

## **What to do when you keep doing what you don't want to do!**

### **Two brothers**

Last time I spoke about the two brothers in the parable of the prodigal son. The older brother had the problem of being controlled from the outside, suppressing what he wanted to do and becoming bitter and critical. The younger brother did what he wanted but he found himself controlled by forces from the inside that led him into a destructive lifestyle. As I went through my process of going from being outer driven to living from the inside I also found there were forces in me that I had to learn to deal with. I want to tell what I have found helpful in this struggle.

### **Sin is bad for us**

In the Bible readings today you will hear the word "sin" used. It is important to understand this word in the right way. "Sin" is not just an invention of religious people to make life boring and miserable. When God uses the word "sin" he is referring to something which is either bad for us, for others or for him. When he tells us not to worship other gods or misuse his name, he is telling what hurts him. God tells us to rest at least one day a week because he knows that if we do not we will burn out, as many have done in our hyper-active society. He tells us not to steal or commit adultery to avoid hurting others and ourselves. When we understand sin in this way I think it makes it easier for us to want to avoid it.

### **Trapped in a cycle of sin**

In Romans 7:7-25 Paul describes the feelings of a person repeatedly sinning who cannot stop it however much he feels bad about it and struggles with it.

### **What's so bad about the "flesh"**

Paul uses the word "flesh" to describe our psychological being which interacts with our physical bodies. Modern research has shown that feelings in the brain lead to chemical changes in the body. Also changes in our hormones affect how we feel. This mechanism operates on a deeper level than our conscious mind and can only be controlled by it to a limited extent. This is what Paul experienced.

God created our flesh, in other words our emotions and our chemistry. The flesh is not bad, in principle, and those who try to destroy their flesh only do damage to the image of God. Paul tells us to put to death the sinful *deeds* of the flesh, Romans 8:13, not to destroy our flesh. However it is this feeling part of our being, the flesh, which is where sin has most affected. Sins of the intellect can be sorted out by good teaching. Sins of the flesh require more than just teaching, although teaching is important.

### **How sin gets hold of us**

Men more often than women get trapped by sins of the flesh, or what we might call compulsive behaviour patterns. Many of us men have very little awareness of what is going on in the feelings area of our being. We function with our intellect and concentrate on doing things. This lifestyle can leave our feelings area undeveloped. Our lives are emotionally empty and we look for something to fill the emptiness. When we find something like sex or alcohol that gives us a good feeling it can easily dominate our lives.

If we have had a strongly legalistic background in which we have been forbidden to enjoy life in any way our emotions may be suppressed. Just like someone who has very little physical exercise will be quite limited in what they can do with their bodies.

Even if we have had a healthy life, a sudden change in circumstances can make us vulnerable, e.g. death of a partner, divorce, unemployment, moving to a new town and feeling loneliness. Also depression, which often comes from emotional exhaustion after strong experiences like childbirth or bereavement.

The result of this emotional emptiness is that we look for something to fill it. A lonely woman starts going to the fridge too often. A bored man starts looking at pornography. A teenager who feels unloved tries to find joy through alcohol or drugs. Once we start on this pathway we can easily find that we are trapped. We try to fight against our problem, usually alone because we are ashamed. We may even cry out to God but it seems that help doesn't come. What is going on?

### **The LP of life**

Imagine an LP record as an example. It normally has many tracks on it. The needle moves in these tracks and makes music. If you get a scratch on the record then the needle can get stuck in the scratch. If the record has very few normal tracks on it the needle is more likely to get caught by the scratch and get stuck there. The longer it stays there, the deeper it makes the scratch. So also with us, the emotional emptiness means that our problem area more easily attracts our attention. The more we struggle to overcome our problem the more we focus on it and the worse the situation gets.

### **Paul's two part solution**

In Romans 7 Paul has shown that our minds and wills alone cannot solve problems of the flesh. In Romans 8v1-6 he gives a two part solution. I want to emphasise that Paul's solution only works when we get to the point of really hating the situation we are in. The prodigal son only got free when he was so hungry he felt he would eat pigs' food. Then he saw the full horror of his situation and decided to do something about it. If you haven't reached this point, pray that God will bring you to it because it is the only way out. Just feeling guilty or ashamed or uncomfortable is not enough. You have to want a solution with all your heart. You have to acknowledge that sin really is destructive for you and that God was right in warning you against it.

### **Part 1 - Forgiveness**

The first part of the solution is in Romans 8v1-3. Paul shows that God has solved the problem of sin in the flesh. This is good news because if we had to be good enough to come to God we would all be lost. We know this don't we? Yet how many of us when we are struggling with problems in our lives stay away from church because we don't feel good enough? We try to solve our problems on our own. We don't really trust that our church can be Armon Talo (House of Grace), a place where we come when we are not good enough in order to find the help to be different. Grace means to be accepted as we are. If we have problems in our lives we need to be more in worship and fellowship and communion than if things are going OK. God offers us this possibility by telling that Jesus has carried the punishment for our sins. There is no condemnation. We can just come to him honestly admitting the problem we have and seeking his forgiveness. It helps to have a person to hear our confession and

pronounce God's forgiveness because it makes it real for us that we are accepted even as sinners and helps us break out of the shame and loneliness that often makes things worse.

## **Part 2 - The Holy Spirit**

The second part of Paul's solution is the Holy Spirit. I find it helpful to think of the Holy Spirit as Jesus in an invisible form. He not only has the mind of Jesus, he has the same feelings as Jesus. The prophets in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament reveal to us a God with feelings. He not just an intellect with no feelings as Protestant Christianity has often pictured him. Through the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements of the last century we now accept, at least in theory, that the Holy Spirit produces feelings in us, even though many Christians are still afraid of this idea. If we have a deep fear of emotion we may need healing prayer before we are ready to let the Holy Spirit bring our feelings to life. We need him to affect us on the emotional level because, as Paul has explained, intellectual ideas cannot solve emotional problems. When the Holy Spirit shares his feelings with us, he begins to fill our inner LP with tracks that play the joyful music of life.

### **Focusing on the things of the Spirit**

How do we get in contact with these feelings? You don't get a feeling by looking inside to see if you have it. You have to look outside at something that allows the feeling to flow. Paul tells us to "set our minds" or "focus" on the things of the Spirit not on the things of the flesh, Romans 8v5. The Holy Spirit operates through us when we turn to those things he likes.

Think of an electrical socket. I could tell you that there is a lot of power in that socket. You could sit and look at it all day and experience nothing. But if you connect that socket to an electrical machine the power will flow out and something will happen. The same thing happens with us. When we give our attention to God in praise and worship and prayer, and to other people in love and service and sharing the good news, we experience a flow of joy and love. Each time we do this a new healthy track is made on our inner LP.

### **Filling the emptiness**

The more emotionally empty we are the more likely we are to get trapped in unhealthy behaviour. Active people in satisfying relationships with a wide range of emotional experience are much less likely to get problems. God has given us all we need to break free and keep free from sinful lifestyles. We only need to turn our attention to what God directs us to and life will flow.

It does not mean we have to be involved in "religious" things all the time. God is the creator of life in all its fulness. We need less things and more relationships. In such relationships we can be healed and grow because they develop our feelings and make room for the Holy Spirit in us. It could be spending more time with the family or a friend. It could be joining a home group for study and fellowship or being part of a team serving the old and sick. It could be working with youth or children or spending more time in praise and prayer with others. In Armon Talo (House of Grace) there is space for everyone to let the Holy Spirit flow through them. As he does this he will create music in our lives and protect us from sin. He will enrich our emotional life. We will feel joy and motivation and strength. Then the old temptations will no longer

have power over us. We become free to live a full life. So I have experienced and I hope you do also.