

Holy War

What do I want you to know?

We are at war

Why do I want you to know it?

We all struggle with sinful desires.

What do I want you to do?

Recognize your weak areas and seek the Spirits help in raising your defense.

Why do I want you to do it?

So that instead of beating ourselves down, we can lift each other up.

The Salvation Army
Mississippi-Rideau Lakes Corps
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At what might be called the family homestead, my parents had two large flower beds that bordered the transition from the patio to a large backyard. Unfortunately, into these beds was planted ‘ageopodium podagraria’, also known as Bishops Weed or the deceptively tranquil name *Snow on the Mountain*. Sounds serene, doesn’t it? However, in short order the Snow on the Mountain became ‘snow in the grass’, ‘snow in the fence’, ‘snow in the joints of the patio stones’, ‘snow in the just about everywhere’. I spent a weekend one summer on my knees digging down into the beds and lifting patio stones to sift out all remnants of the parasite, only to see it return with a vengeance the following year. Snow in the Mountain is a plant from hell. One website says, “One of the most difficult things about growing Aegopodium is preventing it from spreading into areas where it isn’t wanted.”¹

To be honest, that plant is a good illustration of sinful desires. You see, buried deep within each of us are these nasty desires that are always looking for a place grow, spreading into areas where they aren’t wanted. I’ll admit, I have them, and if I’m not careful they can quickly overrun any defense I might muster against them. An acquaintance gets a plum opportunity, and a little thought pokes: “What’s so special about them?” I hear that a friend has had a stroke of good fortune, and a jealous thought pops up, “Nothing good ever happens to me,”—and I’ll admit, sometimes envy arises. I don’t like having those thoughts, and I’d like to say I’m getting better at suppressing them, but it still bugs me that they are there. I think to myself, “Gary, you’re better than that,” and suddenly pride raises its head.



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Now, because Peter broaches the topic, I’m going to assume that I’m not alone; that others too struggle with sinful desires—those Snow in the Mountain type growths that no matter how hard you try, always come back and always spread to where you don’t want them. And if others have them, I’ll assume that here this morning, at least one of you struggles with what Peter calls ‘sinful desires.’ I want to focus really on just verse eleven, which is, by the way, a transition into a new section of Peter’s letter. He has, up to now been describing for us the holiness into which we have entered in coming to Christ, and now begins to describe how we live out that holiness each day in an unholy world.

Here is what I want you to know. We are at war. We all struggle with sinful desires. We need to acknowledge that we have these desires and that only through the Spirit can we be victorious over them, and instead of beating ourselves down, like Peter, we need to lift each other up. Certainly, Peter’s letter is not one of condemnation, but of encouragement. So, let’s listen to the advice of Peter.

11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world,

It has been pointed out that ‘Dear Friends’ does not capture the intimacy, concern and affection that Peter expresses towards his audience. Several translations say ‘Beloved’, while Phillips offers, “those whom I love”. It is only fitting for him to address them such, considering what Peter has previously written about love for one another being a natural product of holiness. All in all, the tone here reflects the bonds that exist between those who have tasted that the Lord is good, and who are building their lives upon the stone the builders rejected.

In addition, the ‘I urge you’ is not so much pushing or prodding, but more an invitation. I picture those times in life when my friends were prodding me into doing something they were too nervous (or smart enough) not to try themselves. “You go first, we’re right behind you,” they would day, then disappear when things went awry.

However, a proper understanding hears him calling them to walk by his side. My beloved friends, come, I implore you to join me, a fellow alien and stranger in the world.” Peter feels a natural affinity with these people, for they are his brothers and sisters in Christ – they too are ‘aliens and strangers in the world.’

From what we know of Peter in the Gospels, he seems to be impulsive, speaking without thinking, and quick to offer his opinion. Then too, being a fisherman, one of those ‘Galileans’ (often offered as a putdown¹), he was most likely rough around the edges. Peter knew what it was to be an outsider.

This is the third time the NIV places ‘strangers’ in the mouth of Peter (1:1 and 1:7), were he is reminding them that this world is not their home. If you remember a few weeks back we looked at how gradually, out of constant exposure or quickly in order to better blend in, an immigrant or an outsider begins to look and sound like the surrounding culture. My Irish brogue giving way to a more Canadian way of talking, eh? Peter is reminding them that they are not to adopt the culture where they live, for this is their temporary home; they are to maintain the culture of their true home, Heaven. In other words, they are not to become of reflection of where they are, but be a portrait of where they are headed.

Although we may think ourselves immersed in a culture that is constantly pressing in around us through social media, print media, music media, television and movies, peer pressure and so much more, Peter is writing to a people that faced just as much a squeeze as us. In our Western world today there is a fairly



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¹ Acts 2:7; John 7:41; 7:52

strong divide between the sacred and the secular, a divide we see becoming more pronounced as “Merry Christmas” becomes “Happy holidays” and Easter Break dissolves into Spring Break. Many Schools have Winter Concerts, instead of Christmas Pageants, eh.

In the first century there was no such divide between sacred and secular. Every part of the community life was saturated with the cult of the Empire. Caesar was a god, and every community observance and celebration included offerings to Caesar, as well as a pantheon of other gods. The Jews has long been given a begrudging pass, but no such quarter was given this new sect that seemed to think itself better than everyone else. Christians, who refused to participate in the cult, were viewed as atheists, treasonous, unpatriotic and haters of humans. There was enormous pressure on them in the workers guilds, the marketplace, to conform to that which as followers of Jesus, was abhorrent. They were aliens and strangers sometimes even in their own families.

It was so important then for them to have beloved companions beside whom they could walk in a dark world that just did not understand or accept them. However, not only did they experience pressure from without, there was always the old man pressuring them from within, so Peter warns them...

to abstain from sinful desires,

D.L. Moody was credited with saying on one occasion that “I have more trouble with D.L. Moody than any man I know.” I can sympathize with D.L. Moody, because I know this guy called Gary Reilly who is constantly giving me grief. I love that Peter is an idealist, but then again, we should expect nothing less from a fisherman who well understood that within us there are things that ought not be. “Hold them back; keep them at bay; and keep yourself away from them,” he urges. What are these things of which we are to seek prevention? Sinful desires.

Again, Peter is writing to Christians, to people like you and me who have experienced the salvation of the Lord. We are a new creation; we have been clothed in a righteousness not our own. We are born again. However, both within us and all around us, there are triggers that awaken part of the old nature. The KJV calls them ‘fleshy lusts’, and John Calvin calls them ‘wicked and vicious lusts’, but we must be careful here to not narrow ‘sinful desires’ down to the point where Peter is thought to address only sins of a sexual nature. Rather, in mind here are any desires or longings of any kind that are contrary to God’s will; any passions that are unfitted for a citizen of Heaven.

Last year after Christmas it was found that we had a few extra turkeys left over, and not enough freezer space to contain them. Luckily for us, the outside temperature was for an extended period well below freezing, and so a few boxes were kept in the garden shed at the back of the church. As freezer space became available turkeys were moved from the shed to a new home in a freezer here or in

Perth, until all the turkeys had been moved. Or so we thought. Well, okay, or so I thought. Sometime in late April early May, someone commented on there being a large number of flies by a certain shed. Of course, once the door of the shed was opened it became evident that a box of turkeys had somehow evaded detection. It was not pleasant, and God bless Mark, our Thrift Store driver, for transporting the putrid mess to the dump, and even there the workers were given cause to gag.

I only tell you that story because it is easy for us to overlook something within ourselves, something slowly eroding our resolve and tainting our souls. Peter tells us to abstain from them, avoid them, keep them away, don't give them any quarter. Don't store those thoughts away, but expose them to the light and cast them off. Back a few verses we are told to crave pure spiritual milk, and that is one way to ward off (or discover) sinful desires hidden away or overlooked. The writer of Hebrews warns "*see to it that...no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*"² In the Old Testament there are some harsh examples of rooting out those things that could grow up to defile the community, and we tend to focus on the rooting out, rather than the root itself.

Idolatry³, fornication and promiscuity⁴, even being mouthy with mom or dad was an evil to be purged.⁵ Yet we focus on the severity of the penalty, missing the severity of the sin. When Jesus described how one should deal with sinful desires he went as far as to say, "*If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.*"⁶

Now don't take Jesus literally, He is merely and graphically pointing out that we are to take any and all sinful desires seriously. We are not to wink and nod, or give ourselves a pass, "I'm only human." Being human is the reason we sin, it is not an excuse to sin. The gravity of those sinful desires is given when Peter points out that these sinful desires are actually waging war against our souls.

...which war against your soul.

Please do not overlook the powerful imagery that is used here. Life is not only a struggle, it is constant combat. Have you given much thought to the reality that even now, sitting here in church, sinful desires are warring against you, seeking

² Hebrews 12:15

³ Deuteronomy 16:2-5

⁴ Deuteronomy 22:20-24

⁵ Deuteronomy 21:20-21

⁶ Matthew 5:29-30



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to destroy your very soul? The term Peter uses conveys the severity of the war, for it comes from a root word meaning an encamped army—and not a Salvation Army. Sinful desires are encamped in your life. The actual word means a military campaign. We are engaged in a war of attrition, with those sinful desires are constantly reconnoitering to see where there may be a weakness to exploit.

Perhaps the most apt description of the war was penned by Paul in Romans 7. Does this sound familiar? This is Eugene Petersen's interpretation of Paul.

What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary. But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

Romans 7:15-24 The Message

From the moment you rise in the morning until you settle in for the night, you are engaged in warfare. Sinful desires wage a war of attrition against your soul, attempting to simply wear you down and exhaust your resolve, just poking and prodding, looking for any sign of weakness that can be exploited, and suddenly unleash a blitzkrieg—lightning war against any breach. Peter tells you to give no quarter, to not for a minute allow your defenses down. Abstain from them, he counsels.

You see, although the war rages in you, every defeat, every advance of the enemy against can result in collateral damage. When you give in to those desires, it can affect your marriage, your children, your church, your community. There is more at stake than just yourself. Right after desire lobbs the argument, "Who is ever going to know?", it fires a volley of "What harm is there?" The moment we begin bargaining, weighing options, wandering whether or not, we've lost the battle. James says, "by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after

desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”⁷

The philosopher David Gilmour writes:

I will, I will she sighed to my request
And then she tossed her mane while my resolve was put to the test
Then drowned in desire, our souls on fire
I lead the way to the funeral pyre
And without a thought of the consequence
I gave in to my decadence
One slip, and down the hole we fall
It seems to take no time at all
A momentary lapse of reason
That binds a life for life²

Peter though pleads for us to abstain from those desires, to weed them out and destroy them; to give them no foothold, ‘keep clear’ (TPT) from them, ‘divorce’ (Phillips) yourself from them, ‘don’t give in’ (GNT) to them. There are so many ways of saying it, but I’m sure you get the idea. And never forget that you are not alone. Just as Peter invites you to walk with him, know that there are others with whom you can walk, being an encouragement to each other.

Something of which we must all come to grips—we have desires’ that war against our souls. Peter has previously highlighted the roll of the Word of God in growing us in our Christian walk, so be aware when that voice begins to whisper it’s too tired read the Bible, let’s just watch TV, or scroll through Facebook, or see what our friends are up to on Instagram or Twitter. Though there is nothing wrong in and of themselves, like many things, it’s when we allow those other passions and desires to keep our souls from the Word, we, like flowers denied water, begin to wilt. We become crispy.

There is an incredible scene in *The Two Towers*, when the armies of man are struggling to defend the walls of Helms Deep against an onslaught of Orcs, the sheer numbers of the enemy proving to be too much. The wall is breached and Orcs pour through the opening, threatening to undo man once and for all. Just when it looks like all hope is gone a shining light appears on the horizon and Gandalf arrives with the cavalry of Rohirrim. Whether the Tolkien, who was a Christian himself, had it in mind or not, this battle is an apt portrayal of Paul’s plea in Romans 7: What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.” (Romans 5:6) Our rescue took place on a hill when our Saviour

⁷ James 1:14-15

triumphed over sin by shedding His own precious blood. And though we are still powerless without Him, with Him we are more than conquerors.

If you know areas of weakness in your life, stay away from those areas. If you feel unhealthy desires arise in your heart, don't entertain them, but instead seek His strength to overcome them with healthy thoughts. Practice being graceful when someone receives good news. Develop a habit of putting others before yourself. Be aware of the reality that just like Snow on the Mountain, sinful desires can quickly spread into places not wanted.

We are at war, and we will all struggle with sinful desires. Recognize those areas where you are weak, and ask the Spirit to defend you, and don't allow the battles to beat you up, but know that we have already won the war, so lift each other up. Never forget that He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. Jesus is always there to give us the victory when we call upon Him. And when we do so regularly we can indeed ¹² *Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse [us] of doing wrong, they may see [our] good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

Endnotes

¹www.gardeningknowhow.com/ornamental/groundcover/snow-on-the-mountain/snow-on-the-mountain-plant.htm

² "One Slip", David Gilmour, Phil Manzanera, from the album *A Momentary Lapse of Reason* (Columbia Records: Pink Floyd Music Publishers Ltd., 1987).
