

“Try Harder”?

I was flipping through a Christian magazine once that unexpectedly came in the mail, and paused long enough to read a little column of an article entitled “Try Harder”.

The author begins with a very true reflection: “I’m convinced that many of us may not resist the temptation to sin as we should.”

It’s easy to get swept up in our culture which has an aversion to the word “sin” – there are times when I’ve just wanted to say “I made a mistake” not “I sinned.” Sin is a serious, ugly word and it means taking responsibility for doing something that we shouldn’t have. For those who haven’t adopted Christ as their identity and are still relying on self and their own doings, admitting sin is a blow to the ego that is often too hard to accept. We’ve all been there.

I believe the author has the good intention of trying to convince his readers of the severity of sin. Because of sin, Christ had to die. It is our sin that has separated us from God, and it is our sin that will cause the ultimate separation from Him in the end.

Doing something as radical as putting on Christ and determining to live for Him, abide by His word and crucify ourselves/our flesh while still having to be here in this world, stalked by our adversary the devil at every turn, is very difficult. Impossible, if it weren’t for Christ and the Holy Spirit.

So what’s the answer?

Our author illustrates:

“Not long ago, a friend of mine gave a lecture in which he raised this question: What if every time we sinned, an ugly scar appeared upon our face? How much harder then would we resist sin? Good question. None of us would like to have our faces scarred. Scars to our faces would be embarrassing, affecting our relationships and our behavior. I’m sure we would tenaciously fight the temptation of sin if succumbing meant a big ugly scar to our faces.”

It’s a logical conclusion, one that I’ve come to before as well: having trouble resisting sin? Focus on the negative consequences. Try harder. If you truly appreciated the gravity of sin, you would resist it.

But is that the truth?

God went to great lengths to provide us with that very answer, and we find it in the summation of the Old Testament, and the message of the cross.

Consequences, law, are not a sufficient motivator for any of us. They work to an extent: they burden us under their requirements and crush us when we fail. Law reveals to us our sins and humbles us in light of our inability to perfectly obey. The Mosaic Law was given to teach us

these very lessons, to provide us an example of a people purely motivated by law and negative consequences:

*“Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a **yoke** on the neck of the disciples that **neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?**” – Acts 15:10*

*“For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: “**Cursed** is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.” Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because “the righteous will live by faith.” The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, “The person who does these things will live by them.”” – Galatians 3:10-12*

In the day of the Law of Moses, the Israelites had much more real consequences to motivate them to perfection than a scar on the face:

If they failed to obey God’s commands, they could be **stoned**, cut off from their community or considered unclean.

If there were ever a people to understand the severity of sin, I would have to say it would be the Israelites. Can you imagine knowing that your disobedience to God could result in your children being taken away from you? Knowing that you could lawfully be stoned to death for a particular transgression?

Yet, did the fear of knowing that their physical life truly depended on their obedience enable God’s people to resist temptation?

Sadly, no. Sadly, the truth of the world is that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” The truth is that God showed us what the world would look like if he allowed us to try to achieve our own righteousness by keeping His law on our own. It looked like sinful hopelessness. It looked like a people enslaved to destruction and in need of a Savior; **a people unable to rescue themselves even with every reason to try very, very hard.**

Thankfully, God doesn’t leave us there, with no hope, knowing we can’t rely on ourselves and cannot please God alone. Instead, after teaching us with His law, He sends His Son to fulfill it, to live the righteous life we weren’t able to. To show us His grace and love that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Look how this changes our hope:

*“For the love of Christ **compels** us because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; **and He died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised.**” – 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15*

I noticed in our magazine article “Try Harder” that no mention was given to God, Christ, or the Spirit. Instead the focus is narrow, just like the focus of the Israelites: here is law, and it is your responsibility to keep it.

But how wonderful to know this isn't the Christian's reality. We can take comfort in admitting that we are in fact sinful, small before a great and perfect God. We can take courage knowing that our just and awesome God sent His Son despite our destructiveness, to save us, to reconcile us to Him. And we can have hope knowing that God has given to those who put on Christ His Spirit, and consequently the power and ability to walk in His ways – by no longer relying just on our own ability, but Him working through us.

*“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always **obeyed**, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is **God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**” – **Philippians 2:12,13***

*“...equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.” – **Hebrews 13:21***

*“But by the **grace of God** I am what I am, and his grace toward me was **not in vain**. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, **though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.**” – **1 Corinthians 15:10***

So maybe you have a small view of sin, maybe you don't realize the importance of resisting sin and maybe that is something you need to figure out in your life.

But, maybe you do understand sin. Maybe you're overwhelmed by the burden of sin and the impossibility of being perfect, living in constant fear of your standing before God. Maybe you recognize His work on the cross, but take on the yoke of pleasing Him alone. Maybe you tell yourself you just need to try harder. That you could do it if you tried harder.

Yes, there will be negative consequences if we forsake God and if we don't continually pursue Him and His ways and His truth. But instead of telling ourselves to try harder, focusing on hell and the consequences of our inevitable sins, perhaps we should constantly strive to bring our minds back to the cross, His love, His grace, and His word (**Co.3.16**). When we're consumed with those, then maybe we'll be so rooted in Him that we'll walk in His way.