
How Can I Resist Temptation?

Fantasizing about sin is a form of enjoying the pleasures of sin. We may not be engaged in the physical act of sin, but our heart is fully engaged in thoughts about the pleasures of sin. One way to resist temptation is to block out every thought that has anything to do with enjoying the pleasures of sin.

Scripture makes it abundantly clear that we should eliminate the desires which are sinful (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5). We are to flee from sinful lusts (2Timothy 2:22).

A serious mistake many of us make, while under the sway of temptation, is to think that we can stop ourselves before we go too far. Yet, the opposite is true. Stopping ourselves becomes more difficult the longer we stay hooked.

When we detect a pattern of behavior that we know will lead us into sin, we should identify the “early warning signs”. Then, when they first appear, we should actively break away from this pattern of behavior. A good goal, then, is to back out as early as possible.

Yet, you need a plan to move toward a greater victory, not just fleeing from temptation. Jesus speaks of the evil spirit that was cast out, and finding the person’s heart empty, the evil spirit returned with a full house of companions (Luke 11:26). The final state of the man was worse than the beginning.

People who follow Jesus Christ are to cast off the ways of sin (Ephesians 4:22), and be renewed in our minds (vs. 23), so we must put on the new self which is created in the likeness of God (vs. 24). We should be spending time setting our minds on Christ (Hebrews 12:2). We should be keeping fresh in our memories all that Jesus endured for our sake, so that we will not grow weary (vs. 3).

It is simply a matter of squarely “facing the facts.” We are to: (1) Think of what Christ did for us, (2) Focus our actions on being the person Christ has made us to be. Protestant Christians teach that our true, eternal identity is determined by what Jesus did for us (Colossians 2:9-12). Believers must cooperate with the Holy Spirit to let their true identity in Jesus Christ shine brightly in this world. Giving into temptation prevents the light of Christ from shining (2 Corinthians 4:6-10).

When we see a contradiction between our identity in Christ with our actions, then we need to confess our sin, and accept His forgiveness. In gratitude for His forgiveness, we are to show our love for Christ by obeying His commandments (John 14:15). Obeying Christ’s commandments will prove to be an ongoing struggle (Romans 7). Yet, Christians are assured that by God’s power they will be victorious in this struggle (Romans 8:37; Phillipians 1:6).

So, in addition to looking for the early warning signs of temptation, we should also watch for the early warning signs of wandering away from abiding in Christ. We need to engage in activities that will provide us with everything we need to grow in our knowledge of Christ and what He has done for us. Some activities most likely to help us to be a blessing to others are: Regular, disciplined Bible reading, Regular times of private prayer, Reading books that deepen a personal understanding of salvation through Christ and all that it involves, Scripture memory, Regular attendance at worship and Bible study, Personal times of in-depth study of the Bible.

These “spiritual disciplines” will equip us to bless other people. If we don’t practice the spiritual disciplines we will have a difficult time rejoicing over what Jesus has done for us because we won’t know very much about what He’s actually done for us. We will also have a difficult time sharing what we know about Christ with other people if we don’t know very much about Christ. So, these spiritual disciplines can go a long way in helping other people to experience God’s grace. For example, if we share the Gospel with another person, and that person comes to know Christ, then that person has come to know salvation through Christ by means of our sharing the news of Christ.

So, can our good works improve our standing with God? Christians will disagree on this point. Some teach that good works will merit our salvation, and this is how we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (Phillipians 2:12). Others teach that when a person has faith in Christ then Christ’s righteousness is credited to the believer (Romans 4:21-25). So a believer is justified by faith in Christ’s atonement, and not by works (Romans 4:6). Still other Christians have taught that we must work hard to draw close to God or we might lose our salvation (Hebrews 10:26-31). However, all these viewpoints agree that good works will provide a blessing for other people who are on the receiving end of their actions. All agree that our sins are a curse on those around us. So, if you love Jesus Christ why would you want to work against God, and be a curse to those who come in contact with you? Likewise, if you love Jesus, shouldn’t you want to join God in His work of Salvation, and be a blessing to those around you?

A Christian should do good works that are motivated by love, and nothing but love (1John 4:12-20). If we only do good works to gain a reward or not get into trouble, then our motivation is selfish. We aren't doing good works for the benefit of others. We are doing good works for the benefit of ourselves. With God's help, Christians should strive to benefit others, even when it won't benefit themselves.

Is it possible to do good works and be motivated by nothing but love? Well, as Christians we certainly believe Jesus Christ did. He died on the cross because He loved us (Ephesians 5:2). When He died on the cross we were actually God's enemies (Romans 5:8). Now it's our turn. We should love others the same way that He loved us (Ephesians 5:1&2).

My personal conviction is that the good news is that "Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3b). When we put our faith in His death on the cross as the payment for our sins, accepted by God, then we are "reckoned" as right before God (Romans 4:24-25). This connection to Christ's salvation is by faith and not by works (Romans 4:6; 11:6; Galatians 2:16). So even though we can't do anything to change our relationship with God by our own efforts, what Christ has done can do that. Christ's death on the cross imputed His righteousness onto all who believe in Him as savior (Romans 4:23). We can rest assured that Jesus has done everything needed to make us right with God. Nothing more can be done to make us right with God because Jesus has already done everything for us.

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Why not continue in sin?

Why not develop a plan to commit sin, ask for forgiveness, and then continue sinning again and again? What's wrong with that?

The Apostle Paul responded to this very question when he said, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Romans 6:1, NKJV). He goes on to say that the entire purpose of our salvation is that we died to sin, so that we might be alive to new life in Jesus Christ. Since we have new life in Christ we should not go back to the old way of life, of living in sin. He also says, we were like slaves when we were in sin. Now we have been freed from sin. It doesn't make sense for someone who has been freed from slavery to want to go back into slavery.

If we say that we believe in Christ, and that we are grateful for His forgiveness, but then we don't resist temptation, something is terribly wrong. It's a little like lighting a match in a room filled with gas. Nobody's going to like how it turns out.

The Apostle John said, "If we say we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (1 John 1:6). That doesn't mean that we never sin because in verses 8&9 John says, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves," so we should "confess our sins" and Christ will forgive us and cleanse us. This means that a Christian who sins is just plain wrong. It should never happen. Yet, if we deny that we are sinners, we would be lying. So, when we do fall into sin again, we should confess our sins and receive forgiveness. In other words, we should have zero tolerance for sinful behavior in our lives. The goal is not less sin, but no sin. We may not be able to achieve that goal, but we should never stop aiming for it.

So what if we ignore all of this and go ahead and sin anyway? What then?

If we sin we are going to hurt other people, as well as our relationships with those people. These injuries will have lasting effects. If you love God and are grateful that Jesus died for your sins, why would you want to hurt other people and yourself? Why would you want to hurt Jesus like that? You need to ask yourself if you really do love God because you are acting like you don't (John 14:15).

If you are continuing in sin you need to repent. You also need to pray that God will deliver you out of the sinful pattern of life that has enslaved you. Seek out every possible form of help. God will be with you as you seek greater freedom in Christ.

If you are a Christian, God will give you total victory over this cycle of sin, in His time (Romans 8:37). If you are not a Christian, consider turning to Christ, and receiving His gift of salvation. He will give you victory over sin.