

Well, I think that I have slacked off enough of my life now. It's really time to get serious. So many things I want to do or know I ought to do that I've put off 'cause I just didn't have the time I wanted. Well no more. Time to start taking things seriously. I'm going to start doing what's right, doing the things I should and living my life properly now. God's actually been really good to me in my life, regardless of how lukewarm I was to him or haphazard my commitment to him. He really does deserve better out of me and I'm going to make that happen.

For one, that means I'm really going to get serious about my own sin finally. There's too many casual sins in my life, too many things I just let slide because they're "just little things". I've tolerated my own secret and habitual sins for too long and enough is enough. I'm going to do something about it. Jesus takes every sin seriously and so should I. I heard what he said today. Leading someone else to sin is worse than being drowned at sea. And he had some pretty harsh things to say about the lengths I ought to go to stop myself from sinning. I mean, I don't want to go to hell. I would much rather be in heaven. Jesus' point is harsh but logical. Better to have one hand and heaven than two hands in hell. Whatever it takes, right? I gotta do what I gotta do.

So that's it. No more sins. And I'm going to take Jesus' advice here so I don't lose out on heaven. Whatever it is that makes me sin, I'm going to get rid of it so I can lead that good life. He starts with the hand. Well, that can't be too bad...after all how much trouble can a hand get into? Actually, plenty now that I think about it. It's the hand that used to punch my little brother when he annoyed me. It's the hand that's always reaching for things I shouldn't eat. It's the hand that made that rude gesture on the highway. The hand gets me in trouble. I'm going to have to get rid of it.

The feet, well, they must not fare much better. The foot takes me to places I shouldn't be. The foot rushes me off to confront people who I want to hurt back. The foot takes me out in the world where I'm bombarded with sinful temptations. The foot...it's going to have to go too, I suppose.

The eye. Now that's one I don't even have to think about. All the greed, all the covetousness, all the lust...all because I could see things I am not supposed to have that then I wanted. The stuff that's advertised that I can't afford. The wealth I would do almost anything to make mine. That other person walking around with just a bit too much skin exposed. All those things I can see that raise up the selfishness in me that God hates so much. The eye cannot be allowed to stay.

But even now, what good have I accomplished? Each thing I've discarded has a brother. The other will just the same get me in trouble. They'll all have to go. But that's not even all of it, is it? What about the ears bombarded by the foul things of the world that trigger me to crave them? And what about the tongue? James said if anyone could keep a reign on his tongue, he is a perfect man, faultless in all he does. He also compared the tongue to the spark that sets a forest ablaze. How much injury and grief has my tongue caused? I don't think about it much, because the results aren't tangible. But the damage it's done, the sin my tongue is responsible for is probably greater than the rest of my body together. The tongue must be removed.

And here I lie at the end of it all. I have removed everything that could lead or influence me to sin. I have no hands, no feet. I cannot see or speak or hear. But I cannot be led to sin either. Many people would call these moves desperate or even insane. But to get to heaven, there is no price not worth paying. At least now I will be free and able to live how Jesus commands.

I have to admit, that will be kind of boring though. I wonder what I'll do to occupy my time? Just me alone with my thoughts... I wonder what those thoughts will be? No...no no no no no. Even now the thoughts turn to sin! Memories of things that I did wrong. Of people that angered me whose very memory boils my blood. Of pleasures I crave that I should not have. It's all here in my head and in my heart. I'm alone in the dark and in the quiet and still I am surrounded by sin! I took every drastic measure to stop myself but it's still coming! How can I also cut out my heart and mind? Why didn't I see this before? All the parts of the body...they weren't what caused me to sin...they were just acting out from the real threat – my own heart. I was the enemy all along.

Brothers and sisters. What I just led you through was perhaps a very unlikely train of thought, but hopefully illuminated the true point Jesus was seeking to make here to his students. Yes, we should not go out of our way to tempt ourselves. And yes, if we can stop a temptation easily from entering our lives, then by all means, do so. But to attack the problem of sin from the idea that we can actually remove it completely from our lives if only we really take it as seriously as it deserves and do whatever it takes to make it happen...that can't happen.

Your sin does not come from outside you. It may be provoked by things outside us at times. But your sin is your own. It starts in your natural heart, the one that inherited the sinful nature from your parents. It pours out of there into the rest of your life. You cannot cut out sin in your life without cutting out the source, and that means cutting out your own

heart. And then what? There's nothing left. You cannot cut sin out because you cannot cut you from yourself. If you try, you end up with nothing.

And that, ultimately, is the point Jesus wanted to make to us. As he does on many other occasions, Jesus does not try to confront those who want to be self-righteous by simply telling them it can't be done. Instead he presents them with the path they think they want to take. And even manages to make it sound half-way possible. And then he leaves it to us to come to the conclusion that it can't be done. That it is futile and we have no hope in ourselves. The process was not meant to show us a hard but possible road to heaven, it was meant to leave us mentally cut off, to drive us to feel alone in the dark and the quiet and realize that any path we think we can walk by our own strength is doomed to failure because at the heart, at the core...I am the problem.

But Jesus does not leave us hopeless in our distress. He very much wants us to take a long, hard look at ourselves so that we abandon any idea of our own goodness or us earning favor with God through our noble actions. He wants us to despair in ourselves, to turn away from our own self in disgust because again, our *selves* are the problem. But that is not the end game. Did you hear what Christ said just before he led us down that difficult path of self-mutilation? We've been focusing on the part where he said that to ensure you get heaven you need to cut off body parts and we saw that even that wasn't good enough. But what did he say right before that?

With an oath he tells us plainly, **"anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward."** What is this? Cutting off all we are is not good enough but the smallest act of kindness guarantees our reward? This makes no sense! Ah, but it does. Look at the difference here. The act is done in Jesus' name...in other words it is done on his behalf, because we know it is what he would want. And it is done for those who also bear his name, meaning we are also doing it to him as well. The act is not the important part. It is the heart that changes everything. It is the heart that loves Jesus as Lord that makes the difference.

In that desperate attempt to save myself, the focus was still on me and I did it to show myself great. But here the focus is on the Lord Jesus and the acts are done to show *him* great. The difference is in the heart. Yet that still seems to pose a problem, because didn't we say the heart was the seat of our sin? Isn't that where all my evil pours out from? Didn't we say it was impossible to separate ourselves from that because that is who I am? All true. For us. Not for the Lord.

Changing that arrangement is exactly what coming to faith is. It is the Holy Spirit coming to us by water and word, cutting out that dead, sinful heart, and replacing it with a new heart that loves and trusts Jesus as Lord and Savior. A heart that knows and trusts his life and his death and his resurrection for our crimes. There is a new self, one free of the control of sin, and the sin that you were is not you anymore. Yes, it's still there and we will not be free of it entirely in this life, but its days are numbered and it will not survive beyond this life.

God, in his power, has done what you could not. He has cut off your sin at the source. By *his* work you are made pleasing to him. By *his* work you are worthy of heaven. You will live forever with him because of what he has done alone. This is our hope and confidence. Not our outward actions. Not how much sin we managed to avoid today or how many good deeds we've done. As soon as you focus on those things, your eyes are off God and on yourself. Look to the right way to heaven, the Lord Jesus alone. Drain the old self out of your heart and fill it with the Lord and his love for you. Keep your eyes on what he has done for you.

The rest will follow. When you keep Jesus and the cross front and center in your life, everything you do, great or small, will be in his name and out of love for him. Don't focus on the actions or the sins. Turn to Jesus, let him fill you with the love of his rescue, let him promise you that heaven is yours, the sin will be quieted and the good will follow naturally. And you will certainly not lose your reward. Amen.