

OVERCOMING SIN, WRONG THOUGHTS & BAD HABITS¹

INTRODUCTION: For anyone who hasn't been born again by having repented of their sin & placing their total trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, the following material will be of little benefit. However even for those who are saved, it usually hasn't taken long to realize that when we were born again, all of our old sinful habits didn't just magically disappear—*much as we would have liked for them to have done so*. In fact, the struggle against sin, wrong thoughts and bad habits only *began* when we became a child of God. Before salvation sin was our friend and we enjoyed it in a multitude of shapes & forms. But now it is our mortal enemy, one with which we will battle until the day we go to heaven.

You may be thinking, “*Why do we struggle to overcome sin & bad habits anyway? I thought believers were given the righteousness of Christ and a new nature.*” That’s true. But while that’s true, unfortunately the old nature is still within us. So the battle now begins. If you’re a believer, the moment you got saved God saw you as perfectly holy through the righteousness of Jesus Christ. *That’s our position.* However in our day to day walk through this world we often fall far short of what we are *positionally*. So the task now is to become in *practice* what God has already made us *positionally*. The following biblical principles will aid you greatly in doing so.

- **AVOID PEOPLE, PLACES AND SITUATIONS THAT LEAD YOU INTO SIN** – Ps. 1:1; Prov. 1:10; 4:14-17 & I Cor. 15:33. The last verse states: “*Bad company corrupts good morals*” (NASV). We know this, yet we often hang around people or places that pull us down & lead us into wrong behavior. So if we’re going to overcome sin and break bad habits, we must first of all avoid people, places and situations that lead us there!
- **CONTROL YOUR THOUGHT LIFE** – Prov. 4:23; 23:7; Mt. 15:19; II Cor. 10:3-5; Phil. 4:8 & James 1:14-15. The battle against sin begins in *the mind*, not the body. Proverbs 4:23 says, “*Keep your heart with all diligence; for out of it spring the issues of life.*” Keep your mind right and you won't do sinful things.
- **DON'T EXPECT ALL OF YOUR SINFUL THOUGHTS & HABITS TO AUTOMATICALLY DISAPPEAR AFTER SALVATION** – Gal. 6:7 declares: “*Whatever a man sows that shall he also reap.*” It would be nice if the moment we were saved God just erased all of our sinful thought and habit patterns, and we never desired any of those wrong things again. But that’s not usually the case. If a person has sown years of immoral thoughts, he is going to continue to reap them—*even if he has now been born again*. He shouldn't be surprised when his mind continues to want to think in a perverted way. After all he has trained it to do so—*sometimes through years of practice*. If a person has a habit of using filthy language, he will tend to do so *even after salvation* since it’s a habit. And so it is with any other bad habit or sinful behavior, internal or external. One has said: “*Habit is a wonderful servant, but a terrible master.*” The good news though is that we no longer have to give in to that sin or bad habit! But the point I wish to make here is that our flesh is still going to desire sin even after salvation!

Furthermore, “*going forward*” in a church service to “*rededicate*” yourself will *not* instantly remove all your sinful desires. I don't know how many times I did that at the end of a sermon, confessing the same sin over and over again, only to wake up the next morning & find that sin just as tempting as the day before & often committing it again. I wanted “*instant godliness.*” But while there are many “instant” foods available today, *there’s no such thing as instant godliness!*

- **UNDERSTAND THAT GODLINESS REQUIRES EFFORT!** – I Tim. 4:7b. In the last half of this verse, Paul says to “*exercise yourself toward godliness.*” The word which is translated “*exercise*” or “*discipline*,” is “*gumnazo.*” We get the English word “*gymnastic*” from it. We have a name for places where people sweat & toil & exercise: “*Gyms.*” They’re places where individuals work and strain and expend effort. The apostle Paul is basically telling us that *godliness requires effort!* The famous locker room saying “*No Pain, No Gain!*” applies in the spiritual realm too. If you’re not prepared to expend some effort (including sometimes painful effort) & discipline yourself, you’ll never overcome wrong thoughts and habits!

¹ By Mike Edwards. Originally compiled for the *Campus Bible Fellowship* group at the University of Papua New Guinea, Port Moresby, PNG, 1986. (revised 1995, Goroka, PNG; 2008, St. Vincent, West Indies & 2016 & 2019, Madison, Ohio)

- **THIS EFFORT IS NOT SELF EFFORT IN YOUR OWN STRENGTH!** – Gal. 3:2-3. We're not talking about some sort of "*Positive Thinking, pull yourself up by your bootstraps*" mentality. **We have NO power to overcome sin—as you may have already discovered!** If you try to overcome sin in your own strength *you will fail!* **But the good news is...**
- **THE STRENGTH TO OBEY GOD & OVERCOME SIN COMES FROM GOD!** – Phil. 2:12-13. Philippians 2:13 says that we are to "**work out**" (literally "*show forth*" or "*show out*") our salvation because it is **God** who "*works*" in the believer. The word translated "*worketh*" or "*works*" literally means "**to work in.**" The word in Greek looks like this: "**Energeo.**" We get our English word "**energy**" from it. So this passage is telling us that we are to show others we are saved by our godly lifestyle and that God has already promised to give us the energy (i.e. strength, power, ability) to *do* right and *stop doing* wrong! **But** though God is the energizer, **WE** have to actually say "*No*" to sin and "*Yes*" to righteousness. **WE** have to **put forth that effort.** **God will not do that for us.** He expects *us* to say "*No*" to sin & then overcome it by the power He promises to give us for that purpose!

It's similar to coming into a room ceiling light. If you want light, **YOU** must flip the switch. The switch has no power in & of itself! But when you flip it, some of the enormous energy that is generated miles and miles away flows through the unseen wires and into the light fixture. *Similarly*, we have no power to resist sin of ourselves, but when by faith we "*flip the switch*" & say "*No*" to sin, the Holy Spirit's energy flows through us enabling us to do right and resist sin!

A KEY PRINCIPLE TO OVERCOMING SINFUL HABITS: REPLACEMENT i.e. "**PUTTING OFF**" & "**PUTTING ON!**" – Eph. 4:22-28 & Col. 3:2, 5, 8, 10, 12 & 14

- **WE MUST SAY "NO!" TO SINFUL THOUGHTS & HABITS** – Eph. 4:22 & Col. 3:2, 5 & 8. Remember, God has promised to give us the energy to say no to sin (Phil. 2:12-13). However, *we're* the ones who must do it. God will not do that for us. **By an act of our will** we must say "**NO**" to sin. **This is where many have bailed out or been tripped up.** Many of us have "*gone forward*" at the end of a church service and asked God to remove our desire for whatever sin which has a viselike grip on us. But God's way isn't always to remove the wrong thought pattern or sinful desire "*miraculously*" in answer to prayer. Instead it's for us to realize that He has promised us the strength to say "*No*" & then to discipline ourselves to do just that! **The Bible calls this "putting off the old man."**
- **WE MUST BEGIN TO DEVELOP NEW THOUGHTS & HABITS** – Eph. 4:24 & Col. 3:10, 12 & 14. **The Bible calls this "putting on the new man."** This is an extremely important and often overlooked part of overcoming a sinful habit or practice. If we don't follow through and *replace* the sinful habit pattern with a good one, we'll usually end up going back to our old sinful way again! Did you notice that in Ephesians 4:24 Paul doesn't simply tell the newly converted thief to "**stop stealing**" i.e. "*put off*" that sinful behavior? Instead he adds **REPLACE** it with good behavior: "**labor with your hands**" i.e. find a job. In other words "*put on*" that good behavior. Paul doesn't just say to stop thinking impure thoughts. No, he goes **beyond** that and says to **begin** thinking *right* thoughts (cf. **Phil. 4:7-8**). **We must "put off"** (say "*No!*") **AND "put on"** (develop a new habit to *replace* the old one!).

Picture a mountainside which has recently endured a forest fire. There it sits, blackened, dry and barren. Should heavy rains begin falling on it day after day, erosion will immediately begin occurring with gullies and ruts scarring the side of the mountain. *What must be done, to stop further damage to the mountainside and how can we begin to repair the ravines that are gouging deeper and deeper into the mountainside?* If you know the answer then you know what you must do to achieve victory in your Christian life. To save the mountainside we must: **1) Build little dams of sticks & brush** in the gullies thus stopping the dirt from continuing to wash down the mountainside, and **2) Redirect the flow of water** by forcing it to fan out over the entire mountainside and **replant** new grass and trees to hold the ground in place.

HOW DOES THE ABOVE ILLUSTRATION APPLY TO OVERCOMING SINFUL HABITS?

Well, when we repeatedly sin whether inwardly or outwardly, we slowly wear sinful gullies and ravines into our lives. Soon we don't even have to think about acting sinfully, it just occurs "*naturally*" like rain water following the ditch that's been created. We call such learned behavior a "*habit*." Each of us have over time worn sinful "*gullies*" or "*ravines*" into our lives, both big and small. They range from internal sins like impure thoughts, anger, hatred, fear, bitterness, and depression; to external sins such as drunkenness, immorality, gluttony, gossip, filthy language, and a hundred other things not listed here. *How can you overcome such sinful practices?* How can you break a wrong habit that plagues you and which you know the Lord is not pleased with? Answer...

1) Build a dam & 2) Redirect the flow & replant! I must say "*NO, I will not think or act that way*" i.e. build a dam. Then I must *begin memorizing Scripture & force myself to start thinking & acting in the manner that God tells me to in His Word* i.e. redirect & replant.

- **THIS "PUTTING ON" IS WHAT THE BIBLE CALLS "RENEWING THE MIND"** – Rom. 12:2 & Eph. 4:23. Romans 12:2 says, "*...be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed, by the renewing of your mind.*" What does it mean to renew your mind? Simply this: You search for and find Bible verses that deal with the problem you are struggling with, then memorize and meditate on them repeatedly each day! Eventually the Word of God becomes a part of you, and those promises from the Bible become the material out of which you build a victorious life—in any area of struggle!

A METHOD FOR RENEWING YOUR MIND: "THE 4-M FORMULA!"

(by the late Dr. Walter Fremont)

1. **MARK** the verses that apply to your problem.
2. **MEMORIZE** some of them.
3. **MEDITATE** on them i.e. run them over and over in your mind, throughout each day.
4. Finally, let them **MASTER** you! (Determine that they will govern your behavior).

HOW TO FIND HELPFUL BIBLE VERSES. A **concordance** is located in the back of better Bibles & is an alphabetical list which shows you where you can find verses containing a particular word. For example, if you have a problem with *fear*, get a concordance and look up the word fear. You'll find listed a number of references in the Bible containing the word fear. Write down the references of ones you find helpful & begin *memorizing them!* If your problem is filthy language, gossip or a sharp tongue, look up words like "*tongue*" "*speak*" & "*speech*" & find verses that address that, then apply the "*Four-M*" formula to them. No matter what the sin is that you are struggling with, find verses that relate to it, then *mark, memorize* and *meditate* on them ...and let them *master* you!

Right about now you may be thinking...

"BUT WHAT ABOUT THOSE SINS THAT I JUST CAN'T OVERCOME?"

Answer: THERE AREN'T ANY! – I Corinthians 10:13

I Corinthians 10:13 says that God never allows us to be tempted "*beyond what we are able* (to withstand), *but along with the temptation provides a way of escape, that we may be able to bear it.*" Now I know you're thinking, "*There's no way that can be true!*" I know you're thinking that, because *my* flesh says the same thing! But this is precisely the place where *faith* comes into action. Am I going to believe God & His Word, or am I going to listen to my flesh & its lies? When we don't overcome a particular sin **it** isn't a matter of "**I can't**" but a matter of "**I won't!**" If I don't overcome some sinful habit, it's because I really don't want to give it up! Let's be honest with ourselves.

FOUR CRUCIAL TRUTHS IN I CORINTHIANS 10:13²

1. **YOU'RE NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO HAS FACED THIS PROBLEM!** This verse says, "*There has no temptation taken you but what is COMMON TO MAN...*" We often think no one else has every faced such a tough temptation or habit as we're battling... *but that's not true!* Others have struggled with what you're struggling with right now—and *have won!* Just knowing that will encourage us. *Yes, this is a difficult sin to overcome, but others have overcome it by the grace of God, so I can too!*
 2. **VICTORY OVER SIN IS BASED ON GOD'S FAITHFULNESS!** Did you notice that victory is not promised based on *our* strength, but on GOD's faithfulness. It says, "*...but God is faithful...*"
 3. **GOD WILL NOT ALLOW YOU TO BE TEMPTED BEYOND WHAT YOU ARE ABLE TO RESIST!** "*...who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able...*" While we sometimes think God has given us more than we can handle or withstand, this verse says that that is *never* the case.
 4. **THERE IS AN END TO EVERY SIN OR TEMPTATION!** "*...but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.*" When we think there is no end to a trial, temptation or problem that we face, we will tend to give up. We can't imagine enduring it forever. **But there is an end to every temptation or trial!** Encourage yourself with that thought! God has many ways of delivering us from temptation or difficulty. He can *remove* the source of temptation or trouble through an unexpected death! Or He may move us so that we no longer face that problem. Or He may change the situation so that if the difficulty involves an individual, perhaps God will save them! If it's a job situation, God may supply you with a new job that delivers you out of the trial. God can even take us home to heaven to be with Him! Just knowing that there is an end to what we are struggling with can give the strength to go on. As Adams says: "*We're never trapped in a box with no way of escape.*" When you want to give up in your struggle to overcome sin and temptation, remember... **there is an end.** So be faithful, *one day at a time.*
- **THE MOST IMPORTANT PASSAGE IN THE BIBLE ON OVERCOMING SIN: ROMANS 6!**
 - I would **STRONGLY** encourage you to memorize the entire chapter. It will be well worth the effort. You may be thinking, "*But that's a lot work, and besides I'm not any good at memorizing!*" If that's your excuse (as it once was mine), then I doubt that you are serious about overcoming the sin or habit you are struggling with in your life. Romans 6 declares that a believer is "**dead to sin.**" You may protest: "*No way! My flesh is very much alive to this sin or temptation!*" But Romans 6 explains that when a person is born again, he or she is taken completely out of the *realm* and *rule* of sin. When we sin it isn't because we don't have the power to do right. Rather it's because we **choose** to listen to *Satan, the world, or our own flesh.* But we don't have to sin! That's the whole point of Romans 6. It tells us that we are dead to sin, so now we need to believe it and begin to behave accordingly!

SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

- "***Christ & Your Problems***" & "***Godliness through Discipline***" by Jay E. Adams (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company: Phillipsburg, NJ, 1971 & 1972)
- "***The Pursuit of Holiness***" by Jerry Bridges & "***Changing Your Thought Patterns***" by George Sanchez (both NavPress: Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1975 & 1978)
- "***Changed into His Image***" by Jim Berg (BJU Press: Greenville, SC, 1999)
- For an in-depth series of expositions of **Romans chapter 6** that will pay rich dividends, obtain "***Romans 6: The New Man***" by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, (Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, MI, 1972)

² From Jay Adams, "*Christ and Your Problems*" (P & R Publishing Company: Phillipsburg, NJ, 1971, 1983)