

Do not conform to this world . . .

Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God – what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.

ROMANS 12:2

In the NT the “world” often refers to the system of values, attitudes and behavior commonplace in society – along with the people and social structures that conform to this system. This system is largely antagonistic towards or dismissive of God. As such, the “world” is essentially evil, and so it is imperative that believers do not conform to it.

. . . So do not live as other people do

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] So I tell you and encourage you in the Lord’s name *not to live any longer like other people in the world. Their minds are set on worthless things.* EPHESIANS 4:17 GW

Avoid bad company

[DAVID:] *I do not keep company with worthless people; I have nothing to do with hypocrites. ⁵I hate the company of the evil and avoid the wicked.* PSALMS 26:4–5 GNT

Remember the persecuted

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I. Encountering Sin

Inevitably on occasions sin “leaks” into our lives, with its ill effects on ourselves and on our relationship with God. But if we address it as the Bible says to, God promises to forgive our sins and take in hand its effects.

Note that the teaching in this section is applicable to both new believers ridding themselves of their old ways and to believers returning to God after having lapsed into sin. However, the focus is more on the latter.

Consequences of Sin for God’s People

Sin deprives God’s people of his blessings

[GOD, TO UNFAITHFUL ISRAEL:] *Your misdeeds have stopped these things from coming. Your sins have deprived you of my bounty.* JEREMIAH 5:25

God may punish sin, which can mean physical suffering and emotional anguish

[DAVID, TO GOD:] *My whole body is sick because of your judgment; I am deprived of health because of my sin. ⁴For my sins overwhelm me; like a heavy load, they are too much for me to bear. ... ⁸I am numb with pain and severely battered; I groan loudly because of the anxiety I feel.* PSALMS 38:3–4, 8

Sin defiles God’s people – making them spiritually unclean

They [the sinful Israelites] were defiled by their deeds, and unfaithful in their actions. PSALMS 106:39

Jerusalem has sinned greatly, therefore she has become unclean. LAMENTATIONS 1:8A ISV

God turns away from those who persist in sin

Someday these sinners will cry to the LORD for help, but he will not answer them. He will hide his face from them at that time, because they have done such wicked deeds. MICAH 3:4

Instead of living as a slave to sin, live as a slave to righteousness and God

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *Just as you once offered the parts of your body as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater disobedience, so now, in the same way, you must offer the parts of your body as slaves to righteousness that leads to sanctification. ...* ²²But now that you have been freed from sin and have become God’s slaves, the benefit you reap is sanctification, and the result is eternal life. ROMANS 6:19B, 22 ISV

One of the most effective preventative measures against sinning is to be preoccupied with doing good – as is the case when one lives as a slave to righteousness and God.

Be Holy

To be holy involves being separated from corruptive influences and totally dedicated to God. As such it includes moral purity and obedience to God. The ongoing process of becoming increasingly holy is largely facilitated by God, but in accordance believers are called upon to be holy. (See also the introductory comment on *God Makes His People Holy*, p. 161.)

Be holy as God is holy

[PETER, TO BELIEVERS:] As obedient children, do not be shaped by the desires that you once had in your ignorance. ¹⁵Instead, *just as the one who called you is holy, be holy in every aspect of your life.* ¹⁶For it is written, “*You must be holy, because I am holy.*” 1 PETER 1:14–16 ISV

If we are to be God’s people, acceptable to him, we need to be holy because: God is holy and so does not accept anything that is not holy. Therefore we should aspire to be holy, like God.

Be set apart for God

[GOD, TO THE ISRAELITES:] Therefore *separate yourselves and be holy, because I am the LORD your God.* LEVITICUS 20:7 ISV

The lambs were eaten by the Israelites who had returned from exile and by *all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of the non-Jews in the land to worship the LORD God of Israel.* EZRA 6:21 GW

Avoid sinful desires

[PETER, TO BELIEVERS:] Dear friends, I urge you as aliens and exiles to *keep on abstaining from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul.* 1 PETER 2:11 ISV

Get rid of sinful influences

[JESUS, SPEAKING FIGURATIVELY:] *If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.* It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. ⁹*And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.* It is better for you to enter into life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into fiery hell. MATTHEW 18:8–9

These instructions are not meant to be taken literally. They are hyperbole, emphasizing that one should do whatever is needed to get rid of sinful influences and avoid sin.

Hate evil and sin

[WISDOM PERSONIFIED:] To fear the LORD is to *hate evil. I hate pride, arrogance, evil behavior, and twisted speech.* PROVERBS 8:13 GW

Alternatives to Sin

Instead of living by the sinful nature, live by the Holy Spirit

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] He [God] condemned sin in the flesh ⁴so that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who *do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* ⁵*For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.* ROMANS 8:3B–5 ISV

Our human nature (“the flesh”) is essentially sinful. But God has given his Holy Spirit to believers. As such, we are to live by God’s Holy Spirit. This involves: being both alert to and responsive to the Spirit’s promptings; and being reliant on his power, to enable and transform us. In conjunction with this, our minds should be focused on “things of the Spirit” (v. 5).

Addressing Sin (I): Return from Sin to God

Even if sin has not led to a believer completely falling away from God, all sin hinders one from being fully devoted to God to some extent. Thus one needs to turn away from any sin and return to being completely devoted to God.

Stop sinning

Sober up as you should, and *stop sinning!* 1 CORINTHIANS 15:34A

Return to God with all your heart

“Yet even now,” the LORD says, “*return to me with all your heart – with fasting, weeping, and mourning. Tear your hearts, not just your garments!*” ¹³*Return to the LORD your God,* for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to anger and boundless in loyal love – often relenting from calamitous punishment. JOEL 2:12–13

In returning from sin to God, do what God wants

[EZRA THE PRIEST, TO THE UNFAITHFUL PEOPLE:] Now then, confess your sins to the LORD, the God of your ancestors, and *do what pleases him.* EZRA 10:11 GNT

[HOSEA, TO ISRAEL:] *But you must return to your God, by maintaining love and justice,* and by waiting for your God to return to you. HOSEA 12:6

Addressing Sin (II): Deal with Sin before God

Confess your sin to God

As soon as you discover that you have committed any of these sins, *you must confess what you have done.* LEVITICUS 5:5 CEV

Be sorrowful over your sin

The sacrifice God wants is a broken spirit. God, you will not reject a heart that is broken and sorry for sin. PSALMS 51:17 NCV™

A “broken” spirit or heart is one that is deeply remorseful.

Humble yourself before God over your sin

The tax collector, however, stood far off and would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am!’ LUKE 18:13

Ask God for forgiveness and restoration

[DAVID, TO GOD AFTER COMMITTING TERRIBLE SIN:] *God, be merciful to me because you are loving. Because you are always ready to be merciful, wipe out all my wrongs. ²Wash away all my guilt and make me clean again. ... ⁷Take away my sin, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. ⁸Make me hear sounds of joy and gladness; let the bones you crushed be happy again. ⁹Turn your face from my sins and wipe out all my guilt. ¹⁰Create in me a pure heart, God, and make my spirit right again. ¹¹Do not send me away from you or take your Holy Spirit away from me. ¹²Give me back the joy of your salvation. Keep me strong by giving me a willing spirit.* PSALMS 51:1–2, 7–12 NCV™

God’s Response to Repentance

God forgives our sins

[JOHN, TO BELIEVERS:] *But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous, forgiving us our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness.* 1 JOHN 1:9

God restores our relationship with him

So tell the people [of Judah]: This is what the LORD All-Powerful says: *‘Return to me, and I will return to you,’ says the LORD All-Powerful.* ZECHARIAH 1:3 NCV™

[GOD:] *I will be their God and they will be my people. For they will wholeheartedly return to me.* JEREMIAH 24:7B

Here God in effect promises his unfaithful people that if they returned to him wholeheartedly, he would restore his relationship with them to what it should be. As such, they would again be his people and he would be their God.

Remember the persecuted

II. Avoiding Sin and Being Holy

The Bible does not merely tell us not to sin. It also helps us not to do so by giving sound instructions and alternatives to sin. In conjunction with this, the Bible calls us to be holy – i.e. to live pure lives, set apart from all that is ungodly.

Avoiding Sin

Take care in avoiding sin

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *Even if you think you can stand up to temptation, be careful not to fall.* 1 CORINTHIANS 10:12 CEV

Ask God for help to avoid sin, . . .

[DAVID, TO GOD:] *Moreover, keep me from committing flagrant sins; do not allow such sins to control me.* Then I will be blameless, and innocent of blatant rebellion. PSALMS 19:13

. . . for God and Jesus Christ are willing and able to help us withstand temptation

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] *No temptation has overtaken you that is unusual for human beings. But God is faithful, and he will not allow you to be tempted beyond your strength. Instead, along with the temptation he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to endure it.* 1 CORINTHIANS 10:13 ISV

For we do not have a high priest incapable of sympathizing with our weaknesses, but one [Christ] who has been tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Therefore let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace whenever we need help. HEBREWS 4:15–16

Note that being tempted to sin is not sinning. But giving in to temptation is.

Use God’s word to avoid sin

[A PSALMIST, TO GOD:] *How can a young person maintain a pure life? By guarding it according to your instructions! ... ¹¹In my heart I store up your words, so I might not sin against you.* PSALMS 119:9, 11