

The Rules of War



Let's go back to 1916. The Battle of Somme is festering like an infected wound. You are a young British soldier who has just arrived at the battlefield in order to replace the most recent wave of casualties. As you step into the trenches for the first time, dread clinches your gut in a tight knot. You imagine the gore of bayonet combat. You watch as rats scurry in and out holes beside your feet. The acrid smell of sweat and decay leaves a tang of stomach acid in your mouth.

Passing a bunk room, you notice a veteran soldier sitting on his helmet. Like a magnet, you are drawn to him. You squat beside him, tap his shoulder, and – without any introduction – you ask, *'What do I need to know? How does a man survive here?'*

Such urgency is the starting line of this chapter. Too often spiritual books are written either with the relaxed tone of a travel guide or the emotional detachment of a professor writing on the mating habits of earthworms. This spirit may be okay if the topic is building friendships or leading small groups. However, if the subject matter is sin, such tones are absurd. Sin can never be a mere talking point. Its fangs are too near and its bite too deadly to permit a relaxed and comfortable attitude. In truth, the only way to talk about sin is with a touch of nervousness. No man feels completely at ease while chatting to his

doctor about prostate cancer. How, then, can we discuss pride or lust without hearing the rustling of a predator crouching at the door?

The purpose of this chapter is to lay down ten basic ground rules for warring against sin. Sin is a unique opponent. One of the greatest threats in our fight against sin is the assumption that competence in the world qualifies us to handle sin. It doesn't. We cannot transpose, for example, life-management skills into tactics for mortifying the flesh. Many a preacher has likened sin to a pig that will eat anything set before it. We need to be careful lest our efforts at self-improvement end up engorging the very flesh we are trying to starve.

All that is written here should be read as the notes of one soldier being passed to another. I will be brief. I will be frank. Now is not the time to shave fine hairs of doctrine while sipping a single malt. The smell of battle is in the air. Our focus needs to be on essential intelligence, the kind of information Christian men need *right now* in order to resist malignant forces that are already scheming their downfall.

One last thing needs to be said by way of introduction. Each of these rules is built on a verse from Paul's letter to the Romans. The reason for this is as follows: Romans is Paul's most lengthy, complete, and systematic presentation of the gospel. This gospel – the core message of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ – is the only remedy for sin. Thus, if a man is looking for a training manual for how to put sin to death, there is no better place to go than Romans.

Rule 1 – You Need the Holy Spirit

'For the law of the Spirit of Life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death' (Rom. 8:2).

Humility could be the most misunderstood virtue of the Christian life. Culturally, we tend to think of a humble person as someone who is timid, insecure, and self-demeaning. He is the perfect Bob Cratchit

– the drone in a cubicle who is willing to sacrifice life, liberty, and all personal happiness in order to keep his line manager, Mr. Scrooge, happy. Yet, true humility is as different from this caricature as a lion is from a house cat. The distinguishing mark of genuine humility is not a correct posture of me-before-me, or of me-before-my-boss, but of me-before-God. Humility is a purebred theological virtue. Only when I understand and *own* my true relationship with God am I free to be a humble man.¹

This explains why humility is able to unite such extremes within a single human heart. On the one hand, a humble man is able to walk with the cool confidence of David into the shadow of a giant.² He can do so for one reason: behind the giant he sees the much larger shadow of an infinite God. At the same time, humility ensures that such confidence never trespasses into the domain of pride. The humble man understands the source of all of his strength. He knows that, if God is on his side, mountains can be tossed like pebbles into the sea. However, if left alone, a pebble is too great of a mountain to be picked up and carried.

This background is important for understanding how humility weighs into the fight against sin. There are two attitudes that threaten to handicap a Christian at every moment of this battle. One is despair, the feeling that sin is too strong of an enemy to be defeated. This disposition takes root whenever we repeat the mistake of the wandering Israelites at the border of Canaan. If we focus on the stature of our enemy instead of the stature of God, all perspective is lost and we end up feeling like mice, not men. The other equally treacherous attitude is

1. Two books worth reading on humility are the following: the classic *Humility* by Andrew Murray (multiple digital versions available) and the more recent book by C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2005).

2. Note the stanza in Frederick Faber's old hymn 'Workman of God': 'Thrice blessed is he to whom is given/The instinct that can tell/That God is on the field/when He is most invisible.'

that of pride, the deep-seated feeling that I-can-get-on-without-God. This attitude would be comic if it were not so dangerous. Any man who tries to face sin armed merely with the flesh will undoubtedly wind up like the Israelites outside the gates of Ai – whipped and licking his wounds.³

Now to maintain humility in the fight against sin we need to understand what Paul says in Romans 8:2: ‘For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.’⁴ The idea here is that, when a person becomes a Christian, he experiences a change of regimes. An old tyrant is deposed. A new order is established. We might liken this to the fate of Paris during WW2. Early in 1940 Paris fell to the Nazis. However, on the 25th of August, 1944, after a six-day battle, the German garrison finally surrendered. For people on the ground, this meant that there was a radical shift of authority within the city. One day, the Nazi commanders were telling citizens what they could and could not do. The next, they were stripped of power. The Allies were now in control.

Such is the nature of conversion. Christ does not just save people from the penalty of sin. He liberates them from the dominion of sin. This is what Paul is telling us in Romans 8:2. He wants us to know that, in place of sin and death, Christ now rules in the hearts of His people through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Now there are two principles that follow this truth. They are two sides of the same coin. The first is that, apart from the Spirit, no one can fight sin, much less kill sin. Without the might of God at work in us, the most we will ever be able to do against sin is echo the cry of

3. Our dependence on the Spirit is a point that John Owen hammers home in *The Mortification of Sin*. He says, ‘A man may easier see without eyes, speak without a tongue, than truly mortify one sin without the Spirit.’

4. We need to not be confused by Paul’s use of law here. What he means by the term is not a set of rules, but a source of power, authority, and control. See Douglas Moo, *The Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), p. 493.

Romans 7: ‘Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?’ (v. 24)⁵

Yet, the flip side is also true. If without the Spirit, nothing is possible, with the Spirit, all things are possible. The same Spirit who enabled Samson to hoist the city gates and topple pagan temples now lives within us. Understanding this is the key to genuine humility. Humility is the posture that enables us to say, ‘When I am weak, then I am strong.’ When humble, we are both empty and full. We are emptied of self-confidence, but brimming with hope in the strength of the Lord. This attitude is the starting position of all effective combat against sin.⁶

Rule 2 – You Need to Know Your Location

‘So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 6:11).

The New Testament often uses the image of being awakened to describe the lived experience of faith. To be unconverted is not just to sit in darkness; it is to be asleep. The unbelieving man is spiritually detached from reality. He is living in delusion, unaware of truths that ought to have a greater impact on his life than the ground beneath his feet, the sun in the sky, and the air that he breathes.

Now, it is a strange experience to be awakened from a deep sleep, especially if one has radically changed locations. I’ll never forget traveling to Egypt to study as a young man. I arrived late at night after a full day of flying. A family picked me up that I had never met before. I was taken to their apartment and brought to a bedroom where I

5. We can neatly sum this truth up in the formula: no regeneration, no mortification.

6. Many a spiritual writer has made the point that, while humility is not the highest virtue, it is the first virtue. It is a unique beauty that attracts the mercy of God. Bernard of Clairvaux writes, ‘And so when you perceive that you are being humiliated, look on it as a sign of a sure guarantee that grace is on the way.’ See *Sermons on the Song of Songs* (Kindle edition).

would be staying for the next couple of weeks. Jet-lagged and delirious, I stumbled into bed.

The next day I woke up in the early afternoon. I didn't know what time it was, where I was staying, or anything about the world around me. I remember looking through the window and seeing sandy lawns and palm trees. I felt as if I was standing at the intersection of two worlds, one old and familiar and one new and unknown.

The situation of Christians is similar to this. After coming to faith, our bodies continue to inhabit the same physical world that we have known from birth. And yet after hearing the gospel something is startlingly new. A light has shone on our hearts that makes truths evident that previously we could not perceive, imagine, or understand. Like newborn infants, we are thrown into dimensions of existence that are as new and unfamiliar as they are exciting and unexpected.

In light of this dramatic change, one of the primary responsibilities of every Christian is to reorient himself using the fixed truths of the gospel.⁷ This is what Paul means when he says, 'So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11). For Paul, the gospel is not a set of religious ideas suspended from reality like clouds in the sky. The gospel is a statement of historical facts. This means that, for Paul, learning about the gospel is a lot like reading a topographical map. The gospel orients us. It tells us where we've come from, where we are going, where we are located right now, and in which direction we need to get moving.

Now, for killing sin, nothing is more important than getting an accurate read on where we are situated before God. One of Satan's favorite tactics is to convince us that we are walking on the boggy

7. It's increasingly common to reduce our union with Christ to the language of identity. There is a danger in this trend. To modern ears, the idea of 'identity' is muddled with subjective, individualistic, and psychological overtones. For a more robust treatment of union with Christ see Douglas Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, pp. 378-422.

ground of condemnation and guilt when in fact we are standing on the solid rock of grace and forgiveness. Satan constantly sends out mixed signals to try to confuse us about our status in Christ. The best defense for this is to pull out our map of the gospel and to remind ourselves of our location. We need to look back and remember that, when Christ died, we died. This means there is no more condemnation for us. Equally, we need to look ahead and see that, if Christ was raised, then we, too, will be raised. This means that there is no more despair for us. Thus, being reminded of our position before God, we can journey on in confidence having shed the dead weight of confusion, doubt, shame, and guilt.⁸

Rule 3 – You Need to Practice the Normal Christian Life

‘Do not be slothful in zeal’ (Rom. 12:11).

As I write we are in the middle of a pandemic. One of the dangers during a crisis is to succumb to tunnel vision. Right now, hundreds of billions of dollars have been invested in the effort to develop a vaccine to subdue the spread of Covid-19. There is a widespread feeling that if we can just manage this particular virus then the world can safely return to normality.

Though the vaccine effort is commendable, the mindset is short-sighted. Covid has undoubtedly exacerbated the health risks of millions of people. Nonetheless, the idea that sustaining health can be reduced to inoculating against a single virus is distressingly naïve. To state the obvious, safeguarding health requires a lot more than medical intervention. It requires regular exercise, a disciplined diet, abstaining from harmful substances, getting sufficient sleep, and even maintaining meaningful relationships. As necessary as a vaccine may be for reducing the danger of a specific virus, the

8. For a good introduction to the gospel, see Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2017).

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routine practices of everyday life are far more important in terms of sustaining the robust organs and vigorous immune system needed to keep the body healthy.

A similar risk endangers our effort against sin. There is a bizarre aspect of human nature that prefers the exciting and exceptional to the routine and ordinary. Lewis captures this in *The Screwtape Letters*. In the book, an elder demon is coaching a protégé in how to disrupt the religious awakening of a man. The elder demon writes,

Keep his mind off the most elementary duties by directing it to the most advanced and spiritual ones. Aggravate that most useful human characteristic, the horror and neglect of the obvious. You must bring him to a condition in which he can practice self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office.⁹

This bias to neglect the obvious is a genuine danger in spiritual combat. When it comes to fighting sin, many of us would prefer to do something unusual and dramatic – like joining Tony Robbins in a bout of firewalking – than cycling through a humble routine of church services, Bible reading, and prayer. The stuff of everyday discipleship sounds boring, repetitive, and ritualistic. Thus, we gravitate toward the novel and adventurous.

This aversion to the normal Christian life is exceedingly dangerous. Killing sin always begins with the mundane, not the extraordinary. If a man wants to snuff the coals of lust or anger, the first step is not a silent retreat, but something far simpler: sitting under a faithful ministry of the Word, committing to a local fellowship, budgeting time for spiritual friendship and communal worship, and establishing personal routines of Word and prayer. More can always be added to

9. C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Harpers Collins, 2011), p. 19.

this recipe, but these ingredients can never be taken away. They are as basic to killing sin as flour and water are for making bread.¹⁰

Why is this? A lot of reasons could be given. I will just refer to one. The normal Christian life is what produces and sustains the basic health of a Christian. In saying this I am not denying that more aggressive efforts will be needed to dig up the roots of some gnarly sins. The point is merely that pursuing a silver-bullet cure will be of little benefit to a person who is not first willing to practice the A, B, C's of a godly lifestyle.

Rule 4 – You Need a Zero-Tolerance Attitude

'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' (Rom. 8:13).

We all live with a mental scale of illnesses. At one end of the spectrum, there are various ailments that are not alarming. For most people catching a cold is an annual rite of passage. They lose no sleep when they get a stuffy nose or a touch of fever. Then there is the other end of the spectrum, the scary diseases that we avoid thinking too much about. At the top of this list are maladies like cancer and dementia. The average person would do anything possible to keep himself from experiencing one of these. We fear them like we fear death itself – and for good reason: the one all too easily leads to the other.

Christians often have a similar mentality regarding sin. There are small sins, and there are big sins. The former do not worry us. We imagine that a touch of greed or a critical spirit will gently evaporate with time like water on a towel. The stuff that scares us are the big sins

10. Men need to realize that we have a spiritual shadow just as we have a physical one. Our shadow is the part of us that we do not want to see and that we deny being in existence. There is no way to mortify sin without confronting our shadow. Yet, how do we do this? The best way to come to terms with the dark side of our person is not self-examination, but living in close relationships with other people. What is invisible to 'me' will be clear to 'you.'

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– murder, adultery, theft, abuse, and so on. These, we imagine, are the hard felonies that imprison the soul.¹¹

When applied to sin, the idea of a spectrum is perversely unhelpful. Sin is not like an assortment of diseases, some worse than others. If we want an accurate picture of sin, we need to think of something like cancer, which is a single disease that produces a host of different symptoms. In fact, the likeness between sin and cancer is uncanny. In a book on the body, Bill Bryson writes,

Cancer is quite unlike other maladies. It is often relentless in its attacks. Victory against it is nearly always hard won and often at great cost to the victim's overall health. It will retreat under an onslaught, regroup, and return in a more potent form. Even when seemingly defeated, it may leave behind 'sleeper' cells that can lie dormant for years before springing to life again. Above all, cancer cells are selfish. Normally, human cells do their job, then die on command when instructed by other cells for the good of the body. Cancer cells don't. They proliferate entirely in their own interests.¹²

He later adds, 'Most cancers in their early stages are painless and invisible. It is only when tumors grow big enough to press on nerves or form a lump that we become aware that something is wrong.'

We could rewrite these exact sentences replacing the word 'cancer' with 'sin.' All of the sinister traits of the one are true of the other. Sin is always moving in the heart. If resisted in one area, sin is quick to retreat, regroup, and shift elsewhere in the effort to go undetected until sufficiently strong. Once we realize this, we can understand why treating some sins as if they are 'minor' and others as 'major' is hazardous. Sin, like cancer, only ever has one trajectory – the death of

11. For treatment of the so-called 'minor sins,' see Jerry Bridges *Respectable Sins* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2017).

12. See Bill Bryson, *The Body: a Guide for Occupants* (New York: Anchor, 2019), p. 337.

a person. How sin kills is a moot point. It is as content for a host to die by gossip or stinginess as by brutality and cruelty.

Two principles flow from this important truth. The first is this: *The only way to fight any one sin is to fight all sin.* What good does it do if a doctor treats cancer in the bladder but does nothing to eliminate malignant cells in the prostate or the lungs? To leave the disease to fester in any one place is to surrender further ground in the near future. The same is true with sin. Allow a foothold of pride and anger will spring to life. Indulge lust and greed will grow. Permit envy to take root and malice will spread.¹³

This leads to a second principle: *The only way to fight big sins is to fight small ones.* Sin always snowballs. One lie leads to two lies, which leads to four, which leads to sixteen. Before a man can come to his senses, he is tumbling recklessly through life in a giant avalanche of deceit. This means that no temptation can be viewed in isolation. Sin never leads to a cul de sac. A person is never simply choosing a single action. He is always choosing a long-term trajectory.¹⁴

Rule 5 – You Need to Be All-In

'Present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God' (Rom. 12:1).

When most guys think about killing sin – if they think about it at all – they imagine a limited activity, something akin to a morning workout or doing an occasional performance review at work. As long as the pit

13. John Owen says, 'If we will do anything, we must do all things. So, then, it is not only an intense opposition to this or that peculiar lust, but a universal humble frame and temper of heart, with watchfulness over every evil and for the performance of every duty, that is accepted.' See *The Mortification of Sin* (Kindle version).

14. The following remark by the elder demon in *The Screwtape Letters* should be kept in mind: 'Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.' See C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 57.