

## First Stage: Purgation

### **SIN as Power and Attachment**

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#### **A. Introduction**

Our current teaching series focuses on the Three Stages of Spiritual Growth: Purgation, Illumination, and Unification. This month, we focus on purgation.

Purgation refers to purging ourselves of unwanted thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. That is, getting rid of habits and behaviors that harm us and others, that make us miserable, unhappy, and un-Christ-like. In a word, purgation refers to getting rid of sin.

Last week I talked about how sin distorts the image of God. We are created in the image of God, but sin distorts that image. The image of God (true self) refers to the human capacity:

1. to respond freely to God,
2. to live in cooperative and helpful community, and
3. to embrace the divine future.

In contrast, sin alienates us from God and distorts the divine image. Sin

1. destroys our ability to respond to God (faith),
2. subverts our capacity to live in helpful and cooperative community (love),
3. undermines our openness to God's future (hope).

For these reasons, it is important to practice purgation. Purgation can help restore and protect the image of God (true self) and overcome the "flesh" (false self).

Today, I want to talk about SIN as Power, SIN as Attachment, and finally how to relinquish attachments.

#### **B. SIN as Power**

##### **1. The many faces of "sin"**

In the Old Testament there are over 60 terms for "sin":

The most common Hebrew term for “sin” is **chattah** (חַטָּאָה). It refers to missing the mark, or failing to live up to a certain standard (e.g., Exod. 32:30; Deut. 21:21).

A second common Hebrew term is **avōn** (אָוֹן), which emphasizes that sin is an offense (e.g., 1 Sam. 25:24; Isa. 5:18).

A third common Hebrew word is **pesha** (עֲשָׂפָה), which indicates that sin is rebellion against God (e.g., Amos 4:4; Isa. 1:2).

In the New Testament, there are about a dozen terms for “sin”:

The basic Greek word for sin is **harmartia** (ἁμαρτία), which refers to missing the mark or making an error (e.g., Rom. 7:7; cf. 3:23).

A second Greek term for sin is **adikia** (ἀδικία), which refers to something that opposes what is just or righteous (e.g., Rom. 1:18).

A third Greek term is **paraptōma** (παράπτωμα) refers to a transgression or a false step (e.g., Matt. 6:15; Rom. 4:25).

The point is, when people talk about the meaning of sin, they usually have these terms in mind. However, there is one more very important use of “sin”--SIN as power. To that we turn to Romans 7.

## 2. SIN as a Cosmic Power

**Romans 7:8-13.**<sup>8</sup> But SIN (*hamartia*), seizing an opportunity [*aphormē*] in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Without the law, SIN lies dead [**I was unaware of it**].<sup>9</sup> I was once alive without the law, but when the commandment came, SIN revived [**I became aware of it**]<sup>10</sup> and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.<sup>11</sup> For SIN, seizing an opportunity [*aphormē*] in the commandment deceived me and through it killed me. (NRSV)

### (1) SIN is an enslaving power!

Notice that in Romans 7, SIN is personified. When Paul uses the term *hamartia* (SIN) in the singular, he refers to SIN as a cosmic power.<sup>1</sup> That is,

<sup>1</sup> John E. Toews, *Romans*, Believer’s Church Bible Commentary (Herald Press, 2004) argues throughout the commentary that SIN (*hamartia*) in the singular refers to a cosmic power.

Paul views SIN as a cosmic power that opposes God and enslaves human beings.

Notice how twice (vv. 8 and 11) Paul describes SIN as seizing an opportunity. The word for "opportunity" is *aphormē*, which is a military term for "a base of operations for an expedition,"<sup>2</sup> like a beachhead from which an invading army attacks.

SIN invades, establishes a beachhead, attacks, and enslaves people. SIN is experienced as an outside force that becomes our master and destroys our freedom.

Sometimes SIN rewards us with what we selfishly want. But ultimately, as Paul says, "The reward of SIN is death" (Rom 6:23). SIN gives us stuff, but what it provides is toxic to our souls. It kills us.

## (2) Paul speaks for Adam

Notice also that Paul uses the pronoun "I" and "me" rhetorically. In this way, Paul seems to take on the role of Adam.<sup>3</sup> That is, Romans 7:7-13 is modeled after the story of Adam's disobedience in the Garden.

The progression in verse 9 parallels Adam's disobedience:

- Innocent = "one I was alive apart from law" (7:9a)
- Command = "the commandment came" (7:9b)
- Transgression = "sin sprang to life" (7:9c)
- Death = "I died" (7:9d)

Just like the Serpent, who deceived Eve, so Paul says "SIN .... deceived me" (7:11). Paul identification with Adam's disobedience suggests that SIN as Power has deceived us as well. Each of us is the Adam and Eve of our own soul (2 Apoc. Bar. 54:19).

## C. SIN as Addiction

### 1. The similarities between SIN and attachment

Now I want to argue that SIN as a Cosmic Power--a force which we have relatively little control over that harms us and other people--is very similar to the way we

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Friberg, ἀφορμή, ἦς, ἡ, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Trafford, 2006) entry 4321.

<sup>3</sup> So Toews, *Romans* (2004).

experience addictions or attachments. I use the terms addictions and attachments interchangeably, although some prefer to make a distinction.<sup>4</sup>

Here I am following Patrick McCormick's 1989 book, *SIN as Addiction*.<sup>5</sup> He defines an addiction as:

Any process over which we are powerless. It takes control of us, causing us to do and think things that are inconsistent with our personal values and leading us to become progressively more compulsive and obsessive. A sure sign of an addiction is the sudden need to deceive ourselves and others—to lie, deny and cover up. An addiction is anything we feel tempted to lie about. An addiction is anything we are not willing to give up.<sup>6</sup>

This sounds very similar to what Paul called SIN. It is the experience of Paul in trying to keep the law. It is the experience of Adam and Eve, which we talked about last week. They were unable to do what they wanted. They lacked moral freedom. It led to deception, denial, shame, and cover up.

Paul wrote that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Given the way Paul understands SIN, we could say, "All are addicted to harmful behaviors and thoughts and fall short of the human freedom that God intends."

## 2. The advantage of seeing SIN as attachment

The advantage of seeing SIN as Addiction is that we move

- From a **punitive response** (the sinner is bad and needs to be punished)
- To a **therapeutic response** (the sinner is addicted and needs to be healed).

Purging or healing ourselves of the Power of Sin is the same as healing ourselves of addictions or attachments.

## 3. The characteristics of attachments

What is an attachment?

- An attachment (addiction) is a harmful behavior, attitude, or thought that a person is unable to break (compulsion).

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<sup>4</sup> See page 5 and Philip St. Romain, who distinguishes between "desire," "disordered desires," "attachments," and "addictions" in *Handbook for Spiritual Directees: A Book of Spiritual Exercises* (Lulu Press, 2010) 30-32. According to Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1988) 25-26 addiction has five essential characteristics: (1) tolerance (need more and more of a *substance* or *process*<sup>4</sup> to get the effect), (2) withdrawal symptoms, (3) self-deception, (4) loss of willpower, and (5) distortion of attention.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick McCormick, *SIN as Addiction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> McCormick quoting Anne Wilson Schaefer's definition, *SIN as Addiction*, 150.

- An attachment (addiction) is an emotionally backed demand—"I must have what I want and I will not be happy unless I have it."<sup>7</sup>
- An attachment (addiction) can be a behavior, an emotion, a substance, or anything else a person is not willing or able to give up.
- An attachment (addiction) controls us and causes us to do things that are inconsistent with our values; it is anything we feel tempted to lie about.

Attachments are distinct from desires:<sup>8</sup>

- Desires are attractions of the will toward any particular person, place, or thing that helps oneself and others; these are natural desires including food, water, sleep, procreation, love, knowledge, happiness, etc.
- In contrast, attachments are inappropriate attractions of the will toward any particular person, place, or thing--the fulfillment of such desires harms oneself or others
- Desires also refer to preferences for this thing over that and such preferences allow us to remain free
- In contrast, attachments are compulsive and enslaving and can prevent us from loving God, others, and self

#### 4. The consequences of attachments

*Attachments make us unhappy.*

- Attachments *cause* negative, self-damaging emotions
- Jealousy that someone may steal our source of fulfillment
- Anger when the outside world does not supply us with what we want
- Bitterness when people do not do what we want
- Fear when we think we our security is threatened

*Attachments feed our narcissistic ego or false self* ("the flesh"; Gal. 5:16ff)

- Turn us toward self-gratification, self-protection, self-promotion
- Turn us away from realizing the image of God in us. Based on last week's sermon, that means attachments:
  - Destroy our ability to respond to God (faith)
  - Subverts our capacity to live in helpful and cooperative community (love)
  - Undermines our openness to God's future (hope)

*Attachments prevent us from loving other people*

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<sup>7</sup> Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (1988) 24-25 states that addictions are "caused by attachments, or nailing, of desire to specific objects. The word *behavior* is especially important in this definition, for it indicates that *action* is essential to addiction." However, May goes on to say that "thinking is also a behavior, a 'doing.' Thus images, memories, fantasies, ideas, concepts, and even certain feeling states can become objects of attachment, and one can become fully addicted to them.... Some of us might even admit to having been addicted to certain moods—depression, shyness, cynicism, and the like."

<sup>8</sup> See Philip St. Romain; <http://shalomplace.com/res/attach.html>.

- Ego sees itself as separate from all others, and knows nothing of any spiritual bond between humans, nature, or God

**Important Note:** Some people use the word “attachment” as a synonym of “love,” as in “I’m attached to my children.” However, I am using the word “attachment” in the sense of clinging to thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that *aim* at self-gratification, self-protection, and self-promotion. My belief is that such attachments *prevent* one from “loving” in the self-sacrificial way of Jesus. Reducing attachments actually helps us love ourselves, others, and God.

*The main problem with attachments is idolatry:*

- Our ego takes control of our life and ignores our Higher Power
- Our ego search for satisfaction in things other than God

## 5. The kinds of attachments

### a. Strong and weak

Some attachments are more destructive than others. Alcoholism is much more harmful than addiction to chocolate. Fear of spiders pales in comparison to racial bigotry. Nevertheless, no attachment, no addiction, is good.

### b. Attraction and avoidance<sup>9</sup>

There are many kinds of attachments or addictions. I believe every human being has attachments, some worse than others. As we get rid of some attachments, we discover others. There are both attraction addictions and avoidance addictions. Here is a list from Gerald May:

Examples of <i>attraction</i> addictions		Examples of <i>avoidance</i> addictions	
Anger	Gossiping	Airplanes	Dentists
Approval	Jealousy	Anchovies	Dirt
Candy	Knowledge	Anger	Evil spirits
Cars	Memories	Animals	Fire
Children	Money	Being alone	Germes
Chocolate	Music	Being fat	High places
Cleanliness	Nail biting	Being thin	Intimacy
Depression	Power	Birds	Needles
Drinking	Reading	Blood	Open spaces
Drugs	Revenge	Bridges	Pain
Eating	Sex	Bugs	Public speaking
Envy	Sleeping	Closed-in spaces	Reading
Exercise	Smoking	Conflict	Sex
Finger drumming	Status	Crowds	Storms
Gambling	Television	Darkness	Success
Golf	Work	Death	Tests

<sup>9</sup> Chart adapted from Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (1988) 38-39.

## 6. The “flesh”

SIN as Power (or SIN as Addiction) works in and through our “flesh” (*sarx*). When Paul uses the term, “flesh,” he is not referring to the body *per se*, but rather to “an inner attitude orientated away from and against God.”<sup>10</sup> It refers to our fallen nature or our *false self*.

**Romans 7:5.** While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. (NRSV)

**Romans 7:18.** For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. (NRSV)

**Romans 8:5-6.** <sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (NRSV)

**Gal. 5:16-17.** <sup>16</sup> Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. (NRSV)

What Paul calls the “flesh,” I call the “false self.” The flesh opposes the spirit, just as our “false self” competes against our “true self”. The “false self” is a subpersonality within us that has attachments that undermine the realization of our “true self” (image of God)

## 7. Three mental programs of the flesh

I suggest there are three “mental programs” (automatic thoughts<sup>11</sup>) of the flesh--a security program, a pleasure program, and a power program. These programs make demands that sound like this: “I must have security, pleasure, and power, and if I don’t, I will not be happy.” If we perceive anything threatening our demands for security, pleasure, or power, we become upset and experience negative emotions.

<sup>10</sup> This is Paul’s primary understanding. See Gal. 5:16-23. There are about six different ways in which “flesh” (*sarx*) is used in the NT, ranging from the human body to human weakness to human existence apart from God. See A. C. Thiselton, “Flesh (σάρξ)” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975) 671-682.

<sup>11</sup> On automatic thoughts, see Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, Patrick Fanning, *Thoughts & Feelings: Taking Control of Your Moods & Your Life* (Third Edition, Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2007) 19-29.

One of the characteristics of the three programs is that they are never satisfied. "You can never get enough to enjoy your life... No one has ever experienced *enough* security, *enough* delightful sensations, and *enough* power to be continually happy or fulfilled."<sup>12</sup> The flesh is never satisfied.

In this way, we can see that there are three basic types of addiction--security (self-protection), *sensation* (self-gratification), and *power* (self-promotion). When we experience negative emotions, it is usually because one of our addictive demands is being threatened.

- If we feel anxious, our addiction to security is probably being threatened.
- If we feel frustrated, addiction to sensation is being threatened.
- If we feel angry, our addiction to power is likely being challenged.<sup>13</sup>

<b>Addiction</b>	<b>Emotion when threatened</b>	<b>Consequences</b>
<b>Security</b>	Fear, worry, anxiety, etc.	Preoccupied with food, shelter, or whatever you equate with personal security. Consciousness is dominated by trying to get "enough." Endless future possibilities to worry about.
<b>Sensation</b>	Frustration, depression, boredom, etc.	Preoccupied with finding more and better pleasurable sensations and activities, such as sex, food, music, entertainment, drugs, etc. When we repetitively experiencing a sensation, we become satiated and bored.
<b>Power</b>	Anger, resentment, irritation, hostility, hate, etc.	Preoccupied with dominating and controlling people and situations, increasing your prestige, wealth, and status. Constant fear of loss. Our grasping for power stimulates a counter-attack from others.

#### 4. Purgation: Relinquishing Attachments

There are many strategies and methods for purging attachments. Here are two.<sup>14</sup>

##### 1. Recognize attachments

One of the first things we should do is recognize attachments. Think about some situation in your life where you feel mental or emotional pain--anger, anxiety, fear, jealousy, envy, etc. Mental pain, like physical pain, is a warning signal. Mental or emotional pain indicates there is an attachment that underlies it.

<sup>12</sup> Ken Keyes, *Handbook to Higher Consciousness* (Living Love Center, 1975) 45.

<sup>13</sup> The chart is from Ken Keyes, *Higher Consciousness* (1975) 59 with slight modifications.

<sup>14</sup> See Roger Walsh, *Essential Spirituality: The 7 Central Practices to Awaken Heart and Mind* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1999) 42-50.

Focus briefly on the negative emotion and then probe for the underlying attachment, usually a security, sensation, or power attachment. Although not all emotional pain is caused by attachment, much of it is.

For example, if you feel angry, it is probably because you believe someone is preventing you from satisfying an attachment (power attachment). If you reach for a chocolate and become enraged because someone beat you to it, it's a good bet you have an attachment (pleasure attachment). If you are jealous or envious, it suggests you are attached to something other people have (security attachment).

You have a choice. You "can continue to cling and suffer, or you can relinquish the attachment and end the suffering." The question is: "*How much pain am I willing to put up with before relinquishing this attachment?*"<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Recognize underlying thoughts and beliefs

"Beneath the emotions and sensation that accompany addictions lurk unrealistic and destructive beliefs."<sup>16</sup>

The most common beliefs comes in the form of silent demands or *musts*—"I must have *something* in order to be happy." The *something* can be almost anything: more money, sex, power, a spouse, or whatever else you think you must have to be happy. There are three common *musts*:<sup>17</sup>

- *I must* be perfect, in control, know more than others, etc.
- *You must* treat me with respect, love me, do what I want, etc.
- *The world or God* must give me a job, treat me fairly, etc.

This is the "if only" game. "If only I had more money, more respect, more whatever, I'd be happy." A variant of this is "I'll be happy when \_\_\_\_\_" (you fill in the blank). These types of *musts* fuel attachments.

Once you become aware that you are being controlled by an attachment, stop what you are doing. Take time to reflect on what you are saying to yourself. Note the unrealistic demands you are placing on yourself, others and the world. Then substitute more realistic beliefs.

<sup>15</sup> Walsh, *Essential Spirituality* (1999) 43.

<sup>16</sup> Walsh, *Essential Spirituality* (1999) 45.

<sup>17</sup> These three "musts" are the three primary inner demands that disturb us and are commonly cited by practitioners of RET (Rational Emotive Therapy) or REBT (Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy). For example, see Susan Walen, Raymond Diguseppe, and Windy Dryden, *A Practitioner's Guide to Rational-Emotive Therapy* (Second Edition, Oxford University Press, 1992) 43, who identify the three statements as "(1) I must do well or get approval (and I'm a worm if I don't), (2) You must treat me nicely and kindly (and you're a louse if you don't), and (3) The world must give me what I want quickly, easily, and with great certainty (and it's awful if it doesn't)."