

Old Sins Die Hard

Genesis 20

Introduction

George was nearly in tears as he explained to his pastor how his marriage had come near the brink of ruin. He had been involved with another woman for several months. He had tried several times to break the relationship and stop the affair, but each time he broke his promises. In desperation George prayed that God would give him the strength to overcome this sin. He earnestly pleaded with God that he would take this desire from him. Now his double life had caught up with him, and his wife discovered the affair. She insisted he immediately stop all contact with this woman or she would leave him, but he was afraid he would fail like he did every other time. George was overwhelmed in guilt, fear, shame and failure.

Sandra had an explosive temper. Sharp words shot out of her mouth like bullets from a gun. If there were five ways to say something, Sandra would pick the most hurtful without even thinking about it. Her anger had shattered her marriage. Her children resented her. Her coworkers avoided her, and though she was good at what she did, she had already burned her bridges at a couple of jobs because of her temper. After one particularly sharp exchange with a coworker, she threw a company owned cell phone against a wall in front of an important client. Humiliated and guilt-ridden, Sandra asked God for deliverance from her temper. Vowing to change did not help; neither did her prayers. Eventually, she gave up, saying, "I can't help it. That's just how I am."

Do any of these stories sound familiar? If we just changed the name, might one be a little too close for comfort? Perhaps the sin is different, Ah, but the struggle, it's the same. How many of us did something this week we swore at some point never to do again? How many words crossed our lips we vowed not speak. What did we watch, what did we read that we swore we were done with? Such struggles with sin are not uncommon. One of the terrible aspects of our sinful nature is that it is quite good at rearing its ugly head again and again, and when you least expect it.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if the moment our heads are lifted from the waters of baptism, our struggle with sin was over with? Wouldn't that be nice? As soon as we confessed our sin and asked for forgiveness— no more temptation. No more weakened will power. No more false promises to God and ourselves. No more disappointing our loved ones. No more guilt.

But that's not the way it is. Yes, once the moment we are saved, we are covered by the blood of Christ, God sees His holiness instead of our rebellion. He forgives our sin and we are freed from eternal punishment, but the maturing process, our growth in righteousness, has only just begun.

We grow through some sins seemingly quite easily. But other sins plague us throughout our lives. We fight them with everything we have. We throw every ounce of will-power at it. We pray and promise to never do it again. We think we have achieved victory, and then we stumble again. We all know how it goes. We enjoy a sinful pleasure, we feel guilty, we determine never to do it again, we take pride in moments of self-control, we think we have achieved victory, and then we fail once more. Each time we repeat, the reigns of the sin's control on our lives tighten a bit more.

You know what? There is nothing new about this struggle. We are not unique are alone in trying to escape sin's tenacious grip. The apostle Paul knew the relentless hold sin could have on our lives. Listen to what he writes in Romans 7:

¹⁵ *I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.*

¹⁶ *And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.* ¹⁷ *As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.* ¹⁸ *For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* ¹⁹ *For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.* ²⁰ *Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

²¹ *So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.* ²² *For in my inner being I delight in God's law;* ²³ *but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.* ²⁴ *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?*

Paul understood this struggle, and so did Abraham. In Genesis 12, Abraham, who is new and immature in his faith, has a period of distrust in God. In fear, he takes matters into his own hands. He leaves where God has called him to be and goes to Egypt.

There Abraham and Sarah entered into a sinful pact. She was a very beautiful woman, and Abraham feared that the powerful Egyptians wouldn't hesitate to kill him to get to her. So they would hide the fact that he was her husband.

This deception endangered both Sarah and the Egyptian Pharaoh. By the time we come to chapter 20, many years have passed. Abraham has been through much, and has seen God prove

His faithfulness over and over. Abraham has grown in his faith, and has matured spiritually. You would think that by this time he had overcome his sin. But let's read what happens in chapter 20.

^{20:1} *Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, ² and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her.*

³ *But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman."*

⁴ *Now Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation?" ⁵ Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister,' and didn't she also say, 'He is my brother'? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands."*

⁶ *Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her.*

⁷ *Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all yours will die."*

Body

Certainly, old sin dies hard. What you might think had died in Abraham years ago, haunts him once again. We see here that Abraham shares with many of us the same struggle with sin. No matter how long we've been a Christian. No matter how long we've been walking with God, we can still stumble. Everyone here is a work in progress. No one is a finished product. We can see in Abraham's example a couple of reasons why we sometimes stumble ourselves. Let's look at how Abraham got himself in this position, and then examine our own hearts.

1. Abraham Left Where God Had Called Him

The first thing that set him up for a fall was that Abraham left where God had called him. Abraham's lie in chapter 20 has more in common with his sin in chapter 12 than just the lying. In both instances Abraham left where God had called him to be, and he went somewhere else.

In chapter 12 he was fleeing a famine. We're not told why he left this time. It's easy to imagine after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, after he had prayed so fervently for them to be spared, after everything that happened with Lot and his wife and daughters, that Abraham just wanted a change in scenery. Whatever the reason, Abraham left where God called him to be and went to where God had not called him.

I'm sure Abraham thought he had a good reason. He probably felt justified moving to the Negev. The point is this- it doesn't really matter what his reason was. By leaving the place God called him, to be he was leaving the place of God's provision and protection.

Now to apply this to our own lives, we need to be very clear: we're not talking about

geography. Sure God had called Abraham to go and live in a certain physical location, when he left that place, he found himself in trouble. God has probably not called you to live in a specific location. For us, the place God has called us is not an address, but it is a spiritual place. It is a way of life- of living within his moral will for our lives. Whenever we leave that place, we set ourselves up for trouble. We expose ourselves to danger. We make ourselves vulnerable to temptation. We cannot ask for God to bless our lives, if we're not willing to live where God wants us to live.

If we go day after day and never crack our Bibles open, and we spend hardly any time in prayer we are not in the place God wants us. If we only go to church when we feel like it or have nothing else to do, we are not in the place God wants us to be. If we give no attention to our spiritual lives and we go through our days doing our own thing our own way, we are not in the place God wants us to be. And when we are not in the place God wants us to be, we will fall into sin.

Sin doesn't just happen. We open the door to it. We invite in, and we should not be surprised when it shows up. We like to say, "I don't know where that came from." But if we are honest with ourselves and we're honest with God, we do know where it came from.

II. Abraham put Himself First

Secondly, Abraham put himself in a bad position when he put himself first. Proverbs 16:18 says, "*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*" Abraham stumbles into this sin, because he was thinking of himself first. Look at verses 9 and 10

⁹ *Then Abimelek called Abraham in and said, "What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done."* ¹⁰ *And Abimelek asked Abraham, "What was your reason for doing this?"*

¹¹ *Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.'*

He was afraid what might happen to him because of his wife's beauty, but he didn't seem too concerned about what happened to her, and once again he puts her in a dangerous situation. He forgot his role as a husband. He wasn't looking out for her. He wasn't putting her first. He was putting himself first. He also wasn't thinking of Abimelech. He put the king in a compromising situation.

If you look carefully at the times you stumble into the same old sin, you will find that almost every time you were operating from a view where you were thinking of yourself first.

You thought to highly of your strength, your willpower, or your ability to stop. You are much more likely to stumble when you try to stand where you cannot stay.

Here's the tricky part. Thinking of yourself first, might not feel like pride. Many times we stumble into sin when we're thinking very poorly about ourselves, what we think of a low self-esteem. This is something that addicts or anyone who struggles with habitual sin understands very well. We're much more likely to fall into sin when we are thinking down about ourselves.

Here's the problem: you are still thinking of yourself first. Pride and low self-esteem are actually close cousins. Both have thoughts centered around me, myself, and I. The fix for thinking less of yourself isn't to think highly of yourself, it is to think of yourself less. Nothing cures poor self-esteem like thinking of others first. Instead of looking down on yourself, you are looking up to serve others, and when you look up you see the face of God.

If you are struggling with a particular sin in your life, consider the others in your life. Put them first. How does your sin affect them? What price do they pay? What position will you put them in? How does your sin make them feel. We need to hear Paul's counsel in Php 2:

3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

When you think of yourself less, and put others first, it quickly steers you away from the same old sins.

III. Abraham built on Half-Truths

Finally, Abraham made himself vulnerable to sin because his actions were based on half-truths. When Abraham and Sarah told others that they were brother and sister, it wasn't a total lie. They shared the same father. I know it sounds creepy to us, but this was before God gave Moses the Law forbidding such things, and it was quite common in ancient times. The lie isn't in what they said. It's in what they left out. Look at the rest of Abraham's explanation to Abimelech in verses 12 and 13,

¹² Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³ And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'"

Even though what they said was true, it was still a lie. It was a lie because it wasn't the whole truth. It was a lie because it was intended to mislead. This doesn't mean we always have to tell everyone everything we know just to satisfy their idle curiosity. That's not honesty, that's

just being a gossip.

However, if we are only telling part of the truth in order to create a false impression, if the withheld information is crucial for them to act appropriately, then we are lying and it is sin. You see the sin isn't just in the act itself. It lies in the intention and motivation of the heart. If your heart's intention is to mislead and deceive, then it is sin.

A half-truth is never a solid foundation for righteousness. In recent years, hundreds of homeowners in Connecticut and Massachusetts have discovered their basements and foundations are crumbling. About 10 years after construction, fractures begin spider webbing through the concrete leading to major structural damage. Repairs often cost more than the house. All of the failing foundations have one thing in common. Their concrete was provided by one company. Researchers have narrowed down their investigations to a single ingredient in the aggregate mined from the company quarry. This one ingredient has a chemical reaction with the soil causing the concrete to break down.ⁱ

Half-truths are like that one ingredient in the concrete. It looks good and solid at first, but it always cracks and breaks down. It leaves us vulnerable and exposed to sin. Even when we would not fall victim to total lies, we will often succumb to half-truths. They are dangerous because they seem to make sense. They can be defended, in part, by incontrovertible logic. They have the veneer of truth, but the heart of a lie.

Jesus told us the Satan is the father of lies, and we open the door to him with half-truths, and we set ourselves for major failure. One of the reasons we keep stumbling into the same sins again and again, is because we aren't being completely honest with ourselves, with our loved ones, and with God. Oh, there is always some truth in what we say. We use that truth to justify what we're doing, but we're also letting in the father of lies.

Michelle had a problem stealing from her employer. It had cost her jobs and a marriage. It had now cost her another job and her second husband was having to pay tens of thousands of dollars to keep her out of jail. It started with half-truths. "They're not paying me enough." "They don't really treat me fairly." "I really need this." Over the years, though, these small half-truths led to more than a hundred thousand dollars in embezzlement. A half-truth is still a complete lie. You can't build on half-truths. It is a foundation that will always crumble beneath you.

If there is a sin with which you're struggling in your life, don't just look at the sin, but look at what happens in your life before the sin. Nine times out of ten there is something you are

doing in your life that sets up for failure. There is some way in your life you have left where God wants you to be. You are thinking of yourself first, and neglecting your responsibility toward others. You are fooling yourself with half-truths. Many times the key to defeating a sin is not in defeating that sin, but in changing the things that cause you to stumble into that sin.

1. Am I where God wants me to be? For Abraham this was a geographic question. For you it may very well not be about physical place. Although if you are an alcoholic, meeting a friend in a bar may not be the place God wants you to be.
2. Am I considering the needs of others, not just my own? When you put yourself first, you won't make the wisest decisions.
3. Are you walking in truth? Half-truths are a slippery slope that will cause you to stumble every time. Honesty and integrity keep you on firm ground.

ⁱ Colli, George. "Crumbling Concrete Causing Headaches for Mass. Homeowners." Fox 25, WFXT. The Associated Press, 13 May 2016. Web. 31 Aug. 2016.