

Fighting Sin

A GUIDE FOR BELIEVERS



Putting sin to death is one of the primary duties and primary struggles of a believer. This lifelong process is called *sanctification* and it's one of the ways we demonstrate that we've truly been converted. Even stronger, Jesus went to the cross *for our sanctification*.¹

Titus 2:14

*[Jesus] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and **to purify** for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.*

The scriptures are diverse in how they instruct believers to combat sin and temptation. **However, there are two guiding principles.**

¹ Not to mention, for our *justification, adoption, redemption, reconciliation, and glorification.*

PRINCIPLE #1

Believers should fight their sin.

Romans 8:13

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Believers are empowered to live differently once they've been converted. This means that conversion leads to positional holiness *and* practical holiness. *Positionally*, we are *in Christ* and his righteousness is credited to our account by faith. Indeed, Christ *is* our sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30). *Practically*, the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us and his resurrection power is at work within us (Romans 1:4-5, 6:1-14; 8:11, Philippians 2:13; 3:10). That work is important for Christians to understand because without it we're prone to fall back into sinful pre-conversion habits. Paul regularly calls this *the old man* and we are told to put him to death.

Indwelling sin is compared to a person, a living person, called "the old man" with his faculties, and properties, his wisdom, craft, subtlety, strength; this, says the apostle, must be killed, put to death, mortified, -- that is, have its power, life, vigour, and strength...taken away by the Spirit.²

PRINCIPLE #2

There is always a way out.

1 Corinthians 10:13

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

² John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers* (CCEL, 1805), 10.

We're reminded that Jesus was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). For our sake, Jesus was sent in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh (Romans 8:3). This means that Jesus, being fully human, was subjected to temptation like we are, and Jesus, being fully human, never gave into temptation because unlike us, he always chose the way of escape. As our savior, Jesus gave us his perfect record, payed for our sins, and rose for our justification. As our God and King, he calls us to live a holy life empowered by the Spirit and has demonstrated it by doing it himself.

Since temptation comes in many different forms, the scriptures provide many ways to combat it. It requires Christian wisdom³ and Christian community to help us discern which action to take in our fight against sin. Here are a few:

1. Take drastic steps.

Matthew 5:29–30

²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Sometimes we need to completely remove the temptation from our lives. Keep in mind that an *eye* and a *hand* are morally neutral. This means that some things need to be evaluated based on whether they are helping or hurting us spiritually. For example, our phones, computers, certain relationships, and specific locations may be harmful to us spiritually and Christian logic demands that we take drastic action towards them. As believers, we are convinced that making hard decisions for holiness is honoring to the Lord and should never lead to regret. *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see*

³ Or as Vanhoozer calls it, *theological improvisation*. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Putting on Christ: Spiritual Formation and the Drama of Discipleship," *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 8, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 147–171; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine*, 0035th edition. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

God (*Matthew 5:8*). Ironically, in order to see God rightly, we may need to pluck out our eye.

2. Run away.

2 Timothy 2:22

So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

Sometimes, the smartest thing to do is to physically remove yourself from the temptation. This requires knowledge of yourself and your situation. For example, the scriptures often *describe* and *prescribe* fleeing when the temptation is sexual in nature (*Genesis 39:11-13*, *1 Corinthians 6:18; 10:8-14*).

3. Confess sin immediately.

We should confess our sins to God and others.

2 Samuel 12:13

*David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."
And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die.*

James 5:16

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

To confess is to say exactly what you've done and then experience the blessing of God's forgiveness and cleansing grace. Confessing sin to other believers is a great way to ensure that you're not hiding sin in the dark. Not to mention, fellow believers can remind us of gospel truths and pray for our hearts to lay hold of them by faith.

4. Repent.

Luke 3:8

Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.

*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance. - **Martin Luther***

Repentance involves confession but goes a step further. Repentance is a godly resolve to never go back to our former way of life. Repentance is a change of heart that leads to a change of behavior. Theologians sometimes refer to repentance as that which occurs at the intersection of *conviction* and *contrition*. *Conviction* is a sense that we’ve done something wrong. *Contrition* is the desire to change. Both are necessary elements of repentance. We must *acknowledge* that we are in the wrong and *desire* to be transformed according to the will of God, in the image of his Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 4:3, Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:18).

5. Pray.

Matthew 26:41

“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

One of the smartest ways to avoid sin is to avoid temptation. It is not a sin to be tempted but you cannot sin unless you are tempted (James 1:14–15). This is why we pray, *lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil* (Matthew 6:13). We should pray for God to orchestrate our day so that temptation is avoided. At the same time, we should pray to delight in God so that His desires become ours (Psalm 37:4).

6. Be a consistent Theologian.

Psalms 119:11

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.

Lamentations 3:21-23

²¹ But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:

²² The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end;

²³ they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Every Christian is a theologian and every temptation is a theological crisis. Will we believe God's word or the lies of this world? Will we submit to the Lordship of Christ or betray him with a kiss? When the unexpected happens, will we rest in divine sovereignty or live like we deny it? These questions are profoundly theological in nature and require us to have a repository of theological content ready to *call to mind*. Theology then, helps us to know and love God. It is *information applied for the purpose of transformation*.⁴ Without a consistent theological perspective, we will be driven and tossed by the wind.

Every Christian is a theologian. Be a *consistent* theologian.

⁴ "The purpose of theology is the knowledge of God applied as wisdom. It forms godly character in Christians as they live in community, and it governs the loves and the lives of faithful Christians who serve God and transform culture. Any theology that loses contact with this goal falls short." See David K. Clark and John S. Feinberg, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2010), 37.



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