

The Believer's Battle Plan

Every soldier in the U.S. Army can appreciate a seasoned general's battle plan, one that pinpoints the enemy's defenses and places him in the best position to gain the field. Every collegiate basketball player can appreciate a savvy, veteran coach's game plan, one that shows how best to stifle the opponent on the defensive end and expose him on the offensive end.

So also is it important for us to have a battle plan as we carry out our calling to be holy. The Christian life and experience is a war. We are engaged in a life-or-death struggle with the devil and the world, but I have in mind especially the spiritual war that takes place within every child of God between the old man and the new. As soldiers in the army of Christ called to fight this daily battle, we need a battle plan, the believer's battle plan.

Know the Enemy

That battle plan, in the first place, exposes the enemy within. There are especially two important things that we need to know about ourselves.

First, we need to know that we are dead (Col. 3:3a). Paul is not referring in that passage to the fact that we are dead in sin and totally depraved, but we do need to begin there. By nature sin is our lord and has a claim upon us. Sin demands that we obey. And we are sin's slaves. We willingly serve sin and do all things for it. All our life is determined by Lord Sin.

But we are dead! We have died and are no longer under the service of that lord. That lord no longer has a claim upon us. No longer does he have dominion and rule over us, and we no longer are his slaves. We no longer render service to that lord. Where once our whole life was determined by sin, now no longer is that true.

We are dead because of the death of Jesus Christ (Col. 2:20). When Christ died on the cross and made atonement for our sins and sinful natures, he put sin to death. And from the moment that he applies that saving work to us by his Holy Spirit, we are dead to sin.

The second important truth that we need to know about ourselves is that we are also alive. We are dead, and our life is hid with Christ (Col. 3:3b). Christ is our Lord, and he has a claim over us. He demands that we obey him. And we are his slaves, quickened and made alive so that we are able and willing to serve him. The life of Christ is the power in us. That life has dominion and rule over us.

We are dead because of the death of Christ, and we are alive because of his resurrection (Col. 2:13; 3:1). When he went through death and rose again on the third day, we also died with

him to sin and arose with him. Through his resurrection we have the holy life of heaven in us. It is this new principle of life that rules and has dominion over our lives.

This is who we are! When someone asks, “Who are you?” your and my answer is, “I am dead to sin and alive to Christ! Sin is not my lord and has no claim over me. But I am the willing servant of the Lord Jesus.” Despite the presence yet of the old man, we *are* dead to sin and alive to Christ. The new man reigns in us.

This provides proper self-esteem. Not the self-love that the world promotes, but healthy self-esteem wherein we know God’s esteem of us in Christ.

But perhaps you wonder, “Why then do I still sin? When I examine myself, I see all kinds of sins. But I thought I was dead to sin?” This is the case because of the way in which God carries out his work in us. When God applies the work of Christ to us at our regeneration, he does not remove the old man. Neither does he improve or reform that old man so that we are without sin. When he regenerates, God gives to us a new principle of life that exists alongside of that old man of sin. The old man and the new man exist in you and me at the same time.

This knowledge provides the basis for our pursuit of holiness. This truth shows us that holiness is *possible*. We are dead to sin, and we are alive to Christ. The old man, although present, does not rule in us, but the new man does. Therefore, we are able to put off the earthly and sinful and seek those things which are above. This truth also forms the basis for the *command* of God to be holy. God calls us to be holy, because we are dead to sin and alive to Christ. God says, “You are dead to sin. Now, be who you are, and fight against sin. You are alive to Christ. Now, be who you are, and live in devotion to me.”

Know How to Fight

The second part of our battle plan teaches us how to fight and engage in the battle.

In deep humility, we must first acknowledge that we often don’t engage in this battle and don’t strive after holiness as we should. The excuses are legion. We might say, “But Christ did it all. He finished the work of salvation, so away with any talk of holiness. To speak of my living in holiness is a threat to salvation by grace alone.” Or this: “Living a holy life makes me stand out at work and school. Others laugh at me and mock me. I am not going to do that again.” Or this: “Being holy is impossible. All of my best works are as disgusting rags, so why even try?” And then there is this unspoken, yet real excuse: “I am simply too tired and lazy.

Living a holy life is hard work, and I don't like hard work. Besides, I secretly love that sin, and putting it off is too painful for me."

But our King calls us to holiness. And that requires a radical, flesh-killing, sin-destroying, lust-quenching, warrior-like mentality. This mentality starts by knowing our sins. Each one of us must know our own, specific nature and our own particular besetting sins. We must know the strategies of the old man, and how he has attacked in the past. This means that we must constantly be in God's word, and constantly seeking to examine ourselves in the light of that word. As we examine ourselves in the light of the word, we also must be diligent in praying the words of David: "Search me, O God, and know my heart" (Ps. 139: 23–24). We need God to show to us the sin that we cannot or will not see. It is easy for us to overlook our sins, to excuse a certain sin as not being that serious, to justify what we have done because of our circumstances. But a radical, flesh-killing, sin-destroying, lust-quenching warrior sees his sins and acknowledges them as such.

Seeing and acknowledging our sins, we mortify them by sorrowing over them and hating them. There is such a thing as insincere sorrow, a "sorrow of the world" (2 Cor. 7:10) which is only a sorrow over the painful consequences of sin. True sorrow is a sorrow not merely over the consequences of sin but over the sin itself. We are grieved because we have provoked God, our Father, who is gracious to us and faithful to us in his covenant. Taking this view of our sins, we start to despise and detest them as the hated enemy in our spiritual warfare. We hate those sins that we used to love because they are abhorrent to our Father.

Finally, engaging in the battle against the enemy within involves the actual fleeing from sin and fighting against temptation. The sorrow of heart and hatred for sin must produce the actual turning from sin. In warfare the man who flees from the enemy is a coward, but that is not the case in our spiritual warfare. The man who flees from his sin is not a coward, but rather is a hero of faith. This means putting up barriers and boundaries where we know we are weak: thinking about something pure, talking about something else, going somewhere different, shutting down the computer, unplugging the TV, deleting the app on the cell-phone. Don't try to ignore your sin. Don't justify it. Don't tolerate it. Don't cherish it. Don't feed it. Don't make a truce with it. Kill it. Crush it. Starve it. Exterminate it. Destroy it. Repent and flee from it.

Know What to Expect

The last part of the believer's battle plan is intended to send us off to war with a realistic expectation of what we are going to face.

First, expect this to be a *daily* battle. Every day, from the moment you get up in the morning until the moment your head hits the pillow again at night, you are called to fight. There are certainly times when we wish that we could have a break, when we wish that sin would retreat for a time so that we can relax. But there is no reprieve, no sabbatical, no time off. Every day we find ourselves on the front line of this great conflict with the calling to fight. So every day we must strap on our armor, take up the shield of faith, grip the sword of the Spirit, and go war a good warfare.

Second, expect this daily battle to be *difficult*. Every day until we die or Christ comes again, we are going to face a violent attack from our enemy within. That old man will always be attacking the new man in Christ, seeking to get his hands around the new man's neck and wring the life out of him. In this war there is going to be blood, sweat, and tears. There are going to be times when we fall and are laid low by a sin. And there are going to be times of success and advancement. But there is always more fighting to do, more blood-thirsty enemies to be on guard against, more deadly assaults to ward off. This is going to be the hardest, most difficult thing you will ever do. Expect it.

Third, because this daily battle is difficult, expect *gradual progress*. At times this is not so easy to see. Often we feel as if we can hardly make any progress. We have all sorts of sins that we constantly fall into again and again. And the moment we think one sin has been put to death, another crops up in its place. The temptation is to doubt and despair and give up. But what we need to recognize is that holiness is a slow and gradual process. This work of God in us is not finished in a moment. It's not finished in a day, or a month, or even a year. As Calvin once said, "This military service does not end except by death." But recognize too that God does put to death the corruption of our flesh. He does give us the victory over our sins now in a continual, yes, sometimes slow advance. He cleanses us of our filthiness and sanctifies us in order that we may repent of our sins our whole life long.

Fourth, expect to make this gradual progress *through the use of the God-provided means*. It might seem obvious or might be something that you hear drummed into your ears over and over again, but the way in which God strengthens us for the fight against sin is by reading our Bible and praying. Through reading the word God shows to us our sins and the path of holiness,

and through prayer he strengthens us by his Spirit to live holy lives. Another important means is having good friends, friends who are not afraid to talk about spiritual things, friends who can keep you accountable, friends who love you enough to point out your sins. The most important means is your church membership. As a member of a true church of Christ, you sit under the preaching of God's word, which is the power of God unto salvation, and you also receive the sacraments and enjoy fellowship with and encouragement from other like-minded saints. Make use of these means!

Fifth, in this difficult battle, expect *victory*. That victory is due only to the cross of the Captain of our salvation. We can be exhorted all day to be holy, but there is no possibility of progress apart from the cross. There Christ took our old man of sin and nailed him to the tree, putting him to death. Although we still have that old man, he is an enemy over whom we already have the victory. We start to experience that victory now already, because we do see progress in holiness. The sorrow for sin is greater, the hatred is more vehement, and the fleeing is more urgent. We can look back at our lives and see that God has given to us the victory over certain sins and we have made progress in other areas. This is not reason for boasting or for slacking, but for perseverance. The cross is the certainty of our final victory also. For now we belong to the church militant, the church that is at war. But we are confident that when God takes us in death, we will be taken into the church triumphant, the church that rests from her fighting in heaven. Our life now is one of constant battle against sin and one of constant sorrow over it. But in the life to come, there will be no more sin and no more sorrow, for God will wipe away all tears from our eyes. The warfare is difficult, but the cause is worth it!

Onward, Christian soldiers!

This is the revised version of a speech given on April 7, 2015, at the young adults retreat hosted by Loveland Protestant Reformed Church. The theme of the retreat was "Our Calling to be Holy" from Colossians 3.