

Battling for our SOULS

"In the darkness of our heart conflicting affections fight hard in successive combats"—Prudentius 4th century.

In 1955 a young Billy Graham published a small book of sermons called *Seven Deadly Sins*. He argued that putting milder labels on sin was like calling a bottle of poison peppermint candy. The milder the label, the deadlier the poison.

Now almost 50 years later, the seven deadly sins are still poisoning the soul but at an increasing rate. And like the slow degeneration of our atmosphere from daily inputs of carbon monoxide, the slow degeneration of our soul's life results from daily inputs of small but deadly messages we have mislabeled as "mostly harmless."

Take for instance, that annoying invasion to your e-mail called Spam. I receive about 100 pieces of Spam per week. My initial reaction is to get angry at the inconsiderate invaders and then simply delete the messages. But why is Spam such big business? What is it about people who sit in front of their computers that keep making them vulnerable to these offers? You would think that people are smart enough not to reply and eventually Spam production would become like New Coke—a brief memory.

But people are not that smart. I heard T. V. Thomas say that 93 percent of Canadians do not think that they are sinners. They define sin as committing some serious crime like murder. And in comparison to murder, we suppose that Spam is an inconvenience at best. But here is the problem. Too many of us tend to think of battles with sin as direct power encounters with demons. And while there is truth to this idea, we need reminders to become more watchful and alert to the subtle attacks on the soul. These attacks are more common and more deadly to the life of the soul than we might think.

What does something as seemingly innocent as Spam have to do with battles for the soul? C. S. Lewis commented, "The safest road to hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."

In the 5th century a Christian poet named Prudentius wrote *Battle for the Soul*, an allegory that became immensely popular in the Middle Ages. He wrote the poem during a time with similarities to ours. For 300 years after Christ, early Christians faced opposition from the Greco-Roman culture. Whether it was simply pressure to conform or outright persecution, many Christians knew that they were in the world but not of the world. When the persecutions ended and Christianity became culturally acceptable, monastics continued to battle on the spiritual level.

Early monastics believed that followers of Christ must overcome the subtle battles for the soul through discernment, watchfulness and prayer. They developed this mind set as Christians in the Roman Empire experienced peace and prosperity for the first time. Their peaceful world ended in AD 476. But in this time of transition, the awareness and labeling of sins became an art form.

How does a Christian wage war in a time of peace and prosperity? In his allegory Prudentius created a dramatic picture of the seven enemies that sought to destroy the Christian's soul. These enemies were depicted as attractive feminine characters fighting and deceiving the soul. The vices were frequently renamed and revised to what eventually would become the Seven Deadly Sins.

Looking at my recent delivery of Spam, I discovered the old sins are still taking attractive forms. Many vices overlapped and so the total is more than 100 percent. That's the enemy's old math. The Seven Deadly Sins:

1. **Pride**—the feeling of superiority and excessive belief in our own ability. Considered the worst of all sins, pride seeks to place the self above God. Pride Spam accounted for 27 percent of messages with appeals to Rolex watches and whiter teeth.
2. **Anger**—the feeling of wrath potentially leading to violence. Anger desires quick satisfaction but leaves regret and brokenness. Anger Spam accounted for a mere 5 percent of messages including software that apparently stops Spam.
3. **Lust**—the desire for physical and sexual pleasure. Lust Spam accounted for 50 percent of messages including numerous hardcore, confidential and personal sites along with performance enhancing drugs.
4. **Greed**—the desire for material gain. Discount cigarettes, free cable TV and free vacations are a few of the examples. Greed Spam accounted for 100 percent of messages because none assumes that we are content.
5. **Gluttony**—the obsessive desire for food. Overindulgence is the softest weapon of the enemy. Gluttony Spam accounted for 21 percent of messages including dietary pills and growth hormones.
6. **Envy**—the desire to possess what others have. Envy displays sadness at another's fortune or happiness at another's misfortune. Envy Spam accounted for 30 percent of messages often reminding us that bigger is better.
7. **Sloth**—laziness and spiritual apathy. Sloth Spam accounted for 20 percent of messages looking for quick debt reduction schemes to the recreational possibilities of the world's smallest cameras.

understand and recognize the powers of darkness as both corporate and individual cause us to be subject to them without realizing what they are.

There are many ways that the powers are active in our culture, but most telling is the influence they have in our churches. A popular trend for measuring the spiritual maturity of a congregation is counting how many people attend worship services and other activities. There seems to be a misguided notion that if we are growing in the Spirit our numbers will increase. This attitude is a cultural rather than a biblical value.

Jesus' followers are rarely numbered other than to identify who is present—the 12 disciples—or to identify significant miracles—the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus was not after numbers. He was after mature believers who could stand when testing came: when their families rejected them, when they were persecuted and killed for their faith. When the powers of darkness attacked them.

Another way we measure spiritual success is in terms of how often we read the Bible or have quiet time. While I certainly do not criticize reading Scripture, I do propose that reading is simply not enough. If we read Scripture daily, then go off in search of the great god money, how spiritual can we be? If our churches “recruit” wealthy people while ignoring or merely tolerating the poor, how mature are we? If church business meetings are concerned with budgets that are not met rather than ministering effectively with what we have, how are we modeling Christ?

We, individually and corporately, are still mired in sin when we fail to recognize that Satan loves nothing more than to enslave us in the very powers that Jesus died to defeat. We as a community of believers ought to have as our goal the freedom that Christ spoke of.

How do we do that? The road to freedom is not easy.

Among other things, it requires recognizing that we are enslaved by money, fame or materialism and then resisting the power that it has over us. Not long ago I recognized that I was enslaved by money. I am not wealthy nor do I want to be, but I was so concerned over meeting our daily financial needs that it affected my marriage and made tithing painful rather than an act of worship.

In order to combat this power, I did several things. I began giving money to homeless people on street corners. I doubt if my dollar changed their lives significantly, but it changed the way I held onto my money. I began tithing before I bought groceries or paid bills. The tithe was based on giving a little more than I thought I could afford rather than a percentage. I also included giving to an impoverished child to remind me monthly that there is hardship and hunger in the world.

These are small changes, but they have changed my heart. We recently went through one of the most difficult financial periods of our lives. I found that the stress of the bills and creditors had little effect on my daily well-being. The battle is not over, but I see the prize and I continue to strive toward that day when I will live as Christ did when he shrugged off the physical cares of this world saying he had “food that you know nothing about” (John 4:32).

We are called to freedom. Not to a random abandonment or to doing whatever we want, but to be people who have been freed from the powers of darkness and who live as such. ■

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Menonite Brethren Confession of Faith

Article 4: Sin and Evil

Sin and its consequences

We believe that the first humans yielded to the tempter and fell into sin. Since then, all people disobey God and choose to sin, falling short of the glory of God. As a result, sin and evil have gained a hold in the world, disrupting God's purposes for the created order and alienating humans from God and thus from creation, each other and themselves. Human sinfulness results in physical and spiritual death. Because all have sinned, all face eternal separation from God.

Principalities and powers

Sin is a power that enslaves humanity. Satan, the adversary, seeks to rule creation and uses sin to corrupt human nature with pride and selfishness. In sin, people turn from God, exchanging the truth about God for a lie, worshipping and serving the creature rather than the Creator. Sin opens individuals and groups to the bondage of demonic principalities and powers. These powers also work through political, economic, social and even religious systems to turn people away from holiness, justice and righteousness. Whether in word, deed, thought or attitude, all humans are under the domination of sin and, on their own, are unable to overcome its power.

Gen. 3; Gen. 6:11-12; Psalm 14:1-3; 36:1-4; 52:1-7; 58:1-5, 82; Isa. 53:6; Ezek. 16:49-50; Amos 2:4-8; Mark 7:20-23; John 8:34, 44; Rom. 1:21-32; 3:9-18, 23; 5:12-14; 18-19; 6:23; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 2:1-3; 6:12; 1 Peter 5:8-9; 1 John 1:8-10; Rev. 12:9.