

Victory against Sin

Our world is plagued with fear, immorality, selfishness, war, and many other types of sin. As a result, some have lost hope in God's goodness while others have become apathetic to sin. St. Paul in his first epistle to the Corinthians speaks of the serious consequence of sin when he states, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:10).

Sin is death and my sin excludes me from the kingdom of God. But thanks be to God, Jesus is life and He washes away my sin. St. Paul emphasizes this point in the continuation of the previous verse, "And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." No matter the previous shortcomings, Christians should never lose hope in Christ's redemptive power to forgive and blot out their sins. Furthermore, the Christian does not normalize sin - the Christian conquers sin by the power of the cross! In this article, I would like to share three ways how Christians can conquer and be victorious over sin.

First, the Christian conquers sin through continuous repentance and struggle. There is no war without battle, and there is no victory without challenge. The Christian, therefore, must first resolve to fight against sin with all their strength. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, St. Paul chastises the Hebrews because "[they] have not resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin" (Heb. 12:4). The question for us is: To what extent do I fight against my carnal desires? Am I willing to delay my instant gratification from sin in order to protect my purity and chastity? The great martyrs of the Church shed their blood in order to resist idolatry, and we should do the same.

Too many people also have the wrong idea about what it means to be "victorious over sin." The definition of "victory over sin" does not only mean that I have not committed a sin for a period of time. Victory of sin is rising up from my fall, it is offering genuine repentance regardless of how many times I fall. King Solomon, in his wisdom, says, "For a righteous man may fall seven times and rise again..." (Prov. 24:16). In the eyes of the world, this would be considered an utter defeat - the scorecard would read 7-1. Yet, in the eyes of God, the score reads 0-1, because rising once eliminated the devil's seven points. Therefore, defeat is not assessed by how many times I fall, rather victory is determined by how many times I rise. Despite living his entire life in sin, Demas the thief was victorious over sin because he repented in his last moments on the cross. Similarly, St. Moses the Strong was victorious over sin because of his frequent confessions. These examples show us that victory over sin is achieved by struggling, fighting, and rising up from our previous falls.

Second, the Christian is victorious over sin through fasting and prayer. The passions of the flesh are relentless and overwhelming, but my human will, despite my good intentions, is weak and frail. St. Paul explains this dilemma in Romans 7 when he wrote, "For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me" (Rom. 7:19-20). This raging internal conflict led St. Paul to conclude, "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:24-25). The weak human will is strengthened through fasting and prayer to God. St. John the Short highlights the importance of fasting and prayer in the following two sayings from The Sayings of the Desert Fathers¹:

"If a king wanted to take possession of his enemy's city, he would begin by cutting off the water and the food and so his enemies, dying of hunger, would submit to him. It is the same with the passions of the flesh: if a man goes about fasting and hungry the enemies of his soul grow weak."

“I am like a man sitting under a great tree, who sees wild beasts and snakes coming against him in great numbers. When he cannot withstand them any longer, he runs to climb the tree and is saved. It is just the same with me; I sit in my cell and I am aware of evil thoughts coming against me, and when I have no more strength against them, I take refuge in God by prayer and I am saved from the enemy.”

Fasting and prayer are the means by which a man becomes full of the Holy Spirit and becomes united with God. Fasting and prayer elevate a carnal man to a spiritual man as we pray in the Fraction of the Great Lent in the Divine Liturgy, “Fasting and prayer are those which raised Elijah to heaven....” Sin cannot be conquered with the sheer strength of human will. It is God’s power granted through fasting and prayer which expels demons (*cf.* Mark 9:29) and conquers sin.

Third, the Christian conquers the devil through humility. A demon once asked St. Macarius: ““What is your power, Macarius, that makes me powerless against you? All that you do, I do, too; you fast, so do I; you keep vigil, and I do not sleep at all; in one thing only do you beat me.’ Abba Macarius asked what that was. He said, ‘Your humility. Because of that I can do nothing against you.’”¹

Humility is the recognition that we are from the dust of the earth; therefore, a humble person detaches themselves from the things of this world. A truly humble person does not seek vainglory or carnal desires, so the humble person is shielded from the attacks of the devil. St. John Chrysostom illustrates this point beautifully in one of his letters to St. Olympia. He writes:

Everything else is dust and smoke. For what is grievous about being in prison and being bound with a chain? What is grievous about suffering wretchedly, when suffering wretchedly is the basis for such great gain? What is grievous about exile? What is grievous about the confiscation of one’s property? For these words are empty of anything fearful; they are words empty of pain. And if you speak of death, you speak of a debt due to nature that everyone must submit to, even if no one afflicts you. And if you speak of exile, you speak of nothing else but seeing [another] land and its many cities. And if you speak of the confiscation of one’s goods, you speak of liberty and being loosed [from the burden of those things].²

Only a humble person can view such terrible injustice and circumstances positively. In this manner, humility renders the attacks of the devil ineffective. Furthermore, a humble person, conscious of their origin from dust, easily recognizes their weakness and dependence on God. A humble person struggles and fights against the devil, admits their faults in repentance and confession, and obeys the Lord’s command to fast and pray.

I hope and pray that these three ways will help us in our Lenten journey to experience victory over sin.

¹ *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*. Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975.

² John Chrysostom. *Letters to Saint Olympia*. Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016.

