

Watch Your *Life*

Session 4: Battling Temptation Pastor Colin Smith

When you became a Christian, you turned from sin. But the impulse to sin remains in you, so to be a Christian is to engage in a lifelong battle against sin and temptation. My aim in this session is to encourage you in that battle. By God's grace, this is a battle in which you can prevail. But you need to know how to fight.

I want to begin by quoting nine verses of Scripture that have one thing in common: They all teach that we need to be actively engaged in our battle against sin. Notice who is to act in each of these verses:

Mark 14:38

Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Romans 8:13

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Ephesians 4:25

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

Ephesians 6:11

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

Colossians 3:5

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Colossians 3:8

But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.

1 Timothy 6:12

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

2 Timothy 2:22

Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.

1 Peter 2:11

...abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

The language of the New Testament is proactive when it comes to your battle with sin and temptation. God calls you to ‘watch’ and ‘pray’ and fight sin and flee temptation. So don’t say “Let go and let God.” Trust God and get going! God has given you power. His Spirit lives within you. God has put you in a position to fight! The Holy Spirit works in you and with you but never without you.

How are you going to fight sin and resist temptation in your life? I want to give you a very simple strategy: Know it. Stalk it. Kill it.

A Strategy for Fighting Sin

1. Know it

a. Identify your primary battles

James says “*Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire*” (James 1:14).

The temptations we face are tied to our own flesh. That means that the distinctive battles you face are to some extent rooted in your temperament. All Christians are tempted, but we are not tempted in the same ways.

Knowing yourself is of huge importance in living the Christian life. David was an impulsive person, and his temptation with Bathsheba reflected his impulsiveness. Jonah was an introverted person, and his temptation to sulk outside Nineveh reflected his introversion. Hezekiah was an extravert. He likes to make an impression and his temptation to show his riches to a visiting king came right out of that.

A person who is meticulous may be tempted to hold a grudge and not to forgive. A person who is naturally cautious may be tempted to live by fear rather than by faith. Become a student of your own heart. Get to know the special temptations that lurk within the frame of your temperament. Are you the kind of person who might be tempted to control, to withdraw, to resent, or to rebel? Ask God to help you see what you are up against.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*
(Psalm 139:23–24)

b. Note your most vulnerable times

i. When you’re tired

The disciples were tired in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was late at night. The whole week had been exhausting since they arrived at Jerusalem after their hundred mile walk from Galilee.

When I am tired, I don't see things clearly. I am less careful with what I say. I am less patient, more irritable, more easily provoked. When I am tired, I am more vulnerable to temptation.

When you are tired—watch and pray!

ii. When a friend has failed

Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. (Galatians 6:1)

Never underestimate the effects in your life from the choices made by your friends. The disciples of Jesus were tempted after Judas walked out of the Last Supper. If you have a friend who has abandoned the faith, watch yourself! This is a vulnerable time for you.

If you have a friend who engages in some deception, what he has done gets into your mind. It makes you more vulnerable to temptation. Has someone you know fallen into sin? Watch and pray, so that what someone else has done does not become a stumbling block to you.

c. Study your past experience

Reflecting on past failures is a great way to avoid repeating them. Study the times when you have failed in the past. When did that happen? What could you have done that might have led to a different outcome?

The defense on a football team will watch reruns of a touchdown they conceded. They watch it in detail. They analyze how the play might have been stopped, because they want to do better next time. Learn from your defeats, so that next time you will prevail.

Listen to how John Owen describes this:

This is how men deal with their enemies. They search out their plans, ponder their goals, and consider how, and by what means they have prevailed over them *in the past*. Then they can be defeated.

(John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*)

So here's where you must begin: Know what you are fighting against. In our last session we looked at how you can use your daily reading of the Bible to identify hidden sins that may be lurking in your life. You may also find that a trusted friend can help you.

I will never forget the first time I plucked up courage to ask my wife to help me with this. We were on a journey, driving in our van, and I said to her, "I've got something to ask you and I want you to help me. Can you identify one sin that you think I should be fighting against more strongly in my life?" She thought about it for a while and then she said, "Can I tell you two?" What she identified was really helpful to me. You can't fight a battle unless you know what you are fighting against.

The apostle Paul uses the analogy of boxing:

Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.... So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

(1 Corinthians 9:25–27)

I don't want to put myself in a position where I am disqualified from ministry. And I know I am in a fight against sin and temptation. So I do not fight *as one beating the air*. A man beating the air exhausts himself without ever landing a punch and when that happens, he will be taken out by his opponent.

In boxing, you have to land your punches and that means you have to have your opponent clearly in view. You move toward him. You take aim at him and you weaken him by many blows.

That's how you have to think of your fight against sin. So what are two sins that you need to fight against more strongly in your life right now? When you know what you are up against, you will be able to engage in the battle.

2. Stalk it

Stalking sin is the way in which you move from knowing your sin to killing the sin that lurks in your life. Stalking means getting to a position where you can see sin's movement in your life so that you can take action against it. Don't underestimate the importance of this. If you have become aware of a particular area of sin in your life and you do not move in on it, then it will grow.

Sin's Trajectory

One way to strengthen your resistance to sin is to look at where it would lead you.

But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (James 1:14–15)

Every sin has a life cycle: First it is conceived, then born, it grows, and it brings forth death. So when you are faced with a particular temptation, ask yourself, "What fruit would this bring if I allowed it to grow?"

John Owen:

Ask envy what it aims at. Murder and destruction are its natural conclusion. Set yourself against it as if it had already surrounded you in wickedness.

(from *The Mortification of Sin*)

In a similar vein,

Every unclean thought or glance would be adultery if it could. Every covetous desire would be oppression and every unbelieving thought would be atheism...

Sin's expression is modest in the beginning, but, once it has gained a foothold, it continues to take further ground and presses on to greater heights.

(from *The Mortification of Sin*)

3. Kill It!

Always be killing sin or it will be killing you. (John Owen)

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Romans 8:13).

Three observations:

a. Sin Dies Slowly

Putting sin to death is a process not an event. The process involves weakening the power of a particular sin in your life.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age. (Titus 2:11–12)

God's grace, trains us to "*renounce ungodliness and worldly passions.*" Every time you say "no" to the flesh you weaken its power. And this happens over time. Sin dies slowly: And that is the point of what Paul says in Galatians 5:24, "*And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*"

Sounds like we did that and now it's all done. But notice the word *crucified*. Crucifixion is a slow death. So, when Paul says we have crucified the flesh, he means that it is dying, not that it is dead. The flesh is gradually being weakened. Every time you say no to a particular temptation, you weaken its power in your life.

And of course, the opposite is also true. Every time you say yes to a particular temptation you increase its power in your life. So, you have to stay actively engaged in this battle.

b. The Battle Continues

The impulse to sin will remain active in your flesh throughout your Christian life. This is a lifelong battle. The particular temptations you are fighting against will likely change over time, but the battle continues. Our battle with remaining sin is like pulling weeds in a garden. The more you pull them the more you subdue them, but you have to keep at it. If you give up, the weeds will soon return.

John Owen said,

[Sin] will not die except by being gradually and constantly weakened: Spare it and it heals its wounds, and recovers its strength...

Let no man think to kill sin with few, easy, or gentle strokes. He who has once smitten a serpent, if he follow not on his blow until he be slain, may repent that ever he began the quarrel. And so he who undertakes to deal with sin, and pursues it not constantly to death.

(John Owen, *Works*, vol. 3)

Here is an important distinction. The impulse to sin remains in you, but it does not reign over you.

Paul says, “*For sin will have no dominion over you*” (Romans 6:14). And for this reason, he says, “*Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions*” (Romans 6:12). Sin doesn’t rule, so don’t let it rule! When you are in Christ, sin is no longer your master. This does not mean that sin has no presence in your life. “*If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*” (1 John 1:8). The impulse to sin remains in you but it does not reign over you.

Dr. Jim Packer says that sin has been “dethroned but not destroyed.” Sin will always be your enemy, but it is no longer your master. And God has equipped you to fight. So, win some battles in your war against the flesh. I don’t say ‘win *the* battle.’ This is not a battle that you fight once and then it is over. Sin dies slowly, and the battle continues. But here’s some good news.

c. Progress Is Possible

The battle against sin is a warfare in which you develop a position. Every time you say yes to a sin you increase its power in your life, every time you say no to a sin, you weaken its power in your life. Think about football. The game is all about moving the ball forward.

Observations:

- i. Even when you are gaining yards in a drive, you can never rest. When you think you are doing really well, sin can snatch the ball and be down to the end zone before you know it.
- ii. The time when you have put points on the board is the time when you most need to be on your defense. You have been exerting yourself in serving. You have led someone to Christ. Watch out! When your ministry is moving forward, sin will be coming back at you.
- iii. When sin has broken through your defense and scored a touchdown, you don’t give up. When you have failed, it is the time to begin a new drive against sin in your life.

I love the words of Micah 7:8, “*Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me*” (Micah 7:8).

J. C. Ryle said, “A true Christian is one who has not only peace of conscience, but war within. He may be known by his warfare as well as by his peace.”

In your battle against sin and temptation: Know it, Stalk it, and Kill it.

I hope you’ll join me next time for session #5 of Watch Your Life when we will be looking at Exercising Faith.

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