

*“Fighting the War Within”*

I Peter 2:11-12

October 27, 2019

Every born-again believer in Jesus Christ is at war!

I’m not talking about being at war with the world or culture though the world is certainly hostile to Christ and His people. Neither am I referring to the spiritual battle with Satan and the powers of darkness which is very real and can have dreadful implications for the warfare I have in mind (Eph 6).

Every believer is engaged in a civil war within his own soul between the Spirit (who inhabits the new man) and the lusts of deceit which seek to destroy one’s very own soul. Every believer is at war with the desires of his own heart! You have internal desires, lusts of the flesh, that act as homeland terrorists to your soul.

Peter is writing to a church suffering under persecution, but here in today’s text he reminds us of the raw reality that the greatest danger the Christian faces is not persecution from the outside world but rather the destructive potential of entertaining sinful desires within the soul.

The world may threaten and even kill one’s body, but the world has no jurisdiction over the soul. This is how Peter has been able to call persecuted believers to rejoice. Their soul is secure, protected by the power of God through faith, and their eternal inheritance is guaranteed. When the world threatens us, believers are free to risk their physical lives in obedience to God because their soul beyond the reach of any earthly or spiritual enemy. The world has no jurisdiction over your soul but the sinful desires within you do.

Let me say it in a way that applies to everyday life: No one else can keep you from becoming the man or woman that God wants you to be. You are the only one who can prevent you from becoming the person God wants you to be. This is empowering, because when we grasp that others do not have power over our character, we are free to respond to them in the spirit of Christ regardless of how they treat us.

The point of today’s passage is this: ***We must win the war of internal desires so that our outward behavior will not disqualify us from accomplishing God’s mission of reaching the very people that maligns us.***

Permit me to point out the obvious. The process of true change in the believer’s life always happens in this order: desires first and behavior second. We will not transform our external behavior until we first master our internal desires. It’s not incidental that Peter calls us to abstain from fleshly lusts in vs. 11 and then calls for excellent behavior in vs. 12.

This is exactly the same order Peter presented in chapter 1. In 1:14 he says, “do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance” then in vs. 15 he proceeds to admonish us, “but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior.”

In the same vein, James 4 diagnoses the destructive behavior of conflict as stemming from internal passions that are waging war within. Here’s the principle: ***The beauty of godly behavior blossoms out of the seeds of God-pleasing desires.*** Attempting to display godly character apart from underlying godly desire is hypocrisy.

Remember, Peter is writing to a suffering church not only to help them sustain their hope, but also their witness to the very world that persecutes them. If we do not master our inner desires, if we are still enslaved to sinful, selfish desires, how will we not take offense when someone wrongs us?

The mission of the gospel to rescue sin-enslaved people from their idolatrous self-love will require us to die to self so that any offense to the gospel that we must bear does not awaken in us a personal offense that is born out of the very same self-love in us that we seek to free them from.

The question before us in 1 Peter 2:11-12 is this: *How do we respond with gospel integrity (maintaining our witness by living what we preach from the inside out) to people to who are hostile to Christ and therefore hostile to us?*

1. **Remember who you are: Beloved aliens and strangers** (I Pet 2:11a)

Peter gets to the very heart of a believer’s identity in the very first word of vs. 11: “beloved.” You are God’s beloved. We saw this at the very beginning

of the letter in 1:1-2. You are “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” There we discovered that just as the Father foreknew Christ with infinite eternal love, so He set His loving affection on you from before the foundation of the world (cf. 1:20).

Peter picks up this theme again in 2:9 (notice this is the immediate context to vs. 11): “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession... (10) once you were not a people but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” And so it’s no surprise that the very next word that Peter uses is the best title for God’s people: “**BELOVED**.” As God’s choice beloved, you belong to Him and therefore your life should be oriented to Him and align with His character (cf. 1 Cor 6:19).

Peter further clarifies our identity in vs. 11 as not only God’s beloved but also as “aliens and strangers.” This tells us who we don’t belong to—the world. Thus our lives should not be oriented to the values of this world or align with the character of this world.

Notice why Peter begins this discussion with a focus on our new identity in Christ as beloved aliens and strangers. Our identity (who we belong to) determines what desires are legitimate for us. If we belong to God, then our desires should align with His. If we don’t belong to the world, then our desires should not reflect the character of the world. So our identity determines what our desires should be and our desires determine what our behavior will be and if Christ can therefore be authentically seen through our lives.

So don’t let your natural desires or circumstances determine your identity. Rather let your God-given identity determine the course of your life.

Illus: Is his name Spent? Your name is Spent. This is who we are so this is what we will do.

## 2. Master the sinful desires that war against you (1 Pet 2:11b).

First, notice that Peter does not merely instruct us to abstain from fleshly lusts, he *urges* us. We cannot have a casual attitude toward deadly sinful

desires that still occupy our inner man. Peter is calling us to put on a war-time mentality regarding fleshly lusts or sinful desires.

The urgency of a war-time mentality means that we must be alert to what is in our heart, discerning as to the source and nature of our desires, and we must strategize to overcome those desires that war against God’s mission of progressive holiness in our lives.

Pause: Do you know what the most notorious sinful desires are in your heart that are stunting your growth—the ones that require the most aggressive militance to overcome. Do you have a vision and a strategy to daily battle against them?

What are these “fleshly lusts” that Peter has in mind? They can be a variety of things. Peter has in mind desires that are sinful because their source is from the old sinful nature of our flesh rather than desires that are oriented toward God. They can include illicit sexual desire, greed for money, power, control or status, desires driven by self-love or pride. Fleshly lusts can also spring out of bitterness in the heart, longing for someone else to suffer according to our standard of justice rather than extending mercy.

Perhaps the most important thing to say regarding our desires is that their moral quality (whether good or bad) is based largely on the orientation of our hearts. When my heart is oriented toward God my desires align with his purity, but when my heart is oriented toward self (flesh) or anything else (idolatry), my desires are distorted and impure.

The point of vs. 11 is that we are to abstain from, we are to not entertain, desires that are characteristic of our old sinful nature because they war against the soul. What is war? It is an attempt to conquer, control, and destroy—in this case, the inner man. So they are terrorist desires and they wage war by enticing, entangling, and strangling the soul. Lustful desires are so strong that when we get preoccupied by them, it’s hard to pull oneself out of their strangle-hold.

These sinful desires also wage war against the soul by means of self-deceit which hardens the heart. Eph 4:22 calls these desires “lusts of deceit.” Hebrews 3:13 warns us that the deceitfulness of sin hardens the heart. When my heart is not oriented toward God, I become easily deceived thinking that I can find fulfillment in the pursuit of what satisfies my flesh: “If I could just have that experience or this possession or rid myself of that difficult person, then I would be fulfilled.” And as I pursue that thing, I walk away from God.

### The War-strategy of wayward desires.

- A. **They entice.** They're attractive. Hence we must abstain from entertaining them. James 1:14-17 says, "*Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow."* (James 1:14-17)
- B. **They deceive.** Eph 4:22 calls these sinful desires "lusts of deceit." As we saw in James 1, their deception is that we can find fulfillment outside of God. We know from 1 Peter 2:9 that God has called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. Yet sinful desires blind us to that light with their deception like spiritual cataracts over our eyes.
- C. **They harden the heart.** James 1 says that when lust has conceived it gives birth to sin and [Hebrews 3:13] tells us that the deceitfulness of sin hardens the heart.
- D. **They abort repentance.** Hardened hearts don't repent.
- E. **They strangle faith.** Unrepentance strangles faith, making it weak and anemic.

And so Peter says, "I urge you...to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against your soul." The question is, how do we abstain from these sinful desires? How do we war against these resident, terrorist desires that are warring against us?

### A War Strategy to overcome sinful desires:

- A. **Train your senses to discern good and evil through a robust diet of God's word for the purpose of obedience** [Heb 5:14].
- B. **Study your own heart.** The great tragedy of modern man, is that the vast majority of people simply follow their appetites, completely unaware of what is really driving their hearts. So we need to ask ourselves what do I really want in this particular instance. We need to dissect conversations, experiences, and endeavors—what did I really want, what was I really fighting for? And did that desire align with God's character purpose and will? Be careful here because you will be tempted to lie to yourself. Yet an honest evaluation of our hearts enables us to exercise true repentance because we now confess what is truly in the heart.

- C. **Expose the deceitfulness of your sinful desires.** What are they promising and what is the lie in that promise? This is really at the heart of fighting sinful desires. The battle over sinful desires must be fought and won in your mind where you evaluate those desires. Let me first just establish that the mind is indeed the crucial battlefield in which sinful desires are fought:
  - **Romans 7:23** speaks to the civil war within the believer's heart this way: "*I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. For 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.*"
    - Our sinful desires take us captive by warring against our mind—deceiving us.
  - **Rom 8:6-7:** "*For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God.*"
    - The mind determines which side of the civil war we will fight on. If the mind is set on the Spirit, the war will end in life. But if our mind is set on the flesh, the war will end in death.
  - This is why **Galatians 5:16** says, "*Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.*" How do we walk by the Spirit? By walking in submission to the truth—God's evaluation of all things.

Now do you see why the mind is so critical? With the mind we evaluate what is good and desirable and that evaluation is good or evil based on whether or not it aligns with God's evaluation of what is good.

So when Eve looked at the forbidden fruit, evaluated that it was good for food, a delight to her eyes and desirable to make her wise, she indulged in the first sin by seeking to find her fulfillment outside of God's evaluation of what was good. The root of that first sin and root of our sin is that we evaluate as good and desirable what God has said is not good. So if you are going to overcome sinful desires, you must do

the hard work of thinking so that you can discern the deceitfulness of that desire and reject its false promise to fulfill you apart from God.

**D. Walk by the Spirit by submitting yourself to God's evaluation of what is good.** This will require self-discipline (self-control is a fruit of the Spirit) and it will require accountability—surrounding yourself with people who will help you expose the deceitfulness of your sinful desires. And it will require that you constantly remind yourself of what is at stake: “the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom 8:6).

As we come to vs. 12, let me remind you of the big picture. We are answering the question, “*How do we respond with gospel integrity to people to who are hostile to Christ and therefore hostile to us?*” First, remember who you are as God's beloved aliens and strangers in this world. Second, master the sinful desires that war against you. Finally, Peter admonishes us to...

Right orientation  
Right desires  
Right behavior

**3. Demonstrate godly behavior that turns false accusations into God-glorifying witness [1 Pet 2:12].**

One of the ways that the early church suffered was under the duress of false accusations—slander. They were accused of all kinds of incredulous things such cannibalism (Lord's supper), incest (love feasts), and insubordination to governing authorities (Christ their King). Eventually Nero would blame the Christians for setting fire to the city of Rome.

Peter's encouragement to these believers who are being publicly slandered is to *live in such a way that all people will see by their character and conduct that the accusations are false.*

But Peter's aim is not merely to clear their names of false accusations, but to also maintain the integrity of the gospel so that their accusers themselves would be one over by the virtuous lives and love of believers. Peter is

looking beyond their present circumstances to the future day of God's visitation—the final day of reckoning for all people. Gentiles will glorify God in the day of visitation in one of two ways: either they will glorify Him in salvation, having believed on Christ, or they will glorify Him as holy under the judgment of His wrath.

What Peter seems to have in mind here is vision of evangelism. He seems to be saying, “*the false accusations that put you under the scrutiny of the public eye are an opportunity for you to display the kind of character and conduct that could only result from a changed heart by the power of Christ. Therefore, abstain from every sinful desire that wages war against the soul so that the virtuous beauty of Christ can be seen through your conduct. And as you live through this painful ordeal, remember who you are. You are God's beloved. You belong to Him and not to this world.*”

***We must live in pursuit of God's glory by fighting our sin for the sake of those who sin against us.***