

HOW TO STOP SINFUL HABITS

By Andy Manning

1 Peter 2:11

The title of this sermon is “How to Stop Sinful Habits.”

There are a lot of Christians who struggle with sinful habits.

These are behaviors that you know you should stop, and a part of you wants to stop, because you want to please the Lord, but you keep going back to it. You keep repeating the behavior.

This could a sexual sin; pornography; getting drunk; using drugs; cheating in some way; stealing in some way; overeating; failing to exercise; smoking; dipping; habitual lying.

Why do we keep going back to these habitual sins?

You may be dealing with a sinful habit right now.

It's something that you know is wrong, and you want to stop, but if you look back in time, you've been wrestling with the same sin for three, five, ten years – and maybe more.

Why can't we seem to overcome these sinful habits?

Before we get into some answers about overcoming sinful habits, let me spend a moment on encouragement.

Encouragement for Strugglers

- 1. The first thing you need to know is that this is not unusual.**

This happens to most if not all Christians at some point in their life.

This doesn't mean you are worse than other Christians; it doesn't mean that there's something wrong with you.

One of the things about sinful habits is that they are usually secret; and that means that there are many Christians around you who are struggling just like you. You just can't tell because like you, they're keeping it a secret.

So if you're struggling with a sinful habit, know that you're not alone; you're not abnormal.

I've certainly wrestled with sinful habits for years at a time before I found victory, and I'm a pastor.

If the pastor has struggled with sinful habits, then it's okay for you to struggle, too.

2. The second thing you need to know is that you can be victorious over that sin.

The situation is not hopeless.

It's only hopeless if you give up.

You can overcome any sinful habit and live in obedience.

If God commands you to do something, He will give you the power to do it.

3. The third thing you need to know is that God loves you so much.

Because you have been failing in this area of your life, you're probably thinking a number of negative thoughts.

You may be wondering if God has abandoned you; if God doesn't love you anymore; if God has given up on you; if God has left you. If you've lost your salvation.

None of that is true.

No matter what you've done, God loves you so just the same, and He has an awesome place for the rest of your life.

But to enjoy that plan, you're going to have to put sin behind you.

But we'll get to that in a minute. Just know that God still loves you deeply.

But the question is **why do we keep repeating behaviors that we want to stop?**

There are a few reasons for this. We do we keep going back to those sinful habits, even though we want to stop? There **four reasons** for this.

4 Reasons We Hold on To Sinful Habits

1. First, we keep repeating sinful behaviors because sin feels good.

As human beings, we like pleasure rather than pain; we like fun rather than boredom; we like to feel good rather than bad.

And sin feels good for a moment; it is fun for a moment; it is pleasurable for a moment.

And so we will always be tempted to sin.

2. Second, we keep repeating sinful behaviors because it seems like our sin isn't hurting us.

When we choose to engage in these secret, sinful behaviors, our head doesn't fall off; we don't start bleeding uncontrollably; we don't get thrown in jail; we don't lose our jobs; our bank accounts aren't immediately drained; we don't lose our families.

When we sin, it seems like everything pretty much stays the same – especially if nobody finds out.

- 3. Third, we keep repeating sinful behaviors because it doesn't seem like our sin is hurting anybody else.**

When we sin, as long as it stays a secret, nobody's mad; relationships aren't broken; nobody is physically hurt; nobody is emotionally hurt; the kids don't drop out of school; our parents don't yell at us; everybody still seems happy.

- 4. Fourth, we keep repeating sinful behaviors because on those occasions when we have denied ourselves and been obedient, there didn't seem to be any immediate rewards.**

When we obey, it's not like all of our dreams start coming true; it's not like our sicknesses are immediately healed, and our problems are solved. When you obey, it's not like you can go online and check your bank account, or your 401(k), and see amazing results.

And so **Christians live with two competing desires.**

It's not unusual to have two competing desires.

For example, right Lydia and I are saving up to buy a new car with cash. That takes some serious savings, and it takes some serious patience. At the same time, there are a lot of other fun and useful ways to spend our money. And so every time we get paid, we are faced with two competing desires – save for a car, or spend on something else.

All Christians live with two competing desires.

On the one hand, we want to please God. We want to say No to sin, and yes to God.

On the other hand, we want pleasure – right now. We want to feel good. We want to have fun.

At the same time, there doesn't seem to be any negative consequences to ourselves or others when we sin.

And there doesn't seem to be any immediate, amazing rewards when we say No to sin.

So in the moment of temptation, the reason we keep returning to our sinful habits is because we decide that sin is worth it.

After weighing the pros and cons, we decide that sin's not that bad.

We decide that the rewards of sin are better than the rewards of obedience.

At the same time, there's still a big part of us that wants to overcome sin. We know we need to live a holy life – a life without sin – a life of moral excellence. We know that's what God wants us. And we know that the Bible says in the long run, that will be better for us.

So how do we stop those sinful habits once and for all?

Well, there are a lot of different strategies to overcome sin. There's a lot that I could say.

But today I just want to give you one principle that might prove to be revolutionary for you. This one principle could be the thing that you needed to hear to help you finally kick those old sinful habits.

Turn with me to 1 Peter 2:11 (CSB). “Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from sinful desires that wage war against the soul.”

Let's walk through this verse word by word.

First, Peter calls us **strangers and exiles**.

In other words, we are first and foremost citizens of heaven; of the kingdom of God. First and foremost we live by the rules and values of God, not of the culture around us.

So we must not excuse our sin because it's normal. We are not called to be normal. We are not called to fit in with the world; or to follow the ways of the world. We are called to be godly; we are called to be holy. We are called to imitate Christ.

Next, Peter commands us to **abstain from sinful desires**.

Now this is not a new command. Stop sinning.

To abstain means to stay away from; to restrain yourself from sinful behaviors.

Now look at the last phrase. "Abstain from sinful desires **that wage war against the soul.**"

Now this is interesting. These are strong words. Peter says that sin wages war against the soul.

The "soul" just means your life, or you.

Sin wages war against you. Sin wages war against your life.

Peter is telling us that the reason we need to abstain from sin, or give up our sinful habits, is that sin is bad for us. Sin hurts us.

In other words, Peter isn't saying that we need to stop sinning because God said so, or to please God, or to further God's kingdom, or to better love others.

Peter is saying that we need to abstain from sin because sin is bad for us. Sin hurts us.

But Peter doesn't just say that sin is bad for us. Sin wages war against us.

Sin seriously damages us. Sin severely hurts us. Sin is lethal. Sin is toxic. Sin is deadly.

Psalm 1:6 (CSB) says, "The way of the wicked leads to ruin."

Psalm 32:10 (CSB) says, "Many pains come to the wicked."

Peter is saying that every time we sin, we are shooting deadly missiles at ourselves. We are putting ourselves in grave danger. More than that, we are damaging ourselves.

So here's the solution to sinful habits. Here's how to overcome sinful habits.

Remember that when you choose to sin you choose to severely hurt yourself.

Remember that the reason we hang on to our sinful habits is because we have concluded that sin is worth it; it's fun; it's pleasurable; and we don't see an horrible consequences. And so we say Yes to sin, even though we know it's wrong, and a part of us doesn't want to do it. We conclude that sin is harmless.

But Peter is saying that that's not true. That's far from true. Peter says that **when you choose to sin, you choose to severely hurt yourself.** He says that sin wages war against your soul; against your life. Sin is deadly. It's

toxic. It may seem in the moment, on the surface, that sin is harmless; but it's not. It's deadly.

So the solution to overcoming that sinful habit is to change your mind about sin.

Up until now, you keep going back to sin because it seems harmless.

But from now on, you need to look at sin through the lens of Scripture.

It's deadly. **When you choose to sin you choose to severely hurt yourself**.

Now what's the problem with this?

The problem is that from our own experience sin doesn't seem to be that bad. It doesn't seem to be deadly. We've all sinned, and we're still here.

So the question is, "What's so bad about sin?" Why does Peter use such strong language? Why does he say that sin wages war against us?

First of all, if you are going to win the battle against sin, you're going to have to exercise faith.

A lot of faith. You're going to have to live by faith rather than by sight.

And what I mean is that even though sin doesn't seem to be deadly, you're going to have to trust Scripture.

If you're going to defeat sin, you're going to have to believe what the Bible says, even if you don't understand it.

You're going to have to believe that even though doesn't seem to be deadly, it must be deadly because God says so, and God is smarter than me.

You have to have faith that God isn't trying to trick you. God isn't playing games with you.

When God says “Don’t,” He’s not trying to ruin your fun; He’s not trying to scare you into submission. When God says “Don’t” He means “Don’t hurt yourself.” God loves you. And when He says that sin is bad for you, that you need to abstain, then you need to believe Him, even if you don’t understand.

Second, let me to take a moment to try to explain the danger of sin. Let me try to answer the question, “What’s so bad about sin?”

What’s So Bad About Sin?

1. Sin separates us from God.

I’m not saying that sin causes us to lose our salvation, because I don’t believe that to be the case.

Sin causes you to feel separated from God; sin puts distance between you and God.

You were created for an intimate friendship with God; but sin hinders and damages the friendship.

This is clearly seen in the story of Adam and Eve.

Before they chose to sin, they had intimate fellowship with God. God walked and talked with them in the garden. But after they sinned they were separated from God. God was still involved in their lives; but the intimacy wasn’t there anymore.

I’ve seen this in my relationships with people.

When I sin against my wife it puts distance between us. Sin kills intimacy.

My wife and I are still in the same bed, but we don’t feel close.

We are still in the same house; driving in the same car; but we don't feel close. We feel miles apart.

And that's what happens when you sin against God. Sin separates you from God. It hurts your relationship with God.

2. Sin steals our happiness.

Sin is fun, but it doesn't lead to happiness.

There is a difference between fun and happiness.

Fun lasts for a moment, but happiness is ongoing.

Sin is fun for a moment, but when the fun is over, sin steals your joy.

Sin may gratify, but it doesn't satisfy.

I've experienced this personally.

I've never felt unhappy after deciding to be obedient.

But I always feel unhappy after I've given in to sin.

I've never regretted obedience. But I've always regretted sin.

After I sin I feel bad about myself; I feel fear of God's discipline; I fear being found out by others.

But also, the reason that sin steals our joy is that joy is the result of intimacy with God.

Psalm 16:11 (CSB) says, "In your presence is abundant joy."

But when you sin, it separates you from God. And so sin steals our happiness.
Sin leads to sorrow and sadness.

3. Sin sabotages our relationships.

Here's what you have to remember.

The only reason that sin seems harmless is because it's a secret.

But what if your secret got out? If your sin got out, it would deeply hurt your family and friends and church. It would embarrass you. It would cause you to lose your influence among unbelievers. It might cause you to lose your job; lose your marriage; and maybe even result in jail.

The story of Tullian Tchividjian comes to mind. He's the grandson of Billy Graham. About five years ago he was hired as the pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Florida, one of the most famous churches in America. He quickly became one of the most well-known pastors and Christian authors in the country. He was invited to speak all over the place. He was respected. He had a beautiful family. But he had a secret sin – he had an marital affair. As long as his sin was a secret, it didn't affect anything. He was still a successful pastor; famous; highly respected in the Christian community. Great marriage. Great family life. But when his sin was exposed, he was fired from the church and couldn't get another job as a pastor. He lost his reputation. He was no longer a respected speaker and author. But worst of all, he lost his relationships. He broke the hearts of his children and spouse. His wife divorced him. This man lost everything because of his sin.

Sin only seems harmless when it is a secret.

But sin has a way of exposing itself at the worst possible time.

That's how the devil ruins our lives. First, he convinces us that sin is harmless.
And then when we least expect it, he exposes our sin and destroys our lives.

4. Sin sacrifices God's blessings.

God has an amazing plan for your life.

And as you live in His will, He promises to guide and direct you every step of the way.

He promises protection, prosperity, provision, healing, significance, success.

But when you choose to sin, you sacrifice that blessing.

When you sin, you are choosing the pleasure of that sin rather than the benefits of God's blessings. And that's a horrible decision.

Let me just read a passage to you that should adequately describe the danger of sin. It's **Psalm 1 (CSB)**.

1 How happy is the one who does not
walk in the advice of the wicked
or stand in the pathway with sinners
or sit in the company of mockers!

2 Instead, his delight is in the Lord's instruction,
and he meditates on it day and night.

3 He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams
that bears its fruit in its season
and whose leaf does not wither.
Whatever he does prospers.

4 The wicked are not like this;
instead, they are like chaff that the wind blows away.

5 Therefore the wicked will not stand up in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

6 For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to ruin.

Recently in Home Group Sean McDonnold shared with us the story of his cousin, and he gave me permission to share that story with you. Sean's cousin was a successful Real Estate agent in Las Vegas, NV. One evening he and his girlfriend went to a party, and they got drunk. On the way home from the party, he veered into oncoming traffic and hit another vehicle head-on, and killed an entire family. He spent the next seven years in jail, and now that he's out, he can't find work doing anything but working fast food. God had so many blessings in store for that young man; but when he chose to sin, he chose to sacrifice those blessings. He missed out on so much.

God loves you and has all these wonderful gifts and blessings for you. It's a life that is better than you can imagine.

But it's only yours if you walk in obedience.

When you choose to sin, you lose it. You sacrifice God's blessings.

Now you've already sinned – many times.

Does that mean you have sacrificed all of God's blessings? No.

You have sacrificed many of God's blessings. Because you have chosen to sin, you have lost many of God's blessings. And that thought should bring you to tears. It should lead to sorrow. You have missed out on some wonderful blessings because of your sin.

But God never gives up on you. He still has a wonderful future in store for you.

He stands ready to forgive you, and you can begin living in the sweet spot of His blessings right now.

But you have to repent. You have to walk in obedience. You have to let go of sin.

CONCLUSION

So here's the bottom line today.

What's the solution to those sinful habits that keep hanging around? Those sinful habits that we can't seem to kick?

The solution is to remember that **when you choose to sin you choose to severely hurt yourself.** When you choose to sin, you choose to suffer.

Sin may seem harmless, but in reality it is more dangerous than you could ever imagine.

So let me give you a homework assignment. Here are four things you can do to stop your sinful habits.

1. Memorize 1 Peter 2:11. When you are tempted, quote this verse over and over until the temptation goes away.
2. Memorize the statement, "When you choose to sin you choose to severely hurt yourself." And meditate on it in moments of temptation.
3. Make a list of twenty reasons why you should give up your sinful habit.
4. Today before we close, take a moment to make a commitment to once and for all give up your sin. Ask for forgiveness and make a new start.