, and set more attendance records than any other clergyman his age in American history. National leaders vied for his attention.’

“Now we all know the name Billy Graham, but I doubt that many know the names Chuck Templeton and Bron Clifford. All three began their ministries in 1945 and all came out of the starting blocks like rockets. Why is it then that we are not familiar with the names Templeton and Clifford? “Just five years later, Templeton left the ministry to pursue a career as a radio and television commentator and newspaper columnist. Templeton had decided he was no longer a believer in Christ in the orthodox sense of the term. By 1950, he no longer believed in the validity of the claims of Jesus Christ.

“By 1954, Clifford had lost his family, his ministry, his health, and then—his life. Alcohol and financial irresponsibility had done him in. He wound up leaving his wife and their two children. At just thirty-five years of age, this once great preacher died from cirrhosis of the liver in a run-down motel on the edge of Amarillo. Some pastors in Amarillo took up a collection among themselves in order to purchase a casket so his body could be shipped back East for burial in a cemetery for the poor.”

What's Wrong Here?

Why do Christians fail? After hundreds or thousands of victories for Christ, why do so many of us plateau, stop growing, or even go downhill?

To the naked eye, such brothers and sisters seem to have simply “run out of gas.” But that’s not it. Christ offers us unlimited energy. (See Colossians 1:29, etc.) The gas is there for the taking.

Nor can we blame the usual suspects: a failure to focus on your goals, upgrade your skill sets, draw upon your resources, seek peer counsel, blah, blah, blah. These things are important, but the true cause of hitting a plateau and failing is most often found in this acronym:

GROJ

That stands for Guilt, Repentance, Obedience, and Joy. I call it the SPIRITUAL GROWTH CYCLE.

Over and over, the Holy Spirit is going to put you through the process of GUILT, REPENTANCE, OBEDIENCE, and JOY. If you learn the drill well, you will become like Christ and grow tremendously in power, wisdom, and love.

But if you *don't* make a habit of getting it right—well, your life will go nowhere—except downhill. You can't coast uphill.

*Years ago the Reader's Digest ran a filler item about a man who was led to a garage sale by a stubby, home-made sign proclaiming: **GROJ SALE***

When he congratulated the homeowner on his creative way of turning a small piece of cardboard into a readable sign, the man replied, “Oh, that's not my way of spelling garage, that's my abbreviation for Getting Rid Of Junk.”

Likewise, that's what I'm talking about here on the spiritual level: Getting Rid Of Junk.

Hebrews 12:1-3

How God Works to Help you Stop Sinning & Keep You Growing

1. Pay attention to GUILT

Psalms 69:5

You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from you.

Romans 8:1

8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus

The purpose of being guilty is to bring us to Jesus. Once we are there, then its purpose is finished. If we continue to make ourselves guilty-to blame ourselves-then that is sin in itself.

Corrie ten Boom

John 16:8 (Holy Spirit)

8 When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment

1 Thessalonians 1:5

our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction

Guilt and shame serve the same function as feeling pain when you injure your body. They are saying, “stop doing that,” or “you need to see a doctor for this.” Nobody likes pain, but it serves an important purpose in keeping our bodies healthy.

Guilt and shame do the same thing for us spiritually. We don't like guilt and shame, but if we respond appropriately they keep us healthy.

---Phil Waldo

Some forms of leprosy cause the sufferer to become numb and no longer experience pain. Then, they do physical damage to themselves, because they no longer feel it.

"I'm okay, you're okay"... this is a lie. We're not okay. We need help from God. And the first step is to admit we need that help.

Just when you think everything is cleared up, the Holy Spirit goes deeper and points out other sins... (Columbo Jesus)

Now it's decision time. What will you do?

Psalms 32:3-5

3 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"

Man does not like to admit that his sinfulness and rebellion are at the heart of the problems of society. He's much more comfortable discussing imperfections, weaknesses, mistakes, and errors in judgment. These terms are socially acceptable, and almost everyone identifies with them. But an outright acknowledgment of guilt before a holy God, a 100-percent acceptance of responsibility for wrong-doing, runs against the grain. Yet this kind of honesty is the first step to the freedom from sin and guilt that God longs to give us and has provided in the death of Christ.

The story is told that one day Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, visited a prison and talked with each of the inmates. There were endless tales of innocence, of misunderstood motives, and of exploitation. Finally the king stopped at the cell of a convict who remained silent. "Well," remarked Frederick, "I suppose you are an innocent victim too?" "No, sir, I'm not," replied the man. "I'm guilty and deserve my punishment." Turning to the warden, the king said, "Here, release this rascal before he corrupts all these fine innocent people in here!"

What we usually do when the Holy Spirit tries to convict us is make excuses or simply ignore Him.

But when He does the Columbo Jesus routine it's really an opportunity to leap ahead spiritually.

Here is a key: Recognize that the Spirit of God is behind those uncomfortable feelings convicting you of sin-and repent accordingly. Don't shrug them off as mere guilt feelings. They may be pointing to real guilt.

2 Corinthians 7:10

10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret

2. REPENT

If your sorrow is because of certain consequences that have come on your family because of your sin, this is remorse, not true repentance. If, on the other hand, you are grieved because you also sinned against God and his holy laws, then you are on the right road. --Billy Graham

Never mistake remorse for repentance; remorse simply puts a man in hell while he is on earth.

Oswald Chambers

Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement; he is a rebel who must lay down his arms ... This process of surrender-this movement full speed astern-is what Christians call repentance. Now repentance is no fun at all. It is something much harder than merely eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death.

C. S. Lewis

But, what if you don't repent? What will happen?

One of four things:

A. You get clobbered.

Sometimes you don't get a second chance, like Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5.

B. You later repent.

Repenting means hanging a U, getting it over with now. It doesn't mean barging ahead more slowly, being careful to do damage control as you go. The idea here is to take a quantum leap, not to waste days, weeks, months, or (in rare instances) years in self-healing and self-reprogramming. Oftentimes, God can heal and strengthen in five minutes a broken soul that might take a psychologist years to fix. Positive Thinking Is No Substitute for Humble Faith
--James Rutz

C. God tries again.

Usually the Lord shows great patience and gives us several-or even hundreds-of chances to repent. That's risky for you and Him, but He usually does it.

D. God gives up.

This is the most dreadful outcome of all. God is a gentleman, and He doesn't like to bug you forever to get obedience. He prefers not to micromanage the universe or coerce His followers into action. So at some point He says, "All right, if you want to do it your way, that's your decision, and I'll let you deal with the effects."

If you dig in your heels and keep refusing to repent of some particular thing the Spirit shows you, He eventually gives up and lets you live with that sin. (This is why over 95% of Christians reach a certain level and stop.) You may even wind up with a stiff neck and a prideful heart that eventually turns to stone.

Until you come to see the horror of sin as God does, you will never grow spiritually."

Repent now and save yourself a ton of grief.

Matthew 3:1-2

John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea 2 and saying, "Repent , for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Matthew 4:17

Jesus began to preach, "Repent , for the kingdom of heaven is near."

Acts 2:38

38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

Acts 3:19

19 Repent , then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord

Many times, when someone asks for counseling regarding a troubled situation they are dealing with, the simplest fix to the problem is repentance. Stop doing what you know is wrong and your problems will begin to fade.

Acts 26:20 (Paul)

I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

Man is born with his face turned away from God. When he truly repents, he is turned right round toward God; he leaves his old life.

Dwight Lyman Moody

Repentance is to be sorry enough to quit.

Revelation 3:19-20

19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.

3. Live out your Repentance in OBEDIENCE

Here is the hard part. You can truly repent in seconds, but then you need to make that repentance a seamless element of your new lifestyle.

That usually means you must face and conquer the underlying temptation repeatedly until each victory is almost automatic.

John 14:15 (obedience = love for Christ)

15 "If you love me, you will obey what I command

1 John 2:3 (obedience = knowing Him)

3 We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands

1 John 5:3-4 (obedience = overcoming)

3 This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, 4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world

Sins of commission – doing things you know you shouldn't

Sins of omission – not doing things you know you should

If for one whole day, quietly and determinedly, we were to give ourselves up to the ownership of Jesus and to obeying his orders, we should be amazed at its close to realize all he had packed into that one day.

Oswald Chambers

Obey ... take up your cross ... deny yourself ... it all sounds very hard. It is hard. Anyone who tells you differently is peddling spiritual soothing syrup, not real Christianity. And yet, in a strangely paradoxical way, it is also easy. With every cross that we lift in obedience to Christ comes the strength to carry it. It is always a package deal.

Louis Cassels

Your obedience to God today determines what you'll be for God tomorrow.

Obeying God is the best prescription for spiritual health.

The cost of obedience is nothing compared with the cost of disobedience.

4. Live on with JOY

John 13:17

17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

A small step of obedience is a giant step to blessing.

Psalms 19:11 (re: God's laws)

... in keeping them there is great reward.

Psalms 119:1-2

Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. 2 Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.

James 1:25

the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

This is the fun part. But it's not just about a reward. This is where you really get strong in God. "The joy of the LORD is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10) It also enables you to handle the next GROJ cycle more easily. Strength begets strength.

If you have no joy in your religion, there's a leak in your Christianity somewhere. --Billy Sunday

Joy is that deep settled confidence that God is in control in every area of my life. --Paul Sailhamer

This is the secret of joy. We shall no longer strive for our own way, but commit ourselves, easily and simply, to God's way, acquiesce in his will, and in so doing find our peace.
Evelyn Underhill

... It is an awful hour when the first necessity of hiding anything comes... When there are questions to be feared and eyes to be avoided and subjects which must not be touched, then the bloom of life is gone.
Phillips Brooks

Now You Know

So that's the reason most Christians remain spiritual babies. They grow rapidly for awhile because at first they're just dealing with the easy or obvious sins (kicking the dog, beating the wife, boozing it up). But after two to three years, the Holy Spirit starts to point out the hard stuff. And they balk. Then they drag their heels.

Don't you do that! Learn the cycle. Learn to grow.

- **Pay attention to your Guilt**
- **Repent**
- **Obey**
- **Live on with Joy**