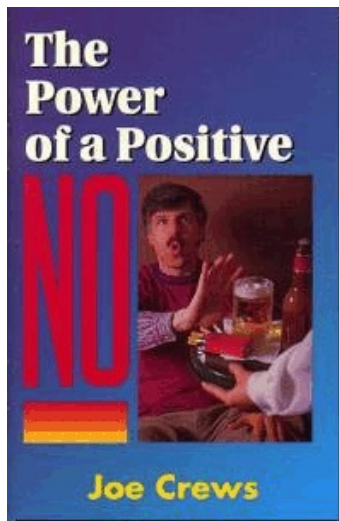


The Power of a Positive NO
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Introduction

As most Bible students understand, Peter and Paul did not always agree with each other over methods of communicating the gospel. At one point they had a public disagreement in which one verbally chastised the other for being hypocritical. Nevertheless, in terms of believing and living the message of their beloved Master, they were in perfect agreement.

After describing the fiery destruction of earthly things at the end of human history Peter posed this rhetorical question : "What manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?" 2 Peter 3:11. To his own query he gave a very short answer: "Be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless." verse 14.

When Paul wrote on the same subject elsewhere in the Bible, he used language very similar in tone but longer in context. "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works." Titus 2:11-14.

We may be slightly confused by the convoluted series of phrases that Paul strings into this long, long sentence, but take a look at what he is saying. There can be no question about the meaning of his words. This masterpiece statement is probably the most complete description of God's ideal for His people to be found in the entire Bible. Paul somehow manages to touch on most of the great Christian lifestyle doctrines which should characterize the true church today.

Look closely at the principles so marvelously interlaced in those few verses:

1. "Redeemed from all iniquity"
2. "Purify unto himself a peculiar people"
3. "Zealous of good works"
4. "Denying ungodliness and worldly lusts"
5. "Looking for that blessed hope"

In these words are found the doctrines of true sanctification and total victory over "all iniquity." Like Peter he boldly declares the possibility of being without spot and blameless, but he also identifies the overcoming group as standing forth in peculiar contrast to all

others around them. Their zeal in the "good works" of obedience would mark them as God's special people.

Furthermore, Paul wrote that the grace which brings salvation would teach the faithful saints to look for the blessed hope of Christ's coming. They would be living in joyful expectancy of the soon advent of Jesus. This end-time church would separate from the indulgent life-style of the carnal majority and "deny ungodliness and worldly lusts." In this he was again in perfect accord with the burden of his fellow disciple Peter, who described the "manner of persons we ought to be in all holy conversation (life-style) and godliness."

How interesting it is that both of these close companions of Jesus made such strong statements about being different from the world. Unfortunately, their doctrine of self-denial and separation has been rejected by the modern church as a manifestation of legalism. As a reaction to this most tragic misconception, most pulpits today are sending forth a "soft" love message about justification, forgiveness, and acceptance and have largely eliminated references to obedience, law, or lifestyle. Any mention of standards of conduct or behavior is immediately dismissed as judgmental and unloving.

The Christian Needs to Refuse Some Things

There is something very strong and reassuring in Paul's use of the word "deny." What does it mean to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts? Obviously there is a time and place for true Christians to draw a line and say No in such a manner that none can misunderstand. There are some things we need to be positive about. I suggest that the power of a positive No is one of the greatest needs in this dissipated, permissive age. We must have the moral courage to refuse that which will cause pollution of the mind or body.

Has it always been necessary for God's children to take such unyielding stands on issues of right and wrong? Consider the life of that great Bible character, Moses. "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." Hebrews 11:24, 25.

The context indicates that Moses was being urged to take the easy route. There had to be another choice pressed upon him in order to refuse it. He had to make a decision for riches and pleasure on one side or affliction on the other. And you can be certain that all the pressure was coming from those on the wrong side. We have no doubt as to where his young friends in the court stood on the matter. They surely presented every enticing reason for him to remain in the palace. Moses was the heir apparent to the throne of Egypt. Nothing was withheld from him. There was music, dancing, and beautiful princesses to vie for his attention.

No one should suggest that it was easy for Moses to turn his back on that honor and royal position. It must have appeared to him that the throne was the only road to popularity, riches, and eternal fame. He had no way of knowing that the opposite was true. Today, Moses' name is known to millions of people all around the world, but the names of the pharaohs have long been forgotten. I visited the mummy room of the great museum in

Cairo and saw the wrapped remains of some of the most illustrious rulers of Egypt. I read names such as Ahmose and Tutmose, which sounded almost like Moses, but his name was not on a single one of the elaborate stone coffins. Moses is not a mummy today. He is in heaven right now enjoying the "recompense of reward" which he counted as "greater riches than the treasures of Egypt." According to Jude 9, he was granted a special resurrection as the first-fruit of those who will be raised to meet their Lord at the last day. But to everyone of us, he is an example of the power of a positive No. He refused!

Most of us have read the Bible story of Joseph and his incredible experiences as a slave, and later as prime minister of Egypt. But it was his bondage which turned his whole life into a different direction. Potiphar's wife was physically attracted by the handsome and personable Joseph, and began a sexual-harassment program to draw him into adultery with her. Day after day she sought to entice him with her charms. Probably no young man has ever faced a more severe emotional test than Joseph, as he was constantly confronted by the seductive wiles of his beautiful mistress. As a normal red-blooded youth, Joseph felt the physical cravings and desires just as strongly as any young person living today. I'm quite certain also that Satan adorned every place and moment of temptation with all the glamour and allurements that could be devised.

How did Joseph relate to the daily harassment? We are not told about his thoughts or feelings, but we do have the simple account of what he did. "And it came to pass after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me. But he refused." Genesis 39:7,8. What a testimony! He said, "No, I will not sin against my God." Like Moses after him, Joseph took an immovable stand against any compromise with sin. Even when the conniving temptress tried to forcibly draw him to her bosom, Joseph wrenched away, leaving his coat in her hands, and fled from her presence (verse 12).

Saying No to Sexual Scenes

The incident I have just described took place thousands of years ago, but it represents a pattern which has been repeated in every succeeding generation. Satan has used the sensual appeal of sex and immorality to destroy souls in all ages of both past and present. But in this late-20th century he has perfected this weapon to the ultimate degree. We live in a sex-saturated society - a world almost wholly dominated by the flesh.

Today there are few young people who have the same relationship with God that Joseph had. They have been conditioned by a thousand indulgent excesses to yield to their impulses rather than live by principle. Television has had a big part in popularizing perversion and creating an attitude of tolerance toward promiscuous behavior. Instead of learning to suppress and control their legitimate sexual drives, the great majority of young people are learning to freely indulge them. The result has been an entire generation growing up with few inhibitions against fornication. Indeed most of them have no understanding that God calls it an abomination.

No one living in today's world can escape the harmful influences which have produced such a state of moral anarchy. We are almost immersed in it from morning till night, and

our only protection is to have the mind of Christ. It is the nature of fallen man to be carnal and to live according to the flesh. In fact, the flesh needs no encouragement in its natural course of self-gratification and sin. Nevertheless, it has been titillated and provoked by the rampant promotion of every form of sexual impurity.

But let us consider now the circumstances under which the Christian can claim protection from the daily bombardment in the midst of all the corruption and remain untainted. In short, this can happen only through the sanctified exercise of a converted mind and will. Victory over sin, possible only through Christ, still involves a work of cooperation between the human and divine. Only as we recognize principles involving our human role in sanctification will we be able to claim God's delivering power. Holiness is not a passive transaction in which we sit back and allow God to separate us from the sin.

This leads us back to the power of a positive No. The command of God is very clear: "Be ye holy." 1 Peter 1:16. This does not mean that we can purify ourselves through human effort alone, nor does it mean that God will do it all without our cooperation. He will never do for us what He has given us the power and ability to do for ourselves. Even though the possibility of victory rests with God only, the responsibility for victory is ours to exercise. We have discovered already that God did not pick Joseph up to convey him out of Mrs. Potiphar's presence; Joseph himself had to make that decision and act upon it. No doubt God revealed to him what needed to be done, and I have no doubt that angels were there to give him fleetness of foot to escape, but Joseph had to start moving against the sin before divine intervention could take place.

Escape from Temptation; Who is Responsible?

This brings us to a very vital principle in dealing with the sin problem. There can be no accommodation of the flesh in claiming the victory. Sin is absolutely non-negotiable. Joseph did not stay around to argue or debate over the issue. Dickering with sin can be dangerous business. The Bible says simply that "he refused;" then he fled the scene to get away from the presence of the temptation. This also is a part of our responsibility in the victory process. It is unquestionable that there are spiritual laws of the mind which must be obeyed in order to be an overcomer. One of those laws decrees that "by beholding we become changed." Flaunting that law leads to defeat in the battle against sin. God has given us a mind to use; to reason with, to choose with, and to refuse with. Moses and Joseph knew how to use what God gave them, and that is why they exercised the power of a positive No. Not even God could make that decision for them.

Another important principle is that no one can follow Christ without deliberately saying no to self. Jesus magnified this spiritual rule when He said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." Matthew 16:24. There lies at the root of every human sin an inherent disposition to indulge the self-nature. We often refer to it as the fallen nature, the lower nature, or the sinful nature. It does not pertain to personal guilt or condemnation, but without the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit that genetic bent will exert a controlling influence over both mind and body. The fallen nature will always be enticed by the attractions of external physical forces. This is why we are never safe in basing our lifestyle choices on emotional feelings. For 6,000 years the

devil has used the sensory perceptions to assail the soul with temptation. As we look back through history, as well as the Bible, we find the same principle at work. Satan has almost invariably utilized the pathway of the five senses in causing people to sin. The evil one has no other access to the citadel of the mind than through our sight, hearing, smell, touch, or taste. Since God has created the brain to automatically conform to whatever enters through these external channels, this is where the devil focuses his strongest attacks. Satan cannot force entry through the senses; therefore he must present his most powerful appeals through sight, hearing, etc., in an effort to secure permission from the mind for him to enter.

What is the secret, then, of maintaining a pure mind while being surrounded with evil scenes and enticing sounds? There is only one answer. Christ must be so fully received into the life that His Spirit has control of all functions of the will. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." Philippians 2:5. In the strength of that reigning power, every one of the five avenues may be closed off to any appeal of the enemy. The eyes are empowered to look away from sin, the ears are able to tune out evil, and every faculty of mind and body is submitted to the divine will - which has become one with the human will. This is the only way to have the mind of Christ and to think His thoughts after Him.

It is clear that the real struggle between good and evil takes place in the domain of the mind. In fact, the great controversy between Christ and Satan is not raging on some faraway galactic battlefield, but in the confines of the human brain. It is the will, with its freedom to choose, which determines the direction and destiny of each individual life. This is the truth which needs to be made plain for every youth, adult and child. If all could understand the crucial role of personal choice and the consequences of making the wrong decision, millions of souls might be turned from darkness to light.

Spiritual Laws of Resisting Evil

Unfortunately, in their ignorance of the real issues most young people are playing a deadly game of Russian roulette over their own future destiny. Even professed Christian youth have failed to grasp the secret of closing off the only approaches by which Satan can access their minds. There is too much teasing and toying with deadly sin-bait - young men and women testing themselves for the excitement of it, and finding that they miscalculated their own strength or weakness.

There is a very good reason for the warnings of Peter, Paul, and all the other Bible writers to "come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord." 2 Corinthians 6:17. This is another of those laws of spiritual growth. We cannot mingle with the impure and remain pure. We cannot trifle with unholy thoughts and continue to be holy. Even those activities which merely lead in the direction of sin should be discontinued. If a certain place or a certain person presents a temptation which is hard to resist, that is the time to exercise the power of a positive No. Like Joseph and Moses, we can refuse to do that which would offend our loving God. We weaken our defenses by lingering in the atmosphere of temptation, and when our strength is dissipated the enemy prevails.

Immediately after describing the guilt of an adulterous look, Jesus spoke these significant

words: "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." Matthew 5:29. What did the Master mean by that drastic statement? Was He recommending mutilation of the body? No, He was not referring to the literal eye at all. He was talking about the thing your eye is focused on - what you are looking at. If you find yourself viewing a scene which opens a door of temptation, Jesus commands that we cut it out of our sight, even if it is as painful as slicing out the physical eye with a sharp knife.

These words of the Son of God surely indicate that it will be a real test to turn away from some of the glamorous pictures prepared for our destruction. But the most urgent message He conveyed in that sermon on the mount was the shocker that we can be cast into hell just by looking at the wrong pictures! This concept is ridiculed today by modern theology which dismisses all lifestyle standards as legalistic works of the flesh. Great will be the remorse someday for those who fail to distinguish between the works of the law performed to earn salvation and the good works of obedience produced from a heart of love.

Someone might protest that none can evade the visual offenses referred to by our Lord. So, does this mean we are all guilty for the glimpses of bad things which might flash across our vision as we walk along the street? Indeed not. We must distinguish between the momentary first look at some sudden evil which enters uninvited into our range of sight, and the deliberate gaze upon scenes which feed into carnal imaginations. It is that willful second look which most often blossoms into mental violation of God's revealed will. The sequence of sin moves from a focused look to a cherished thought and finally into a full-blown act of sin.

Is this not also the history of so many divorces and remarriages, even in the most conservative congregations? Too many do not repel that first thought of sin. They continue to look and feed the illicit desire until their own companion looks less desirable than someone else. Emotions sweep out of control, and lives are blasted as a result. Again, there is a failure to recognize that we are responsible for closing the door on that alluring scene.

We cannot be strong against a foe that we secretly admire, and the longer we gaze at sin the more appealing it becomes. David is a perfect example of that law of the mind. One day he saw his beautiful neighbor taking a bath on her rooftop. Even though he was a man of strength and noble character, David became a puppet of clay in the hands of Satan because he continued looking at that which God had forbidden. Later, that lingering look led him into adultery and even murder. It is totally presumptuous to keep looking at sin. Exposure to it increases our tolerance for it, and finally blinds us to the true nature of transgression. Sexual license is no longer considered evil by those who have viewed it so long. Many couples living in fornication are insulted if someone charges them with being immoral.

The greatest causative factor in the visual exposure to evil must be identified as television. When we consider the countless hours wasted by millions who watch and listen to the endless barrage of filth which pours forth, we can begin to understand why America leads the world in illegitimacy and sexual assaults. Survey after survey has pinpointed television

as the culprit in rising rates of violence, the breakdown of family values and destruction of morals in general. Professed Christians nod in solemn agreement with the statistical reports, but how many of them have thrown the evil out of their living room? We might even ask, how many are guilty of feeding on the same slimy diet of programmed sin as the most confirmed unbelievers?

An Altered Definition of Sin

What is the explanation for such passive acceptance of the present moral mess in our society by church people? They do not speak out or take strong stands because their own convictions are too weak and they don't have the courage to practice what they preach. This is why religion has failed to impact or change the eroding morals of this spiritually bankrupt generation. Too few Christians are committed enough to take consistent, uncompromised stands against the social evils of the day. They cannot stand in the strength of a positive No because their own weak wills are not fully persuaded to give up the pleasures of the world.

We spoke earlier about the pervasiveness of the self-nature. There are fierce battles to be fought in resisting the inherited tendencies of the natural man. Unconverted people have no incentive to put forth such strenuous effort against pride and selfishness. In fact, in most cases they have no consciousness that those attitudes are sinful or even objectionable. Churches have often been responsible for exacerbating the problem by not speaking out against manifestations of the fleshly self-nature.

Congregations glitter with enough ornamentation to construct another golden calf, but few pastors have the courage to tell the truth about the vanity. Movies, dancing, rock music, and television are often contextualized in sermons as being acceptable forms of entertainment. Members are not being provided with a single nail on which to hang their convictions.

This brings us to another reason that many church members have no strong feelings against practices of the world. The perception and definition of sin has been modified by many religious leaders in the world today. It is no wonder that the fruits of sin are not recognized when the root of sin is not even acknowledged. Much to the consternation of faithful church members, a new theology has gradually permeated both large and small denominations. Its largest focus seems to be against "works of the law." Ostensibly it purports to correct the problem of legalism in the church, hence its obsessive thrust against anything having to do with law-keeping.

In its extreme reaction against a perceived "works" or "behaviorism" theology, almost every sermon oozes with an overload of syrupy sentimentalism - a supposed "love" which does not produce obedience. Sin is no longer defined as breaking the great moral law of God, but in not maintaining a correct "relationship" with Jesus. Although the love experience is absolutely essential, we must never, in the least degree, diminish the role of the law as both teacher and moral guide. God's Word still declares that "sin is the transgression of the law." 1 John 3:4.

Bookstores are filled with publications which minimize the seriousness of sin. They claim that sin does not bring condemnation, and that it does not separate us from Christ. A recent popular book being acclaimed by thousands of conservative Christians states that "there is a world of difference between sinning under law and sinning under grace." In case you wonder what distinguishes sin committed by the converted from sin committed by the unconverted, the author gives this bit of enlightenment: "Stumbling under grace, falling into sin, does not deprive us of justification. Neither does it bring condemnation."

The illogic of this statement appears when we remember that justification and condemnation are diametrically opposite each other in the Bible. It is impossible to have both at the same time. The sinner is under condemnation, and the Christian is under justification. When the author says that a sinning Christian is not condemned by his sin, but that a sinning worldling is condemned by his sin, we stand in confused amazement. This type of reasoning would make disobedience by the Christian much less serious and reprehensible than in the life of a non-Christian.

Mark it down as a primary truth. Sin is deadly and brings its lethal results upon all who choose to practice it. The whole purpose of the gospel is to save us from the penalty and power of sin. Nowhere in the Bible do we find the least tolerance for the violation of God's law. Of course, there is mercy and grace in the gospel to forgive and cleanse from all sin, but there is no provision for anyone to keep on sinning. The true faith required for salvation is always attended by the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit to keep us from falling (Jude 24). The righteousness-by-faith experience not only imputes the merits of Christ's perfect obedience to cover our past sins, but it imparts at the same time a sanctifying moment-by-moment power to keep us from sin in the here and now.

The Word of God has very much to say about that ugly word sin, but there is one thing which is never said about it. You will never read anything in the Bible about diminishing the amount of sin you commit. Isn't that strange? Nowhere does it say we should reduce our sinful practices. All the inspired writers seem to agree totally with Jesus when He said to the woman who had committed adultery, "Go, and sin no more." John 8:11.

Legalism Not the Final Issue

Are we suggesting that there is no danger of legalism springing up among Christians? No indeed. It is an enemy which has led millions to trust their works for salvation, and we must always be watchful against its subtle intrusion. Nevertheless those who see this as the great end-time issue in these closing days of history have not studied the prophecies very carefully. The books of Daniel and Revelation portray the final conflict between Christ and Satan to be in regard to the law of God.

The whole world will be divided and marked by a sign denoting obedience to His law or rebellion against it. From the Garden of Eden until the present, God has maintained a special test of man's love and loyalty. Jesus affirmed the test in His day when He said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." John 14:15. John wrote that only those who kept the commandments would enter in through the gates into the city of God (Revelation 22:14).

Would it not be a masterful stroke on the part of Satan to infiltrate the churches just before the end with a campaign to belittle the law and the Sabbath? No better scheme could be plotted to prepare the world to reject the seal of God in favor of the mark of the beast. Very few would risk death to uphold a law whose authority was in question. Furthermore, a lenient attitude toward sin could be a softening factor in the final choice of many to abandon the Sabbath.

I see a systematic, underground operation of a very clever enemy in the present theological controversy - ostensibly between the liberals and the conservatives. But there is much more involved than the isolated issues so often raised. It is a very organized attack with connecting links to church structure, Bible translations, separationists and evangelicalism. But most of all, Satan's strong push has been to water down the message, compromise with the world, and destroy the distinctive doctrines and standards which have always identified God's true remnant church.

Diversions to Mask the True Problem

If indeed Satan is behind a diabolical plan to downplay the real issues in the approaching Armageddon contest, it makes perfect sense for him to create artificial issues to divert attention from the biblical scenario. That is why God's people today should be suspicious of any teaching which excludes sanctification from the salvation process. With so many winds of doctrine blowing, it becomes even more urgent to study and pray as never before. Every Christian who survives the terrible shaking ahead of us will find security only in a personal faith rooted in a knowledge of Scripture.

Our enemy is a master of deceit and subterfuge. Attacks on God's law will be refined and devilishly subtle. Only a consistent, living relationship with Christ and His Word can prepare any of us for the fiery crucible of deception which lies just ahead. We must saturate our minds with the truth as it is in Jesus. All must be especially certain of where they stand concerning sin and concerning God's law.

But being able to recognize the diversionary tactics of the enemy is only a part of the problem. Standing firmly and openly against them often involves the risk of alienating many good people who just don't understand the seriousness of the errors. Because Satan's strategy has always been to mingle error and truth together, those who are the quickest to spot the error and oppose it are apt to be labeled as attackers of the truth. True reformers have always had to face the difficult choice of stifling conscience to maintain status quo relationships, or run the gauntlet of ridicule and reproach for resisting an evil that others fail to see. Probably the true heroes in the sight of heaven are the unsung, maligned little people who have stubbornly said no to institutional or personal compromise wherever it appeared. Like Joseph and Moses, they also refused to take the easy popular route which crowd conformity pressed upon them. In moral independence they exercised the power of a positive No. Thank God, such heroes are still with us today.