

What About ... Willpower

By Dave DeWitt

God told Cain, "...sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). James said, "resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). But how to do that? How do we master it and resist the devil?

First, let's deal with some naive nonsense about this. We have all heard something like, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," "If you can think it, you can do it," "You can do anything you set your mind to." Yeah, right! That may (or may not) be helpful if you have a physical project, or personal ambition, but don't apply it to using willpower to overcome a sin, unless you are planning on disappointment and failure. Ideas like "set your mind to it," usually means overcoming obstacles while continuing to live in sin. It's like floating down a rapid in a kayak. You can "set your mind on" improving your style as you avoid rocks and whirlpools. But that's your life with sin. Reversing a life of sin is like getting out of your kayak and walking back upstream. Only then do you realize the power of the river. A life of sin might show you the consequences of sin, but you only know the power of sin when you try to reverse it.

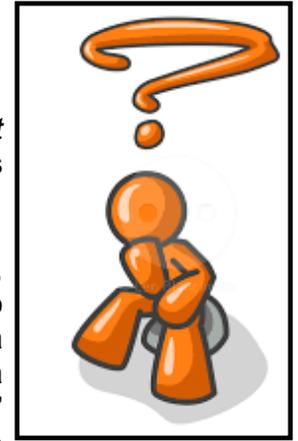
The dictionaries define willpower as "control." I think the best definition comes from Gotquestions.org, "a **strong determination to do something or not to do something.**" The question is, "Can we overcome sin with willpower?" Here is what the Apostle Paul said:

Romans 7:18, 22-25, *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not...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. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! 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.*

Let's make some observations from this paragraph about believers. Those of us who have been set free from the body of this death...through Jesus Christ our Lord, and the ones who can say, *I myself with my mind am serving the law of God* (Romans 7:24-25):

- Nothing good dwells in the desires of our flesh.
- We are continually waging war with our sin nature and losing.
- Our sin makes us wretched (the word used only here and Revelation 3:17, also means miserable).
- Our fleshly sin nature wants to serve the law of sin.

We don't accidentally fall into sin. We decide to sin. Whether it is the devil or our own sin nature tempting us, we decide that giving in to a sinful temptation is the better thing to do, at the time. As believers in Jesus



Christ, we would say that committing the sin is wrong. But, at the moment of the sin, we do not think God has our best interest in mind, or we simply do not care. Our sin nature is so disgustingly evil that it will defy God to His face. We know very well that we are quenching the Holy Spirit, and we do not care.

I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good (Romans 7:21). Satan tempts us (Ephesians 6:11), God disciplines us (Hebrews 12:7-11), and the Holy Spirit fills us (Ephesians 5:18). Nonetheless, it is our own will that decides to sin (James 1:17). So, what can we do about it?

Don't Fight a Battle You Know You Are Going to Lose

Ok, here is what most sermons are not going to tell you. The reality is, your willpower is going to lose every battle it has with your sin nature, plus your sin nature will never go away, give up, or get weaker this side of the grave.

So, how to fight such an enemy? How do you fight a war when you know you will lose every battle? You know that, at the end of the war, you will be declared victorious, the other side of the grave (Romans 8:1), but your willpower will lose every battle (Romans 7:25). Clearly, if you will lose every battle, do not fight any you do not want to lose.

If you depend on your willpower to win your battle with a specific sin, you will lose. You might think you are winning a few skirmishes, but eventually you will lose, every time! If you put yourself in a situation where you are tempted to commit adultery, but plan

on your willpower overcoming your temptation, your sin nature will sooner or later (and probably sooner) defeat your willpower. You are going to lose, every time!

“Forty percent of the pastors surveyed admitted to having an extra marital affair after entering the ministry” [standingstoneministry.org]. Why is that? Answer: because part of most pastors’ job description is to do counseling. That means sometimes (or often) being alone with women in his office. Why do 40% of the pastors have affairs? Because they enter the arena where affairs are likely and depend on their willpower to defeat their sin nature.

If you put yourself in a situation where you are tempted to gossip but count on your will power to not actually gossip, your sin nature will defeat your willpower. You are going to lose, every time! As Clairee Belcher said in the 1989 movie *Steel Magnolias*, “If you don’t have anything nice to say about anybody, come sit by me!” This was interestingly depicted in the movie *War Games* where a computer tries to play a thermonuclear war game. In the end, everybody dies. So, the computer concludes, “A strange game, the only winning move is not to play.”

How can you be sure you will not be killed in a knife fight in an alley? Do not go in the alley. How can you keep from being killed by a hungry lion in an arena? Do not go into the arena. The Mosaic Law and the restrictions on Israel against mingling with the Canaanites were about keeping the Israelites out of the arena where they would have to take on their sin nature with their willpower (Deuteronomy 20:17).

Whereas your willpower will lose when confronted with a battle against sin, it can be used to not enter the battle in the first place. We might lose that battle, too, but the odds are better, often because the arena itself is not sinful. It is easier for an alcoholic to decide to not go in a bar, than it is to go in and decide to not drink. It is easier for a pastor to use his willpower to decide to not counsel women alone, than it is to hope his willpower will overcome his temptation in tempting situations. Incarcerated prisoners are forcibly kept out of the arena where their sin flourishes.

The challenge we face is to find a way to self-incarcerate our sin nature. Move away from battles that involve using willpower to defeat the deeds of the flesh. *Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions* (Galatians 5:19-20).

If you take on the deeds of the flesh with your willpower, you might win a skirmish or two and deceive yourself into thinking you are winning, but you will eventually lose the battle. So, do not do that. Whatever arena you are in, when you encounter one of the deeds of the flesh, use your willpower to get out of that arena. Do not ever think that your willpower will help you win a battle with your sin. It won’t. You will lose, every time. “The only winning move is not to play.”

- **Genesis 39:12**, *She caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me!” And he left his garment in her hand and fled and went outside.*
- **Romans 8:13**, *...for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*
- **Romans 13:14**, *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.*
- **Ephesians 5:3**, *But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.*
- **1 Thessalonians 5:22**, *Abstain from all appearance of evil.*
- **James 4:4**, *You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*