

## **Four Steps to Kill Nagging Sins - Gavin Ortlund**

The Bible portrays sin as a powerful, ever-vigilant enemy. Sin deceives (Genesis 3:13), desires (Genesis 4:7), destroys (Genesis 6:7). Even forgiven sin within the Christian is powerfully active, waging war (Romans 7:23), lusting (Galatians 5:17), enticing (James 1:14), entangling (Hebrews 12:1).

Many Christians struggle with “nagging sins” — those entrenched, persistent, difficult-to-dislodge sins that continually *entangle* us in our efforts to follow Christ. Sometimes we struggle for decades, with bouts of backsliding and despair recurring. Most godly Christians, who have made true progress in their pursuit of holiness, can sing with feeling “*prone to wander, Lord I feel it,*” or share the lament of Augustine: “I have learned to love you too late!”

The gospel gives us hope that all sin, even nagging sins, can be both forgiven and subdued. But because sin has such persistence and power, we must be vigilant in our struggle against it. As John Owen puts it, “If sin be subtle, watchful, strong, and always at work in the business of killing our souls, and we be slothful, negligent, foolish . . . can we expect a comfortable event?”

Here are four strategies for maintaining vigilance in the fight, drawn from John Owen, and particularly in relation to a nagging, persistent sin — the kind that keeps on tripping us up and *entangling* us in its grip.

### **1. Hate it.**

We are accustomed to using the gospel to relieve the guilt of our sin. But sometimes — especially in the case of persistent, nagging sins — we should use the gospel first to *aggravate* our guilt. John Owen puts this challenge quite vividly:

Bring thy lust to the gospel, not for relief, but for further conviction of its guilt. Look on him whom thou hast pierced, and be in bitterness. Say to thy soul, “what have I done? What love, what mercy, what blood, what grace, have I despised and trampled on! . . . Have I obtained a view of God’s fatherly countenance that I might behold his face and provoke him to his face?”

If we do not feel the magnitude of our sin, if we are not gripped by its stench and grossness, if we pass over it lightly with glib affirmations of grace — we will probably never get around to the serious vigilance required for killing it. Truly subduing it requires properly grieving it.

This is particularly so with nagging sins. Nagging sins are those we are most likely to become numb to, and therefore we have to work extra hard to continually re-sensitize our consciences to them in light of the gospel, saying things like:

- *This impatience is part of what Christ had to bear on the cross.*
- *This worldly ambition would lead me to hell, but for the grace of God.*
- *This lingering resentment grieves the Holy Spirit within me.*

Often this means really slowing down and really examining our hearts. In a lesser-known passage in his *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis, reflecting on the distinction between enjoyment and contemplation, observes that “the surest means of disarming an anger or a lust (is) to turn your attention from the girl or the insult and start examining the passion itself.” Defeating nagging sins often requires this uncomfortable, honest reflection and acknowledgement on what the sin is doing within us.

Nagging sins can survive our annoyance and mild dislike. Only hatred will fuel the needed effort.

## **2. Starve it.**

In one of my favorite films, a man is diagnosed with schizophrenia and told that several of his lifelong friends are actually not real. He genuinely misses talking to them, but knows he must stamp out all delusions in order to move toward health. So he simply chooses to ignore them, calling it a “diet of the mind” — and as he does, they gradually recede in their influence over him. Even at the end of his life, he still sees the delusions, but they have lost their destructive power over him.

There is a similar principle at work in our struggle against sin — the more we indulge in it, the more of a grip it gains over us (even while we

*understand* that grip less and less). But, as with any addiction or animal, the less we feed it, the weaker it becomes. “Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Choose not to acknowledge your sinful desires — starve them of your affections and your attention, and they grow weaker.

One of the most important principles involved in this starvation process is to act quickly: Don’t let sin get even the smallest step. Don’t say, “I will give in this much, but not that much.” That never works. As John Owen puts it: “Dost thou find thy corruption to begin to entangle thy thoughts? Rise up with all thy strength against it, with no less indignation than if it had fully accomplished what it aims at.”

### **3. Corner it.**

Sin, like any other enemy, thrives among its allies (unhappiness, exhaustion, and discouragement are some that come to mind). To wage effective war against sin, therefore, we must deprive it of the opportunities and occasions it makes use of. John Owen is helpful once again:

Consider what ways, what companies, what opportunities, what studies, what businesses, what conditions, have at any time given, or do usually give, advantages to your distempers, and set yourself heedfully against them all. Men will do this with respect unto their bodily infirmities and distempers. The seasons, the diet, the air that have proved offensive shall be avoided. Are the things of the soul of less importance? Know that he that dares to dally with occasions of sin will dare to sin. He that will venture upon temptations unto wickedness will venture upon wickedness.

This means we need to study the particular triggers of sin in our lives. It could be a geographical location (like a bar if you’re a recovering alcoholic), but I find it’s more commonly emotions and unhealthy habits that we need to avoid. Lust is greatly weakened when it cannot appeal to fatigue, emotional need, loneliness, and shame. It’s more difficult to succumb to envy when you’re soaking your heart in your heavenly inheritance. Sinful anger often melts away when you are spending time with exceptionally kind, forgiving people.

In short, an effective fight against a nagging sin will often involve thoughtful consideration to your sleep, exercise, diet, emotional life, and relationships.

## 4. Overwhelm it.

In the gospel, God has given us the resources that we need to deal with nagging sins. Let me just mention three: patience, pardon, and power. The gospel means that God has “perfect patience” (1 Timothy 1:16) for us even amid our struggles with nagging sins. To truly kill a nagging sin, we need to know that God has not given up on us. Even when we have lost patience with ourselves, he is still there, like the Prodigal’s loving father, calling us back to obedience and joy.

The gospel also means that God pardons our nagging sins. “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). Only when we see our nagging sins through the gospel — as right now, *before* it is subdued, already forgiven in God’s sight — will we make true progress against them. As William Romaine wisely wrote, “no sin can be crucified either in heart or life unless it first be pardoned in conscience. . . . If it be not mortified in its guilt, it cannot be subdued in its power.”

Finally, the gospel means that God provides us with power, that we might overcome nagging sins (2 Timothy 1:7). His Spirit gives us strength beyond ourselves with which to fight, and his all-satisfying presence gives us the promise of a superior, lasting joy. However strong our nagging sins may feel, it is truly possible in Christ to “not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). As John Owen counsels us:

Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror. Yea, thou wilt, through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet.

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