

Character Defects ?

I have character defects. So do you. That may seem a bit harsh, but it is only another way of saying that we are not perfect, which we are normally quite prepared to admit.

What about other people's defects? When we say that we don't really like someone, what are we doing? We may quote examples of things that they have done, but what we are really reacting to is not so much what they **do**, but much more what they **are** – or what we think they are! In our assessment, their wrong actions only go to demonstrate and prove the defects in their character. There will also be things about ourselves that other people do not like, defects in our character. But where do those defects come from? And is there any solution?

One of the first things to say is that we are **not** called upon to criticise each other! ¹ We **are** told to challenge our brothers and sister about **wrong actions**, in the hope to bring each other to repentance, confession and forgiveness, ² but we are **not** told to produce a list of perceived imperfections! Especially not with some sort of expectation that the other person can do something about them.

It's important to make the distinction between these two things. Perhaps confusingly, the New Testament uses almost the same word to describe them: 'sins' and 'sin'. Sins are the individual wrong actions: sin is the underlying source of 'wrongness' in us, the well from which those individual actions spring. It's even deeper than what we might now call 'character defects' – it's the root cause of all of them.³

The link is obvious, and the process of facing up to our individual wrong actions will probably begin to alert us to that well of imperfections. Glimpsing that unpleasant source could so easily bring us down into negative introspection, self-hate and despair, but we need to know that there is a way out, a way that doesn't only rescue us from depression but brings us up into genuinely positive living.

We have looked at how we can learn to deal with individual wrong **actions**, both on a personal level and in our relationships with other believers.⁴ Lessons which are vital for us, from the very earliest days of our learning to live 'in Christ', learning to keep 'short accounts' with the Lord and with our brothers and sisters.

But what about that deadly **source** of imperfections? Are we lumbered with it for the rest of our natural lives? Is our Father God content to rescue us from eternal judgment, only to leave us in daily condemnation? Or is there a way out?

It may encourage us to realise that we are not alone in this. The apostle Paul went through the same sort of struggles, wanting to please God in every way he could but finding himself unable to match the requirements of the Jewish Law, let alone the more exacting demands of right motivation. He wasn't trying to **earn** salvation by his good deeds; he already knew that he was forgiven by the grace of God through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus, but still he found that he simply could not do anything to please God. He tells us his story in his letter to the believers in Rome, in **Romans 6 & 7** . . .

In the earlier chapters, Paul has taken his readers with him as he describes how Jesus has paid the price for each one of us to enter into a right relationship with God. We may tend to think that he is 'preaching', telling people what they need to know, but look at his language! He goes on saying 'we', not 'you'! He is describing his own appreciation of what God has done for him (and for the rest of us) through Jesus. For example: *"For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation."* (**Romans 5:10-11**)

¹ See 'Judged – or Condemned?' at <https://justonecandle.substack.com> and <https://www.justonecandle.uk>

² **Matthew 18:15-17**

³ The Greek word *hamartia*, translated 'sin', means 'missing the target' or 'failure'. Our 'sins' are those individual acts of failure; our 'sin' (or 'sinfulness') is our inbuilt tendency to go off target.

⁴ See 'Call It What It Is!' at <https://justonecandle.substack.com> and <https://www.justonecandle.uk>

Now, in **Romans 6**, he introduces a completely fresh understanding. Not only has Jesus reconciled us to God through his death, but **we have been included** in that death, so that the old person that we used to be is now dead! He writes: “. . . *consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus*”, and he goes on to explain (in this chapter and in **ch.8**) that we have been included in the resurrection of Jesus as well, enabling us to live lives that are pleasing to God.¹

‘Dead to sin’ – what does he mean? Especially if we are still thinking about those character defects which we know we have but would like to be rid of? ‘I don’t seem to be very dead to them’ we may say (or at least think!)

What does it mean to be dead to sin? Let’s go back a stage: what does it mean to be dead? When there is a search for a missing person and then they are found, sometimes we hear a report saying something like ‘the person was unresponsive when they were found’. If that unresponsiveness continues despite any attempts at resuscitation, the conclusion is drawn that the person is dead. Responsiveness is characteristic of life; unresponsiveness is indicative of death.

So, Paul says that we are dead to sin – unresponsive to it – because we have been included in the death of Jesus on the cross. That may not seem to fit with our experience! How can we begin to move away from being all too responsive to sin – those character defects and all that springs from them?

Paul writes about **knowing** in **Romans 6:3,6 & 9** and about **considering/reckoning/counting** in **v.11**. If we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we need to really see that we have been included in his death. Even more fundamental than that, our Father has joined our lives to the life of his Son; we are **in** him.² Please don’t pass this by as just another bit of theoretical theology; this truth is transformational!

As Watchman Nee reminds us (and I really must acknowledge a deep debt to him for his clarity on this), the Greek word translated ‘consider’, ‘count’ or ‘reckon’ is basically an accounting word. When we have added up a column of sales figures, we have a total which is based on actual transactions; it is based on facts and we can count on it. We can’t change it to fit what we would **like** the total to be. That would be false accounting. So when the Lord tells us to count ourselves as being dead to sin, he is not asking us to **imagine** or **pretend** that we are dead to sin, he is telling us that **we are** – and that we can bank on it!

And that’s the point at which what may have looked like ‘theoretical theology’ becomes practical, and once again we can begin to discover **the experience of truth**, when ‘theology’ comes alive and profoundly affects our lives . . .

I first became aware of the fact that God said I was dead to sin about seven years after I was converted. In those seven years, I had eventually become very familiar with the cycle of failure → confession → forgiveness. **1 John 1:9** was a genuine life-saver, but I seemed to be continually getting trapped by the same failures. In those days, people called them ‘besetting sins’ and I was getting fed up with myself for not doing better. The reality of God’s forgiveness was great, but why did I keep coming back for forgiveness for the same old things? Of course, I tried to ‘do better’; I sincerely wanted to live a life that was honouring to the Lord Jesus Christ. But I kept on failing. Miserably.

But then I was reading in **Romans 6** and saw that God said I was dead to sin.³ Could that mean that I could break free from those ‘besetting sins’? I began to believe it was possible, very tentatively taking God at his word, and yes, I did begin to experience more freedom. At about the same time, I began to see that for most of those seven years I had been trying to ‘live the Christian life’ by following sets of rules, attempting to live up to standards that I thought were expected of me. Those standards were all external, whether they were God’s commandments, other people’s expectations or my own notions

¹ These chapters of **Romans** usually don’t get the attention they need. Most Christian believers seem content to know that they have been saved, have a good relationship with God and have an eternally secure future. These chapters seem difficult to understand and so don’t often get explored. I can’t remember **ever** hearing anyone else speak about them, and yet they are at the essential foundation of our life in Christ. I have tried to explain more in *No Mere Remembrance* (available from the ‘Books’ page at <https://www.justonecandle.uk>) but Watchman Nee’s *The Normal Christian Life* is much more complete!

² **1 Corinthians 1:30**

³ Thanks again to Watchman Nee in the *Normal Christian Life*!

of how I should behave as a good Christian. I had 'discovered' the plague of legalism in myself and soon began to see it in some of the 'Christian world' around me. The more I saw of it, the more I hated it.

Had I become sinless, never doing anything wrong? No, of course not, but I **was** starting to find that failing was not so inevitable as it had been. God said that I was dead (= unresponsive) to sin and failure and I was learning to take hold of that truth and begin to experience it. The 'way of escape' that I had read about in **1 Corinthians 10:13** (but had never seemed to find) now became a practical reality. On the occasions when I was faced with temptation and realised in time what was going on, I was able to 'hide' in the fact that I was dead to sin, and – on those occasions – I found that I had escaped the temptation. No fighting on my part, no great effort to resist, but learning (and I would emphasise *learning!*) to take hold of the unresponsiveness to sin and failure which I had begun to see was something that God had done for me by including me in the death of his Son. No, not sinless, but beginning to see that I had been set free from slavery to sin and failure – which is what Paul writes about in **Romans 6:6**: *"so that we would no longer be slaves to sin."*

Several decades later, I am still learning, but the process is real, however slow it may feel. And it goes further than dealing with temptation. The Holy Spirit is dealing with those character defects, too. There's both a negative and a positive side to that amazing process.

We have already seen that although the Lord says that we are 'dead to sin', the process is not automatic; we don't magically become totally resistant to temptation, but need to co-operate with what God has already done for us through including us in the death of Jesus. Yes, that is what he has done – and more! If you need that confirmed, just read through **Romans 6** again!

It's the same with the way the Holy Spirit is changing us. The negative side may start a bit like this:– We begin to see a flaw in our own personality. That may be quite devastating if we generally think we are doing reasonably OK. If we are on the other end of the spectrum, with a fairly low opinion of ourselves, it will come as no surprise and will only confirm our worst thoughts. But the remedy is the same whichever angle we are coming from.

Perhaps we are habitually arrogant or repeatedly fearful (opposite ends of the spectrum!) and begin to see that truth about ourselves. Because now we have come to see that we have been included in the death of Jesus on the cross, then we can consign that personality flaw, that character defect, to be included in his death. It is something for which our Father has already given us the remedy, and we can take hold of it, just as we are learning to take hold of his forgiveness when we realise we have failed and confess it.

It's very similar to dealing with temptation, except that now we are reaching back to one step earlier: not to the temptation itself but into that 'well of imperfection' out of which all these wrong things come. Our Father has not only given us the way to be forgiven and restored to right relationship with him, he has made the provision to deal with that poisonous source – to gradually purify the well.

To see this process work out in practice, we need to take on the positive side as well as the negative. Both are essential.

Paul uses the picture of death and resurrection in **Romans 6** and in **Colossians 2 & 3**. It is one process: death leads to resurrection. We have not only been joined to the death of Jesus but also to his resurrection. Our inclusion in his death gives us the means to escape temptation and to consign our character defects to death, but it does not give us any way to experience anything positive in their place. That is where resurrection comes in!

Paul puts it simply in **Romans 6:8-11**: *"Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus."*

And in **Colossians 2:12-13**: *"having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him,*

having forgiven us all our transgressions". Paul says **how** the resurrection of Jesus takes effect in our lives: *"through faith in the working of God"*. That's us, taking hold of what he has given, and finding the new life of the Holy Spirit at work in us. As he writes in **Romans 8:11** : *"But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you."* Real practical results!

Even dealing with those character defects – consigning them to death – requires the resurrection life of the Holy Spirit to be at work in us, as Paul writes in the next verses: *"So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."* (**Romans 8:12-13**). This instruction, to 'put to death' parts of our life, sounds very strange and has been badly misunderstood by people who have subjected themselves to significant personal pain and torment, thinking that they need to undergo that in order to find new life in Christ. When we see that **we have already been included** in the death of Jesus, what seems like a strange, even barbaric instruction to 'put to death the members of your earthly body' in relation to sinful behaviour now begins to make sense. (**Colossians 3:5**)

Just as we can't pay the price for our own forgiveness – Jesus did that in our place on the cross – so we can't get rid of those wrong aspects of our lives by our own efforts. Again, he has done it for us and has included us in his death and resurrection. We can take hold of that truth and begin to experience real release and a life that is being transformed from the inside. Once again, **the experience of truth !**

A word of warning here: There is no resurrection without death. What do I mean? Just that we can't just 'tack on' the positive life of the Holy Spirit in us, trying to claim his renewing power in our lives, without also allowing him to deal with getting rid of our character defects. He needs our co-operation in both aspects, negative as well as positive.

* * * * *

We have started to see how the Lord deals with **our own character defects**. Having begun to understand that, it becomes obvious that we can't do very much about the unwelcome aspects that we see in our Christian brothers and sisters. They, like we, will need to go through that same process of 'delivering to death' the things that Lord has shown them are wrong in their own lives, and they will not be able to do that until they have 'seen' that they have been included in the death and resurrection of Jesus and so can take hold of that amazing ongoing process of being transformed by the Holy Spirit – death and resurrection, death and resurrection, again and again, as he focuses on different aspects of their lives, just as he does with ours.

What we **can** do, as we have seen before, is to **lovingly** tell them when we see that our relationship has been affected by sin/failure by either of us (**Matthew 18:15-17** and **5:23-25**) and see that broken relationship healed through confession and forgiveness. As we will soon learn and know from our own experience, being alerted to wrong **actions** on our part will be likely to help us see those character defects in that well of imperfection and bring them before the Lord to be delivered to death. Making critical judgements about what we don't like about others, and somehow expecting them to be able to change themselves, simply doesn't work and is not the Lord's way of changing us.

Our Father is committed to transforming every single Christian believer into the image of his Son, so that that will be no character defects in us. He is carrying out that process now, but it will not be complete until we see the Lord Jesus when he returns. See **2 Corinthians 3:18**, **1 Corinthians 15:49**, **1 John 3:1-3**.

"Father, let your Spirit flow inside me, Till all that will not praise You is undone"
(Don Francisco, *Brother of the Son*)

Dave Taylor June 2026