

# Habitual Persistent Sin

By Dave DeWitt and Kevin Rubley

When we come to faith in Christ and begin to grow as a Christian, we desire to rid ourselves of our sin. Our “big” socially awkward sins are usually obvious, and we tend to deal with them, although not without difficulty, in a generally successful manner. Some deal with alcoholism, some with drug addiction, some with adulterous affairs, some with lying, pornography, blasphemy, or hatred. But that’s what believers in Jesus Christ do. Believers deal with their sin.

*No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God (1 John 3:9-10).*

Over a reasonable amount of time (and sometimes immediately), we rid ourselves of those blatantly obvious sins. Then, just about the time we think we are on a path toward righteous living, something happens that brings us face-to-face with some sins that will just not go away. As we mature, external sinful acts begin to disappear, but the evil *thoughts and intentions of the heart* remain (Matthew 15:19; Hebrews 4:12). Try as we may, our evil thoughts are stubborn and obstinate. The old man’s sinful pleasure base is still there and still strong. As we mature, we will all come to confront our habitual persistent sin.

## Understanding Habitual Persistent Sin

### Sin Is Anything Contrary to the Character of God

Before we pursue an understanding of habitual persistent sin, we should first define sin. Sin is not just selfishness. Sin is not just breaking God’s law. At its foundation, **sin is that which is contrary to the character of God**. God Himself is the definition of good. Goodness is not some standard outside of God, which God keeps. Goodness is God Himself. Anything contrary to His character, anything that offends His holiness, is sin—by definition. God told Ezekiel,

*Yet your fellow citizens say “The way of the Lord is not right,” when it is their own way that is not right (Ezekiel 33:17).*

Sin is not the ying/yang coequal opposite of good. Sin is something evil, and evil cannot exist without good. Evil is like an adjective that modifies good with a perversion. If I have a broken arm, I must first have a good arm to break. So the character of God is good. And the fact that God actually exists, makes the perversion of His character possible. That perversion is the definition of sin.

### Habitual Persistent Sin Offers Pleasure

The primary reason we sin is for enjoyment or as a response to pain. It gives us pleasure, or we think it will relieve our suffering. And as sinful pleasure becomes habitual and addictive, it tells us two lies:

- (1) It tells us that it will **satisfy** a “need.”
- (2) It convinces us that we **cannot live without it**.

As believers in Christ, we have a new nature. As we grow in Christ, we realize the new man can orient us toward the joy found in the character of God rather than the pleasure of violating it (Psalm 37:4). So the war is on. The believer has a battle of two competing sources: the old self and the new self (Colossians 3:9-10). The challenge is to *put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has*

*been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth* (Ephesians 4:24). Most believers do not make it to maturity because they like sin too much.

### **Habitual Persistent Sin Is Learned Over Time**

As we grow up, we increase in our knowledge, experience, and exposure to everything in the world around us, including its sin. And through trial and error of the sin we are exposed to, we pick up, choose, and develop our tastes for certain sins. We “gain” familiar patterns of our favorite sinful desires and turn them into lusts. It’s the *former lusts* Peter talked about when he said,

*As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts, which were yours in your ignorance* (1 Peter 1:14).

Like everything else, the more we practice our favorite sins:

- The better we get at performing them
- The more efficient we get at getting away with them
- The more entrenched they become in our lives

In some cases, we build our lives upon them. We personalize sin, just like we personalize settings on our computer or cell phone.

Not all sins become a life-long problem. We might get drunk, throw up, and decide not to do that again. We might try shoplifting, get caught, and decide it’s not worth it. But if nothing physically or socially detrimental happens right away, the seemingly free sin-based pleasure encourages us to try it again. Not getting caught or suffering harm strengthens our tendency to repeat those high-pleasure sins. Sins we have learned how to get away with, tend to become habitual. Sin always leads toward destruction, but that is not obvious when we get away with it for a period of time.

*But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death* (James 1:14-15).

### **Habitual Persistent Sin Is Often Established in Community**

You’ve heard, “Nobody likes to drink alone.” Sin can become persistent and habitual when our culture, our community, and our peers accept our sin. Tolerance for sinners increases our tolerance for sin. Any social community which accepts a person the way he is makes him worse.

*Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them* (Ephesians 5:11).

In the midst of pursuing sin, we tend to find others pursuing similar sins. “We want to go where everybody knows your name and troubles are all the same.” If you are driving considerably faster than the speed limit on a highway with hundreds of other cars going considerably faster than the speed limit and you all pass a police car, you are not very concerned. But if you are on a country road by yourself going considerably faster than the speed limit and see a police car, that’s a different matter.

*Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals* (1 Corinthians 15:33).

If you look at the good guys of the Bible, like Job, Noah, Daniel, Joseph, and Samuel, the Apostles Peter, Paul, and John, they didn’t participate in the community of sinners, and most of them stood alone.

## **Most Habitual Persistent Sins Are Common, But Not All of Them Are Tempting to Everybody**

*Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these (Galatians 5:19-21).*

Men lust. Women gossip. It's almost universal. But not every sin appeals to everybody, or in the same way, or to the same degree. For example, I have no temptation to be an alcoholic, a homosexual, or a pedophile. But gluttony, heterosexual perversion, outbursts of anger...well...moving right along.

There are (at least) three categories of sin:

- (1) **Things that are always sinful**, like adultery, homosexuality, and lying.
- (2) **Things that are sinful when taken to excess**, like eating =>gluttony, drinking=>drunkenness, drug use =>drug abuse, providing needs=>materialism.
- (3) **Things that are sinful for one but not for another**, like alcohol for one and certain foods for another, things that violate my conscience that do not violate your conscience.

## **The Sin Nature Is Inescapable**

Regulating sin is like damming up water. A dam can stop the outward flow, but it will not stop the flow coming into the reservoir. After a while, it will break the dam or overflow its banks. If you think you have your sin nature under control [or if you believe a view of the spiritual life that says you have no sin nature], you are only leaving yourself vulnerable for sin to express itself in an undetected and/or unexpected way.

## **The Escape of 1 Corinthians 10:13**

The question is, "Does 1 Corinthians 10:13 tell us there is a way to escape sinful temptation?"

*No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.*

If this is translated correctly, it says that God tempts people to sin, and along with the temptation to sin, God provides a way to escape the sin so that you will be able to endure His temptation. Notice that the one providing *the way of escape* is the same one providing *the temptation*. But James said that God never tempts anyone.

*Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. [In James 1:13, the word translated tempt and tempted is πειράζω (peirazo).]*

God cannot be tempted because all His desires are good—by definition—and He does not change. If He wants to do something, that thing is good because that's how good is defined. So evil is categorically impossible for God. Then James adds the fact that God never tries to get anyone to do things contrary to His consistent character. So it would be impossible to assume God would provide a temptation, even one with a way of escape.

We must, therefore, conclude, *temptation* is not a good translation of πειράζω (peirazo) in 1 Corinthians 10:13. This word for *temptation* is also the word for *test*. If we translate it as *test*, 1 Corinthians 10 is saying we are not *tested beyond what we are able*. Also, the word *escape* [ἐκβασίς (ekba-

sis)] means *a way out* or *an end*. The only other place this word *escape* is used in the Bible is in Hebrews 13:7, where it means the *result of their conduct*.

*Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the **result of their conduct**, imitate their faith.*

So, it seems that 1 Corinthians 10:13 should be translated:

*No **test** has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be **tested** beyond what you are able, but with the **testing** will provide the way **to conduct yourself through it** also, so that you will be able to endure it.*

It seems that the idea of this verse is not that there is a way to escape sin, but that there is a way to endure the trials that life brings our way. In the context of 1 Corinthians 10, Paul is saying our life-tests do not have to lead to sin and rebellion, as they did with the Israelites in the wilderness, because God *will provide the way* to endure those trials, to have a way through those trials to the end of our lives. [This is also the understanding of “The Ryrie Study Bible.”]

God will provide a way for you to endure, be able to bear, a way through your trials or tests in life. God tests His people, but God does not tempt people to sin.

## **The Sin Nature Is Incurable**

Sin cannot be controlled legalistically because sin is not just something “out there,” it’s something inside our nature that proceeds out from us. It’s part of who we are. And there is no cure for it this side of the grave.

[Jesus] *was saying, “That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man”* (Mark 7:20-23).

How do you put rules around the evil thoughts that come from your heart? We cannot eliminate our evil thoughts with laws, rules, principles, or systematic discipline. Joining a monastery or a convent, becoming part of an Amish community, being a Mennonite, having an accountability or support group will not eliminate our evil thoughts. Paul told the Colossians,

*If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!... [These] are of no value against fleshly indulgence* (Colossians 2:20-23).

Before the Flood,

*...the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually* (Genesis 6:5).

And after the Flood,

*The Lord said to Himself...the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth* (Genesis 8:21).

## **Overcoming Habitual Persistent Sin Does Not Get Easier as We Get Older**

Habitual persistent sin is not restricted, or regulated, by age. In general, as we get older, it is easy to get worse at what we are bad at, and become a crotchety old man or a grouchy old woman. Generally speaking, if you have a persistent sin, it will get worse as you get older. We often think that as our physical bodies deteriorate so will our temptation to sin. Not so! Our bodies may get weaker, but our sin nature does not. If our bodies do not allow us to express our sins the way we used to, our sin nature just expresses itself in other ways. As we get older, we often don’t care what society thinks of us,

we may become lonely, angry, introspective, and offensive. So maturity takes more effort. If we don't work against our sin when we are young, as we get older, it gets harder. The longer we live with our sin, the more our sinful patterns become engrained. Both David and Solomon committed their worst sins when they were over 50. And how you finish your life matters. Paul wrote to Timothy,

*...the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing (2 Timothy 4:6-8).*

Many believers who want to mature will not be able to because they carry too much sinful baggage. As we get older, our baggage gets heavier. As we continue to sin, we keep adding to it, and it gets increasingly hard to carry around. Life is not written in dry erase markers. Life is written in permanent ink, which cannot be erased. We can turn the page, but we cannot erase the past. Whatever we do stays with us. True, Jesus paid for our sins on the cross, and we can have a new position in Him if we receive Him by faith through repentance. But that does not erase the consequences of our sin.

### **Habitual Sins Become Persistent When We Treat Them as a Social Problem**

A common practice today is to move sin into a different category, which allows us to think of sin as something that can be treated as a social ill. Chris Bunn, a friend of mine and pastor in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, recently published a short story about a pastor who was closing his church and posted a sign that read, OUT OF BUSINESS FOR LACK OF SIN. One of his parishioners pointed out that there were still a lot of unreached people in the neighborhood. Then the dialogue went as follows.

The pastor answered, "There are plenty of people. It's the sins that have all moved out. We're going out of business for lack of sin. All we have to offer is God's solution for sin, and when all the sins have disappeared, we've got nothing left to say. There's no longer a market left for what we offer."

Now I was getting worried about the Pastor's state of mind, and nervously asked, "Well, what happened to all the sins? The world used to be full of them."

"Well," he answered, "a great many of them became mistakes, others became addictions or diseases, some weaknesses or needs. Some moved to the city and became lifestyles or rights, and some even moved to one of the coasts and converted altogether to virtues. Even those unable to climb the social ladder to respectability or victimhood have managed to become mere crimes."

The story went on, but the point is clear. When sin changes from a moral to a social condition, it can be treated and managed without being turned away from.

### **Treating Habitual Persistent Sin**

**Most problems that involve people cannot be solved.** If your roof leaks or your car breaks down, you can probably solve those problems. As has often been said, "If money can solve the problem, it's not a very big problem." But when it comes to people, most problems cannot be solved. And we can waste a lot of time and energy trying to solve their (or our own) problems only to be disappointed. The reason most human problems cannot be solved is because there is no cure for the sin nature. But there is an important corollary to that truth.

**Most problems can be treated.** Even though most problems cannot be solved, we can do something about them. We cannot eliminate the temptations caused by our sin nature. But we can treat them. So

the advice we have is not how to get rid of the temptations of our sin nature. That cannot be done. But we will offer some thoughts about how to deal with them.

## **1. Fear God more than you fear the consequences of your sin.**

*Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin" (Exodus 20:20).*

Moses defined "fear" as *be afraid* of, not respect or even reverence. The above instance is interesting because Moses used the same word for "fear" in two ways. Actually, there was a right and wrong way to fear, *be afraid* of, God. The Israelites were afraid that they would die because of the presence of God on the mountain. They were concerned about their health, safety, and wellbeing. But God had just given them the Ten Commandments, and these would be a *test* for the people. Moses told the people to not fear the smoke and fire coming out of the mountain, but to fear sinning against God, by not keeping His commandments.

You might do things motivated by love and you might obey God out of love. But when it comes to dealing with your sin nature, you will never conquer it with love. Only fear will result in obedience when your sin nature is involved. For example, children might make a gift for their parents out of love, but when they are naughty, only the fear of discipline will result in obedience.

### **We hope according to our faith. We perform according to our fears.**

So it's clear, we obey what we fear. But when our fear is directed toward the earthly consequences of our sin, and we base our performance on that, we are usually pleasing ourselves rather than God. We have become the center of our morality. Too often Christians suggest this as a deterrent for sin:

- Don't drink and drive because you might kill someone.
- Don't use drugs because it will ruin your body.
- Don't have an affair because it will ruin your marriage.
- Don't commit adultery because you wouldn't want to admit it to your children.
- Don't lie because you will get caught.
- Don't cheat your customers because it's bad for business in the long run.
- Don't overeat because it's unhealthy.
- Don't commit fornication because you can get a disease.

If our motive for not sinning is to benefit us here on earth, then we, not God, are the beneficiaries of our self-denial. It's actually not self-denial at all. God takes a back seat to our self-preservation or our wellbeing.

When we focus on the consequences of our sin, rather than the fear of God, we will tend to ask ourselves if we can afford the cost of sinning.

- Do I have a good enough excuse, so that if I get caught, I can lie my way out of it?
- Will the adverse effects of this be bad enough to offset the pleasure of the sin?
- Can I afford it financially?
- Will it ruin my relationship with my wife or children?
- Will it destroy my reputation?

When the problem is the fallout of our sin, then our focus is horizontal, on ourselves or on one another. When we see the problem as the sin itself, then our focus is vertical, on God.

*The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person (Ecclesiastes 12:13).*

## **2. Keep on Repenting**

**We will not have a chance against habitual sin without continual repentance.**

**Repentance** μετάνοια (*metanoia*) is a change of mind, and repentance is a big deal with God.

- “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord God. “Therefore, **repent** and live (Ezekiel 18:32).
- **Repent**, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2).
- The kingdom of God is at hand; **repent** and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15).
- ...unless you **repent**, you will all likewise perish (Luke 13:3).

Remember, if we are justifying, excusing, or giving reasons for sin, then we are not repenting of it. There is a saying in politics, “If you are explaining, you are losing.” Similarly, with your moral conduct, if you are explaining it, you are not repenting of it.

**There are several common reasons for not repenting:**

- We have convinced ourselves (or someone else has convinced us) that what we are doing isn’t sin.
- We enjoy doing it too much to give it up.
- We give up hope of improvement. After we feel like we have tried everything and we still sin, we give up on overcoming that sin.
- We see it as a minor sin. We think, “It’s not that big of a deal.” If we see it as clearing the stones out of a field, we will pick up the big ones first. We may or may not get around to clearing the little ones.
- We suppose God will overlook it. “In my case, this is something God understands.”
- We justify it because the sin “isn’t hurting anyone.” We stop thinking of sin as something against God and focus on the question, “Does it hurt people (or animals or the environment)?”
- We begin looking downhill. We look at people who are worse than we are and measure ourselves against them. “Everyone does it, and I’m not as bad as that guy.”
- We don’t have our minds trained to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:14).
- Our sins are not socially obvious and are culturally acceptable, so it’s easy to ignore them.

The point is, don’t go down that rat hole. Repentance is a change of mind, and a change of mind is reflected in a change of life. Keep on repenting.

## **3. Don’t Use Repentance as Leverage for Sin**

Repentance can go the other way. We should be continually confessing our sin to God and living in repentance (1 John 1:8-10). But it’s also possible to use that idea to continue to sin. Don’t be like the kid who prayed and asked God for a bike. But then he said, “I know God doesn’t work that way, so I stole the bike and asked for forgiveness.” It’s the old idea that it’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission. Don’t put yourself in a position where you are presuming upon the grace of God. It’s easy to say Jesus paid for all my sin on the cross so all I have to do is repent and ask for forgiveness. It’s a dangerous thing to play games with the grace of God.

- *It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31).*

- *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? (Romans 6:1-2).*

#### **4. Avoid Places and Situations Where You Tend to Sin Most Often**

Ezekiel wrote,

*Then some elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me. And the word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Son of man, **these men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity.** Should I be consulted by them at all? (Ezekiel 14:1-3).*

It’s hard to avoid persistent sin when we set it right before our face. Generally, we will commit certain sins in certain situations more than in other ones. If we take note of that, we can either avoid the sin-causing situations, or if it’s unavoidable, and sometimes it is, then be on the alert that it is a danger zone requiring special caution and preventative measures. Joseph could not avoid being in the same house with Potiphar’s wife. But when she *caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me!”* [Joseph] **left his garment in her hand and fled** (Genesis 39:12).

If you gossip, ask yourself in which situations are you usually in when you gossip. If you practice some sort of sexual immorality (say, viewing pornography), what situations are you in when you do that? For example, you don’t usually gossip alone or view pornography with others. If you have a problem with blasphemy, one question might be, “Are you more likely to blaspheme when you are around your children and grandchildren, or when you are around other people who blaspheme?”

*Do not be deceived: Bad company corrupts good morals (1 Corinthians 15:33).*

So one suggestion is to be aware of your most likely sinful situations, and avoid them or be on high alert.

#### **5. Conviction Requires Action**

The Holy Spirit is a *Helper* (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). Positionally, He cleanses, and regenerates and renews us (Titus 3:5). Experientially, He will convict you of your sin, but He does not get rid of your sin for you. It is up to us to be obedient to the Holy Spirit.

When it comes to **God the Father**, the emphasis is on who He is and what He does.

- *Have you not heard? Long ago I did it, from ancient times I planned it. Now I have brought it to pass (Isaiah 37:26).*

When it comes to **God the Son**, the emphasis is on giving and judgment. Giving at the first coming, judgment at the Second Coming.

- *I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me (Galatians 2:20).*
- *For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son (John 5:22).*

When it comes to **God the Holy Spirit**, the emphasis is on what He offers as a teacher and a helper.

- *But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things (John 14:26).*

So, what exactly does the Holy Spirit do? The Holy Spirit convicts, leads, guides, and fills (John 16:8; Romans 8:13-14; Ephesians 5:18), but He does not force, demand, or orchestrate our actions. He calls us to obedience, but He does not organize or arrange that obedience. We have to do that as a response to His conviction (John 16:8).



## 6. Take a Stand Against Unrepentant Sinning Believers

Peter wrote:

*Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God (1 Peter 4:1-2).*

Peter tells us that one way to cease from sin is to suffer in the flesh, and the context of that suffering is not being sick or getting caught for a crime, but suffering *no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God*. We should ask, “Am I suffering because I am a human or because I am a Christian? Atheists can get sick, sued, or thrown into prison for a crime. So how might we suffer for the will of God? Many Christians suffer but not because of their faith. If you would like to change that and suffer for your faith, and have a taste of what the apostles suffered, here is an easy way to do that. **Take a stand against the sin around you, especially in those believers close to you.**

For example, suppose you take a stand against a Christian son or daughter or close relative who is living with a girlfriend or boyfriend, practicing homosexuality, having an affair, or getting divorced and remarried, lying to their customers, gossiping, or following other gods like astrology or some pantheistic meditation. If we take a stand against unrepentant sinful actions of those who call themselves Christians, we are on a path of suffering *for the will of God*. That suffering greatly aids the process of ceasing from sin because it takes a public stand for godly living.

Usually, people will say something like, “You are just a hypocrite, pointing the finger at someone else,” or “Instead of pointing a finger at the sins of others, you should look at the fingers pointing back at yourself.” It’s true. That’s the point. We should be constantly examining ourselves. But what causes us to do that? Let’s look at Galatians 6:1 and focus on the last phrase of the verse:

*Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.*

We have been involved in several situations over the years where separation of fellowship was carried out. Without exception, the biggest impact was upon those making the decision to carry out the separation. The decision to separate fellowship jerks your **own** moral chain faster than anything we know. It is far more effective at conviction of sin and self-examination than an accountability group. Nothing against accountability groups, they can be very helpful. But it will not usually provide the self-examination that happens when we personally take a stand against the sinning Christians around us.

The tendency of everyone involved in the process of evaluating and confronting the unrepentant sinner is to think, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” Actually, one of the main reasons people do not want to take a stand against unrepentant sin is because they do not want to examine themselves, or be examined by others. But Paul said,

*Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you (2 Corinthians 13:5).*

*Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25).*

The question is, are you going to *deny yourself* or gratify yourself? Are you going to take up your cross, which includes all your temptations to sin, *and follow* Christ or are you going to follow your temptations? Either you will deny yourself or you won't. It's up to you. Oh, and by the way, you will be judged accordingly.

- Genesis 4:6-7 — ... *sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, **but you must master it.***
- Genesis 39:12 — *She caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me!" And **he left his garment in her hand and fled...***
- Job 1:1 — *There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless, upright, **fearing God and turning away from evil.***
- Psalms 18:23 — *I was also blameless with Him, and **I kept myself from my iniquity.***
- Romans 6:11-13 — *Even so **consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign** in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and **do not go on presenting** the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness.*
- Romans 13:12-14 — *Therefore let us **lay aside the deeds of darkness** and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, **and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.***
- 1 Corinthians 6:18 — ***Flee immorality.***
- 1 Peter 2:24 — *Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, **being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.***
- 1 Peter 5:9 — *Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But **resist him, firm in your faith.***

## **7. Think of the Spiritual Life as a Battleground, Not a Playground**

This world we live in, the life we live this side of the grave, is not a playground but a battleground. We are not waiting for God to call us in from playing, but to call us home from fighting. Some of that war is external (Ephesians 6:10-17). But that's not all of it. Some of it is also internal (Romans 3:23; 7:14-25). We must all say with the Apostle Paul, *I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good* (Romans 7:21). So what do we do about it? In the end, the internal battle is between what you want and what God wants.

We need to understand that we are at war. Two times Paul told Timothy to *fight the good fight* (1 Timothy 1:18; 6:12). To become a believer in Jesus Christ is to enter into a conflict which will continue as long as we are living this side of the grave. Unbelievers do not experience this war. The war is because of our salvation. Salvation gives us peace with God and declares war against sin. *Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.* If you have been called to eternal life in Jesus Christ, you are called into a spiritual war here on earth. We are not victims, we are warriors.

The war is fought on two fronts. One is external. One is internal.

**The external front** is a conflict between the desires of our new nature and the desires of Satan and his world system. It manifests itself in things like false teachers, false prophets, false religions, cults and progressive philosophies. It dominates the agenda of Hollywood, liberal politics, and the universities where we send our children. But all that is just a manifestation, it's not the real external enemy. Externally, Paul said you must

*Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.*

But that is not our focus in this paper.

**The internal front** of our spiritual warfare is a conflict between the desires of our new nature, and those of our old sin nature. Satan may tempt us to follow our sin nature, but the internal conflict is between our old and new natures, the old man and the new man. It's why we are to

*lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit...and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth (Ephesians 4:22 & 24).*

Our focus here is on the internal war, and especially those battles we habitually lose to our persistent sin. Those battles are probably best described in Romans 6 and 7.

**Romans 6:1-10** tells us about the new position believers have in Christ – baptized into His death, buried with Him, and raised with Him. Positionally, judicially, foundationally, *our old self was crucified [with Him has been added by the translators], in order that [with the purpose that] our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves [it's an infinitive, "to no longer be slaves"] to sin (verse 6).*

[The "positional/experiential" distinction was taught by L. S. Chaffer and Charles Ryrie. We can find no better way to put it. Some object and say our sanctification is "actual." Okay, but so is our sin nature actual, alive and well. So some sort of distinction needs to be made between our position in Christ and our struggle with sin while in this mortal body. And it's not just physical because the body does not sin all by itself, it requires a perverted spiritual nature (animals don't sin). Clearly, our "old man" does not go away with salvation (Ephesians 4:22 & 24). So we feel comfortable using the Chaffer/Ryrie "positional/experiential" distinction.]

**Romans 6:11-23** focuses on the application of our position. God's grace through the cross abolished our slavery to sin. But the cross makes us free from sin, not free to sin. To be experientially free from sin, this side of the grave, we have to choose to walk away from that slavery to sin. That's what we usually call salvation. But that salvation gives us the freedom to choose to serve God and become slaves to His righteousness, or go back and serve our old sin master – our sin nature.

A good example is the Israelites who God delivered from Pharaoh with the Passover (which is a type of what Christ did on the cross – 1 Corinthians 5:7). When they applied the blood to their doorposts they were free from the death plague which was on the Egyptians (like our salvation). But then they had to decide to follow God by keeping the Mosaic Law. Actually, some of them wanted to return to Egypt (like we want to return to our sin – Exodus 14:11). The Law for them was comparable to our new nature. God gave them a way to follow Him, but they had to decide to keep it.

When people are in slavery, there is a sense in which life is easier. Slaves do not have to make decisions about right and wrong because a master does that for them. But when they are freed from slavery, they have to make their own decisions. And that decision making is a continual daily process. When Lincoln abolished slavery in America, when Wilberforce abolished slavery in England, when the Soviet "Iron Curtin" fell in Eastern Europe, when the "Arab Spring" of the Muslim countries freed the people, it did not result in peace and tranquility. Freedom meant that each individual had to make their own decisions about what was the right thing to do. Decisions that were previously made

for them. This often led to chaos like it did with the Israelites after they left Egypt. The same is true when our salvation frees us from sin. When you are saved you are no longer *slaves to sin*, now it's up to you to decide to be a slave to righteousness. But that is not a one-time decision. It must be made every time our sin nature tempts us to sin. It is not your job to maintain your salvation. But, beginning in Romans 6:11, you learn that your job is to:

- *consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*
- *not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts,*
- *not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but*
- *present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.*

Those decisions are the front line of our internal spiritual warfare, where we confront our habitual persistent sin every day.

## **8. Combat Bad Desires with Good Desires**

Victory over sin is always about obtaining our godly desires. The spiritual war we entered into at salvation is about a conflict of desires.

**Romans 7:1-14** tells us that we need to consider ourselves free (dead to and released) from the Mosaic Law. Not that the Law is bad. *The Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.* But the Law was for Israel not for the church (Galatians 3:25), the Law was for the age that began with Moses and ended at the cross (Romans 10:4), the Law points out our sin, but it does not keep us from sinning (Romans 7:7-10). So we cannot go to the Mosaic Law to fight the internal war.

**Romans 7:15-25** is a great encouragement to most of us. Here Paul describes an inner conflict that all believers in Christ experience. Most of us can say with Paul, especially concerning our habitual persistent sin,

*For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate* (verse 15).

The real problem is one of conflicting desires. The reason I have an internal war going on is because I actually want to do good. My new nature wants good while my sin nature wants to practice evil.

*For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want* (verse 19).

My sin nature is waging war against my new nature, the one I received from God at salvation.

*I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members* (verses 21-23).

My **hope** is expressed in the question and answer,

*Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* (verses 24).

But for now, I need to face the battle with the **conclusion**,

*So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin* (verses 25).

## **Conclusion**

Unbelievers do not have a spiritual warfare. Sin is usually replaced with the idea of malevolence or social injustice with extremists labeled as sociopaths. Sin against God is replaced with mistreatment of other people, or nature or animals. Everything else is dismissed with a need for tolerance.

But when a person receives Christ and becomes a true believer, the Holy Spirit gives him or her a new nature which creates a conflict with the old nature. The old sin nature has created a pleasure base, over time, which has often been supported by a community. Not all of our habitual persistent sins are the same, but the sin nature is incurable, and although its manifestations may change as we get older, the sin nature does not get weaker. So the first step in dealing with our habitual persistent sin is to understand it is not just some social or personal quirk which can be handled by changing our situation or going to counseling. The problem is our sin nature, and the war will continue as long as we are in this mortal body.

We are not just victims of our sin nature, we are called to be warriors who have to enter into the conflict. Although the sin nature cannot be eliminated, the habitual persistent sin it continually tempts us to commit can be treated. In order to treat it, we must fear God more than we fear the consequences of sin. We need to keep on repenting to God for our sin without entertaining the idea that we can presume upon the grace of God and confess it later. We can do some mechanical things, like avoiding places and situations where we are most likely to commit our frequent sins. And using the procedures of Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 5, we can confront other believers we are close to about their persistent sin. But in the end, we need to realize that we are in a spiritual war. And rather than run from the fight, ignore the fight, or pretend there is no fight, we need to *Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called* (1 Timothy 6:12).

In the end:

1. **I must deny myself** the pleasure afforded by my sin nature. Jesus said, *If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me* (Luke 9:23).
2. **I must focus on the good that I want** in my new nature, and not *practice the very evil that I do not want* (Romans 7:19).

My eternal rewards depend on it.

# Appendix

## Three Random, Related, Relevant Observations

### 1. It is not always good to discuss our persistent sin.

We should always confess all of our sins to God. Repentance is essential in your relationship with God. (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Acts 2:38). When our sin affects other people, we should ask their forgiveness (Matthew 18:21-22). It is also valuable to ask a *righteous* person to pray for you (James 5:16). But at the core of our sin nature is a despicable evil that should not always be discussed publicly. Here are a few things Paul told the Ephesians:

- **Ephesians 5:3-4**—*But immorality or any impurity or greed must **not even be named among you**, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.*
- **Ephesians 5:12-13**—*...for it is **disgraceful even to speak** of the things which are done by them in secret. But all things become visible when they are exposed by the light, for everything that becomes visible is light.*

Apparently, there are some sins, like *immorality or any impurity or greed*, which **must not even be named among you**. And sometimes, it is **disgraceful even to speak** of the things which are done by them in secret. Rather they should be *exposed by the light* of the word of God.

In the 73<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, Asaph tells about a crisis in his faith. He thought that God rewarded the righteous in this life and punished the wicked. So when he found that many wicked people seemed to be just fine and the poor not rewarded, it almost caused him to lose his faith in God. He had so much doubt that he said this in verse 13:

*Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence*

Then Asaph said something very interesting. He said his doubt was so severe that he decided not to tell anybody about it, lest it cause doubt in others. In verse 15 he wrote,

*If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.*

Both Paul and Asaph found a solution in the holiness of God, not wallowing in the details of sin. Paul said, *all things become visible when they are exposed by the light*, not when they are discussed in groups. Asaph resolved his doubt when he *came into the sanctuary of God* (Psalm 23:17), not by telling a group about his doubt. Paul and Asaph concluded that there are some sins, at some times, that are better kept to ourselves. Just talking about them might tempt others to follow them. We should expose our sins to the light of the Word of God and holy character of God, not parade them in front of others.

When sin is discussed openly it tends to become acceptable. Putting sins like homosexuality, abortion, cohabitation, and divorce on TV, makes them more acceptable. The more you talk about sin the more acceptable it becomes. Support groups may amplify the problem they are trying to overcome. Having a discussion about a certain sin is what Satan did with Eve in the garden. He turned sin into a conversation. Sinners need to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Christ. They need to be taught to turn away from sin and press on to maturity. They need to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. They do not need to be given sensitivity training that allows them to wallow in their sin, and the sins of others.

If you have stubborn sinful tendencies, it's good to tell some godly friend and have them pray for you. James said,

*Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed.*

*The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much* (James 5:16).

This statement from James would include telling a friend who is a *righteous man* or woman about your sinful temptations and asking that friend to pray for your spiritual healing. But this verse is not about discussing your sin before believers in some public manner, which may only serve to betray a *generation of Your children* (Psalm 73:14).

## **2. The heart is the heart of the matter.**

In the Bible, the word *heart* is often used metaphorically to represent the connection between personality and spirituality. The Hebrew word for heart is לֵב (*leb*). The “Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament” says,

“By far the majority of the usages of לֵב (*leb*) refer either to the inner or immaterial nature in general or to one of the three traditional personality functions of man; emotion, thought, or will.”

The Greek word is καρδία (*kardia*). Thayer's Lexicon says this word includes,

“the center and seat of spiritual life, the soul or mind, as it is the fountain and seat of the thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes, endeavors.”

The *heart* represents what's inside of, or the foundation of, a person's thoughts and desires, whether good or evil (Genesis 6:5-6). When you only change the outside and not the heart, then habitual sin continues to be persistent in our desires. In order to deal with stubborn sin, we have to change not just our habits but our moral desires.

*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, **first clean the inside of the cup** and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also. You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery” but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his **heart*** (Matthew 23:25-28).