

Indwelling Sin: Know It, War Against It!

A Study of Romans 7:14-25

“Inquire, then, how it is with your souls. What do you find of this law? What experience have you of its power and efficacy? Do you find it dwelling in you, always present with you, exciting itself, or putting forth its poison with facility and easiness at all times, in all your duties, “when you would do good?” What humiliation, what self-abasement, what intensesness in prayer, what diligence, what watchfulness, doth this call for at your hands! What spiritual wisdom do you stand in need of! What supplies of grace, what assistance of the Holy Ghost, will be hence also discovered! I fear we have few of us a diligence proportionable to our danger.”¹

So ends a portion of John Owen’s treatise entitled *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Reminders of Indwelling Sin in Believers*² first published in 1667. What incited so much fervency in the pen of the “Prince of the English Puritans”³ may well be one of the glaring omissions in the evangelical church of the 21st century. Could Owen be right in saying that the struggle between the will to do good and indwelling sin in believers are, “next to the free grace of God in our justification by the blood of Christ, the only things wherein the glory of God and our own souls are concerned”? Are these really “the springs of our holiness and our sins, of our joys and troubles, of our refreshments and sorrows”? Is it “then, all our concernments to be thoroughly acquainted with these things, who intend to walk with God and to glorify him in this world”?⁴ If so, then it is the purpose of this paper to bring the fruit of Owen’s studies and meditations on this subject to the forefront of the believing reader’s mind and experience.

Owen uses Romans 6-8 as the basis for his treatise just as he does for the majority of his teaching on sin and sanctification. Specific to ‘indwelling sin’ is Romans 7:21 where the Apostle

¹ John Owen, “The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Reminders of Indwelling Sin in Believers,” in *Temptation and Sin* (Vol.6 of *The Works of John Owen*; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 167.

² Owen, “Indwelling Sin,” in *Works*, 6:153-322.

³ Joel Beeke, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 455.

⁴ Owen, “Indwelling Sin,” in *Works*, 6:162.

Paul recounts his own experience when he states: “I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.” This, therefore, must also be the experience, to one degree or another, of every believer. The truth and ubiquity of this law, as well as the practical implications of its presence, is what Owen seeks to explain and apply to his readers.

Owen approaches the topic pastorally, desiring first to lay the foundation of the doctrine and then to build upon it practically. The first principle to be understood, then, is that ‘indwelling sin’ is a *law*. “Where there is a law there is power.”⁵ A law is an inward principle that inclines constantly toward an action that is in line with the nature of that law. Therefore, although every believer has been released from the dominion of sin,⁶ the power of sin continues to exert its influence throughout the entirety of the believer’s life. He further explains this key concept by stating that indwelling sin in believers is a law *in* them but not *to* them as it is with unbelievers. The nature of a law is to insist on obedience, but the true believer is not bound by this law. Thus, regenerate persons are able to resist this law’s influences and are commanded to do so in the power of the Holy Spirit. In order to resist, the presence of indwelling sin must be realized. Here Owen brings to the forefront one of the many paradoxes of the Christian life: “They that find not its power are under its dominion. Whosoever contend against it shall know and find that it is present with them, that it is powerful in them. He shall find the stream to be strong who swims against it, though he who rolls along with it be insensible of it.”⁷ Owen maintains that this is one of the distinguishing marks of true believers. These are the ones whose will is to do good⁸ but they find evil within them. This proves to be a great disturbance in the souls of true believers. On the other hand, unbelievers are those who remain under the dominion of sin and these will never have the “will of sinning”⁹ taken away. Along this line, certainly there is cause for alarm among professing believers today. Are there any who would hear the pastoral concern for souls in the words of John Owen? Here is a call for self-examination. Is there a constant struggle between the prevailing disposition to do good for

⁵ Owen, “Indwelling Sin,” in *Works*, 6:163.

⁶ Romans 6

⁷ Owen, “Indwelling Sin,” in *Works*, 6:159.

⁸ Biblically speaking

⁹ Owen, “Indwelling Sin,” in *Works*, 6:160.

God's glory and the evil that is found within? If there were no consequences or other hindrances to sin, what would one think of sin then? The professing believer cannot afford to have a slight view of sin because, by definition, sin is enmity towards God.

Realizing that the law of sin indwells them, Owen urges believers to be acutely aware that this law is continually present within the soul. One author, attempting to make the truths of Owen's teaching on this subject more accessible to modern readers, states that the Christian must be conscious that there is always "evil at my elbow."¹⁰ Furthermore, this evil that is always there is also always ready to act. How careful the believer must be to heed the words of Christ: "Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation" (Mt 26:41). Finally, not only is it always ready to act, but when it acts, it acts with great ease. Indeed, it is "sin that doth so easily beset us" (Heb 12:1). Is Owen's purpose here to discourage the Christian? On the contrary, his exhortation is that the more one knows of the reality of the law of indwelling sin, the greater will be the fight against it. To summarize his classic Puritan prose, one may state it this way: The more the believer sees the power of indwelling sin, the less power it will have over him.¹¹

To further his point, Owen turns to the dwelling *place* of sin: the heart. In Scripture, the term 'heart' is used to describe the whole soul of man. Apart from the work of God in the soul, "every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart is only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). Owen persistently presses his readers to acknowledge that their hearts are precisely as portrayed in the Bible. The heart is unsearchable (Jer 17:9,10). Who can seek out the full extent of the inner workings of indwelling sin in their own heart? Only God is able, and therefore the psalmist prays, "Search me, O God and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Ps 139:23,24). He does this because he knows that not only is his own heart unsearchable, it is also deceitful. Owen, in characteristic Puritan style, repeatedly warns his audience to avoid trusting their own hearts. This has prompted Packer to recapitulate Owen's teaching this way:

¹⁰ Kris Lundgaard, *The Enemy Within* (Phillipsburg Penn.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1998), 21.

¹¹ Owen, "Indwelling Sin," in *Works*, 6:168.

Christian living, therefore, must be founded upon self-abhorrence and self-distrust because of indwelling sin's presence and power. Self-confidence and self-satisfaction argue self-ignorance. The only healthy Christian is the humble, broken-hearted Christian.¹²

Just when things seem most hopeless, Owen comes shining through with skilled pastoral counsel. What are we who acknowledge and experience the power of this indwelling sin to do? We are to realize that the fight against this indwelling sin will never come to an end this side of heaven. We are to continually do exactly what the Scripture commands us: Be careful (Mt 16:6), watch and pray (Mt 26:41), be on guard (Lk 12:15, 2 Pet 3:17), beware (Lk 12:15), mortify (Col 3:5), pluck out (Mt 5:29), cut off (Mt 5:30), put off (Eph 4:22), let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles (Heb 12:1). These duties are the 'negative' side of sanctification; yet there is no sanctification without them.

The genius of Owen in this work is seen, in part, with his simple yet profound treatment of what he considers to be one of indwelling sin's leading properties: It is enmity against God. Drawing from Romans 8:7, he urges his readers to consider that the Scripture informs us that indwelling sin is not just an enemy of God; it is *enmity* itself. What greater impetus for killing sin in the life of a true believer than to insist that indwelling sin is enmity against the God that they love and serve? What great resistance to this law of sin would this incite? Indeed, serious contemplation of this truth may result in a new enmity toward this *enmity* against God. Might we agree with Owen in saying that "as every drop of poison is poison, and will infect, and every spark of fire is fire, and will burn; so is everything of the law of sin, the last, the least of it—it is enmity, it will poison, it will burn...[The] most imperceptible working of it, is the acting and working of enmity...Grace changeth the nature of man, but nothing can change the nature of sin."¹³ This indwelling sin is constantly present, always opposed to God and the things of God, continually exerting its power in even the souls of the regenerate. If this does not stir the Christian to watchfulness, what will? What a sad truth it is that we constantly have this enmity against God within our own souls—opposing all that he is and all that he does. Yet another paradox of the

¹² J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton Ill.:Crossway, 1990), 196.

¹³ Owen, "Indwelling Sin," in *Works*, 6:177.

Christian life lies in the fact that those who experience this sorrow for indwelling sin are pronounced blessed by Jesus Christ, for “blessed are they that mourn;” and those who possess this paradoxical blessedness “shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4).

Lest some Christians be unconvinced that this indwelling sin is a powerful law that resides within them, our author seeks to show that this evil within is evidenced by its aversion to everything good. This is likened to a great ongoing battle in the Scripture, “for the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Gal 5:17). The flesh is this indwelling sin and this flesh is hostile to God and to his means of grace. To be persuaded of this one may simply ask these questions: Which is easier: attendance at a concert of music or a concert of prayer? Concentrating on a movie or concentrating on a sermon? Eating a gourmet meal or fasting for biblical reasons? Preparing for a night out or preparing for worship? Reading a good novel or studying the Scriptures? Conversing on the phone with a friend or conversing with God? Holding a family outing or family worship? As one reflects upon this truth it becomes apparent that this antagonism is seen mainly when a Christian desires to commune with God using the means of grace that God has ordained. The Christian knows the hostility of the flesh particularly when desiring to approach God, precisely because the flesh *is* enmity against God.

Not only is the law of sin antagonistic God and His means of grace, but sin is also hostile to the believer, for as Paul states, “I find a law in my members...bringing me into captivity” (Rom 7:23). Here Owen makes an important distinction: Unbelievers may not be led captive by indwelling sin for they are willing subjects of this dominion. Believers, though freed from the dominion of sin, may still be captives to the power of this “enraged foe”—but they are unwilling to remain there.¹⁴ Certainly, the example of Paul must be the experience of the true believer at least to some degree: “For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice...O wretched man that I am!” (Rom 7:19,24).

¹⁴ Owen, “Indwelling Sin,” in *Works*, 6:206. Owen further clarifies this by making the interesting observation that unbelievers may be led captive to particular sins for they have no power to overcome them in spite of them acknowledging the evil of those sins. Believers on the other hand, may be led captive to the law of sin because it is against their ‘regenerated will.’ No one is in captivity willingly.

How is the believer led into this ‘captivity’? It appears that this occurs mainly through the instrument of deceit. Scripture speaks in several places about the deceitfulness of sin¹⁵ and we are commanded, “Do not be deceived.”¹⁶ However, in order to obey this command, it is imperative that the believer know the way in which indwelling sin deceives. This is most clearly laid out in James 1:13-15. This passage demonstrates the five steps that sin employs to deceive and lead captive: (1) Drawing away the mind, (2) enticement of the affections, (3) conceiving sin in the will, (4) giving birth to sin (in actions, words, thoughts, etc., and finally (5) death, in which the soul is hardened in sinning. This results in a hardened life of sin and finally culminates in eternal ruin. Owen focuses the discourse upon the first three since, he claims, that in believers, God generally prevents the fourth step and always prevents the fifth.

1. Drawing away the mind.

- First of all, sin draws away the mind by de-emphasizing the evil of sin. If the mind fails to see sin as God sees it—evil, wicked, vile, and unholy—then the affections will not be guarded from settling upon it, and the will cannot be safe from giving consent. Therefore the first line of defense must be to keep the pollution, corruption, defilement, and *danger* of sin in the forefront of one’s mind.¹⁷ Never fail to be terrified by how much God abhors sin and judges it accordingly.

- Second, sin seeks to drag away the believer’s mind by distracting it from a constant, holy consideration of God and his grace. Here is what Owen calls the heart of “gospel obedience”—to love and obey God because of who he is and what he has done. But sin insists on filling the mind with earthly things in order to oppose that spiritual frame of mind which is the source of this gospel obedience. So the Scripture repeatedly urges the believer to “Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (Col 3:2), for “you cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt 6:24). Owen rightly maintains that the primary method used by the deceitfulness of sin to

¹⁵ Jer 17:9, Eph 4:22, 1 Tim 2:13-14, Heb 3:13.

¹⁶ Lk 21:8; 1 Cor 6:9, 15:33; Gal 6:7; Eph 5:6.

¹⁷ Two other Puritan classics dealing with this subject include *The Sinfulness of Sin* by Edward Reynolds, and *The Plague of Plagues* by Ralph Venning.

distract the mind is to press earthly things as necessary. Hence, even the busy-ness of Christian ministry can be used by sin to deceive the mind into believing that heavenly things such as communion with God are of lesser significance.

2. Enticement of the affections

- The second factor in the deceitfulness of sin is the enticement of the affections. This is related metaphorically to the 'bait and hook' method where the bait is presented to the affections, but the hook is hidden. Puritan Thomas Brooks comments along a similar line:

“To present the bait and hide the hook; to present the golden cup, and hide the poison; to present the sweet, the pleasure, and the profit that may flow in upon the soul by yielding to sin, and by hiding from the soul the wrath and misery that will certainly follow the committing of sin.”¹⁸

- How does one know if he or she has been 'hooked' by sin in the affections? Owen contends that this is certainly the case when that person frequently imagines the object that he or she has been attracted to. When John speaks of 'the lust of the eyes' it not only refers to the physical eyes but also to the eyes of the imagination. Furthermore, the entanglement is increased when the mind dwells on the object with secret pleasure, and the sinfulness of the sin is minimized. Using rationalization and euphemisms to diminish the sin, such as 'a white lie,' a 'pecadillo,' or an 'affair' are symptoms that the affections have been entangled.

3. The third device that sin utilizes to deceive is the consent of the will. “When desire has conceived, it brings forth sin” (Jas 1:15). In other words, when consent of the will is obtained, indwelling sin's seduction of the soul is complete and sin is brought forth. It is the goal of indwelling sin to convince the mind that, somehow, this proposed sinful act is 'good' (it seems to be the best option at that time, place, and situation). Since it appears to be 'good' for the person, the affections begin to hunger for it, and the will

¹⁸ Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990), 29.

chooses it. Once the will selects this option, sin will erupt unless God providentially intervenes (as many times he does). Yet, in the believer, this consent is not without resistance. It is not a full and complete consent to sin. The indwelling Spirit wars against the flesh (indwelling sin). There is always a reluctance, to one degree or another, to the will to commit sin. There is always a ringing in the ears of the soul a form of Owen's much recited paraphrase of Romans 8:13, "Be killing sin or [sin] will be killing you."¹⁹

When indwelling sin is thus considered by the Christian, it is no wonder that the most holy of all Christians, the Apostle Paul, would cry out, "O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?" When a person is awakened to the frightening fact that this indwelling sin is always present and is relentless in its propensity toward evil and death (James 1:17), the common mistake is to neglect the biblical remedy, and instead try to combat this outflow of evil by 'damming it up' with pledges, vows, promises, and even by establishing various deterrents. Modern examples of this include New Year's Eve resolutions, purity rings, accountability partners, and internet monitoring programs. As well-meaning as these may be, there is no inherent power in these to overcome the 'law of sin.' Using Owen's metaphor is helpful in understanding this truth. It is useless to try to 'dam up' the outflow of indwelling sin as long as the source continues to run unabated. These 'dams' will quickly be overrun as sin rises up against the proposed deterrent. But suppose the *source* of the sin is powerfully diminished by regenerating grace—and increasingly so by sanctifying grace. Now here is power to overcome sin.

This power is abundantly provided for Christians in "the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe" (Rom 1:16). Owen understands the gospel in the fullest sense of the word which includes not only the work of Christ to cleanse from the guilt of sin, but also the present work of Christ through the Holy Spirit indwelling every believer cleansing them from the power of sin. Most Christians in our day tend to think that the gospel is applicable *only* to unbelievers who need to be regenerated. But this is far from the biblical scope of the gospel. Through this powerful gospel, there are continual supplies of grace

¹⁹John Owen, "Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers," in *Temptation and Sin* (Vol.6 of *The Works of John Owen*; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965),9.

available to the saints through their fountain head, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is every Christian's duty (and delight) to drink at these "springs of living water" where deliverance from the power of sin may be found.

Throughout Owen's great discourse on *Indwelling Sin*, he emphasizes that it is the Christian's duty through the power of the Holy Spirit to continually be killing sin. Although there are more specific directions for doing this in his treatise entitled *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*,²⁰ the author does lay out some very helpful and much neglected means of grace for those who are seeking this cleansing and deliverance from the law of indwelling sin. Owen emphasizes that whatever means are appropriated, these must be done in faith, drawing strength from Christ, without whom we can do nothing (Jn 15:5). He reminds his readers that Christ is revealed in Scripture as 'our life' (Col. 3:4)—he is the spring and cause of spiritual life. So the Apostle Paul says, "Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God" (Gal 2:20). We must derive supplies of grace and strength from Christ *by faith*. Every duty performed in this grace and strength of the Spirit works directly against the law of sin.

However, Owen posits that there are some means provided that are particularly damaging to the law of sin where it is strongest, and it is these that believers should give special attention to throughout their lives. Since, as has been said previously, sin works first and foremost by deceiving the mind, the believer must combat this deceit by focusing upon the heinousness of sin and the loveliness of God and his grace. But how is this best performed? Owen presents the two that, in his opinion, are the most effective at striking at the heart of indwelling sin: Private prayer and meditation. While most Christians read their Bibles and pray for needs, this is not what the author is referring to. In fact, most Christians in our day do not know much at all about which Owen writes. Perhaps this speaks to the condition of Western Christianity in this 21st century. Believers everywhere would do well to recover the teaching of John Owen.

Meditation is pondering on the Word and our own hearts, to bring them into greater harmony with each other, while prayer is directed at bringing our souls into complete conformity with

²⁰ Owen, "Mortification of Sin," in *Temptation and Sin*, 6:3-78.

the mind and will of God. Indeed, the ultimate example of this is the model prayer that Jesus teaches to his disciples. It focuses upon God and his glory revealed in the Scripture, and then turns the spotlight on the spiritual and physical dependency that every believer experiences in greater degrees as faith grows. According to Owen, were we to pray and meditate earnestly with special emphasis on the lovely attributes of God and conversely, on the ugly filth of our sin, indwelling sin would be restricted at its source. Because professing believers in the 21st century know little to nothing about the ‘art’ of biblical meditation, the teaching of Owen’s contemporaries is readily available.²¹

It has been nearly 350 years since John Owen first published his work on indwelling sin in believers, and the impact on those seeking to persevere in the faith is inestimable. Sadly, however, it appears that this biblical truth is largely unknown in our own time. Professing believers would do well to study this vital work with an open Bible alongside. Yet, some may finish the lengthy discourse with some discouragement. Indeed, it is possible that they would cry out with Paul: “In light of these truths about the sin that dwells within me, who *shall* deliver me from this body of death?” Although one certainly might turn to Owen’s work on mortification of sin for sweet refreshment, other works such as *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices*²² by Thomas Brooks and John Flavel’s *Keeping the Heart*²³ are noteworthy.

It was Owen’s purpose to awaken professing believers to the veracity of indwelling sin so that, by the Spirit, more resistance may be given this frightening monster that lies within each of us. But, in this discourse, Owen offers only a little comfort to those who may be overwhelmed with the powerful reality of it. Those who experience the truth that when they will to do good, they find sin lying within—what despondency this may bring! Is there no consolation for these mourners? Indeed promised comfort (Mt 5:4) is found in the mere fact that their *grief* for this sad sin is a sweet sign. False professors do not grieve for the evil that lies within their heart, but instead their sorrow is only for the external effects and consequences of sin. Only ‘new hearts’

²¹ For an unparalleled summary of the teaching of the Puritans on this subject, see Joel Beeke, “The Puritan Practice of Meditation” in *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2004), 73-100.

²² Thomas Brooks, *Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices*, (Grand Rapids: Banner of Truth, 1990).

²³ John Flavel, *Keeping the Heart*, (Morgan Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1998).

are hearts that are troubled by sin. “Let this trouble for sin comfort thee when the presence of sin grieves thee.”²⁴

Furthermore, what does one who knows indwelling sin do when he or she sincerely desires to hear the Lord say, “Well done thou good and faithful servant”? In light of the presence of sin throughout the life of the believer, is there such a thing as a truly “good and faithful servant”? If God requires that we be “perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect,” what hope do those have who know the “law of sin” indwelling in their own hearts? Here is where the ongoing application of the gospel is such a powerful comfort to the true believer. This sincere desire itself is imparted to the believer by the Holy Spirit, “for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13). Therefore this sincere desire for God’s affirmation is your evangelical perfection. God accepts, through Jesus Christ, what the believer sincerely *wills to do* in spite of the fact that the actual performance of it is tainted with sin.

Finally, when the believer cries out, even as the Apostle Paul, “O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” he or she must never fail to remember the remainder of the verse. “I thank God through Jesus Christ!” God has sent His only begotten Son to deliver His people from the guilt *and* power of sin. Even now, with sin dwelling within us, our justification is forever perfect, although our sanctification is not yet so. Nevertheless, we are now in the process of being more and more conformed to the image of Christ, and the time is soon coming when our sanctification will be perfected as our justification now is. If you are a true believer, it is the longing of your heart to put off sin and put on Christ. If this is your desire then look to Jesus Christ for this sanctification, for “without [Him] you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5) but with Him you may say, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

Many professing Christians in the 21st century may find the subject matter of *Indwelling Sin* irrelevant and even boring. Yet Owen’s passion and urgency against this law of sin is desperately needed today. This doctrine is of utmost importance and needs to be proclaimed in the pulpits, taught in the seminaries, explained in Bible study groups, repeated in family

²⁴ John Flavel, “The Third Meditation, Upon Romans 7:21,” in *The Works of John Flavel* (6 vols.; London:Banner of Truth, 1965), 6:400.

worship, and meditated upon privately. Why? Because in the final analysis, Owen understood that the knowledge and experience of indwelling sin is not just for apostles, prophets, and other super-sanctified believers. It must be the *normative* experience, to one degree or another, of every true Christian. Viewed from this perspective, the sincere believer will say along with Owen, “How great concernment a full and clear acquaintance with the power of this indwelling sin is unto believers, to stir them up to watchfulness and diligence, to faith and prayer, to call them to repentance, humility, and self-abasement.”²⁵ May God revive this sense of indwelling sin in professing believers in our own day, and may we have the boldness to exhort one another to “be killing sin or sin will be killing you.”

²⁵ Owen, “Indwelling Sin,” in *Works*, 6:155-6.