

19. We believe in the victorious life over sin by consistent Bible study and prayer.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on August 21, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

"Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

Jude exhorts believers to "contend earnestly for the faith..." and the two best ways to do that is through consistent Bible study and prayer. Of course, both of these subjects are ones that I've covered from this pulpit numerous times over the past 21 years, so the challenge today is trying to figure out exactly what to say when there is so much that really needs to be said. First of all, let me say that it is absolutely, positively, unequivocally impossible to live a victorious life over sin without consistently studying the Bible and consistently praying. Years ago when I was a youth pastor for two very large churches, I had countless teenagers come to talk to me, oftentimes crying and confused, because they were unable to secure victory over sin and temptation. And I would always ask them: "Are you reading your Bible everyday and are you praying everyday?" And every time I can remember the response was "no." Now I'm not suggesting that if you read your Bible and pray each day that you'll never struggle with temptation or sin. Even the most-godly have to wrestle with the flesh on a daily basis. But this I know—if you don't consistently stay in the Word and don't stay on your knees you will unquestionably struggle to live a life of victory over sin. That is beyond question. And yet, that's what most believers attempt to do.

Step One To Victory

Several Christian research groups have concluded that the average Christian in America only prays three to four minutes a day, even though the average Christian watches over four hours of television each day. And these same researchers say things aren't much better when it comes to Bible reading either. Christian leaders all across the globe are stating that this generation is the most biblically illiterate generation since the Reformation. And I think they have a point. Far too many who call themselves Christians are more influenced by psychology and pop-culture than they are the Word of God. According to national surveys conducted in 1992 by the Barna Research Center, nearly 50% of all adult Christians read from the Bible at least once a week. By 1995, the figure had dropped to 33%. And though I haven't seen the most recent surveys, it is very possible that figure may now be somewhere around 25%. That would mean that 75% of the people who call Jesus their Savior never read a single verse of Scripture at least once a week. And believe this or not, in some recent polls taken by the Barna Research Center, they discovered that 63% of Christians could not name the four gospels of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and that 12% of Christians today think that Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. George Gallup and Michael Lindsay co-authored a book in 1999 called, "Surveying the Religious Landscape: Trends in U.S. Beliefs" and they state: "(There is a) glaring lack of knowledge about the Bible, basic doctrines, and the traditions of one's church...with many people not knowing what they believe, or why." So even though the Bible is still the best-selling book each year worldwide, it's probably the least-read and least-understood best seller in human history.

It reminds me of a story about a seminary graduate who was being interviewed by the Board of Ordained Ministry from a particular denomination that will go unnamed. He was asked: "What part of the Bible do you like the best?" He answered, "I like the New Testament." The board asked, "What book of the New Testament." "Well," said the young minister, "I think it's the Book of Parables." Then one man said, "Will you kindly relate one of those parables to this board."

"Well," said young minister, "once upon a time a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves, and the thorns grew up and choked the man and he went on and he didn't have any money and then he met the Queen of Sheba and she gave the man a thousand talents of gold and silver and a hundred changes of raiment. And when he was driving along under a tree, his hair got caught in a limb and left him hanging there. Yes sir, he hung there many days and many nights and the ravens brought him food to eat and water to drink. One night when he was hanging there asleep, his wife, Delilah, came along and cut his hair off and he dropped and fell on stony ground and it began to rain. It rained for forty days and forty nights and he hid himself in a cave. Then the man went out into the highways and byways and compelled them all to come in. Then he came up to Jerusalem and he saw Queen Jezebel sitting high up in a window, and when she saw him she laughed at him. So he said, 'Throw her down out of there.' And they threw her down. He said, 'Throw her down again,' and they threw her down again. And he said, 'Throw her down again,' and they threw her down seventy times seven, and the fragments they picked up were twelve basketfuls. Now, I ask you, whose wife will she be on the Day of Judgment? And the board members turned to each other and said, "Wow, he really knows the Bible!" Now I realize that might be a slight exaggeration, but it may be truer than we want to admit. An informal poll was taken a few years ago and the respondents were asked this question: "If you were stranded on a desert island, and you could only take one book with you, which book would you choose?" The answers included: "Anything by Shakespeare..." "Mere Christianity..." "The Hobbit..." One guy said that he would take the "Microsoft Windows Manual." He explained, "Without a computer to contradict the manual, it might actually make sense." Others said they would take their high school yearbook; and one even said he would take a volume of the encyclopedia. But I thought one of the most creative answers came from a guy who said, "If I were stranded on a desert island and could only take one book with me, I would take 'The Time Life Do-It-Yourself Guide to Basic Ship Building.'"

What book would you take? If I had to choose, there is no question what that book would be—the Bible. It is the most important book not only in my library; it is, and has been, the most important book in my life. And even though I've been reading it for approximately

forty-five years, it still challenges me, motivates me, encourages me, convicts me, and inspires me. The Bible is amazing! It is absolutely the most astounding book that has ever been written. It was penned by more than forty different authors over a period of 2,000 years and yet it is remarkably consistent from beginning to end, even though most of the authors obviously didn't even know each other. Some were educated, some were illiterate. Some were young, some were old. Some were male, some were female. Some were Jewish, some were Gentiles. Some were preachers, some were laypeople. This "mixed bag" of individuals combined their efforts to produce the greatest work of literature in human history. Do you think that's by coincidence?

2 Timothy 3:16 provides the key. It says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." "Given by inspiration" literally means "God breathed." 2 Peter 2 talks about the fact that holy men of God spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. That is why over forty different writers, spanning a period of over 2,000 years, could write one book and never contradict one another. They weren't writing on their own; they wrote as the Spirit of God directed them. And because they did, we have a book that is profitable for: (1) Doctrine—which is teaching. (2) Reproof—which is conviction. (3) Correction—which refers to setting something straight. (4) Instruction—which refers to the process of training a child.

And this is what it does. It makes us: (1) Complete and capable. (2) Thoroughly equipped for every good work and fully prepared. It also means that anyone who masters the Word of God will never lose his or her way, because right doctrine will produce right living. David tells us in Psalm 19 that the Bible will change everything that needs to be changed in us, give us practical wisdom, give us confidence, and provide us guidance on a daily basis. For instance, Psalm 19:7-9 says: "The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

These verses give us six titles for Scripture: (1) The law of the Lord. (2) The testimony of the Lord. (3) The statutes of the Lord. (4) The commandment of the Lord. (5) The fear of the Lord. (6) The judgments of the Lord. They also give us six characteristics of the Word: It is perfect, sure, right, pure, clean and true. Furthermore, those three verses tell us six effects the Word has on people: It converts the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes, endures forever, and it produces righteousness altogether. Is it any wonder verse 10 goes on to say, "More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb."

This single book, the Bible, has erected empires and cast others down. Those who have wholly followed its precepts have been blessed and those who have rejected it have been cast down. It's an amazing book! It's a living comfort because it teaches us how to live, and it's a dying comfort because it teaches us how to die. And even though it's been burned, banned, ridiculed, distorted, abused and outlawed; it has never been destroyed and it can never be ignored. It's simply too powerful for that. It has too much influence on anyone who reads it for that! And that is why anyone who truly wants to live a life of victory over sin MUST consistently study their Bible!

Step Two To Victory

Why does the average Christian only spend three to four minutes a day in prayer? Most people would say they don't have the time. But we know that's not true, don't we? We make time for what's important to us. I have an old weathered book in my library that was written by Dr. Oswald Smith. In it he writes: "All men of God have become men mighty in prayer. The sun never rose on China, we are told, without finding Hudson Taylor on his knees. No wonder the China Inland Mission has been so wonderfully owned by God! Conversion is the operation of the Holy Spirit, and prayer is the power that secures that operation. Souls are not saved by man, but by God; and since He works in answer to prayer we have no choice but to follow that Divine Plan. Prayer moves the Arm that moves the world... Oh, how few find time for prayer! There is time for everything else: Time to sleep and time to eat, time to read the newspaper and the novel, time to visit friends, time for everything under the sun, but no time for prayer, the most important of all things, the one great essential... My friends, it is not so much a case of finding time as it is of making time. And we can make time, if we will." How does God work? According to Smith, He works in answer to prayer!

1 Kings 18 tells us one of the most dramatic stories in the Bible, that famous confrontation between the prophet of God named Elijah and that sorry excuse for a king named Ahab. The land of Israel was so filled with sin and disobedience that God speaks through the prophet and declares that there will be a drought in the land that will reflect the spiritual drought in Israel's heart. It happened just as God said it would. For three-and-a-half years there was not a single cloud in the sky, and when God decided it was time to end the suffering He sent Elijah back to the evil king. And the story tells us that each man blamed the other for the desolation. Finally Elijah says, "Let's just settle this once and for all. Let's build an altar, place a sacrifice on it, and then pray. I'll pray to Jehovah; you pray to Baal; and the God who answers by fire, let us declare that he is God." All the people agree and the stage is set.

On the appointed day, 450 prophets of Baal begin to cry out to their pseudo-god, but there is no answer. They cut themselves with the sword, but there is not even a spark. This goes on for hours until finally verse 29 of 1 Kings 18 says, "But there was no voice; no one answered, no one paid attention." Elijah then stands, tells the prophets of Baal to step aside and take note, and he prays the simplest of prayers and basically says, "God, show them who You are!" And no sooner do the words come out of his mouth, but fire comes down from heaven and consumes the sacrifice, the altar, the wood, the stones, and even the dust. And the congregation of Israel fall on their faces and say, "The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!" But that's not the end of the story. Now Elijah turns to Ahab and says, "...there is the sound of abundance of rain." That sounded like the ranting and raving of a crazy man because there wasn't a cloud in the sky and it hadn't rained in three-and-a-half years. But Elijah had heard the voice of God and he knew the mother of all thunderstorms was around the bend.

Now here's the most amazing thing in the entire narrative. The next thing Elijah did was pray. He goes to the top of Mount Carmel and not only prays, but he perseveres in prayer. Seven different times he prays before his servant finally says, "There is a cloud, as small as a man's hand, rising out of the sea!" And the sky became black and the Bible says there was a "heavy rain." Now my question is this: If God had already promised Elijah that He was going to send rain, then why was it necessary for Elijah to go up on the mountain and pray? Why did Elijah need to pray about something that God Himself had already declared?

To truly understand we have to go all the way back to the Garden of Eden when God said, "Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion..." (Genesis 1:26). Man was given supreme authority over planet earth; moreover, he was given the legal authority to rule and reign. But guess who showed up? God's adversary—soon to become man's adversary—and he came in the form of a serpent and his name was Lucifer. This serpent that was clever and cunning enough to convince a third of heaven's angels to follow him in his rebellion, and now he beguiles the epitome of God's creation. And when Adam and Eve bite into the forbidden fruit a LEGAL TRANSACTION takes place. In that moment, they hand over the "title deed" of planet earth to Satan and he becomes the legal ruler over this world and brings with it the curse of sin, sickness, disease, and death. Please remember, none of those things were present prior to this transaction. Someone will say, "But why didn't God just stop Him?" The answer is because God's power is always governed by moral law and spiritual principle. And because Adam, of his own free will, transferred the dominion of this universe to Satan, God, required by His own system of justice and law, respected the legal transaction that took place and never used His superior power to void the contract.

Now we move ahead 4,000 years: Jesus comes to planet earth and prepares for His ministry by going into the wilderness to be alone with His Father. Guess who shows up? The same one that showed up in the Garden 4,000 years before, and he's up to his same old tricks! Satan offers Christ everything, anything, if He will just worship him. Of course, Jesus refuses.

Did Satan really have the ability to make these claims, these offers? He did. Luke 4:5-7 says, "Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, 'All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for THIS HAS BEEN DELIVERED TO ME, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours.'" Dear one, read that chapter once, twice, ten times, a hundred times...and you will never find Jesus, not a single time, arguing with Satan about that statement. Jesus knew Satan had that authority because it had been delivered to Him by the "first Adam."

Jesus knew this, but He had a plan to overcome it. Satan didn't understand what that plan was nor did He understand Jesus' ultimate goal, which 1 John 3:8 says was to "destroy the works of the devil." And as we know, Jesus accomplished His goal on an old wooden cross at a place called Calvary. When Jesus said, "It is finished," He literally broke the back of the adversary. Everything that needed to be done in the heavenlies, in the spiritual realm, above the earth and under the earth, was accomplished in order that the powers of darkness could be crushed and Satan's grip over mankind could be broken. In that moment, Satan's power over man was broken!

And then what does Jesus do? According to the book of Revelation, He ascends to the Father as the only One worthy to open the Scroll—the Lamb with the fresh marks of slaughter—and presents the blood of the Lamb to God. Then He comes back to planet earth and commissions His church—like arrows shot from His mighty bow—to go into the world and gain back the dominion on the earth level that had just been gained in the heavenly level! In other words, what had been accomplished in the INVISIBLE REALM was now to be ENFORCED in the visible realm on planet earth. And how do we do that? The way we ENFORCE what Christ has already done is through prayer. It happens through the believing prayers of God's people. When Dr. Smith said that God works in answer to prayer, this is what he was talking about.

Think of it this way: In Huntsville there are several men on Death Row. Their sentence has been passed, but there is a big difference between a sentence being passed and the execution of that sentence. Likewise, the Bible teaches us that Satan was sentenced to Death Row at the Cross. One day he will be bound forever in a lake of fire, and thereafter, there will be no more sickness, pain, sorrow, or sin. But even though his sentence has been passed, his execution is yet to come. So what are we to do? Well, what do we do with Death Row inmates? Do we say, "Mr. So & So, you are scheduled to be executed March 10, 2010—so would you please mark that date on your calendar and be sure to come to Huntsville that day so we can kill you?" Of course not! What do we do? We restrain him! We use our legal authority to BIND him!

The same is true with regard to Satan. His sentence was passed 2,000 years ago and his power was actually broken. All he has left is what the Bible calls "arguments and thoughts" that men can either entertain or confront and reject. And until Jesus comes one day to execute His final judgment and carry out the sentence that was passed, we, the Church, are responsible to restrain the adversary and BIND his activity on this earth and this is done through prayer! That's why Jesus said these words in Matthew 18:18: "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you (the Church) bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Through prayer, we have the power to bind the works of darkness and loose the souls of men unto salvation! Through prayer, we extend the Kingdom of God and its authority. Through prayer, we de-throne principalities and powers. And through prayer, we rule and reign with Christ in the here and now, and ultimately in eternity. With that being said, do you see now why it is so important that we be consistent in our prayer life? This is a war and lives of men and women and boys and girls literally hang in the balance; and so does our personal victory over sin.

George Mueller was one of those extraordinary men who impacted the globe with the gospel of Jesus Christ in a prior generation. When Mueller was well into his 80's he was invited to speak at a major university to a large group of seminary students. When he finished his speech a student raised his hand and said, "Mr. Mueller, there is a question that many of this room would like to ask?" Barely able to hear, Mueller said, "Sure son, go ahead and ask?" "What's your secret?" the young man replied. Without saying a word, this old white-haired saint of God pushed back his chair, turned around, bent his old limbs to the floor as he knelt in prayer. And he looked at the room full of future ministers and said, "Children, this is my secret. This is my secret." God is looking for people who will discover that secret. God is looking for people who will pray, so He can fill them with the power necessary to transform their world!

After golfer Lee Trevino made a great putt to win a golf tournament, a reporter said, "Boy, you sure were lucky." "Yea," Trevino replied, "the more I practice, the luckier I get." Practice does make perfect. To be a great golfer you have to play a lot of golf. Reading golf magazines, watching instructional videos won't cut it. You simply have to get into the game; you have to do it! The same is true in regard to your spiritual victory. You'll never be victorious until you get into the game—until you get into the Word and pray each and every day.

What do you want out of life? Do you want to be "average"? Do you want to continually struggle with the sin issues of your life or do you want to be victorious? If so, then you have to **CONTEND** for the faith! There's only way to victory—and as old fashioned as it sounds, that truth has never changed through the ages. And that is why we believe that the victorious life over sin is only made possible by consistent Bible study and prayer.