

Every believer is aware of sin. To even become a believer, we must first be confronted by it. There is a God, he has a law, and we have broken it. The terrible price for our sin was paid on the cross. Someone had to die, and Jesus chose to do it for us.

Praise God! This is the good news - that sin no longer separates us from God! The bad news is we still sin. We still sin a lot. We like it. We're drawn to it like an addict to a drug and like a moth to a flame. Perhaps we might self-righteously look down our nose at a drunk or a thief or a homosexual, as if we're somehow better and more deserving of God's love. But is gluttony or gossip or fornication any different? How about unrighteous judgment? There's not a person alive who hasn't broken the most important commandment - to love God before all else. The Bible plainly teaches that we all sin. And if we deny it, we're liars.

1 John 1:8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

So, do we just live with our affliction, knowing we are weak and powerless and destined to be poor sinners all our days? The answer to that question is both yes and no. This is because the children of God are holy spirits in sin suits. God has re-birthed our spirits, but our flesh - which is to say our physical body - is still sin waiting to happen. It craves sin and fights us tooth and nail all day, every day. Our brains only want to think about what's easy and entertaining. Our tongues only want to taste delicious food. Our muscles love to slouch all day in a comfortable chair. One day, we'll be free of these bodies that are constantly hungering for sin, but until then, the fight is on! We are in the middle of battle whether we're aware of it or not. We are supposed to be fully engaged in the conflict, not waving the white flag. The Apostle Paul knew well this dichotomy.

Romans 7:18-19 And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.

So, if we can't stop sinning, can we at least stop sinning less? Yes! And, we should be sinning less as we mature in Christ. If we're still involved in all of the exact same sins as years ago, then something is wrong. How can we help break the cycle of continually doing what we don't want to do? The Bible provides us with an answer.

James 1:14-15 - Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.

As a simple illustration, let's look at a toddler being told no.

Have you ever seen a two-year-old child told not to touch something? First, there is angst at being told no. Then, there's confusion over the instructions. Why can't I touch it? Who made you the boss of me? Then, there's a cursory attempt to obey, but the eyes keep wandering back to what he wants to touch. Gradually, little feet inexplicably wander in that direction, the hand innocently plays nearby, and oops! How did that happen? Little fingers accidentally touch what they were told not to. Of course, none of that was an accident. The truth is that while there was an initial battle for obedience; eventually the will

drops all pretenses and makes a decision not to fight anymore and to do what it wants. This is highly amusing when we're watching the process play out so plainly in a child, but those same steps are how sin takes its course in our lives. We just hide it from ourselves. We are all innocent in our own judgments.

Consider a man who confesses to his wife that on his walk home from work, he tripped on a curb and accidentally committed adultery. Or imagine a thief who explains to the police that he became confused while buying a loaf of bread, and instead accidentally robbed the store at gunpoint. These are not accidents. They are the culmination of many sins, a process that started with temptation. The sin process goes like this:

1. We are tempted to sin.
2. We don't control our thoughts.
3. We begin to treasure the sin in our heart.
4. We act on the sin.

Sometimes this process is so quick; it seems we go straight from temptation to action. But more often, we move through each of the steps. Go back to the example of the adulterer. Here's the sin process:

1. The man is first tempted when he sees a woman he desires.
2. Then, he allows his mind to pursue the pleasure of thinking about the woman. He either pushes aside guilt or begins to justify his reasoning. He is already involved in the sin.
3. Eventually, the temptation becomes rooted like a treasure in his heart, lust which he both hides and continually pulls out to examine and enjoy. It has now become an idol.
4. After a while, he begins to act on the temptation and find ways to be around her and interact with her, until finally, he commits adultery with her.

Now, let's be honest about this. Unless there's a work of God to remove a particular sin's desire from us – which can certainly happen – fighting sin is a lifetime of hard work. This is the dying of flesh, and everything that dies does so kicking and fighting. It's usually a long hard slog, getting better a little bit by little bit. But the war over sin involves many small battles of faith to obey the instruction and leading of the Lord. And, faith pleases God.

Hebrews 11:6 - And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.

Being Tempted

Although sin begins with temptation, is being tempted a sin in itself? Temptation is the desiring of something that it is not in God's will, but is it a sin? No, it is not. If it were, then Jesus was a sinner, because he was tempted by Satan in the beginning of his ministry years.

Matthew 4:1 - Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil.

Jesus really did desire the things offered by Satan. Otherwise, he would not have been tempted. Still, he did not sin.

1 Peter 2:21-22 - To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."

To be in these bodies of flesh means we will be tempted. Although our spirits are alive, our physical bodies remain corrupted. So, we will be tempted, over and over, until we're finally free of these bodies through Jesus. Paul speaks to this in his second letter to Corinth.

2 Corinthians 5:3 - For we will put on heavenly bodies; we will not be spirits without bodies.

However, as much as we can, we can avoid temptation and ask God to keep us from it. In Proverbs, the Holy Spirit exhorts us to avoid temptation, to do what is necessary to not even be near it.

Proverbs 5:7-8 - So now, my sons, listen to me. Never stray from what I am about to say: Stay away from her! Don't go near the door of her house!

And we're all familiar with Jesus' example to us of asking the Lord to keep us from temptation. God doesn't tempt us, but he can help us avoid it.

Matthew 6:13 - And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Just as the best way to win a fight is to not get into one, the best way to win against sin is to avoid temptation. Don't hang out in places or with people or in situations in which we know we're likely to be tempted. Gossipers can avoid spending time with other gossipers. Alcoholics can avoid being in a bar. Unmarried men and women can avoid being alone together. We can surround ourselves with people who push us closer to the Lord, instead of those who encourage laziness, or violence, or gluttony, or homosexuality.

Does that sound too extreme? If so, consider the Lord's advice in Mathew.

Matthew 5:29 – So if your eye – even your good eye – causes you to lust, 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 in hell.

Avoid temptations, because that's the easiest way to deal with sin. All gardeners know, the longer a weed grows, the harder it is going to be to pull it out.

Controlling Our Thoughts

It's very common to hear excuses for sin along the line of, I can't help it. I didn't mean to hurt him, but I hate him. I didn't mean for us to have sex, but I can't stop thinking about her. The reason the world is a slave to their passions is because they are a slave to their passions. Lust, coveting, and hate are not actions; they are thoughts and they are sin. The Lord expects us to be different.

Once we are tempted, the battle begins in earnest, and the battleground is in our mind. Will I allow my brain to think about something it shouldn't or will I decide to think about something else? The sin is not seeing the pretty girl, but in following the thoughts into lust. The sin is not in noticing money left on a desk and desiring it, but in following the thoughts into covetousness and beyond that into theft.

But, I'm not a robot. I can't help what I think about. Actually, yes, I can. Not only can I think about something different, I should choose to do so. This is one of the reasons why the Apostle Paul tells us to think about good things.

Philippians 4: 8-9 - And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

So, we literally put our thoughts onto something else, something good. And if the tempting thought pops back up, we ask God for strength and help and choose to move our thoughts onto something else. Just like training a muscle to be strong, we can help train our brains to become accustomed to thinking about good things. But, like exercising or losing weight, it's not pleasant. It's not what our brains want.

This is the next best way to avoid sin. If we can't avoid the temptation, then control the thoughts and nip it in the bud, because it only gets harder to deal with the further it goes. And beyond avoiding sin, this is also how we grow in Christ, allowing him to transform our lives and desires from seeking the world to seeking God. Take comfort though, it's not all up to us. God helps us with this. Paul speaks about it in Romans.

Romans 12:2 - Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

The world says you can't help how you think; you can't help who you are. But that's exactly what God tells us to do: change the way we think and change the way we are. Make decisions to avoid sin and to bring our thoughts in line with him, and God will transform us to be more like his son. Then, we begin to love what he loves and hate what he hates. We begin to think more like him.

Treasuring a Sin

If we do not control our sinful thoughts, they eventually become a treasure in our hearts. Once a sin becomes a treasure in our heart, it is all the harder to get rid of it. Instead of arranging our life to avoid temptation and evil thoughts, we have likely done the exact opposite and arranged our life to pursue the same temptation and evil thoughts. This sin has now become an idol, and it lives in our heart. We worship it with adoration and desire. We begin to rearrange our life to accommodate it. All of our thoughts are bent on it.

Can we be delivered? God can deliver us! It's his specialty. If we acknowledge that we have sinned and confess that we have no control, he will hear us. We can choose with all our might to turn our thoughts toward him and away from the sin.

James 4:7-8 - So humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world.

God can help us to back up, right out of the hole. He can change our desires of our heart. But I find he almost always requires work on our part. He expects obedience. He expects turning. He expects us to avoid temptation and to control our thoughts. As my pastor preaches to our youth, if they are trying to make a decision in the back seat of a car, they have already made the decision. They were tempted, they have been thinking about it, and it has become a treasure in their heart.

Acting on Sin

Some people believe it's just fine to think about something that they know is wrong as long as they don't actually do it. But Jesus stomps on that idea in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:21-22 - You have heard that our ancestors were told, 'You must not murder. If you commit murder, you are subject to judgment. But I say, if you are even angry with someone you are subject to judgment!

Mathew 5:27-28 - You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

First, all sin – even the smallest thought – separates us from a holy God. But beyond that, sin is never satiated. Give it an inch and it wants a mile. Sinful thoughts grow to sinful desires grow to sinful actions. And unrestrained sin can lead to horrible places. Paul acknowledged this in I Corinthians, right before he teaches about avoiding sexual sin.

I Corinthians 6:9-11 - Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

As we saw in the book of James earlier, when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death. On the other side of sin, there is always regret, and loss, and death.

Romans 6:23 - For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

But, on the other side of repentance and obedience, there is always life, and light, and promise, and redemption.

Once we're caught up in sinful action, we can repent of them, to God first and to those we sinned against. Repentance means to not only ask for forgiveness, but to turn away from the sin and leave it behind. Asking for forgiveness, while still treasuring the sin in our heart, is like a thief apologizing for stealing your money while he eyes your wallet. God dealt with Israel in the Old Testament over and over again about their sin. He continually watched them for repentance. And when he saw it, he would run like the prodigal father to meet his child with arms thrown wide.

II Chronicles 7:13-14 - If I close the sky so there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send a plague among My people, and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin, and heal their land.

No one can rain down blessings like God can. There is always a way out. We might have to deal with terrible consequences of our actions, and it might take considerable time. But, God can make all things clean and right and wonderful, if we turn from temptation and resist sin.

- Bill Wilson (This article may be copied freely.)