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KEY THREE: HOLINESS

How do I stop sinning (and why should I)?

In Jesus Christ a new nature was prepared for the believer ... the needed endowments for living holily, the heart's inclination, and the sufficient strength to serve God acceptably are provided for us in that new nature, and ... this is communicated to us through our living union with Christ.—Andrew Murray (1828-1917)¹

Without holiness, no one will see the Lord. (Heb. 12:14)

JAY'S BATTLE WITH SIN

Living a life that is pleasing to God (*holiness*) is absolutely essential if we want to experience all the benefits and blessings of being a Christian. When my friend Jay first started following Jesus, it seemed like holiness was impossible. He came out of a crazy, destructive lifestyle. He had been sexually abused as a child, and the trauma led him into years of sexual sin and drug use. Needless to say, he still

¹ One of the most important works written on holiness (outside the Bible) is Walter Marshall's *The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification* (1692). However, this work is massive and very difficult to follow. Andrew Murray made this classic more accessible in the following book: Walter Marshall, *Sanctification, The Highway to Holiness* (London: Nisbet & Co. Limited, 1884). The above quote comes from Murray's introduction to this work (pp. vi-vii).

had some big issues to hammer out. We got together once a week at his place for intense spiritual conversation (and his awesome homemade breakfast pizza). One of these mornings stands out in my mind more than all the others—the day Jay desperately asked, *How do I keep from falling into my old sin habits?*

I began the discussion with a question. I asked him what biblical strategies he was using to combat sin. He looked at me blankly, like he had no idea there were such strategies. I told him that our battle against sin is sort of like a wrestling match. *If you don't have any moves, you get thrashed.* I told him that the Bible gives us a plethora of moves to use. I came up with ten of them right off the top of my head. We spent the next hour or so talking over these strategies, and when we were done, Jay said, *You really need to make this into a Bible study.* That conversation happened over ten years ago, and I have taught “Ten Strategies for Overcoming Sin” frequently since then.

If we are going to be technical about it, we should actually call the study “One Major Spiritual Principle ... and Nine Strategies for Overcoming Sin.” The fact is that you really need to wrap your mind around the first truth if you ever hope to have ongoing victory over sin. Therefore, we will be devoting several pages to the first principle and just a few paragraphs to each of the remaining nine strategies.

So, what is number one, the all-important principle so vital for living out the Christian life? You must, by faith, embrace the fact that now you are really, actually a saint, literally a *holy one* (Gk. *hagios*). You may not feel like a saint, but the fact is that if you are truly born again, you *are* a saint—end of discussion. According to the New Testament, when we are born again God not only forgives

us, He changes us at the very deepest level of our being. He gives us a new nature—He makes us holy!

If you think of yourself as a twisted, wicked person (who just happens to be going to heaven), you will never be free. You must embrace your new identity, your new nature. A saint doesn't obey God because they have to, they obey because that's who they *are* now. Embracing this truth is absolutely foundational for living a holy, victorious Christian life. Only then can we talk about the remaining strategies. They are vital but must work in conjunction with this foundational reality—you *are a saint*.

STRATEGY 1: BELIEVE YOU ARE A SAINT

Are you ignorant ... ? (Romans 6:3)

It seems that just about every week, either my wife or I get a call from a young person asking if we would consider discipling them. We always say *sure* and then go to our favorite coffee shop for an interview of sorts. We are interviewing them, but they are also interviewing us. Most of these talks go pretty well (like Jason in Chapter 1), but occasionally we won't hear from the student again.

On those rare occasions when a young person says, *Thanks, but no thanks*, the reason is often the same. They don't want to give up partying, or they are in an ungodly dating relationship that they refuse to let go of. In short, they want to keep a little "sin action" going on the side. They want a version of Christianity that says, *Don't worry about it, nobody's perfect. It's all covered by the blood of Jesus*. In the course of our interview, they realize we won't simply wink at a little "sin on the side," and so they decide to pass on the whole discipleship thing.

The apostles dealt with this same issue in the first century. In Romans 6, the apostle Paul (playing devil's advocate) asks, *Should we keep on sinning so that God's grace might abound?* Paul's answer is like a slap in the face. He first gives his most emphatic Greek, *NO WAY* (Gk. *mè génoito*), then asks these deluded Christians the rhetorical question, *Are you ignorant?* Paul then proceeds to correct their misguided thinking. He explains in meticulous detail the spiritual realities that take place inside a person who is really born again. His main point is that the very idea of a real Christian willfully continuing in sin doesn't even make sense.

Why do birds fly? Why do fish swim? Because it's their nature. A similar answer could be given to the question, *Why don't Christians sin?* Or the flipside, *Why do Christians live right?* Because it's their nature. The New Testament makes it clear over and over that when a person is born again, they are transformed in the deepest part—the very core—of their being (what the Bible calls *the spirit, the inner man*). Their very nature is changed. Because of this, nothing is more natural and comfortable for them than living a life pleasing to God. As John says, *His commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3)*. Paul says, *I joyfully agree with the law of God in the inner man (Romans 7:22)*. This inner change is a secret to victory that the greatest Christians down through the ages have understood.

In 1677 a letter from a young man by the name of Henry Scougal was made into a little book titled, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*. In it, Scougal explains to a friend what real Christianity is. It's not an effort to conform to external rules—do's and don'ts. It's not primarily an effort to avoid punishment or obtain spiritual blessings (even heaven).

According to Scougal (and the Bible), real Christianity is all about God's very life infused into the human soul. This changes everything ... from the inside out.

Scougal died very soon after this letter was written, but God has used this little book to bless thousands. (It is actually what saved one of the greatest preachers of all time, George Whitefield [1714-1770]). Scougal says,

True religion is a union of the soul with God, a real participation of the divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul, or, in the apostle's phrase, "It is Christ formed within us." Briefly, I know not how the nature of religion can be more fully expressed than by calling it a Divine Life.²

Are you aware of the fact that when you were born again, an inner transformation occurred in the deepest part of you? You received an infusion of the life of God into your soul. To be even more specific, you entered into a mysterious union with the Holy Spirit, and the deepest part of you was actually made one with Him. *He who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him (1 Corinthians 6:17)*. As a result, your very deepest desires have been changed—you now yearn to do God's will, and you have also been given all the power you need to live out these new desires. The apostle Peter puts it this way, *You have become partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4)*.

Don't make the tragic mistake of believing that you are still the same old sinful, selfish wretch that just happens to be going to heaven now. To put it bluntly, that is an unbiblical, ignorant view of salvation. When we were born

² Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Boston: Nichols and Noyes, 1868), 6-7.

again, it's like we were given a holy heart transplant. God's Holy Spirit and our spirit are joined together as one.

One of the most frequent ways the Bible refers to this holy transformation is by calling God's people *saints* or *holy ones*. I know the idea that we are saints is a stretch for those who grew up in certain religious traditions, where only superhero Christians are called saints. But the New Testament makes it perfectly clear that we are *all* saints the very moment we are born again. Some Christians think they are being humble by refusing to call themselves saints, but the fact is that they are just disagreeing with God.

Because of what Jesus has done, even the weakest Christian is a saint—forgiven and clean and bent toward God and His ways. This reality is affirmed in the New Testament epistles every time the apostles write, *To the saints (holy ones) in Rome*, or *the saints (holy ones) in Philippi*, or *the saints (holy ones) in Colossae*, etc. They used to be identified as “sinners,” but now they are holy.

NEW POWER

Another thing every born-again person needs to be clear on is this—in addition to having your identity changed, you also need to embrace the fact that God has infused power into you. He knew we couldn't pull off this “holy living” thing in our own strength. When He gives us His Holy Spirit, He also gives us the supernatural power to do His will. So if you are truly born again, you actually have way more power inside of you than you will ever need. Understanding this is a game-changer.

One prayer found in the New Testament puts a profound twist on this idea. Paul prays that Christians understand that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is now

available to them. Most new believers are totally unaware of this.

I pray that the eyes of your heart would be enlightened so that you would know ... the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He demonstrated in Christ when He raised Him up from the dead. (Eph. 1:18-20)

We are not supposed to see ourselves, first and foremost, as weak, wicked sinners who are straining (against our deepest desires) to be good. No, we have been invaded and transformed by the Holy Spirit. We are now saints learning how to cooperate with our new identity and tap into this new power source.

Of course, we need to stay balanced here. This doesn't at all mean we are now perfect and will never stumble. The book of James summarizes it best when it says, *We all stumble in many ways (James 3:2)*. The fact is that when we are saved, we are saints, but we are stumbling, bumbling, little baby saints. We still have a lot to learn, but nothing we do or don't do will change the fact that we are saints—changed at the very core of our being, made one with God, and filled with new desire and power. We may stumble, but *sinner* is no longer our primary identity.

Don't be deceived, neither fornicators, nor idol-worshippers, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunks, nor troublemakers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were, but you were washed, you were made holy, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

It takes some practice and a lot of retraining of the brain to embrace this radical idea, but don't fight it. Holiness is natural for you now—you are a saint. This is why a Christian who wants to sin is utterly crazy, like a fish determined to get out of the water and flop around on the land.

We need to look further into this matter to really make sense of things. Every young Christian will inevitably find themselves asking, *If I am now a saint, why do I sometimes still feel a powerful pull towards sin?* One reason is that, although we have been changed at the very deepest level of our being (*the spirit, the inner man*), we still have the same brain we had before salvation (we covered a little of that in the previous chapter). We need to retrain our brains, which the Bible calls *renewing the mind* (*Romans 12:1-2*).

Another fact is this—until our life on earth is over, we all carry around inside ourselves a fallen, evil power. This is like a little monster, a sinful compulsion inside us that fights against our new nature. We must learn how to master this monster.

MASTERING THE MONSTER

Again, the Bible says that even after God changes our nature, there is still an evil force remaining in us. The New Testament calls this *the sinful nature* or *the flesh* (Gk. *sárx*). It can also be referred to as the *old man*.³ This power will eventually be removed (*Hallelujah!*), but unfortunately, it remains in us until the day we die. It is sort of like a

³ *Galatians 5:19-21* describes the works of this evil indwelling principle in detail. *Now the deeds of the flesh are obvious, which are sexual immorality, impurity, indecency, idol worship, witchcraft, hatred, strife, jealousy, fits of rage, self-seeking, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like.*

rebellious, ravenous beast with its own mind, totally contrary to God and hell-bent on our destruction.

There is no person on earth who does not carry this monster around with them. Listen to one Christian (*one of the greatest Christians who ever lived*) express his frustration at being caught up in the inner struggle between his *old man* and his *new man*. It kind of looks like he has split-personality disorder:

I do not understand what I am doing. I am not doing the things I want to do, but I am doing the very things I hate ... For the good things that I want to do, I don't do, but I do the very evil things that I don't want to do. But if I do the very thing I don't want to do, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which resides in me. (Romans 7:15-20)

This inner monster is the power that used to rule and reign over us before we were born again, before we invited God to take over. The monster demanded to be fed constantly and was the thing that made us fundamentally selfish at the core of our being.

The good news is that, although this evil monster may be present in all of us, it does not define us anymore. We are no longer monsters, we are saints. The monster is eventually going to be removed from us, but for the time being, we must master it. If we don't, we can still fall into anything we did before we got saved.

As Christians, we must learn how to allow the new life principle—God's Spirit—to rule and reign over us and how to subdue that old life principle—the sinful nature/the flesh/the old man. This is why the Bible says,

But I tell you, walk in the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the

Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh. These two are opposed to one another, so that you may not do what you please. (Galatians 5:16-17)

The monster (*the flesh, the old man*) is irrational and destructive and will completely wreck us if we allow it to. Don't kid yourself ...

Don't be deceived; God won't be mocked; whatever a man sows, he will also reap. For the man who sows to the flesh will reap corruption. (Galatians 6:7-8)

The fact is that even the holiest person is capable of the most heinous sins if they don't keep the monster in check. It is in you, and it is in me ... and it is more wicked than you can imagine. And this monster will never change—you can't train it, you can't reform it, and you can't starve it. *Then how do we control it?* The answer is so incredibly simple that many people completely miss it.

IT CAN'T BE THAT EASY!

If you really want to take away the monster's power, here is what you do—simply believe that it is no longer your master and no longer has any power over you. It cannot make you do anything. The Bible clearly states that somehow, mysteriously, through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the power and influence of the flesh over you has been utterly shattered. It may be present in you, but for all intents and purposes, its ability to control you has been broken and it cannot *force* you to do anything. According to the apostle Paul, we are dead to its power.

How can we who died to sin still live in it? Or are you ignorant ... ? (Romans 6:2-3)

Think of it this way—before God saved you, the sinful flesh was your slave master. The flesh used to order you around, and you felt powerless to resist its demands. But now you have given yourself to a new Master—an *all-good and all-powerful Master*. Your new Master has utterly shattered the rule and reign of the old man, the flesh. But, you need to stand in this truth, because that wicked old master is still hanging around trying to influence you.

You and I need to embrace the reality that we now have the power and the authority to look that old slave master in the eye and say, *Shut up flesh. You can't tell me what to do anymore. You are dead to me. I am changed, and my life is under new management.* If we do this with faith and authority, something supernatural happens, and the old man, the flesh, will just skulk back into the shadows.

For all of this to be a reality in your life, however, you have to really believe (have faith in) what the Bible says about the issue. If you are born again, you are changed, and the flesh/the old man has been put out of a job. Believe it and receive it! This may sound too simple to really fix anything, but just try it. The more you believe it, the more it works.

In the kingdom of God, we lay hold of every spiritual blessing *by faith* (a.k.a., *believing*). You are saved *by faith*, you appropriate all God's promises *by faith*, and you also walk in victory over sin *by faith*. Faith is a tragically forgotten principle in our day. Previous generations of Christians understood it much better than we do today (and we will go into this a lot more in the next chapter).⁴

⁴ There was an amazing work of God in the 1800s, affecting hundreds of thousands of people. It has come to be known as “The Keswick Movement.” It put this idea at the very center of its teaching. *The quest for victory over every known besetment, and for fullness of power in Christian service, led to a re-examination of the Scriptural teaching*

It is absolutely vital that we get ahold of the New Testament notion of faith. Without it, we should expect nothing. *Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:3)*. This means that if you don't believe what God says about an issue, nothing will happen. The Bible clearly tells us that the Word of God is of no benefit to us if it is not united to faith (*Hebrews 4:2*). The importance of this kind of faith is confirmed so many times in the New Testament that it's a wonder so many people miss it.

But let him ask in faith without any doubting. Because the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, blown around by the wind. Don't let that person expect to receive anything from the Lord, being doubleminded, unstable in all their ways. (James 1:6)

As you come to embrace by faith what the Bible says—you *are a saint, and sin is no longer master over you*—you will experience more and more supernatural power to *be a saint*.

Knowing this, our old self was crucified with Him (Christ) so that our body of sin might be made powerless so that we should no longer be slaves of sin; for he who has died is free from sin. Now, if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with Him. ... Even so, think of yourself as dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:6-11)

Agree by faith with what the Bible says about you. Agree by faith that a greater power has now taken hold of you and

concerning holiness. And God, who awakened the sense of need and desire, provided the answer. Herbert Stevenson, ed. *Keswick's Authentic Voice: Sixty-five Dynamic Addresses Delivered at the Keswick Convention 1875-1957* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 14.

has transformed you into a saint. Don't deny these wonderful truths in the name of "being humble"—that is not humility, it is a lie. Agree by faith that Jesus's victory over sin is now your victory over sin. The truth is that if you are born again, you love doing God's will, and you have all the power you need to do it. Again, I know this may sound too good to be true, but you would be hard-pressed to find a Scriptural truth that is stated so many times and in so many ways.

I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. (Galatians 2:20)

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:24-25)

Think of the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire. (Col. 3:5)

What does this mean in practical terms? It means that the next time you are tempted to lust, drink, lie, or hate, first think about who you really are—a holy one, changed on the inside, with the desire and the power to do what is right. Changing your mindset here takes practice, but it will soon become automatic. You will find yourself saying, *Why would I want to do that? I am a saint who loves the will of God, and besides that, sin's power over me has been broken.* Just declaring the facts is often enough to squash temptation like a cockroach. Now that you are no longer *ignorant* (Romans 6:3), try it and see what happens.

This is the first and greatest strategy for overcoming sin. So let's see if you really got it. If you are truly born again, go look at yourself in the mirror and say in faith,

I am a saint. At the very deepest level of my being, I have been changed. I now have the desire and the power to do God's will. The power of my old nature, the flesh, has been broken because Jesus's death has freed me.

Let me be as blunt as I can be here. If a born-again Christian isn't willing to look in the mirror and say, *I am a saint*, then they are living a lie. They believe they are something that they are not. If you believe that your fundamental identity is "sinner," you will continue to feel and act like a sinner. But if you embrace your new identity, you will begin to live more and more like a saint ... and there are other useful strategies to help you live this out.

THE REST OF THE STRATEGIES

No one is very good at the whole *saint* thing early on, but our ability to live like a saint will improve with time, sort of like playing the piano or learning a new language. Even as we begin to embrace our new identity, strong temptations will still arise (note: temptation is not sin, it is just the pull toward sin). If Jesus Himself was tempted, we can't assume we will ever be out of the woods. He was *tempted in all things as we are (Hebrews 4:15)*.

How then do we stay on top of temptation? If we combine the truth that we are saints with the remaining strategies, we will be well on our way to victory. Just like wrestling moves, many of the remaining strategies seem to work together and sort of overlap one another, but they are all unique enough to be considered on their own. Meditate on them prayerfully and consider how you might implement them in your own life.

STRATEGY 2: THE WORD

I have treasured your word in my heart so that I will not sin against you. (Psalm 119:11)

The great evangelist D.L. Moody (1837-1899) used to say, *The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible.* When Jesus had His showdown with the devil in the wilderness, He demonstrated just how valuable a thoroughgoing knowledge of Scripture is. He beat down Satan's temptations with, *It is written ... It is written ... (Matthew 4:1-11).* The Word of God not only defeats the devil, it reframes our entire outlook on life and develops in us the mind of Christ. In short, our very life depends on it. Jesus said:

Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. (Matthew 4:4)

When I disciple young people, I insist that they develop the habit of spending at least one hour a day in the Bible. This only sounds extreme to people who don't understand how vital the Word of God really is. It is God's primary tool for remolding and reshaping us into His image, changing our scrambled brains into the mind of Christ. A deep knowledge of the Bible transforms us from spiritual babies into mature adults. Apart from it, a Christian will forever be ignorant, weak, vulnerable, and easily deceived.

Like newborn babies, long for pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation. (1 Peter 2:2)

The Bible may come second in our discussion here, but apart from it, we could not understand strategy number one ... or any other strategy, for that matter. The fact is that

coming to know the Bible is absolutely foundational to everything you are as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The Bible may be huge and intimidating, but if you want to have victory over sin, *know the Word deeply!*

STRATEGY 3: PRAYER

Pray this way ... Don't lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:9-13)

As important as a deep knowledge of the Bible is, you cannot really say that it is more important than prayer. One thing is obvious from Scripture and Christian history—people who know how to pray overcome, and those who don't learn to pray don't overcome. This is why I insist that the young people I disciple develop the habit of spending at least one hour a day in prayer (in addition to their time in the Word). This isn't some sort of rigid legalism—it's about survival. I often say, *If you pray for an hour a day, you will at least be in the game, spiritually speaking.*

The Bible says that Jesus Himself was tempted in every way that we are, yet He never sinned (*Hebrews 4:15*). How did He overcome? He used the awesome weapon of prayer. He gives us a vivid example of this in the Garden of Gethsemane just before His crucifixion. There in the garden, He overcame excruciating temptation and found the strength to push through to the cross ... and He did it in prayer. He wrestled on His knees until He sweat drops of blood, and He got the breakthrough. It was there that He found the strength to say to His Father, *Not My will, but yours be done (Matthew 26:39)*. Here again, Jesus is showing us how it's done. The temptation is overcome in prayer. (It is also worth noting that at this most critical juncture, Jesus instructed His

disciples to do the same. *Pray so that you don't enter into temptation [Matt 26:41]. They failed to listen, and failed.)*

Prayer is where we exercise our faith, it is where we overcome the devil, and it is where we gain new wisdom and insight from the Holy Spirit. Prayer is the way we receive virtually every spiritual blessing from God, including the strength to stand against sin. We may think we don't have time for long hours in prayer, but the truth is that if you want to have victory, *spend regular time in prayer!*

STRATEGY 4: CONFESSION

Therefore, Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. (James 5:16)

Confession is a commonly overlooked channel of grace, but it is often God's appointed way to set us free from besetting temptations and sins. When we have some vice that keeps getting the best of us—impurity, gluttony, bitterness—we shouldn't assume that we can overcome it all by ourselves (because if it didn't work the last 1,000 times, it probably isn't going to work now). Keeping it to ourselves often causes it to fester and grow like a rotten wound. It may very well be that what we need to do is find some Christian friends we can trust, humble ourselves, show them the filthy thing, and let them pray for us.

The one who hides his sins will not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them will receive mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)

The Bible repeatedly says that God's grace is released to those who are humble (*James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5-6; Proverbs 3:34*). There is little in life more humbling than being open and honest about our weaknesses and failures. Now, we need

to be wise about this—this doesn't mean we indiscriminately vomit every dark detail of our life onto the entire church. What it does mean is that there will be times in our lives when we need to “come clean” as God's Spirit leads us. When appropriate, we do as the book of James commands and confess our sins to other believers and allow them to pray for our healing.

It is worth noting that many of the greatest moves of God on earth ignited when God's people began openly confessing their sins and struggles. We do not have time to go over the history here, but there is something supernatural and wonderful about God's children coming clean with one another. And one more thing. Often when one person is honest enough to share some struggle in their life, it's like a dam breaks—there are usually a bunch of people in the room who need to do the same thing. It may be hard and humbling to do, but if you want to have victory over sin, *confess your sins to others*.

STRATEGY 5: GET HELP FROM THE STRONG

If anyone is snared in a sin, you who are spiritual restore this one. (Galatians 6:1)

If you are stuck in sin, be willing to allow one or two mature, godly individuals to enter into the battle with you. Virtually every Christian (*EVERY CHRISTIAN!*) has been stuck in some sin issue that they just can't seem to get out of. The Bible gives us clear instructions here—get some mature saints into the mix, those with experience and wisdom. What seems like an unwinnable battle for you might be small potatoes for them. Your “impossible struggle” might be something they overcame decades ago

and have since helped many people get out of. Be open to the idea that there are some really wise folks out there, saints who know a whole lot of things you don't. Chances are they would absolutely love to help you out, and in the process, you will probably make a lifelong friend. (Tip: How do you know who these spiritual people are? Ask around. They come highly recommended because they have a track record of helping others.) If you want to have victory over sin, *get help from the strong*.

STRATEGY 6: FLEE

Run from youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace. (2 Timothy 2:22)

This strategy is sort of a no-brainer. When things get hot and heavy ... *just run!* Literally, get up and go. Leave the premises. Get in your car and drive away. Walk out of the party. Leave your boyfriend's/girlfriend's apartment. When it involves powerful sins of the flesh, your very best option is to do like Joseph in the Bible and hightail it out of there (*Genesis 39:12*). There are times in your life when you are supposed to stand, and there are times when trying to stand is just plain stupid. Don't overestimate yourself. You will live to regret it. In these situations, don't stand there praying for strength. Don't rebuke the devil. Just get out. Run!

And one more thing. There will never be a time in your life when God does not provide an escape hatch for you. If you are willing to run, He will always give you a way out—it's a promise:

No temptation has overtaken you, except that which is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able to

endure, but with every temptation, He will provide the way of escape so that you can endure it. (1 Cor. 10:13)

If you want to have victory over sin, *flee!*

STRATEGY 7: DEAL RUTHLESSLY WITH SIN

If your hand makes you stumble, cut it off. (Matthew 5:30)

Jesus says some pretty extreme things in His most famous sermon, The Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew 5-7*). Nothing He says sounds more extreme than suggesting that we gouge out our eyes or cut off our hands to avoid sin. The truth is that cutting off body parts isn't actually a remedy for sin. Jesus was using hyperbole. But He was telling us to deal ruthlessly with our sin. Don't mess around with it and do whatever it takes to get victory over it. *It is better for you to lose one body part than for your whole body to be thrown into hell (Matthew 5:29).*

Again, getting control over sin is not about removing hands and eyes. First and foremost, it's about getting control over our inner life. To do this, it would seem obvious that we should remove those external things around us that trigger temptation. And we need to act as if this is a matter of life or death because it really is. *When sin has fully run its course, it results in death (James 1:15).* Sin is no joke. It will kill you. Battle it ruthlessly, using all appropriate biblical weapons and strategies. Cutting off your hand or gouging out your eye won't help, but cutting off certain relationships could. Moving out of your apartment or quitting your job at the club might. Whatever you have to do, do it! If you want to have victory over sin, *deal ruthlessly with it!*

STRATEGY 8: CLEAN UP YOUR ENVIRONMENT

*Give no opportunity to the flesh with regards to its lusts.
(Romans 13:14)*

There are things around you right now—in your apartment, in your car, on your computer, or phone—that regularly tempt you to sin. If you are serious about holiness, stop flirting around with them. Clean up your environment. Throw them in the dumpster, burn them, or cancel your subscription. Figure out what around you is making it easier for you to sin and put the axe to it. If it is an app on your phone, delete it. If it is unrestricted internet, put controls on it. Sure, you may lose some money, it may “cramp your style,” and you may have to give up “rights,” but is anything really worth that continual feeling of failure and defeat?

When I was a young man, I realized that I kept stumbling over things I watched on TV, so I took my new TV out to the dumpster and smashed it with a car jack handle. I was once discipling two brothers who realized they were addicted to video games. They took their console out to a field and annihilated it by using it for target practice. Some people might shake their heads and say such actions are a little extreme, and perhaps they are, but I think God was smiling. God’s problem is not that He has too many people pushing too hard. His problem is that so many of His kids are doing next to nothing for the sake of holiness. If you want to have victory over sin, *clean up your environment!*

STRATEGY 9: GODLY FRIENDS

The one who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm. (Proverbs 13:20)

It is a fact that we become like the people we hang around with. This is why the apostle warns, *Bad company corrupts good character (1 Corinthians 15:33)*. If you want to overcome sin in your life, make the decision today to seek out those who inspire you to lead a courageous, committed, godly life. Distance yourself from those who cause you to stumble, or who are just plain sluggish in their spiritual lives. Readjusting your social circle can be painful, but it is a must for every serious disciple of Jesus.

John Wesley (1703-1791) was without question one of the most influential Christians of the last 500 years. When he was a young man, an older saint gave him a great piece of advice. He told Wesley, *Sir, you wish to serve God ... Remember, you cannot serve Him alone. You must therefore find companions or make them. The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.* As a rule, it is God's will that we find people on the same path and lock arms with them. Wesley did this, and he and his friends shook the world. If you want to have victory over sin, *find godly friends!*

STRATEGY 10: ACCOUNTABILITY GROUPS

Let us consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds. (Hebrews 10:24)

This strategy is a bit like the last one but a little more specific. One powerful way to overcome sin is to become part of an accountability group, a band of brothers or sisters that you can be completely open and honest with. In this little circle, you can make sure you are walking in holiness and regularly practicing all the other strategies. Pick a specific time during the week—like breakfast on Tuesday—and spend an hour or so together. Pray for each other, confess

sins and temptations, and encourage each other from the Word.

Anyone who has been in the kingdom of God very long knows that this is one of the best ways to attain spiritual goals. It can keep us disciplined and on track in our study of the Bible and prayer, and it helps us over-come specific areas of weakness. If you want to have victory over sin, *join an accountability group!*

LET'S GET PRACTICAL

So there you have it, one grand principle and nine strategies for overcoming sin. If you train your mind to adopt these attitudes and habits, you can successfully live out your identity in Christ. You are a saint now. These strategies will ensure that you live like one. Prayerfully review the list, and very specifically determine how you are going to live these things out. Here is the list with a few “for example” applications because if you don’t get very specific, nothing will change.

1. Believe you are a saint (*Go ahead, look at yourself in the mirror and say it!*)
2. Know the Word (*I am going to begin taking ½ hour a day to memorize the book of James*)
3. Pray (*I am going to wake up at 5 a.m. daily to pray*)
4. Confess
5. Get help from the strong (*I am going to call my pastor’s wife and open up about my eating disorder*)
6. Flee
7. Deal ruthlessly with sin (*I am going to quit my job at the club, even though the money is good*)

8. Clean up your environment (*I will delete that social media app*)
9. Find godly friends
10. Join an accountability group (*I am going to ask Tom, Chuck, and Ernesto ...*)

Down through history, there have been times when God's people have gotten deadly serious about holiness ... and God has come in power. We will wrap up this chapter with just one account of this happening in the early 1950s in the Hebrides Islands off the coast of Scotland. It reads like an account straight out of the New Testament. Could it happen again? Of course it could.

A certain young man, a deacon in the church, got up and read Psalm 24. "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart ..." And then that young man closed his Bible. And looking down at the minister and the elders, he spoke these crude words ... "It seems to me to be so much humbug to be praying as we are praying, to be waiting as we are waiting, if we ourselves are not rightly related to God." And then he lifted up his two hands and prayed, "God, are my hands clean? Is my heart pure?" But he got no further. That young man fell to his knees and then fell into a trance ... When that happened in the barn, the power of God swept into the parish. And an awareness of God gripped the community, such as hadn't been known for over 100 years. —Duncan Campbell (1898-1972)⁵

⁵ From sermon, *Revival in the Hebrides* (1968), by Duncan Campbell. (listen at www.sermonaudio.com/saplayer/playpopup.asp?SID=5562)