

*"A careful and refreshing resource that every Christian should read."*

—R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

# DIEHARD SINS

How to Fight Wisely  
against Destructive  
Daily Habits



**RUSH WITT**

*foreword by*  
**ROBERT D. JONES**

*Diehard Sins* is of great benefit to any believer and a source of encouragement to any local congregation living the daily Christian life. Rush Witt theologically and thoroughly deals with the realities of sin's pervasive and destructive nature—but he doesn't leave us hopeless. He supplies practical tools as a reminder that although sin may be great, there are even greater, conquering provisions found in Christ.

—**Jose Abella**, Lead Pastor, Providence Road Church, Miami, Florida

If you struggle with sin—which describes all of us—Rush has provided great encouragement and help in *Diehard Sins*. Read it and be encouraged to move forward with joy and renewed hope!

—**Amy Baker**, Certified Counselor, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors; Instructor and Counselor, Faith Biblical Counseling Ministries

*Diehard Sins* is written by a man who knows that we desperately need vivid and memorable mental weapons to combat our deeply rooted but hard-to-notice sins. While rightly reawakening the reader to the dire problem of our “little” sins, Rush emphasizes our hope in the gospel and offers more practical ways to meditate on the gospel than any book I have read in a long time. Realistic about both the slowness and the possibility of real growth in fighting our sin patterns, *Diehard Sins* will repay the time you invest with a rich harvest of ways to grow in daily godliness.

—**J. Alasdair Groves**, Director of Counseling, Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation New England

Long-developed patterns of sin die hard because sin is rooted in the depths of our hearts. Christ alone offers hope! Rush Witt serves the Christian church by offering wise, biblical, Christ-centered help for understanding and fighting the

seemingly “little” sins in our lives that threaten to quietly destroy us. *Diehard Sins* instructs, encourages, and challenges as Rush helps us to battle our persistent sins.

—**Johnny M. Hunt**, Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church,  
Woodstock, Georgia

In *Diehard Sins*, Rush demonstrates that God’s revelation is practical. He helps readers to take up arms against our most buried and besetting sins. I most appreciate the way Rush encourages readers with the hope of biblical heart change—especially readers who are discouraged from wrestling with deep-rooted vices in their own strength. Not only will this book encourage you, but it will give you confidence in God’s practical wisdom for fighting the sins that are hardest to kill.

—**Dale Johnson**, Executive Director, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

Rush Witt has taken a great theological model used elsewhere for helping others and has applied it to personal growth. I love that he is helping us to wrestle with our identity in Christ, which redefines our persistent sin struggles. This book is both theological and practical.

—**Jason Lee**, Dean and Professor of Theological Studies,  
Cedarville University

Rush Witt has written a book that will be very helpful to those who read it and heed it. People who read and apply the biblically accurate and practical contents of the book will be greatly assisted in the process of sanctification—becoming more and more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

—**Wayne Mack**, Author, *A Fight to the Death: Taking Aim at Sin Within* and *God’s Solutions to Life’s Problems: Radical Change by the Power of God*

Christians are a people characterized by holiness. The Lord calls us to be holy as he is holy and commissions us to be separate from the world. Yet Christians also know that we daily fight indwelling sin. Rush Witt's *Diehard Sins* is a clarification call for holiness that also provides us with meaningful and theologically rich resources to fight indwelling sin. This book is a careful and refreshing resource that every Christian should read.

—**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Rush Witt addresses our most challenging sin struggles with practical biblical truth. He lays the theological foundation for understanding how progressive sanctification works and then builds a usable model for fighting sin and growing in grace. He draws from the wells of great Christian writers from the past while also offering helpful contemporary examples and illustrations. He speaks to the heart from a gospel-centered perspective. I personally benefited from reading this book and will commend it to the people I counsel and train.

—**Jim Newheiser**, Director of the Christian Counseling Program and Associate Professor of Christian Counseling and Practical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

Rush Witt has written a comprehensive book explaining the underlying foundation that Christians must have in order to fight the sin that remains in us. These are precious truths that every Christian needs to understand, know, and remember. It is obvious that Witt has a high view of God, and I highly recommend this book.

—**Martha Peace**, Biblical counselor, conference speaker, best-selling author

Your sins are hard to get rid of. They are diehard—they don't leave easily. They hang on, corrupting every part of you. If you need help fighting stubborn sins that don't ever seem to leave you alone, then this might be exactly the book you've been looking for.

—**Deepak Reju**, Pastor of Biblical Counseling and Family Ministry, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC

# **DIEHARD SINS**

How to Fight Wisely against  
Destructive Daily Habits

**RUSH WITT**

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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To my dear wife, Kathryn, and our five wonderful children.

“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” (Rom. 8:12–13).

I am delighted to kill sin with you,  
my brothers and sisters in Christ,  
until Christ gloriously comes again for us.



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## Foreword

I don't know how many people routinely read book forewords. I myself sometimes skip them in order to plunge right into the introduction. You won't offend me if you do the same. But if you're hesitating to read this book and need some preview and perspective, let me help you.

Why a book on *sin*? Because—despite myriads of theories by philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists—sin, in all its depth, remains the most fundamental explanation for human problems. I recall reading, many years ago, before heated gun-control debates or #MeToo movements, a newspaper article decrying our society's deterioration. The gist: with all the modern developments of our age, why can't we come up with a program to solve the problem of societal violence?

The Bible, of course, provides both the deepest diagnosis and the most profound cure for all who will heed its message. In this book, Dr. Rush Witt gives us a theologically sound, gospel-soaked treatment of sin and grace, lacing it with insightful quotes from various voices throughout church history. This is a safe book for you and for those you love.

So why *another* book on sin? I could list a half-dozen other solid evangelical treatments of this doctrine. But this one is different. Rush writes as a lead pastor who is on the ground with his people and as a trained biblical counselor who counsels

men and women in both his church and his community. With the case wisdom of an active shepherd, he tells us (pseudonymously) about Janet, Rob, Kristen, and others and about their struggles to fight against their remaining sin.

Yet this book is not about sin in general but about a particular type—what the writer calls *diehard sins*. Don't think about Bruce Willis. Think about your long-term, stubborn, unyielding patterns of sin—not the biggies like murder or adultery but the entrenched ones that don't lie down and die quickly. Rush shows how these diehard sins manifest themselves in daily ways, dishonoring our Lord and debilitating our Christian walk. Yet he also tells us how the active, saving work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit brings real answers to real people like Janet, you, and me.

But why another book on sin *by a writer you don't know*? Because Dr. Rush Witt is worth knowing. I met Rush in 2004 when he served as an associate minister at Open Door Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, and was completing his MDiv degree at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. As a new professor at Southeastern, I joined Open Door and in time became a part-time staff member with Rush. His biblical wisdom and relational skills were immediately evident. After Rush graduated, the Lord called him to a pastoral staff position in a large church in Florida. We reconnected when he became one of my doctoral students in counseling at Southeastern and then when our church sent him to plant the church he now pastors in Columbus, Ohio. More recently I had the privilege of supervising Rush through his certification process with the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, where his pastoral wisdom again emerged.

It is my hope that this book will gain a wide readership—not only among laypeople and those who pastor and counsel them, but also among Bible college and seminary professors

who, like me, crave books that blend sound Bible doctrine with practical life application. With graduate training in both disciplines, and a heart that loves people, Rush models for us how to do this.

Robert D. Jones  
Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

# Acknowledgments

As fallen people, we owe all that we are and do to God, who specially reveals truth to us. Above all else, we are heirs. There is no doubting that this book is the product of an enormous inheritance given to me by a myriad of spiritual benefactors. I am grateful for each of them.

With special gratitude I remember those who have made profound contributions to my life and doctrine. I give thanks for Dwayne Milioni and Robert Jones, two men who have taught, mentored, counseled, reprovved, comforted, fathered, and befriended me in more ways than I could begin to count. More generally, I give thanks to God for the countless fellow believers who have faithfully modeled the Christian life for me in their writing, preaching, counseling, and day-to-day living.

I am also grateful for those who read, critiqued, edited, consulted, and encouraged my work. Thank you to my friends and colleagues at P&R Publishing, who have made *Diehard Sins* significantly better in every way.

Above all, I am grateful for my Redeemer God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who showers infinite patience, grace, and love on diehard sinners like me.

## Melody's Diehard Sin

“Blessed are the peacemakers.” Melody has read those words a million times, yet she faces conflict on every side. Recently, Melody’s one-year-old dachshund dug up the prized petunias of her neighbor, Joy. While Joy says that it’s not a big deal and doesn’t want Melody to replace them, it’s obvious that she’s nursing a grudge. Every time they lock eyes—as they’re walking out to get the mail or toting the recyclables out on trash day—Melody can tell that all is not forgiven. But how to make peace, Melody doesn’t know. So she fakes peace. Most of the time, she avoids Joy. Other times, she small-talks her way out of awkward exchanges.

Her relationship with Joy is not the only one that has suffered. Melody could make a long list of currently unresolved conflicts, and each one eats away at her. Why can’t (or why won’t) she make peace with others? In some cases, Melody has faked peace. In other cases, she has lashed out at her opponents. One thing is for sure: Melody is not the kind of peacemaker to whom Jesus promised His blessing.

# INTRODUCTION

## A Destructive Daily Problem

*Living a just and holy life requires one to be capable of  
an objective and impartial evaluation of things.*

ST. AUGUSTINE (354–430)

There is a giant problem in East Africa: snails. *Lissachatina fulica*, giant African land snails, originated in Kenya and have traversed as far as Asia and the Caribbean. They can wreak major havoc. In fact, in the United States it's illegal to possess one of these little critters. Illegal!!

Though they seem small and weak compared to other wildlife (at their adult height, they are slightly taller than a tennis ball),<sup>1</sup> these African snails live long, reproduce quickly, and perpetrate their evil work under the cover of darkness. Creeping in unnoticed, they devastate crops, forests, coastal areas, and cities. They also carry an insidious disease that is deadly to humans. In vain, hunters have levied against them all manner of quarantine, chemical warfare, and predatory creatures. Even flamethrowers were no use.

Diehard snails! How can such a small creature cause such a widespread problem? It takes only a little time and a little neglect.

1. "Giant African Snail," USDA APHIS, last modified June 4, 2018, [https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/planthealth/plant-pest-and-disease-programs/pests-and-diseases/giant-african-snail/ct\\_giant\\_african\\_snail\\_home](https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/planthealth/plant-pest-and-disease-programs/pests-and-diseases/giant-african-snail/ct_giant_african_snail_home).

## Diehard Sins

This book is about sins. Not the ugly, notorious sins we have come to know and hate. But the little, daily sins. The snail-sized sin habits that slither undetected in the shadows, beneath a fire-resistant shell, and eat up our lives from the inside out. This book is about the sins that nag us, resist our spiritual treatments, and persist beyond all our measures to contain them. The subtle sins. The respectable and acceptable sins. The resilient and relentless sins. *The diehard sins.*

In spy novels, the silent assassin learns to live incognito, waiting and plotting his deadly deeds. Our sins can be very much like that. We hustle through life while they escape our notice and fester just beneath our noses. Either we don't recognize them as sins because they're commonplace in our lives or cultures, or we know that they're sinful but have given up on changing them. With the passage of time, we accept them as a disappointing, natural part of life. These sins are hard to fight because they are concealed from us.

Puritan pastor John Owen provides this ominous warning: "Be killing sin or it will be killing you."<sup>2</sup> For many Christians, the sins that "will be killing" us are not the million-dollar sins like murder or rape. We often have sufficient reason to avoid them. Rather, the hidden faults that fly under the radar—at the lower altitudes of our hearts—are the sins that cause us the most trouble. If we are not alert, we practice them day by day and they burrow into our lives like lice. And once they are settled in, extermination becomes all the more difficult.

I have known people with a deadly peanut allergy. Even a whiff of peanut butter constricts their airways and immediately endangers their lives. The most serious allergies don't

2. John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin: Dealing With Sin in Your Life* (1656; repr., Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 1996), 28.



even allow the sufferer enough time to reach a doctor for help, meaning that the person must remain ever ready to jab himself with a shot of medicine in order to reverse the violent reaction. The fight against sin carries a similar quality. We depend on pastors, counselors, and other Christian friends to give us wise counsel. But we also need a growing ability to minister the Word of God to our own souls. Immeasurable hope and help await you as you learn to kill the diehard sins that plague you, because, no matter how deep your sin struggle runs, there is hope through Christ and His Word.

### **The Gift That Keeps on Giving**

Newspapers of the 1920s offered readers “the gift that keeps on giving”: the Victor Micro-synchronous Radio Console with Electrola. Happy families tuned in to the Victor-Radio every night, and their delight continued on and on. Although I was not aware of it at the time, the Lord gave my wife and me a gift much like this. (No, it wasn’t a radio.) Two years into our marriage, during an exceptionally hard time, He called us to biblical counseling through the care of a faithful pastor.

Despite growing up in a faithful Christian family, my wife had walked a dark path. Amid life-dominating despair and recurring panic attacks, she had twice attempted suicide. She had been hospitalized in prominent psychiatric wards and had received nearly every psychiatric treatment available, including electro-convulsive therapy (an option of last resort). Soon after our marriage, we moved seven hundred miles from home in order to go to seminary—two broken people who were intimately acquainted, yet disappointed, with the full gamut of psychiatric help—and there we heard for the first time about the grace of Christ and the sufficiency of His Word for the care and cure of sinful, suffering souls like ours.

We were confused, amazed, and panicked all at once. This was very new to us. The next few weeks of class were especially eye-opening and challenging. We faced new truths about the nature of our persistent problems. These truths were hard to hear, and we didn't immediately respond well. But by God's grace we scraped together what little courage we had and reached out to the professor of the class for help: "We've never heard any of this before, and we really need to talk to you." He abounded with generosity and understanding. The next Friday we entered a simple yet life-changing season of gospel-centered, grace-driven biblical counseling.

There were good days and bad days. Sometimes the truth was a sweet salve for our souls; other times we spewed our medicine and stomped off in disgust. In small, hesitant steps, we found hope, help, and lasting biblical change. The colors of our world became brighter as God's truth renewed our minds. The fingers of depression and anxiety that had relentlessly gripped my dear wife (and me too at times) were pried away. The process of change was sometimes unpleasant and often slow—but, looking back, we wouldn't wish it any other way. Through it we received lasting benefits.

The transformation God worked in my wife and me through biblical counseling compelled me to discover ways to instill Christ-centered hope in the lives of others. With each step toward becoming more competent in the care of others, I became a more competent counselor of myself. The Scriptures rang true: all the trials and temptations addressed in my counseling were common to man—common even to me (see 1 Cor. 10:13). In every case, I gave the people who I counseled the same comprehensive counsel of God's Word that I myself needed. And I counseled myself in the same ways. The gift of biblical counseling that I received many years ago has kept on giving to me, helping me in my own walk with Christ.

## The Three-Part Plan

My method of caring for others through counseling and discipleship is simple. When ministering to another person, I use a three-fold plan: enter his world, understand his need, and then bring Christ and His answers to the person.<sup>3</sup> It is by no means simplistic, but it is simple. As you will see in this book, I have adapted this method of ministry to others and presented it as a tool for fighting sin and caring for our own souls day by day. With practice, it has become second nature to me, and I hope it will become second nature to you too.

1. *Enter* with joy into your struggle against destructive daily habits,
2. *understand* your real needs in the fight, and then
3. *bring* Christ and His provisions to bear on your beliefs and desires.

The three steps of the plan are specifically drawn from Matthew 9:35–36, but they more broadly represent Jesus’s entire ministry. In an unassuming passage of his gospel, Matthew gives a glimpse of Jesus’s normal mode of ministry.

Jesus was going through all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness. Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. (Matt. 9:35–36)

3. I learned this approach to ministry from my mentor, Robert Jones. He applies it to counseling others; I am adapting it for personal growth. If you skipped over the foreword that he wrote for this book, please read it.

On a mission of love, Jesus *entered* our world by His incarnation and even walked our streets. He would actively traverse the cities and villages. Jesus routinely spent time with people and entered into the dark and difficult experiences of life. The Lord of glory did not remain in His regal, heavenly home; rather, He condescended into our fallen world—born in a manger, living in poverty, and working with His hands. Though sinless, He was tempted as we are and suffered a cruel atoning death. Many people may love me, but none would stoop down in such a magnificent way for me. Jesus entered my world and yours.

As one of us, Jesus *understands* our true needs. Every thoughtful person has some sense of our common spiritual problem. Every person knows that there is a God “with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13; see also Rom. 1:21). But the blinding influence of sin hides the true nature of our need from view. In the light of a doctor’s knowledge, a patient’s crude self-diagnosis falls flat. Our Great Physician understands our need. When Jesus went through the villages, He understood the people He encountered. He saw their sinful, distressed, and broken spirits. He saw sheep in need of a shepherd.

What is so impressive about a shepherd? A shepherd understands his sheep. As in Psalm 23, the divine Shepherd knows the whereabouts of His sheep, the dangers they face, the nourishment they lack, and the restoring care they need. The Lord understands the people into whose world He enters.

Not only that, Jesus *brings* His provisions and resources. By His perfect knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, He not only cared for people’s broken, diseased bodies but also brought help for their souls. Jesus *counseled* the people who He met in the cities and villages. He taught them biblical truth in their synagogues, and He ministered the good news of His kingdom to their souls.

Ultimately, He brought the people *Himself*. In the synagogue

or on the street corner or house-to-house, Jesus and His disciples didn't present a program or tool for changing lives. Jesus didn't create an app for fixing life problems. He brought Himself—His perfect person, His unstoppable power, His eternal promises and purposes. Jesus entered our world, understood our need, and brought to us His power and grace.

## Preparing for the Fight

This book contains a mixture of theological and practical considerations for launching your grace-empowered fight against sin habits. Along the way, we will carefully consider the nature of sin, the issues of life, and how our Redeemer God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—relentlessly works in us to kill our relentless sins.

We all love pragmatic answers. My own natural inclination is to cut to the chase. *Just tell me what to do so I can get some relief.* But please resist the temptation to jump to the parts of the book that seem more practical. God has wisely scattered the treasures of sanctification across the entire field, from the hills of knowledge to the valleys of practice. Each chapter serves an integral role in sharpening your knowledge of and perspective on sin. Without the correct diagnosis, the effective remedy will never come.

## Reflections for the Fight

1. What good and unending gifts has God given to you in Christ?
2. How have you counseled God's Word to others? In what ways do you need to grow stronger in this area?
3. What do you think it will mean for you to counsel yourself?

# **PART 1**

Enter with Joy into Your  
Struggle against Daily Sin

## Eliza's Diehard Sin

Many people love a good story. Mystery. Suspense. Intrigue. Danger. What's not to love? Eliza eats it up with a spoon. But as she grows in her walk with Christ, she begins to notice her taste for real-life mystery, suspense, intrigue, and danger. She loves to hear the juicy news of her friends' latest breakups and the water-cooler whispers about who is moving up and who is moving out in her workplace. The stories make her adrenaline surge. She is addicted to the rumor mill.

Eventually, a close Christian friend gently confronts Eliza about her participation in these corner conversations. She agrees with her friend and makes a commitment to change. But no matter what she tries, her heart is drawn in like a mosquito to a hypnotic buzzing strobe. As she struggles to break free from her addiction to gab, she quickly realizes that this seemingly innocent sin will die hard, if it will die at all.

# 1

## The DNA of Sin

*Sins are many times hid from the godly man's eye, though he commits them, because he is not diligent and accurate in making a search of himself, and in an impartial studying of his own ways.*

ANTHONY BURGESS (1600–1663)

In 1882, beneath the majestic Sudety Mountains, a child named Gregor was born—the only son of Anton and Rosine Mendel. An Austrian farm boy, Gregor grew to love the created world of God's creatures. He cultivated the family garden and nurtured their bee collection. These experiences led him to pursue a higher education in the sciences. But financial troubles put a damper on his school plans. In his twenties, Gregor became a friar in the Augustinian order of monks, preferring the monastic offer of freedom from anxiety (and the free tuition)! Although he studied for only a brief period of time, Gregor's scientific exploration led to an invaluable discovery: DNA.

Biologists had known about the inheritance of traits passed down through the generations. But they knew little else about it until Gregor, the father of genetics, began to unlock a hidden reality through his work with pea plants. Over the following century, efforts to crack the vault of genetic codes led Watson and Crick to discover the foundations of organic life. Standing



on the shoulders of Mendel and others, Watson and Crick formalized the double-helix model of DNA, which made the molecular sciences all the more useful. Since 1953, DNA has played a regular part in the evening news, crime scene investigations, ancestry research, disease prevention, and more. What took so long for someone to finally look beneath the surface and find the DNA?

I often ask this same question of myself: What took you so long, Rush? I've been slow to understand the most important truths of life. I came to Christ a little later than some, it's true. But even then, for the first ten years of my walk with Christ, I was nearly oblivious to the important and powerful realities at work beneath my skin, in hidden recesses of my heart. Regrettably, it wasn't until much later that my eyes were clearly opened to consider the root of life's struggles: my pervasive, controlling sin nature.

Sins are hard to detect and kill because they are engrained in us. Like a method actor inhabiting his character, sin meshes with our souls. It is inside our hearts, insidiously interacting with every aspect of our being and exerting a measure of power over us.<sup>1</sup> The Christian must wage a personal war of epic proportions and constant conflict against sin. If we are to gain any victory against it, we must understand its DNA. That knowledge will help us to develop a battle plan through which we can form a God-centered and effective response to ongoing sin.

1. Paul describes this conflict in Romans 7. He knows what is good and right—he wants to please God—but he fails to carry it out. Sin is at work against Paul, tripping up his pursuit of godliness: “The good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. . . . I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members” (v. 19, 22–23).

## What Is Sin?

If someone asked you to answer this question, what would you say? How do you define something that is unseen, sinister, deceitful, and malicious all at the same time? Even if you come to a sincere definition, how do you know that your own sin hasn't thrown you off the scent trail? To know what sin is, we need a reliable source of truth that is unaffected by the ravages of sin. In the special revelation of God's Word, and in God's Son, we have what we need. As the Word of Christ dwells in our hearts, we know the truth about sin.

### **Sin Commits a Lawless Act**

The Bible speaks of sin as an act that transgresses God's law. Every time that we sin, in a big or small way, we violate a commandment, rule, or precept that God has established for us. "Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness," says John (1 John 3:4). The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines sin as "any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God."<sup>2</sup>

The laws of God were revealed to His people in the Old Testament and the New Testament—in part as a way of life. His laws are good, and they keep us on His straight and narrow path. When obeyed, they have a powerful ability to hem us in and even restrain our sinful inclinations (see Prov. 29:18). But, through sin, God's law is broken, placing us in danger of appropriate consequences and discipline from our heavenly Father. Owning our sins as serious transgressions of God's precepts alerts us to when and how we have gone astray. God's laws in Scripture are objective and easy to identify.

2. Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer 14.

## Sin Presents a Rebellious Attitude

Scripture also depicts sin as the violation of God's will. Since God's commands were given according to His revealed plans for us, all sin involves a rebellious attitude against the Lawgiver. Paul wrote this caution to the Ephesian Christians:

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. (Eph. 5:15–17)

Instead of allowing our sin to persist, we must learn God's will, and from there we will know how to change. Do you think of your sins as violations of God's wishes and desires?

In the Bible, God urges us to live our lives according to His will. Sin says, "No. I prefer my will over yours. I'll go my way." Sin is, therefore, never merely a matter of rule breaking. The words of pastor R.C. Sproul remind us that "sin is cosmic treason. Sin is treason against a perfectly pure Sovereign. It is an act of supreme ingratitude toward the One to whom we owe everything, to the One who has given us life itself."<sup>3</sup>

Sin also alerts us to what we could describe as *disordered affections*—failure to love and worship God from the heart. One of the church fathers named Augustine taught that right living involves the ability to recognize when our hearts go wrong—when we are loving what we should not love.<sup>4</sup> A goal of our conflict with sin is not that we would be better rule-followers, but that we would be more faithful Christ-lovers. This means that sin is not only an obedience problem but a worship disorder too.

But that's not all.

3. R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1985), 115.

4. See his quote on the subject at the beginning of appendix D, on page 199.

## **Sin Displays an Ungodly Attribute**

Sin is the fundamental distortion of our likeness to God's holy character. Whenever we sin, we also fail to think, act, feel, or talk like our Creator. Children tend to favor the appearance of their parents. When there is a strong likeness between them, the children are said to be the spitting image of their parents. This cliché could be applied to our created likeness to our Creator. Simply put, God created image-bearers who could reflect His glory and display His character. We exist in order to image Him, but sin holds us back and perverts the portrait we would like to project.

Alarms should ring when we think about our sin as a whole and when we notice the various sin habits that we wish would die already. We may feel an overwhelming sense of despair. But we shouldn't give up in our contemplation of sin. By grace, we can rejoice, in the words of David,

How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven,  
Whose sin is covered!  
How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute  
iniquity,  
And in whose spirit there is no deceit! (Ps. 32:1–2)

We have abundant hope in the face of our sin.

## **Where Did It Come From?**

God is perfect, and the Bible tells us that He didn't create sin in human beings. Rather, God created us good and in His image. He created us in true righteousness and holiness, so we might know Him, love Him, and live with Him happily ever after.<sup>5</sup> So then, from where did our sinful nature come?

5. See the Heidelberg Catechism, answer 6.

The Bible teaches that our sin originated with our first parents, Adam and Eve. In a paradise world, fashioned by the hand of God, the first humans chose their own way. Spiritual darkness fell, and the whole world became shrouded in the deadly curse of sin. Ever since then, each person in history (except for Jesus) was born with a sinful, fallen human nature. Like a delicate garment eaten through by moths, the perfect nature that God created in us decayed in a moment.

Original sin, as it is called, was subsequently passed down from generation to generation. And today, all our daily diehard sins spring from the original sin nature that lurks in us. Jesus graciously repairs the holes in our fallen human nature, as we are conformed to His image, until the day of final redemption. For now, sin remains, and we must struggle against it.

When you read the Genesis account of the fall of mankind into sin, you might be tempted to cast aspersions on Adam and Eve. During especially epic battles with sin, have you ever thought or said, “This is all their fault! Adam and Eve made me this way!”?

While it is true that Adam and Eve were the first to sin, we are wrong to shift the blame to them. They were our first parents as well as our representatives. We are not only guilty by association; we are truly, personally guilty of the fall. Adam’s sin was imputed to all mankind. Therefore, from the moment of our conception—before any of us actually sinned on our own—we were sinners in need of God’s saving and transforming grace (see Rom. 5:12–14).

This may be a new, frightening, and even despairing thought. Just hold on, because I have more good news for you. Paul proclaims the hope of redemption for sinners like us when he writes, “If by the transgression of the one [i.e., Adam] the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many”

(Rom. 5:15). Just as sin came to us through the first Adam, perfect righteousness comes to us through faith in the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus has assured the end of sin's reign. Therefore, we who fight hard against sin—even the sins that fight hardest against us—do not lose hope. The light of Christ's glory and grace shines at the end of this dark tunnel.

## Where Does It Lead?

If we do not take sin seriously, sins will manifest in two directions—toward God (upward) and toward people (outward). In some sense, every sinful fault is an upward sin—a failure to love God. The *New City Catechism* says, “Sin is rejecting or ignoring God in the world he created, rebelling against him by living without reference to him, not being or doing what he requires in his law—resulting in our death and the disintegration of all creation.”<sup>6</sup> All sin is against our righteous and loving Creator. Yet some sins are more clearly directed against Him, while other sins are more clearly against our neighbors. This second category of sin is outward.

The Ten Commandments fall into two categories, loving God and loving our neighbor, and our many sins may be understood in this light. Look closely at the Decalogue (see Ex. 20:2–17). The first four commands are clearly upward. The following six commands are notably outward.

### Upward Commands

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.
2. You shall not make for yourself an idol.

6. Kathy Keller, *The New City Catechism: 52 Questions and Answers for Our Hearts and Minds* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), answer 16.

3. You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.

### **Outward Commands**

5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not murder.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet.

Think about your wrestlings with sin. Can you pinpoint sins that you commit on a daily basis that move either upward or outward? Can you identify specific ways that you dishonor God? Can you see other ways in which you fail people?

As one faithful pastor's writings convinced me, my heart is an idol factory—perpetually inventing new ways to sin against God and man.<sup>7</sup> And so is yours. Our fallen human nature boasts endless ways to churn out sinful habits, and in the process of committing some sins we spin off even more ways of sinning. To list all of them would take untold lifetimes. Yet we still must take an account if we are to make progress in this important spiritual fight.

Try crafting your own personal list. Thinking in terms of upward and outward sins will help you to take inventory of the battle you will face and, later, help you to respond wisely.

7. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.11.8.

## Where Is It Headed?

C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* paints a bleak and oppressive picture of the curse of sin. The hero, Aslan, is the king of Narnia. Aslan's domain is temporarily under the magical influence of the White Witch, whose spell has changed the once beautiful landscape into a place where it's "always winter and never Christmas." Despite the present darkness, Aslan maintains his sovereign rule and performs a renewing work. As he moves through the land, he melts the snow and instills new life across the frozen panorama. All the creatures of Narnia await his return, when he will finally and fully break the spell.

Scripture presents a real promise of life-changing renewal in Jesus Christ. Through His atoning work on our behalf, Jesus has secured for us a final victory over sin. Through faith in Him, we are granted a sure and complete salvation from the power and penalty of sin. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes that God raised us up with Jesus and then seated us with Him in the heavenlies (see Eph. 2:6). Our final redemption is already complete. Yet here we are in the earthlies, wrestling with life day after day. In one sense, our destiny is set. In another sense, we are still on our way to our destination, working out our salvation according to God's power in us. Paul comforts us: "We do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor. 4:16). Where is sin headed? It is fading away, as God progressively renews us in this life.

God's process of renewal—which brings an end to sin—happens gradually over time. For most of us, the work of sanctification creeps along much more slowly than we would like. Perhaps the lumbering pace of spiritual growth has provoked your attention to the presence of the diehard sins that are discussed in this book.



This is what happened to Eliza. Untangling herself from the tentacles of gossip would not come easily or without a fight. For Eliza, and for many of us, change happens slowly. Regardless of how fast your problems change, you may rest assured in the confidence that “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). We can participate joyfully in this war because there is hope, even when the battles rage on longer than we think they should. Our sin is going somewhere. It’s going away . . . but it’s not going away without a serious, searching fight.

### **What Can Be Done about It Now?**

If our fall into sin had been avoided, present-day Christians would live a life of continual peace without the slightest conflict, temptation, trial, or trouble. As redeemed kingdom citizens sojourning in a foreign and fallen land, we live with Christ, war against sin, and deny self. If we fail to employ the weapons of our faith or to follow our Captain into the battle, we will surely languish. We will be like soldiers who forget the war is raging, who mistake the intense sounds of combat for thunder booming in the distance.

Regrettably, some Christians live as though our enemy has lulled them to sleep—their impervious heads resting quietly on pillows of blind contentment. They feel no pressure to make war with sin. Their lives get along well without much fuss needed over the world, the flesh, or the devil—that is, until the arrows of sin pierce the pleasant facade they have come to enjoy. By God’s grace, the sting of sin arouses us to take up spiritual weapons and fight back.

Gaining control over our sin struggles requires a wartime mentality. But this war is unique. It is a dependent, grace-fought war. Our dependence is on God, who helps us by His

grace. He gave us His Son and His Word to strengthen us in the fray. For this reason the Scriptures say,

The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword . . . and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. . . . We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:12, 15–16)

These gifts of His grace (and many more) embolden us to take action against sin—even the diehard sins of life. But just as the war of faith is a specific kind of war, the action that we take is a specific kind of action. I fear that we so easily fall back into the trap of believing that our battle is one of simple repentance and willpower. *Try harder. Change your ways. Do better.* These are the familiar mantras of modern self-help. But this is not the Christian way. All our multiplied self-efforts could never unleash enough firepower to preclude our diehard sins from ruling over us. We need the divine power of God, who wisely gives us particular tactics for the fight.

Jesus said that a wise king does not rush into battle but first surveys the situation, evaluating how the battle will be won. Don't rush into battle quite yet. There is more to examine about the nature of sin in the next chapter.

## Reflections for the Fight

1. Why is understanding the DNA of sin an important part of addressing sin?
2. How does knowing the origin of sin in history help you find sin in the present?
3. Spend time meditating on the two Adams who are found in Romans 5. How are they different and similar? How is Jesus the better Adam?