

The Victory that Requires Retreat

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Ready, aim, fire!
Fix bayonets! Charge!
Hold your ground and fight like men!

In days gone by, commands like these were among the ordinary sounds of the battlefield. The victorious army was the one that pushed forward. The winners were the men who overpowered and overran their enemy, forcing those who were not killed either to surrender or to run for their lives. “Retreat!” however, was a disgraceful word when shouted out by a military leader. It was an admission of defeat. More than one military officer has consigned his own soldiers to annihilation, or committed suicide himself, rather than utter that awful command.



Christians are at war against sin. As one example, we fight daily against sexual sin. But the biblical method for defeating this enemy is not to charge, or even to stand and fight. The Bible yells to us, “Retreat!”

“Flee immorality” (1 Cor. 6:18).

A handsome young Israelite named Joseph resisted and defeated sexual temptation by retreating. His master’s wife tried to seduce him. Day after day she flattered him with sexual advances. Then one day she brazenly took hold of his clothing and said, “Lie with me.”

Think about Joseph’s choice of responses: He might have pulled her hands away from his clothing, and said, “Not me. I’m saving myself for marriage.” He might have tried to reason with her about the folly of unfaithfulness. Or, he might have just said politely and firmly, “Please leave me alone,” and then gone back to his work. These all would have been “stand your ground” responses. But Joseph knew remaining near the source of this temptation would lead to disaster. And so “he left his garment in her hand and fled, and went outside” (Gen. 39:12).

Joseph is not the only man who has defeated sexual temptation by wisely running away. A friend of mine once ran to his car and drove away when a seductively dressed woman approached him and attempted to engage him in friendly conversation. He did not run because she was repulsive or uninviting. He ran because she was attractive and obviously available, and because he

sensed his own attraction to her—at least to her body. He knew that even though he was a Christian, he was not strong enough to resist his fleshly passions while in close proximity to what would satisfy them. In obedience to Paul’s command to flee immorality, he sounded the “retreat!” alarm in his mind and ran away.

Another way to “Flee immorality” is to avoid dwelling on past sins. By requiring yourself to “pay” for sexual sins in your conscience, you actually replay the events over and over in your mind. Rather than solving your problem, you make it worse.

As an illustration of the way this works, picture in your mind a purple gorilla seated in a fancy, white-tablecloth restaurant eating steak and lobster with a knife and fork. Can you see him? If not, close your eyes for a moment and really picture him in your mind. OK, now *stop* thinking about him. Put the image out of your mind . . . You can see the problem, can’t you? The image wasn’t difficult to get *into* your mind, but it is very difficult to get *out*. Your mind absorbs easily yet expels reluctantly. The same is true of sexual images from past sins.

Instead of dwelling on your sinful failures, run away from sexual sin in your thoughts. Retreat for the sake of victory. If you have sinned, replace your self-debasing thoughts about that sin with thoughts about Christ. Think of the forgiveness you enjoy because of His death on the cross. Think about who you are—a new creation, a partaker of the divine nature, a child of God. In other words, train your mind to think as Paul instructed the Philippians: “If there is any excellence and if anything is worthy of praise, dwell on these things” (4:8). Remorse is a natural response to a sinful failure, and in the true Christian it leads to repentance. But after this, there is no benefit in morose meditation on past sexual sins.

Would a sensible man stand and fight with a swarm of angry hornets? NO! The wise man will run away (or dive into a pond).

Whether you drive away, run away, walk away, look away, or divert your thoughts, you are no coward if you obey God’s command to retreat from sexual temptation. Only a fool would stand and fight with such a deadly foe.

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