

HOLY WAR



INTRODUCTION

Whether you like it or not, you are at war. The process of sanctification is described in scripture as being a battle between our flesh and the Spirit; a wrestling match, a holy war. 1 Peter 2:11 refers to “fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.” This struggle with sin is not merely with temptation “out there,” but as James 1:14 declares, “...each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.”

In other words, sin is not merely something wrong that we do. It is something that is active, living and indwelling. In describing his own struggle with sinful desires, the Apostle Paul said that they “wage war” within, “making [him] a prisoner” (Romans 7:23). We feel the heat of the apostle’s intensity and longing as he cries out, “wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (Romans 7:25). The purpose of this study is precisely that; to answer the question of “Who?” Will it be us, or someone else, who will set us free from sin’s domination?

“But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’”

~ 1 Peter 1:15-16

Let’s be clear. Despite the lax spirituality of our times, God calls us to holiness. If God has not provided a way for us to actually walk in victory over sin, then the good news is no longer all that good, and the above verse has got to be the most frustrating command in scripture. We are to be holy, like God? But get this: God HAS provided the means for our sanctification. Jesus is the answer to Paul’s rhetorical question of “Who will set me free?” He says, “Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 7:25). Jesus

didn't die on the cross, to leave you in bondage to sin, only half-saved. He died to set you free. When we are told to be holy it is precisely because we CAN be by God's power and grace. This doesn't mean simply being moral, but actually being **holy**. Holy means "other," or to be completely different than we were; to think differently, feel differently, behave differently. This means that God's call to holiness is most assuredly NOT a call to simply change our outward behavior. It is nothing less than a call to allow the Holy Spirit to transform us from the inside out.

- *How does it make you feel to realize Paul struggled with sin at a very deep level also?*
- *How does God's call to holiness affect you? Do you see why it can actually be hope-giving, as opposed to shaming or frustrating?*

Struggling with sin is an act of worship. (You might want to read that again.) Many of us are so driven by fear of failing to measure up that whenever we encounter a call to be holy, we experience shame at what bad Christians we must be. This is not true at all! Before we became believers, most of us didn't struggle with sin. We simply let it happen. We embraced it. We reveled in it. Now, our struggle with sin is an indication that we truly believe, that we long to please God. Even our struggle is an expression of a heart that says, 'I believe. I worship God. I want to be holy.' This still leaves the question, how do we make progress? This study will focus first on going deeper into our forgiveness and deeper into our crucifixion in Christ. Then, we'll talk about killing our lizards, and we'll turn to how to get back up when we fail.

PART 1: DEEPER INTO FORGIVENESS

Before talking about growing in personal holiness, we MUST remember how Jesus has washed us clean. If you're not growing, notice what you've forgotten, according to the Apostle Peter:

“For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; 6 and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; 7 and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. 8 For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins.”

~ 2 Peter 1:5-9

Contrary to what we might think, shame and guilt are not effective motivators in Christian life. They pull us toward self-reliance rather than to God-reliance. The cross motivates us to grow in our faith by depending on the Holy Spirit. Again, as we look backward, we move forward.

Imagine standing before the Judge of the Universe, God Almighty. The charge against you is stated for all to hear; "This person has sinned against a holy God and is guilty before the Court!" The books are opened and a record of everything you've ever done, said, or thought, is read aloud. Your mind is flooded with the memory of all your sins and a deep sense of shame wells up within you. Fearful and desperate, you begin to plead, eventually throwing yourself on the mercy of the court. You are found guilty and the sentence of death is passed (see Romans 6:23); all sense of hope vanishes. Just then, the Judge rises, removes His robe, and says, "I, and I alone, will pay your sentence, my child! You, therefore, are acquitted of all charges. I now find you, Not guilty." That is what forgiveness is all about.

1. The forgiveness of God means that our sin is completely paid for.

When the Lord Jesus died on the cross of Calvary, one of the last phrases He uttered is TETELESTAI, which we translate from Greek to mean, "It is finished". Nothing can be added to it, or taken away, but it's the same word that the Romans used for "Paid in full". According to Roman law, if a person was convicted of a crime, a certificate of debt was prepared which listed his offenses and the prescribed penalty. This would be fastened to the door of his cell until the day when, having paid his debt to society, he was set free. The magistrate would then take this paper and write TETELESTAI across it, denoting that justice had been satisfied, and the person could never be re-convicted for the same offenses.

"You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross."

~ Colossians 2:13-14

God has written TETELESTAI across the certificate of debt for every believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. The forgiveness of God means God is not angry with us.

I think we get the picture all wrong when it comes to God and us and our sin. We imagine that God is up there in heaven, ready to throw a lightning bolt, angry at us for our sins. We think that God is so offended by our sin that He wants nothing to do with us, turning away from us in disgust, but the scripture teaches that Christ draws close to us when we sin.

"My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if you do sin, there is someone to plead for you before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who pleases God completely."

~ 1 John 2:1

The big, Bible word for this is propitiation. It means "satisfaction". In other words, Jesus Christ is our propitiation, our payment, our means of God being satisfied with us even though we have failed. Christ draws closer to us when we fail because it is when we sin that we really need Him. God is satisfied with us because all of our sins were paid for at the cross; past, present, and future!

3. The forgiveness of God means that we are perpetually clean before God.

*“because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”
~ Hebrews 10:14*

*“Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? Will God? No! He is the one who has given us right standing with himself.”
~ Romans 8:33-34*

Let's think back to the court of law. The question is asked of us, "How do you plead?" "Guilty. Guilty, your honor." At that point, Jesus Christ, our defense attorney, stands up and proclaims, "Not guilty!" To our surprise, the Judge announces our innocence, based on Christ's defense. "Not guilty. You are acquitted." This state of being acquitted, of being in right standing with God, is a perpetual and unchanging state.

4. The forgiveness of God means that God does not punish or condemn us for our sin.

*“He has not punished us for all our sins, nor does He deal with us as we deserve. For his unfailing love toward those who fear Him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth.”
~ Psalm 103:10-11*

Like a parent, God does correct us for the wrong things we do and trains us to not continue in them, but He never gives punishment for our sin because Jesus already took the blame and our punishment. Without realizing this, we may feel guilty and think, 'God is out to get me.' God is not out to get you. God is out to grow you. When we fail in some way, we can ask God to teach us how to not sin the next time but without fear of condemnation and punishment.

*“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”
~ Romans 8:1*

5. The forgiveness of God means God will never again bring our sins into His mind.

*“Then he adds: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.’ And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.”
~ Hebrews 10:17-18*

If Jesus Christ has fully paid for our sin, God will not dishonor what Jesus has done. God will not and cannot remember our sin because He would be unjust to do so, as if Jesus' blood wasn't enough. The freedom and relief that this brings to us is enormous.

- *How does it affect you to know that you either are, or can be, forgiven?*
- *Describe what you think is in God's heart that He would offer such forgiveness.*
- *Explain why you think the complete atonement for our sin is a better motivator than guilt or shame.*

PART 2: OUR CRUCIFIXION WITH CHRIST

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.”

~ Romans 6:1-7

It's not that Jesus just simply died for us. It's that when He died for us, we died too! Adam, the first man, brought sin into the world and all his descendants (us) enter the world as fallen people. We were "in Adam," receiving the consequence of his actions. In the same way, because we are IN CHRIST, we were in Him in the moment of His death. If that seems unlikely to you, ponder again, how it is that Jesus paid for your sins when you hadn't yet been born or committed any! Since we are in Christ, when Christ was put to death; so were we. WE were crucified with Jesus. Consequently, the power of Sin over us was broken because we died! Our old self was nailed to the cross and buried in a tomb with Jesus. This means that just as Jesus raised from the dead, when we hear the gospel and believe it, our old self is done away with, and we receive a new nature.

There are times when the Bible is straightforward and easy to understand. There are other times, like this, where the concepts are so deep it will take eternity for God to explain them. One thing the Bible is clear on is this: we were crucified in Christ and that is the key to our struggle with sin.

- *Have you ever heard of our crucifixion in Christ before?*
- *What is your reaction to it?*
- *What questions does it answer and what does it leave unanswered?*

Because of our Crucifixion with Christ, we have a New Identity

“Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

~ Romans 6:9-11

Christians struggle against sin in a number of ways.

(1) We use rules and law-keeping to prevent us from sinning.

(2) We push down our sinful desires, like a balloon in the pool, and hope they don't pop back up.

(3) We condemn ourselves and wonder if we are, indeed, even believers.

The Apostle Paul suggests a radically different way. He tells us that despite our on-going struggle with sin, God really did something significant to our old self on the cross, and our struggle is actually one of identity. “Even so, consider yourselves to be dead to sin.” Think this way! Why? Because it is reality. We are not being told to enter into fantasy, but instead, to align our thoughts with what God tells us is true. Whereas before I could NOT do right because I was a slave to my sinful nature, now that my sinful nature has been put to death, I have the power to do right. I still live in a fallen world. I still have indwelling inclinations to sin, but my nature has changed. My want to is different.

Before we come to Christ, we have both a sinful nature as well as a “flesh”, the residue rebellion, selfishness and independence that result from living outside of Christ. The flesh is where our sinful thoughts and selfish patterns of behavior reside. When you become a Christian, the Holy Spirit transforms your old, sinful nature into a new self; a new nature with brand new DNA. The real you now loves God and longs to obey Him. The residue rebellion and sin is in your flesh that wages war against the indwelling Holy Spirit. Since future grace will one day even transform your flesh into a sinless body, your present flesh where you struggle with sin is not the real you. Look how Paul described this:

*“So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.
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.”*
~ Romans 7:17-18

The apostle Paul, our model for how to struggle with sin, roots his identity in who he will one day become. That's the real Paul. As he walked through this life, he owned his sin, but said it was in his flesh, NOT in his nature. While owning sin, he didn't shame himself.

Since Christians have a new nature, do we still struggle with sin? Of course we do. As we've already said, sin wages war against us. It can captivate us, however though we could NOT choose the righteous path before, we now have the power to do so IF we believe our new identity. This is, indeed, good news. God has taken our old selfish nature which was desperately sick, and He has created a new nature in its place. Christians sometimes say, "Oh, I know what a wicked heart I have." Well, no, actually you don't. Salvation has given you a new heart that loves God, despite the sin that still remains in your flesh. It isn't the real you.

The key in our battle with sin, according to Paul, is our **identity**.



Because you are in Christ:

- **You are God's child whom He loves, and that never changes. See Romans 8:38-39**
- **There is no condemnation for you, ever again. See Romans 8:1**
- **God does not move away from you, but actually draws closer to you when you sin. That's when you really need Him most. See 1 John 2:1**
- **You have a new nature, one that longs to obey God. See Ephesians 4:24**
- **You are freed from sin's power over you because you died to sin. See Romans 6:18**

The scripture tells us, 'Put off the old...put on the new!' When it uses this language it is speaking to us about IDENTITY. Remember who you are, what Jesus has done, and live out of your new self! Through our crucifixion in Jesus, we've been set free from sin, such that we really don't have to sin anymore.

- *How would you summarize your new identity in Christ?*
- *How would you explain the concept the New Self vs. the old?*

PART 3: KILLING OUR LIZARDS

“So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh 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. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God”

~ Romans 8:12-14

This is one of the most encouraging, yet easy to misunderstand, scriptures. Paul here is walking a fine line between calling us to practical holiness and encouraging us NOT to do it in self-effort, which we've already seen simply will not work. Again, the apostle Paul is our model for how to struggle with sin, and he tells us to put the deeds of the flesh TO DEATH by the Holy Spirit. In other words, I am NOT to attempt to cleanse myself in my own power, AS IF I have the ability to do so. Instead, he proposes that when we encounter sin's various temptations, we deal ruthlessly with our sins by the Holy Spirit. To put it another way, if you a Christian, you can be completely assured the Spirit of God is leading you. In your moment of temptation, He most definitely will be present, prompting you, tugging on you to put this sin to death. You are not alone in this "holy war."

C.S. Lewis gave an illustration in his book *The Great Divorce*, which I am adapting for our purposes:

I saw coming toward me a man, so transparent that he looked more like a ghost. The ghost-like man carried a little lizard on his shoulder. It twitched its tail like a whip and was whispering things into the ghost's ear.

"Shut up, I tell you," he would say to the lizard, but the lizard just continued on. Then I saw another Being. A Holy One invisibly approached the ghost-man and they began to discuss the appropriateness of him, a Christian, having this lizard on his shoulder.

"Would you like me to make him quiet?" said the Holy One.

"Of course I would," said the ghost-man.

"Then I will kill him," said the Holy One, as He stepped forward.

"Wait a minute," said the ghost-man, retreating. "I didn't say anything about killing him!"

"Don't you want him killed?" asked the Holy One.

The ghost-man again answered, "Well, I don't want to bother you with anything as drastic as that. How about he stays on my shoulder but doesn't talk as much?"

"No," said the Holy One. "Killing it is the only way," again reaching for the lizard, and asking again, "Shall I kill it?"

The ghost -man hesitated then said, "Well, I am quite open to considering that, but for the moment I was only thinking of silencing the thing. After all, it isn't THAT embarrassing to have up there."

"May I kill it?" asked the Holy One yet again.

The ghost -man replied, "Please, I never meant to be such a nuisance. Please don't bother. Look. It's gone to sleep all by itself. I'm sure it won't bother me anymore now. Thank you ever so much."

"May I kill it?"

"Honestly, I am sure I'll be able to keep it in order now. I think the gradual process would be far better than killing it."

"The gradual process is of no use at all," spoke the Holy One. "Don't you think so?" replied the ghost-man.

"Well, I'll think over what you've said very carefully. I honestly will. In fact, I'd let you kill it now, but I'm sensing that now is not the best time. Some other day perhaps."

"There is no other day, and there is no other way."

"Get back! Said the ghost -man, "You're burning me. How can I tell you to kill it? You'd kill ME if you killed it."

"It is not so" said the Holy One.

"Well you're hurting me now," said the ghost.

"I never said I wouldn't hurt you. I said it wouldn't kill you," replied the Holy One.

"Well, if you are really trying to help me, why didn't you kill the thing without asking me?"

"I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible. Do I have your permission?"

"Blast you! Go on, can't you? Get it over with," spoke the ghost -man, whimpering.

The next moment the Ghost -man gave a scream of agony such as I have never heard on earth. The Holy One closed his grip on the reptile and twisted it while it bit and writhed; then he flung it, broken backed on the turf.

At this point, with the lizard now dead, the ghost -man cried out, "Ow! I'm done for!" and fell to the ground as well.

For a moment you couldn't make out what was happening. But then the ghost-man began to take on a new shape. It materialized before your eyes until at last standing in front of you was a whole man; a new man, no longer transparent, but having depth and substance. At the same time, something transformed for the lizard. At first, it appeared that the lizard hadn't died, but then it was apparent that a new creature was being formed from its remains; the greatest stallion you had ever seen, with a silvery white mane and powerful legs. The newly made man patted the majestic horse's back, but then turned to the Holy One, and fell at his feet. When he rose his face shone with tears of joy, and he leaped upon the back of the stallion. Off they shot, riding furiously then ascending to mountain heights never thought possible.

The point of this illustration is that you and I both have lizards, pet sins that we keep in our lives because we aren't willing to deal ruthlessly with them. The Holy Spirit will help us to kill "our lizards", but only with our cooperation. If we do work with the Spirit in killing our ungodly desires, we will see them transform into godly passions; deep and powerful longings to please God. This process causes us to materialize. We become substantial, more whole as we kill lust within us. What we really are, a new creation in Christ, begins to take form.

As C.S. Lewis wrote, "The more we get what we now call 'ourselves' out of the way and let Him take us over, the more truly ourselves we become." Killing our sin helps us transform from a ghost-man or woman into a person of substance.

- *What spoke to you most about this illustration?*
- *How was it helpful in portraying our reluctance to deal with sin?*
- *What specifically can we do to kill "our lizards" in our moment of temptation?*

PART 4: WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU FAIL

"For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again"
~ Proverbs 24:10

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."
~ Romans 8:1

"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."
~ 1 John 2:1

Our temptation is to disbelieve that godly men and women fail. It is to disbelieve that we've passed out of condemnation forever. It is to disbelieve that Jesus is our Advocate, our defense attorney who draws alongside to help in time of need. It is to disbelieve that Jesus Himself is the propitiation. That he is literally the satisfaction for our sins, such that God's anger toward us fully appeased. All these are struggles of identity.

What we do when we sin is a test of character. We can either hide our sin from ourselves, justifying it or denying it happened, or we can be honest with ourselves. We can either hide our sin from God or we can be honest with Him. We can either hide it from a trusted friend or be honest with them. What is amazing about grace is that there is no reason to hide anymore if we believe the gospel. Our acceptance is complete, so we're free to be honest, which removes much of shame's power. The bottom line is that

when we fail, when we sin, we will experience shame. It is in those times that we must root our identity into what God declares as truth, not what we feel.

So, what do we do when we fail?

Preach the gospel to ourselves.

Refuse to hide.

Put your eyes back on Jesus.

Acknowledge your sin to the One who loves you.

Simply get back up.

I love what Robert Murray McCheyne often prayed, "Lord, make me so holy as it is possible for a saved sinner to be!" He was able to walk the fine line, longing to be holy, yet understanding we won't be perfect. It is this fine line that allows our struggle with sin to be an act of worship.

- *How is each scripture just above instructive on what to do when we fail?*
- *How does our identity in Christ change everything about our struggle against sin?*
- *What is your tendency when you've failed in some way? What do you do? How is that a denial of the gospel in some way?*

SUMMARY

We've talked about our crucifixion in Christ and our new identity that comes from that. We've been encouraged to "kill our lizards", not through self-effort, but with the Holy Spirit. We've looked at what to do when we fail. Let us remember, in the context of this holy war, our struggle with sin, God is the One who has the power to transform us.

"Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful."

~ 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

ACTION POINTS

1. One practical step forward is to wash your mind on a consistent basis with the scripture that speak of forgiveness, even committing them to memory. Consider memorizing some of the forgiveness above.

2. Take a courageous moral inventory by answering the questions below. Keep in mind that shame is our enemy. You can grow and overcome your struggle.

- If you could change one habit in your life, what would it be?
 - What sin area do you think God desires to change in?
 - In what areas does your conscience bother you?
 - What is that other area you didn't want to write down, but you really need to?
 - What is the cost of these issues on your life?
- What prevents you from coming into the light with these issues?

3. Add to your prayer life, the prayer of Robert Murray McCheyne; "Lord, make me so holy as it is possible for a saved sinner to be!"