

## **BEST NEWS FOR BREAKING BAD HABITS**

**By Paul Penno Jr.**

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When trainers begin taming a baby elephant, they place a heavy chain around its ankle and stake the chain into the ground. Day after day, hour after hour, the baby elephant struggles to escape. But his efforts are in vain. He simply cannot break free from the grips of that powerful chain. Eventually he surrenders. He resolves in his mind that there is no possible way he can escape that chain. So he relinquishes forever the struggle to be free.

Then when he has given up trying, his masters replace that giant chain with the small little rope. If the elephant ever opened his eyes to the truth, he could break free at any moment. All it would take is one try, but since the elephant doesn't know that, he doesn't take a step in the right direction of freedom.

And so it happens that ten, twenty, thirty years later, the giant elephant remains held in bondage by something that really has no power to control him, except the power he chooses to give it.

I have a native American friend in Southern California who occasionally calls and we enjoy Christian fellowship. He is a down-to-earth fellow and he asked one time, "What is the secret of overcoming habitual sin?" Another way of asking that question is, "If we understand true righteousness by faith why don't we practice it? If we truly understand righteousness by faith it will work and we will live it."

Some have no control of their temper. They are as quick-tempered as a flash. In this respect they have hardly any control of themselves at all. They are intemperate. Others are ruled by their passions. Such was Felix, before whom Paul reasoned of righteousness, self-control, and judgment to come. Others are ruled by their appetites—things which in themselves are perfectly lawful, but by which thousands of people allow themselves to be controlled, instead of assuming the mastery themselves, and acting with self-control. Others allow the desire of greed to rule, and to drive them onward into many foolish and hurtful things.

So it is in all things, in every phase of life. Instead of ruling themselves they allow themselves to be ruled by some wicked, sinful thing. One is controlled by strong drink, another is controlled by impure thoughts and lustful desires, another by a gluttonous appetite, and so on through the long list of human frailties. Each one lacks something of that self-control which he owes himself, in filling the place of a real manly man, or womanly woman, in the world. No one of us has much in which he can boast himself over his fellow-mortals.

So now to my friend's question: "How do you overcome bad habits?" We fall prey to habits because it brings us perceived pleasure. Bad habits are a form of pleasing self. The radius of concern is self-centeredness. If the secret to victory over bad habits is focused on self the results will be continued failure.

In 1888 Hannah Whithall Smith published her book *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* which was

the product of the beginnings of what was later known in the Evangelical world as the Victorious Life Movement. It is the Evangelical version of *Steps to Christ*. The book is a beautiful little literary masterpiece of charming clarity, and it is no wonder that it continues to be reprinted. It is understandable that many Seventh-day Adventists have been charmed by it, including many of our General Conference speakers and the editors of *Insight*. If dour, long-faced, insecure, cantankerous Adventists can find spiritual happiness and “renewal” in Hannah Smith’s “secret,” what’s the harm? In it she wrote: “At this point it is that I desire to help you. What you must do now is to come once more to Him in a surrender of your whole self to His will, as complete as you know how to make it.”

Does *Steps to Christ* (1892) teach the same basic message as *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*? Smith’s (*Christian’s Secret*) detours completely around the atonement and scarcely even mentions the cross. Her Preface to her 1888 edition says: “Most of us acknowledge that there is behind all religions an absolute religion, that holds the vital truth of each; and it is of this absolute religion my book seeks to treat: (p. vi).

In contrast, *Steps to Christ* points the reader to the cross some seven times on one page alone (p. 27). “God upon the cross of Calvary, the mystery of redemption . . . the goodness of God leads us to repentance. In dying for sinners, Christ manifested a love that is incomprehensible; and as the sinner beholds this love, it softens the heart . . .

“ . . . It is the power of Christ that is drawing them . . . As Christ draws them to look upon His cross, to behold Him whom their sins have pierced . . .

“The sinner may resist this love, may refuse to be drawn to Christ; but if he does not resist he will be drawn to Jesus; a knowledge of the plan of salvation will lead him to the foot of the cross in repentance for his sins, which have caused the sufferings of God’s dear Son.” SC, p. 27.

“No outward observances can take the place of simple faith and entire renunciation of self. But no man can empty himself of self. We can only *consent* [permission] for Christ to accomplish the work. Then the language of the soul will be, Lord, take my heart; for I cannot give it. It is Thy property. Keep it pure, for I cannot keep it for Thee. Save me in spite of myself, my weak, unchristlike self. Mold me, fashion me, raise me into a pure and holy atmosphere, where the rich current of Thy love can flow through my soul.” COL 159.

The popular hymn “I Surrender All” (#309) expresses the idea that ego can give up self to Jesus. Can I surrender all?

In Romans 7 Paul presents the ego “I” as being at the very center of the problem of doing the right thing. “For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do” (Romans 7:19). There have been endless debates over whether Paul is writing about his pre-conversion or post-conversion state in Romans 7. For those who argue that this is the normal Christian experience of tension between knowing and doing, it gives a good

excuse to continue in sin. Bad habits can never be overcome.

It probably really doesn't matter if Paul is specifically addressing the pre- or post-conversion state. "Paul's 'I' is the ego of the human race." So long as the ego is alive and motivating the life whether Christian or non-Christian one is living under the old covenant. An "under the law" experience is driven by fear of hell and hope of reward. There is no appreciation of the cross of Christ. Self is very much alive. There is no heart reconciliation with God. Self is not in harmony with God's law however much it might assent to its goodness and holiness.

The dear Lord doesn't want us to get ourselves into old covenant resolutions, for they "gender to bondage," says Galatians 4:24, that is, they lead us into spiritual slavery. The little book *Steps to Christ* tells why: "You desire to give yourself to Him [the Lord], but you are weak in moral power, in slavery to doubt, and controlled by the habits of your life of sin. Your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. You cannot control your thoughts, your impulses, your affections. The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you" (p. 47). Stop right there. Here's the problem! The memory of your frequent failures to keep your promises makes you feel that you are no good and "that God cannot accept you" or respect you. And that is horrible slavery.

A far better way is under the "new covenant." Instead of promising God you will do better, thank Him that He has promised to save you, that Christ has given Himself for you already and bought you with His blood, and that you are precious in His sight. The new covenant is Good News, the "old" is bad.

Thousands of people have quit smoking through accepting the simple formula, "I choose not to smoke." When temptation assails us, our part is to choose not to yield. Then the Holy Spirit is free to go into action. No matter if your will is weak, you are still the boss. The tempter can never force you to do wrong against you will.

"No man can be forced to transgress. His own consent must be first gained; the soul must purpose the sinful act before passion can dominate over reason or iniquity triumph over conscience. Temptation, however strong, is never an excuse for sin."<sup>1</sup>

The "good news" of sanctification by faith is beautifully expressed in the New International Version's rendering of Paul's letter to Titus: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 5, p. 177.

are his very own, eager to do what is good.” Titus 2:11-14.

Do you know how to pronounce that word “No!” to temptation? “The grace of God” will teach you! It teaches us to be the boss, the king; and none of the enemy’s most alluring temptations can stand up against the word “No!” which expresses our “right action of the will.”

And how does “the grace of God” succeed in teaching us backward mortals such a marvelous skill? By providing the dual motivation of (a) an appreciation of how Christ “gave himself for us,” and (b) the delightful anticipation of letting Him “purify for Himself a people” ready to honor Him at His “glorious appearing.” It works!

Is choosing hard? When you fall in love with someone, is it hard to “forsake all others” and “cleave” to that loved one? The constraint of the love of Christ makes all the allurements of the world seem as pale as a street light glowing in comparison with the pure brilliance of the sun. Also when we are yoked up with Christ, we find that He bears the weight.

This is what it means to “live by the Spirit” or to “walk in the Spirit.” It is a constant choosing to say “No!” to temptation, and “Yes!” to the Holy Spirit. He never forsakes us, night or day, twenty-four hours a day. He is the One called to come and sit down beside us; He is with us constantly. “Whether you turn to the right or to the left,” it is His voice that you hear “behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’” Isaiah 30:21, NIV.

This response of faith is not salvation by works, not even one percent; “we walk by faith.” 2 Corinthians 5:7. As we respond by faith to the good news of justification, so we now respond by the same faith to the prompting of the Spirit. See Colossians 2:6. We let this mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus. See Philippians 2:5. When sorely tempted, He cried out, “Not as I will, but as thou wilt. . . . Thy will be done.” Matthew 26:39-42. Thus He exercised His own power of choice. “I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.” John 6:38. Oh, it was indeed a terrible struggle; but He gained the victory as we are to gain it—by “the right action of the will.”

He will never will for us or excuse us from exercising our own power of choice, even though we read that “it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Philippians 2:13, NIV. Since the Lord gives the Holy Spirit to tell us, “This is the way,” and also gives us the power of response, He works “in” us “to will.” But this never bypasses our own volition, nor does He overwhelm it. Not all the angels in heaven tugging together in our behalf can release us from making our choice pro or con, nor can all the fallen angels in hell force us to make a wrong choice.

Since we can choose to “let this mind be in [us], which was also in Christ Jesus,” does this mean that the believer is now saving himself by his own efforts? Is surrendering to the guidance of the Holy Spirit a do-it-yourself religion in which we pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps? Never!

Although we cannot save ourselves even one percent, we can let our Lord save us 100 percent!

If we make the right choices, we “walk in the Spirit.” We “let” Christ’s “mind” be in us, in the sense of motivation. It’s like using power steering to drive a huge truck. No way can you turn those great front wheels yourself; but if the engine is running, your choice to turn right or left is all that is needed—the slightest pressure on the steering wheel activates the power-steering pump to do all the work. Paul didn’t have power steering in his day, but he understood the secret of sanctification by faith: “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit [desires] what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not [cannot] do what you want.” Galatians 5:16, NIV.

So, it’s “good news” again! The “power source” is the Holy Spirit. Give Him your will, make your choice to walk in His way, and you cannot be overcome by the desires of your “sinful nature,” however strong they may be or however long you have walked in evil habits. The reason is simple enough: the Holy Spirit is stronger than the flesh, just as light is stronger than darkness and love is stronger than hate.

Who is stronger—Christ or the angel who fell from heaven—Satan? Which is stronger, light or darkness? Which is stronger, love (*agape*), or hatred? Which is stronger, that “much more abounding grace of the Lord Jesus” (Rom. 5:20,

21), or the power of our evil appetites and habits and obsessions and addictions?

Which is stronger: the power of death that held Jesus Christ captive in Joseph’s tomb, or the resurrection power of the Father that raised Him up after three days?

We can’t say it often enough: that much more abounding grace is stronger than all the power of sin the devil can invent. In fact, there is in that grace “much more” power! “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.”

Let’s not try to serve God with anything less than that full power of that much more abounding grace that is revealed in Christ. That grace of Christ is the enemy of sin; it condemns it, defeats it, conquers it, annihilates it, so that we might be free indeed.

Then the grace of God will be manifested in us in “newness of life” (6:4). That grace “reigns through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Then we discover something precious: it is easy to be saved and it is hard to be lost, when we begin to appreciate that much more abounding grace! We must not conclude that the upward path is the “hard path” and the downward path is the “easy one;” it’s the opposite. All the way that leads to hell there are impediments and obstacles to hinder us in that way; God is constantly trying to tell us this. It’s like we are driving on the freeway, you’re at the wheel (because you are the boss), but the Holy Spirit is sitting beside you in the front seat. He is saying, Don’t stay on this freeway to hell; take this exit to the kingdom of God! That’s what Jesus promised

that the Holy Spirit would do when He gave Him the name "*Parakletos*," the One called to sit down beside you and never leave you (John 16:7, 8; "*para*" = beside you; *kletos* = called).

Don't misunderstand: you DO have something to do: it's to make the constant choice to let the Spirit guide you. But please remember, you are not your Savior yourself: you let the Lord save you. It is you who turns the wheel on to the blessed Exit coming up that leads to eternal life. But He guided you to do it; and you praise the Lord for ever and ever.

In Rwanda near what is now Mugonero, a man-eating lion had been troubling the African villagers. This was terrible; no one felt secure. The villagers came to Dr. John Sturgess to ask him to bring his gun and shoot the offender.

Dr. Sturgess took his 7mm. Mauser with the hair trigger and went with the guide. They walked a long distance, when finally the guide said, "Here is where we last saw the lion."

The missionary reached in his pocket for some bullets, and discovered to his horror that he had left them at the mission.

"Quick," he urged the guide, "hurry back and fetch the ammunition for me. I'll wait for you here."

There was a log nearby, and he sat down to wait, then dozed off. He was awakened by a rustling noise in the grass just in time to see the lion facing him.

He realized that his gun was useless. To run would be sure suicide. As the lion took a step toward him, the missionary took a trembling step

toward him. The lion got into springing position, ready.

Dr. Sturgess realized in a flash that he must do something quickly. Throwing down his useless gun, he took another step toward his enemy. Seeing the beast hesitate for a fraction of a second, he decided to turn things right around backward from usual, and charge the lion. On he came, shouting, waving his arms wildly, looking the lion in the eye and yelling, "Go away, GO! GO!"

The beast was taken completely by surprise. How dare this puny, two-legged creature come at him, yelling and screaming as if he were the king of the forest? He was so shocked that he turned tail and ran.

Our "enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion" (1Peter 5:8, NIV), but we are the boss. We have been given the power of choice, and Christ has given "all men" liberty to exercise it. A firm, decided choice makes us indeed king of Satan's forest, for if we "resist the devil, . . . he will flee." James 4:7, NIV. By "the right action of the will," exercising this God-given authority, "you will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent." Psalm 91:13, NIV.

While the Holy Spirit indeed does the work, our part is to "let" Him do it, and that is important. Our "carnal mind" is constantly fighting Him. If we don't consent for Him to sanctify us, He is blocked and frustrated, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." Philippians 2:5. "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts." "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." Colossians 3:15, 16, NIV. The

power of choice is ours, and what the Lord does in us is always contingent on our choice to let Him do it. It was a wise writer who said this: "What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can choose to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 47