

The Prodigal Returns

Overcoming Habitual Sin

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Lord Jesus Christ, whose will all things obey: pardon what I have done and grant that I, a sinner, may sin no more.

Lord, I believe that though I deserve it not, you can cleanse me from all my sins. Lord, I know that man looks upon the face, but you see into the heart. Send your Spirit into my inmost being, to take possession of my soul and my body. Without you I cannot be saved. With you to protect me I long for your salvation. And now I ask you for wisdom.

Grant of your great goodness to help and defend me. Guide my heart. Almighty God, that I may remember your presence day and night.

A prayer from the Desert.

I am always happy to receive correspondence from people around the world. Almost every day I receive messages on Facebook or by email, and much of my time is taken up in responding to the spiritual needs of those who have taken the time to contact me. Very often those who want to talk with me are facing the challenge of overcoming habitual sin.

Of course, each one of us is a sinner. As we reflect on the state of our hearts before God we are well aware that each

day has seen us fail to live in accordance with the command of God, be holy for I am holy. The words of the Psalmist are those which we make our own...

For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Psalm 51:3

Yet there is a difference between the constant daily struggle to overcome sin, even falling into the same sins often, and finding ourselves bound by the force of habit to continue repeating the same sins every day, and even many times each day. To resist sin with grace and in hope is one thing, even when we fall. But to be subject to sinful habit is to have lost all power to resist, and to be a slave of sin.

St James describes how it is that we fall into sin. He says...

Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

This is how we experience the development of sin in our life. We find that the desires which are already within us, those passionate energies which were created by God for good, are the means of our own destruction. These natural powers, operating without grace, are stirred up and they produce their ugly offspring, sins of thought, and heart and body. More than this, if we allow these sinful behaviours to mature, then they become habitual and lead to spiritual death. When we face temptation in this way we are still able to recognise that we are being led astray. There is still the opportunity to interrupt the process before we fall into sin. But when a sinful habit has

been established then sinful behaviours become almost automatic and difficult to interrupt. To have established such a habit, and to act almost without choice, does not excuse us. The fault is ours. We have abandoned our will to sin. Only humility, repentance and the grace of God can save us.

When we have allowed sinful behaviour to become habitual then we are no longer subject to the passing force of temptation but have allowed the enemy of our souls to establish a foothold in our hearts. Now it hardly takes any effort for us to be led astray.

Habitual behaviour is not simply due to external stimulus, but the repeated practice of any habit develops physical, psychological and spiritual consequences. When we are beginning to learn to drive a car we have to concentrate on all the necessary movements of our hands and feet. We make plenty of mistakes because there are different operations that have to be performed at the same time or in a particular order. After many hours of practice these operations begin to become habitual and we no longer have to think very carefully about each one. Our hands and feet move without thinking, but with intelligence, because we have learned to drive a vehicle by practice so that it has become habitual. In fact, when we have been driving for many years we can find ourselves miles down a road without remembering any of the operations we have performed to get there.

The same positive development of habit can be found in various sporting activities, in the playing of a musical instrument, in all sorts of artistic endeavours. If someone wants to enjoy playing football, then they need to play a

lot of football. My son plays in a local team, and has been playing since he was four years old. That's eleven years of practicing and playing. There were plenty of times when his team were all over the place, chasing the ball up and down the field. They would often be beaten by other teams of boys just as young as them, but better prepared.

After eleven years of practice there is now a pleasure in watching them play. They know what they are doing, they co-operate instinctively. They can win. They don't have to think about every move they make any more, they just act out of the habit that has formed through hundreds of hours of practice. Eyes and feet and body and balance work together without thinking but with intelligence.

We wish we could play a musical instrument as effortlessly as those talented people we admire. Some people seem to be able to make music without thinking or hesitating. The experience of making music begins as a purely mechanical process, such as a beginner might have to start with, carefully trying to reproduce each note one after the other. But after many tens and hundreds of hours of practice the creation of music begins to become more fluent. The musical instrument is no longer simply a mechanical device used to produce sounds, but a means of expressing something of the heart, of creating music rather than just making a pleasant sound.

It is easy for us to understand how it is that habit can become the means of acting without hesitation, and expressing the inner life of the soul in the fluent and fluid operation of skills and art.

Something goes on inside of us to facilitate this habituation. Within our brain we find that the repetition

of some activity makes it become easier and easier. There are neural pathways which are laid down, electrical connections that are like the tracks followed by walkers in the countryside. They begin as almost invisible remembrances of previous visitors, then as the grass becomes more and more worn the path becomes more and more distinct. Further visitors follow the path that others have established without thinking.

This consideration of how it is we become skilled at some activity, so that we can engage in it without thinking but with intelligence, describes how, in the same way, we can allow a sinful action to become habitual. Sins are human behaviours. They may become habits by repeated practice, just as any other human behaviour may become habitual. Indeed, virtuous behaviour may also become a habit. The process of developing a habit of such virtuous behaviours is an essential part of growth in the spiritual life.

What began as a sin, at some point became a habit through repetition. It has been widely suggested that it takes 21 days to form a new habit. In fact, recent research has shown that depending on the practice in question it may take between 18 to 254 days to develop a habit, with an average of about 2 month's repetition. The characteristics of such habits are efficiency, lack of awareness, unintentionality and uncontrollability. This means that as the habit becomes established it becomes an automatic response. We do it well. We find ourselves engaged in the habit before we know it. We find ourselves doing the habitual practice even if we don't want to, and we find it very difficult, almost impossible, to avoid it.

What does this tell us? It is surely that at some point in our life we have allowed occasional sinful behaviours to become sinful habits. We cannot say that it is not our fault, since the habit became established through a series of choices over many months. But we may also say, what seems a clear fact, that having developed such habits we do not find ourselves able to escape their grasp through any effort of our own.

There are a variety of reasons for this. In the first place, having developed a sinful habit it becomes the easiest course of action in many circumstances. It is an easy course of action because we have trained our brains to choose it over and above other courses of action. Secondly, and perhaps even more seriously in regard to the power such habits have over us. Those bound by sinful habits have allowed these habitual activities to become an automatic response to a variety of situations, feelings and stresses.

To overcome these sinful habits is not a simple matter of the will. Many bound by such behaviours will insist to themselves that they must just try a little harder and all will be well. But in fact we if we are honest with ourselves then we know that we have tried a little harder many times, and have failed to overcome the force of habit.

Yes, we are at fault for having allowed sin to become a habit in our lives, but there are aspects of our situation which should give us hope. Having allowed a habit to develop we have learned clearly over many years that we are not able to overcome its power on our own. But God waits to help us if we will admit that we are without strength in ourselves. While we still deceive ourselves

with the idea that we could become holy in our own strength if we just tried a bit more we will find ourselves without that divine assistance. But when we cry out with the blind man, Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, we have hope for healing and salvation.

This second and important aspect of habit indicates that when we turn to the sinful behaviour, without strength in ourselves to resist, it is very often, almost universally, because we are seeking to respond to some other underlying stress or emotion. If we are able to understand what it is that is really causing us distress, then this will be a necessary aspect of our healing. This is why we cannot easily overcome them by the force of our human will alone. It is because at some deep level we are actually choosing them, because they seem, to our broken and corrupted self, to be a solution to some real problem.

This is not to say that our sinful behaviour and habits are not serious and deadly to our spirituality, but it is important that we recognise that they are often a corrupt and corrupting means of trying to deal with something else without God. We find in the case of habitual sin that there are these three elements. Firstly, a trained and automatic behaviour. Secondly a repeated set of circumstances that encourage this automatic behaviour. And thirdly some underlying and equally serious spiritual and psychological sickness that considers this behaviour as a useful means of relief.

What do I mean? The person who eats much more than they need to, in an habitual and compulsive manner, is guilty of sin. Such a person will wish to overcome this habit, especially if it interferes with their spiritual life and

their practice of prayer and fasting. At some point in the past, and over a period of months and years, what began as individual occasions of sin, of gluttony in this case, of desiring and consuming food in an unspiritual manner, became a habit, and therefore became an easy option, and chosen almost automatically. But having become a sinful habit it is not enough to simply imagine that this person is always being tempted to eat. This might well have been the case at the beginning. But when it has become a habit it becomes much less subject to such deliberate choice and becomes a conditioned response.

There will certainly still be times when it is a sinful response to temptation, but often, very often, when it has become habitual and there is no pleasure in the sin at all, it is an automatic response to something else. It may be, for instance, that there are underlying feelings of loneliness, or a sense of being unloved, or one of many external pressures and difficulties which we wish to escape from. It may be that we are responding to feelings of anger or bitterness, self-pity or shame. If we wish to overcome habitual sin, then we need to recognise what this underlying and more serious condition actually is. These underlying conditions are also spiritual and also sinful, or at least expressions of some spiritual deficiency.

There are many who contact me because they are struggling with habitual sin of a sexual nature, or with habitual feelings of anger towards people. Whatever the habit that has overcome us, there is great value in seeking to understand what it is that triggers such behaviour. Beyond the initial period of habituation, such habits have usually gained their power because of a recurring need to satisfy some underlying condition, which the enemy of

our souls is manipulating, and by the recurring opportunity to engage in the habit. These various aspects of sinful habit need to be addressed, even while we also turn to God in faith, hope and repentance.

The inner need which we are trying to satisfy with habit is perhaps more important to identify than the recurring circumstances that enable the sin. This is because if we do not deal with the real problem in our heart then even if we change our circumstances we will still find ourselves turning to whatever the sinful habit is which dominates us. It is the need within the heart which is being used to give the habit its force.

In the case of habitual sexual sin, for instance, it is the case that at first the enemy will use the natural human desires to attract us, and to lead those who are entangled into sin. In this beginning of sin we find ourselves caught as St James describes. There is a pleasure of one kind or another dangled before the soul, and when the bait is taken the careless one finds that desire has become a cause for sinful behaviour. If the soul is seeking after God then this falling into sin becomes a matter of repentance and regret. The sinful behaviour does not become a habit. But if the sin is allowed to mature without the necessary interruption in its development then it takes on a deadly influence of its own.

What is committed as sin one day, if repeated the next, and the next, so that it becomes a behaviour which we do not immediately repent of, may begin to take on the force of habit. We find that as circumstances are repeated, the memory of previous pleasurable experiences leads us to repeat the sin as well. But this is how habit is formed.

After a relatively short period of time, if we are not spiritually observant of what is taking place, we discover that when the same circumstances arise we feel a compulsion to commit the same sin. It is beginning to have a force of its own. We no longer commit the sin with the thought of pleasure being foremost in our mind, but because it is beginning to be the natural response to certain situations. But the habitual process develops further, and eventually we find that even without the circumstances that produced thoughts of committing this sin, we are still driven to commit it by some compulsion. And this compulsion now operates even when there is no pleasure in the sin, only a sense of revulsion and disgust.

In this latter stage, when sinful habit is most powerful, it is no longer a matter of seeking pleasure, but it is often the unwitting attempt to satisfy some interior and powerful spiritual and psychological need.

The person with a habitual compulsion to eat no longer eats only at meal times, or at other particular times suggested to the appetites by circumstances. But is consumed with a need to eat, even when there is no pleasure in it at all. What might have begun as eating too much, and then eating habitually in certain circumstances, now becomes the focus of life itself. There is a thinking about food, the arrangement of circumstances so that food can be purchased, even at great inconvenience, and then the consumption of food. But it is no longer about food. It is about something else.

The person with an habitual compulsion to sexual sins may have begun by satisfying the pressure of temptation at certain times and in a certain way. But eventually this

also has become a way of life. There is no longer a connection between manifest temptation and the practice of this sin. On waking there may already be a compulsion, entirely detached from the appropriateness of the situation. And through the day there may be thoughts of how to satisfy this desire that produces no satisfaction however much it is indulged. The same pattern is followed, for this sin and all such habitual sin. There is thinking about performing the sinful behaviour, an arrangement of circumstances to allow the performing of this behaviour, even when it is entirely inappropriate, and then the performance of the sinful behaviour without pleasure or satisfaction.

We find ourselves in the situation that St Paul so graphically describes in Romans 7...

For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

There is hope even in such a situation. Even after years of compulsive sinful habitual behaviour. There is hope if we find, as St Paul writes, that there is still present the voice of that true person within us, made in the image of God

and destined to be renewed in the image of Christ who says, without power or strength, but with insistence, this is the very evil I do not want.

The one who has abandoned themselves to sin does not reflect in such a way. They do not agonise over their behaviour. But the one in whom there is still some spiritual life, the one who is still in a living relationship with God, it is this person who finds no satisfaction in sin and who cries out with St Paul...

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

For many who are bound by habitual sin, the first thought is that what is required is more effort. This is certainly true. But generally the effort is directed in the wrong direction. If we have allowed ourselves to fall under the power of sin through a turning away from God and from the spiritual life in Christ by the Holy Spirit, then we will not be saved from the circumstances we find ourselves in by relying on ourselves even more. It is this self-centredness which has been much of our problem. If we reflect on how we are feeling when we are bound by habitual sin it is very often prideful. We are ashamed that we are not able to overcome this sin by our own strength of will. Our focus is on ourselves. We say to ourselves that we are better than this, and that we can overcome if we just try one more time. But we cannot save ourselves. If we think that we can bring about holiness of life ourselves then we are not exercising faith in Christ, who alone has power and grace to be Lord and Saviour.

What does St Paul say when he reflects on the situation of someone bound by sin? How does he find that we can escape this malign power? He says...

Thanks be to God it is through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Indeed, our whole life is healed, renewed and fulfilled through this same Jesus Christ our Lord. We can do nothing of spiritual value apart from Christ. Nor are we called to become perfect apart from Christ, as if that were possible. What is the purpose of our life? It is surely not simply to avoid sins, and do more good and religious things, as if there were some divine checklist against which we were being graded. My son's school runs such a system. If a student fails to hand in homework, or is talking in class, or has not brought the appropriate texts books to a class then he will receive a bad behaviour mark. If he excels in some activity, or is particularly helpful in class, or performs some other action worthy of recognition then he receives a good behaviour mark.

But such a system, though useful for managing the behaviour of students in a school has nothing at all to do with spiritual life and salvation in Christ. We will not be saved simply by avoiding sin, and escaping the sinful habit that most concerns us, and substituting these sinful behaviours by attendance at Church, learning hymns, and reading the Bible a little. Of course these latter behaviours are commendable and even necessary, but the purpose of the Christian life is not to become more religious, but to come near to God and dwell in union with Him.

It is even possible to be a deeply religious person, held in esteem by others, and yet be filled with sin, just as much as the one who is unable to break the power of compulsive

and sinful habit. Such sins in such a person may be inward and of the heart, but it is possible to have a habit of pride, and self-righteousness, though this is less visible to others and can be mistaken for piety.

Let us be clear. The problem with habitual sin is not that it prevents us doing God pleasing behaviours, though that may be true. The problem with such sin, and with all sin, is that it prevents us being united with God, which is the essence and meaning of the Christian life. Therefore, the solution to such bondage must lie in seeking and experiencing this closer union with God, and not simply with performing other actions. If the God we worshipped were one of the pagan deities then it is true that he might be pleased by certain acts, and would give his favour as long as they were performed properly. But our God is not of such a character. He is not pleased by sin, but neither is he pleased by the performance of any religious acts without the desire on our part for union in love with Him.

We need only remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. One was a very religious man and full of pride and self-righteousness. The other was a sinful man, filled with a sense of his unworthiness. What does our Lord say...

The tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Therefore, we must begin the journey of overcoming habitual sin by being sure in ourselves that what we are

seeking is not the means to justify ourselves, as if we could say, “Look at me, God, I can be holy too”, but the means of union with God, so that God becomes the focus of our life. One of the problems with those bound by habit is that God is not the focus. There is undoubtedly faith and repentance towards God, but the habit makes us think about ourselves all the time. This is not the means to salvation. Indeed, it leads to a greater bondage.

The Christian life is not about us. It is about God. It is not about our sinfulness. It is about God. It is not about how hard we have tried to be holy on our own. It is about God. And the reason we should do anything in the Christian life must be always and only with the aim of deepening and enriching our union with God.

How shall we begin? We must begin with the parable of the prodigal son. Repentance is required of us every day, but especially when we are bound with sin. But repentance does not essentially mean feeling miserable about ourselves. We can grow very accustomed to such feelings. I have corresponded with Christians who feel very miserable about their circumstances but have not really begun to repent at all. In fact, repentance, which is a translation of the Greek word *metanoeo*, means to turn around, to change our mind and behaviour. There is no value at all in being miserable. It is possible to be miserable and continue to sin according to habitual behaviour. If we are to really repent then we have to turn around and do something different.

The prodigal son did not repent all the time he was in the pig-sty feeling miserable. He only repented when he stood up and took the first step back to his father’s home.

If we consider this parable we see that in the first place he had to come to his senses. He had to have some experience of clarity. He realised that he could not live as he was anymore, and that it was only in returning to his father's home that he could find salvation. He said to himself, I will get up and go to my father. And there are many, faced with life in the spiritual pig-sty, who say the same thing. They find within their heart some longing for another way of life, for a closer experience of union with God, and they say that this is what they will now commit themselves to. But this is not repentance. It is possible to remain in the pig-sty and keep thinking about how life could be better if we returned to our spiritual home.

Repentance only takes place when we act, when we use our will, weak as it is, sustained and supported by grace, to take that first faltering step home. In the parable we see when this took place for the prodigal son when it says, so he got up. And this is what is required for each of us if we are truly to be repentant. Until this point the prodigal son had been running away from his father. He had taken his inheritance and had travelled to a far country. But now, for the first time, he had turned around, he had repented, and he was making his way back home.

But what does this actually mean? It seems to me that for those facing the bondage of habitual sin it requires us to be very honest with ourselves, just as the prodigal son had to be honest. Firstly, we must recognise that there is no strength in us to overcome sin. Secondly we must admit that we are weak and not very experienced in the spiritual life, and that there is no justification for our feeling proud about ourselves at all. Thirdly we must abandon any sense that we could solve the problem of sin just by trying

a little harder, and we must confess to God that we barely have enough strength to ask for his help and grace. Fourthly we must recognise that the reason we commit habitual sin is because at some level we want to carry on committing these sins. Fifthly, we must pray earnestly, asking that God will grant us all that we need, the strength and grace and hope, to even begin to want to overcome sin. And finally, we must understand that the issue we face is not ultimately that of sinfulness, though that is serious and dangerous to our spiritual life, but of our lack of union with God. The aim is not negatively to overcome sin, but to positively enter into communion at all moments of our life with God, and in doing the latter we will accomplish the former.

If we are to overcome habitual sin we must realise that it is not the main problem we face at all, indeed it can be a distraction from the real issue, which is our diminished experience of union with God. Seeking this union with God is the effective and positive means of overcoming sin by the power and grace of the indwelling Holy Spirit. To seek to overcome sin without first seeking the presence of God is to invite failure and to build on shaky foundations.

What is the first step back to the Father's home? It is to pray asking for the grace even to properly desire that union with God which he offers. It is to pray without making empty promises that we cannot keep about how we will never sin again. Here is a statement I can be sure about, we will sin. But God knows what we are like. He knows everything about the one who is bound by habitual sin, and yet...

God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

The first step of repentance is to ask in earnest prayer for all that we need to grow into union with God, even for the grace to desire that union as the fullness of life in Christ. The first step is to ask for the grace to set our eyes always on God and not on our sin. The first step is to offer this day to God. We do not know what will happen tomorrow. God promises only to give us what we need today, and today is the day of salvation. So we begin our journey with this day.

We must do what is required of all those who are seeking union with God, even if we are aware that we are the worst of sinners, and even if we fall into sin we must continue to do what those who are seeking union with God do, and what is required of us if we are to enter this union. We must not allow our falling into sin to distract us from what must be and become the goal of our life. The prodigal son, when he set off to his father's home still smelled of the pigs. He was still covered in mud and dirt of every kind, and he was still hungry. It is the same for us. We must resist the temptation to turn to God only when we have overcome sin. It is as much a temptation as the sin that binds us, and both keep us from God's presence.

The fathers teach us four necessary aspects of this seeking after union with God. In the first place we must put no confidence in ourselves at all. We might think that this is how we have always lived, but in fact if we consider our hearts we will see that we have too much thought that we could rely on our own strength. But we cannot. To rely on self is to abandon faith in God. This lack of confidence in

ourselves must lead us to think humbly of our abilities and experiences. It has been said, the foundation of every virtue is the realisation of human weakness. Therefore, we must be conscious of our weakness.

We can tell if we still trust ourselves because when we fall into sin we are surprised, and filled with an excess of grief, as if it was the last thing we expected of ourselves. If we say, I should have done this or that, then we are still trusting in our own strength and will try again to force our unaided will to do that which is good. If we say, this is entirely what I expect of myself, I am a great sinner and have no strength at all in myself, then we are led to turn to God, who alone can save us. Those who trust in themselves may well be filled with many miserable emotions, but we have already considered that this is not repentance at all. The one who is trusting in God will immediately offer a repentant prayer as soon as they have fallen, and with the grace of the Holy Spirit will arise and press on in the pursuit of holiness and union with God. The one who experiences the strength of God is well aware of their own weakness. Though sorrowful on the occasion of sin there is no inordinate grief because such grief is the fruit of pride.

In what does our weakness consist? In regard to habitual sin, as we have considered, it lies in both the circumstances which prompt sinful behaviour, and in the inner motivation which these sinful habits come to satisfy. The one who is bound by habitual sexual sin, for instance, must seek to eliminate as a practical measure, all those opportunities to be led into habitual behaviour, and all those opportunities for the passionate desires to be nourished with tempting images and ideas.

We must not imagine that overcoming such sin and experiencing an increasing union with God will be without effort. But it must be an exercise in grace and in the will of God, and not an exercise of merely human will. At the beginning we should not allow ourselves to be consumed by thoughts of sin, but with desire for God. With such an attitude, that we might know God better, we should act to remove opportunities for sin, the stones which are found in the hard soil of our heart and which prevent fruitful spiritual growth. We must pick at each of these stones and cast them away. If we are easy and gentle with ourselves we will say that these stones do not matter so much. But we must remind ourselves each day, perhaps for one who is strong in the faith and in holiness these stones present no obstacle, but for me, the weakest of sinners, every stone must be removed for the sake of my salvation as I stumble at each one.

For the one who faces habitual sexual sins, for instance, those images and ideas we allow into the eyes will have grave consequences when they are used against us to provoke sinful behaviour. It is necessary for us to be strict with ourselves, and to fight against our own inclinations asking always for the grace of God to do so. If we are serious then we will take whatever actions are necessary to starve our passionate desires from nourishment. What are the television programmes we are watching? There are many programmes which are amusing, exciting and interesting. But if they have any content at all which is either explicitly of a sexual nature, or which promotes non-Christian attitudes to sexuality, then they must be avoided altogether. This is not a matter of being prudish, or over-sensitive. If we wish to overcome habits of a

sexual nature, then we must eliminate all those causes of sexual passion which lead to sin. This is a matter of recognising our weakness.

We must avoid those films which would fill our mind with unhelpful images. We must abandon songs and musicians whose lyrics are liable to be repeated over and over in our mind and are not consistent with growth in Christian spiritual experience. We must be strict with ourselves in our access to the internet. The installation of filters, and ensuring that someone else has the password to override them is essential. To expose ourselves to sinful materials is to offer ourselves as a willing participant in sin. Since we find it so hard to resist the compulsion to sin each day, we must do all we can to prevent the occasion for sin arising. It is wise to prevent the poison entering our mind and heart if we wish to avoid being poisoned.

Even while walking down the street and in the shops and other public places we must be careful to protect ourselves now from the desire which might be stirred up later and be the occasion for habitual sin. There is a practice of guarding the eyes which we should observe. As soon as you notice someone guard your eyes by looking down to the ground. By notice someone I mean that as soon as someone becomes an attraction to the eyes look away so that you do not look twice, because the second look will be liable to lead to danger.

What are we trying to do? We are trying to starve the passionate energies within us of those sensations which are liable to stir them up and lead us into sin. We are always to respond to the temptation to sin by adopting an opposite solution. So the one who is proud should humble

themselves. The one who talks all the time should be silent. And the one who is driven by compulsion due to the temptations arising through the senses must starve them of nutrition. We must be serious about our weakness. If we are honest with ourselves then we realise that we must take steps to change our circumstances so that we do not feed that weakness.

But our weakness, that weakness we are to have in mind as the first step in our salvation, consists of more than our easy submission to temptation and habit. It is also found in the interior brokenness that leads us to use habitual sinful behaviour as a means of relief for this greater sense of pain and hurt.

There is a reason why someone might practice a sinful habit that gives them no pleasure or satisfaction, and leaves them in a worse state than before. Indeed, we may discover that many different sinful habits are used to try and resolve the same inner conflicts. One of the most significant in modern times is the desire for intimacy. We are created by God to live life in communion with others, but for many people there is a great sense of isolation and atomisation. We do not experience life as unique persons made in the image of God and for communion with God and others, but as isolated individuals who are unable to connect with others except on the most superficial level.

It is possible to spend a day at work or at university perhaps, and speak meaningfully to no-one, and certainly without the possibility of sharing the deepest reaches of the heart. We are made for communion, but we find ourselves alone, as if we were swimming in the open sea with nothing around us or below us for miles and miles.

Almost unable to face the effort of kicking our legs to stay afloat. Worst of all, we may feel like this while surrounded by a crowd. Everyone else appearing to have their lives well organised and rooted in deep and fulfilling relationships with others.

In such circumstances, experienced by millions, habitual sin can appear to offer a comfort that our own lives lack. Sexual sin, for instance, may offer the prospect of a momentary intimacy with another person. Sins of gluttony may offer the prospect of a return to some childhood experience of sharing food with family in an environment filled with love. But habitual sins such as these can also be a means of responding to and managing feelings of anger, or self-pity. They do so because they engineer a sense of warmth and comfort, of unconditional acceptance and tenderness.

But they are all utterly false and empty means of dealing with these inner feelings and conflicts. Indeed, they eventually remind us of the very interior deficiencies we are trying to compensate for. If we turn to habitual sin because we have a sense of being without intimacy in our lives, or because we feel lonely, or un-appreciated, then once this sinful behaviour has become habitual it actually reminds us of that which most distresses and disturbs us every time we engage in it. This is why they become revolting and hateful to us. The one bound by such habits cannot stop, but driven by interior need to find comfort in practicing these habits, is on the contrary reminded over and over again of everything they feel they lack.

The one who commits a sexual sin through habit may well be saying, I feel utterly alone and without any connection

to another human being. The practice of sin holds out the promise of giving a sense of being close to someone. But immediately it becomes abhorrent because the one bound by it is reminded again just how alone they are.

If we must begin our journey by facing up to our weakness, then this is a necessary aspect. In the first place we have considered removing those things in our life which feed our habitual behaviour. But secondly we must also consider what is the interior malady which is also driving these habits. These are not simply psychological issues, they have a deeply spiritual aspect. Reflect on your heart and what it is that you feel and fear most. Do you feel alone? Do you feel un-appreciated? Do you feel angry all the time? What is there in the heart that it seems that these sinful habits might promise to resolve?

This inner motivation must also be taken into account and must be offered to God in prayer. We feel these things because we have not yet experienced life in union with God. The one who knows God does not feel alone, nor angry, nor unappreciated. Nor any of those things which can be the daily cause of sinful habitual behaviour.

Just as we must begin this first day of our pilgrimage back to the Father's home by facing up to our weakness in the face of various external stimuli, so we must face up to our inward weakness. Why do we feel alone? We must confess it is because we have not learned to find satisfaction in the presence of God. Why do we feel unappreciated? We must confess it is because we have not learned to be concerned only by the judgement of God. Why do we feel angry all the time? We must confess it is because we have not learned to trust God to govern our circumstances.

We must become aware of this inner motivation towards sinful habit so that when we feel ourselves inclined to sin in this way we do not struggle against the symptoms, but against the cause, and for those facing habitual sinful behaviour the cause is not usually some immediate temptation, but the stirring of this inner condition. If the one who is bound by such habitual sin realises that they feel utterly alone, for instance, then when they are aware enough to notice that they are being led to practice this habit again they can oppose this feeling of loneliness, which is the real cause of the sinful behaviour. When sin has become a habit we may find that merely opposing the immediate occasion of sin is not enough.

This is why it sometimes seems that the impulse to habitual sin occurs at odd moments. It might be thought that someone bound by sexual sin would respond in a sinful manner by some physical temptation presented to the eyes. But in fact when such a sin has become habitual it may well be that the impulse occurs when such a person suddenly feels alone. Perhaps their friends have all gone out and they are indeed alone. Perhaps there has been an argument with a friend or family member. Maybe a film without any sexually inappropriate material at all deals with sentiments of love, and this leaves the person feeling lonely themselves.

It is possible to identify the real force behind sinful habit when we consider how and when we fall into sin. It is this we must have in mind, even while we must also work hard to remove the sinful material which is received by our senses and which becomes the substance of the habit.

I know myself that I can begin to feel a little depressed when I have some unresolved anger in my heart. So if I start to feel depressed I do not look anywhere other than for such feelings of anger towards someone which I have not confessed and which I have not dealt with. It is the same with these sinful habits. They use what we see and hear as the fuel for sin, but the match that sets the fire aflame is usually some identifiable spiritual and psychological condition which we must recognise and immediately seek to resolve whenever sin beckons.

If it is loneliness and a desire for intimacy, then as soon as we feel the compulsion to sin we must consider this cause. We might pray, *Lord I feel this great sense of loneliness, it drives me to sin as if that would solve the pain in my heart, but I know that only you can fulfil these needs. Help me Lord to seek my comfort in you.*

When we identify what is happening to our hearts in prayer in such a manner, we take away much of the power of the habit. It promises much, but cannot deliver at all. When we make this the subject of prayer for grace we discover that it is harder for us to be deceived. We begin to see that our real problem is not the practice of sin itself, although that is a measure of our sickness, but it is always our isolation from God.

This was only the first step. Recognising that we are weak and sinful and can do nothing on our own. Being weak and sinful we need to be conscious of how we live. What we do can have lasting consequences. Someone who wants to become an Olympic athlete understands that they will have to change many aspects of their life. They cannot continue as they have done in the past. We need

to be aware of our weakness, both the external and internal causes of sin. More than that, we need to be conscious that we are too weak to achieve anything good of ourselves and must constantly seek the grace of God, every day and every moment of every day.

The second aspect of our seeking union with God, which is the means of overcoming sin, is therefore to always ask God for his divine assistance. We should not be surprised at this. Surely the mark of one who is becoming more Christian is that he acts in a Christian manner, and we should act according to Christian principles of behaviour even if we often fall into sin, and even if we seem to lack spiritual feelings.

St Luke teaches us...

He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart.

We don't pray enough. But when we are facing the insistent compulsion to sin we need to pray more than ever before. There is no salvation without the enduring prayer of the heart turned towards God at every moment. If our problem is serious, and we are taking it seriously as preventing us experiencing union with God, which is the Christian life, then we need to recognise that prayer is the means by which we commune with God, and this interior communion is the prevention of sin and the participation in the divine life by grace in the Holy Spirit.

There will be no solution if we do not begin with praying the Agpeya prayers in the morning and evening without fail. Why must we pray them without fail? It is because we must begin to build virtuous habits of spiritual

practices to sustain us as we hope to overcome the sinful habits that have bound us. Nor is it enough to pray the Agpeya as if mere words could please God. We are already loved by God. He does not need our prayers. But we need to pray. Pray with care and attention as if our life depended on it. And it does. The morning and evening prayers from the Agpeya provide those inspiring thoughts which we should make our own in beginning and ending each day.

We must pray with a sense of being in God's presence, as indeed we are invited to be. The words of each prayer must be offered with reverence and directed to God himself. We will certainly find our minds wandering, but this is no excuse not to put great effort into establishing such a godly habit. This is necessary if we wish to overcome sin by union with God. Is it too hard? To pray in the morning and evening for fifteen or twenty minutes? If we will not commit ourselves to prayer, then we cannot be healed.

When the Lord Jesus healed the man who was blind he put mud on his eyes and sent him to the pool of Siloam to wash the water off. In obedience he went off and did just this and received his sight. When we are taught that we must pray how can we be healed if we ourselves do not obey?

Indeed, more is required of us, both because we know ourselves to be spiritually sick, and because the experience of union with God is found in prayer. St Paul says...

Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

This is the will of God for us, for each one of us. Not only for monks, or for saints. But it is the will of God even for those bound by habitual sin, and it is a necessary means of our salvation. It is not enough to pray from the Agpeya in the morning and evening. We must also rejoice, pray and give thanks always and without ceasing through the day.

How do we do this? The spiritual fathers of the Church teach us that we may learn to pray at all times by using the short prayer which has become known as the Jesus Prayer. It has the form...

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me (a sinner)

This prayer can become an integral part of our life such that even for ordinary faithful Christians it may rise up in the heart whenever we are still and lead us into the presence of God in the heart. The heart is the centre of our being, and it is that secret place which the Lord commands us to enter and shut the door and meet with God. At the beginning we pray these words as we pray many other prayers, and we find ourselves ashamed that we sin even as we have prayed, realising that we have so much more healing and renewal to experience. But if we persevere then it will become a habit, a godly and virtuous habit. Not quite the same as prayer, since we have already understood that any repeated behaviour can become a habit. But it is the basis and beginning of constant prayer, since when the words come to mind we are invited to truly pray, turning all our attention to God.

In the morning, when the prayers from the Agpeya have been completed, remain in stillness for a few minutes and

pray the Jesus Prayer slowly and attentively for 50 times. This will take about 5 minutes only. And in the evening, when the prayers from the Agpeya have been completed, follow the same practice, and pray the Jesus Prayer with attention for 50 times. Then, during the day, whenever there is a moment of calm, when walking about, when driving, when waiting for something to happen, fill that moment with the Jesus Prayer again. Indeed, try to pray the Jesus Prayer as much as possible. We need not expect wonderful spiritual feelings. We may well discover a sense of frustration, or boredom. But we must persevere, because prayer is the means by which we enter the presence of God, and it is the presence of God which drives away sin.

It is useful to obtain either a prayer rope, or a rope of beads. These will help to maintain our determined offering of the Jesus Prayer since we can force ourselves, as far as this is necessary, to pray carefully on every little woollen knot or wooden bead. But we may also find that while we are about our daily business, we find the rope or beads in our hand and take up the prayer again. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.

There is more that is required of the one who is seeking healing and the grace to overcome habitual sin. St Paul instructs us to give thanks for all things, and the Agpeya reminds us to give thanks in every condition. Much of the power of sinful habit is found in that sense that we are missing out on things somehow, and that God is not being fair to us. When we give thanks for all those things we receive each day then we start to recognise all that God has already given us. It becomes harder for us to wallow in self-pity and speak as though God has failed to favour

us as we deserve. In the morning it is good to give thanks for the things we have already received: for a roof over our head, for our family, for employment, for life and health, for breakfast. And then in the evening it is good to give thanks for those things which have taken place through the day and which are to be received as the gift of God.

There is an old song I used to sing as a small child. It said, count your blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done. This is a truth. We will be surprised when we give thanks each day, and this will begin to change our heart and mind. How can we listen to the voice that says, God has forgotten you, when we have named before God in prayer all the things that we thank him for giving us each day?

If it is the case that unceasing prayer is necessary for our salvation, then we must not neglect the prayers of the Church, the prayers we offer together as a community of those sinners who are being saved. We are not facing this struggle alone. If we are bound by habitual sin, then we need to make sure that nothing prevents us attending the liturgy. We need the grace of God more than others, not less. And as far as our spiritual father allows we must make sure that we take every opportunity to receive the Holy Eucharist for our salvation. Indeed, these Mysteries are called the Medicine of Immortality. How can we be healed if we avoid the medicine we need? It is as if we were to say that we would visit the Doctor for some chronic illness after we had cured ourselves. This sickness cannot be cured by any human means, and we must approach the altar in humility and with repentance, seeking the grace we need to make those small steps, day by day, week by week, towards the Father's home.

If we are to consider prayer, then there is one last aspect we should not avoid. That is the prayer of absolution offered by our priest and spiritual father when we have confessed our sins to God in his presence. We are concerned here about those bound by habitual sin, therefore we cannot neglect the means by which God has provided for us to deal with sin in the Church. As St James says...

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

There are three things we can note in even this little passage. We are taught to confess our sins, and we should not imagine that those to whom we confess, if they are spiritual guides, will be shocked by our confession. We also learn that we require the prayers of others for our healing. In the first place we need the prayers of our spiritual fathers, but we also need the prayers of anyone who cares for us. We should not hesitate to ask others for such prayerful support. And finally we learn that the prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. This must give us great hope and confidence when we feel that we are sinful and far from being righteous. Those who are bound by habitual sin should seek the prayers of those who have already experienced this conflict with sin and have overcome by the grace of God. He hears their prayers.

Prayer is the means by which we enter into communion with God, and this communion with God is salvation. Therefore, if we are bound by habitual sin we must not neglect prayer at all, nor imagine that we can start to pray

when we have become holy. Remember the man who was blind and sat at the side of the road in the dust and dirt. He cried out without ceasing, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. We must make this our prayer. We must seek to be in God's presence at every moment. We will fail and fall, but it is his presence alone which is true life.

There is a third aspect which the fathers teach us in this journey of repentance and resistance to sin. It is that we must be very wary of our spiritual enemies and not underestimate their influence and power over us. Of course we should not imagine that they are greater than God, nor that we may be snatched out of his hands. But our experience already teaches us that we are weak, and it is not wise to place ourselves at risk.

We have already considered avoiding the opportunity to be led into sin by changing as far as possible the environment in which we live, and removing and reducing those sources of temptation. But in our daily activities we must be aware and alert so that we take notice of the movement of our heart.

As it is written...

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

The one who is bound by habitual sin needs to have this teaching in mind at all times. Often it is when we are given over to a spirit of spiritual laziness and boredom that we are struck down. We should not doubt that even an elite athlete, an academic or a scientist, can become cast down and lose concentration on their efforts. But what draws

them back to their life's work is a remembrance of the goal which is set before them. St Paul says...

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.

And elsewhere, to the Philippians, he speaks of his own spiritual life saying...

I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God's heavenly call in Christ Jesus.

Do we have this clear goal, this prize, set before us? It is more than a distant hope we will get into heaven. It is that even while we compete in the race of this life we may receive the guarantee of our victory over death and sin in Christ, by participating in this life with God now by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

We should not imagine that this participation is a matter of warm and comforting feelings. Often those who are bound by habitual sin are already too concerned about feelings, as if they represented the reality of things. But as we grow more spiritually aware and awake we will discover the presence of God in our heart as an unshakeable foundation of virtue and faith, and this will give us that confidence of which St Paul speaks when he says...

For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.

And elsewhere when he says...

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

This is our daily goal. To be found in Christ Jesus where there is no condemnation, and to have that confidence in God which comes through a clear and clean conscience that we have acted in holiness and in grace. But such a daily living requires us to be alert. The enemy will seek to lead us from the straight and narrow path, and within moments of having determined that we will repent and having offered our life to Christ anew, we will find that the enemy stands at the door of our heart seeking entrance and threatening violence.

Do not imagine that the Christian life is one of ease. It is one of constant conflict with our self and with the enemy of our souls to the end. But God is with us. More than that, he is God within us, and we may find him present in our heart if we will seek his presence above all else.

But this requires of us a constant vigilance and watchfulness over the movements of our mind and heart. My wife is a nurse and is often required to reflect on the way in which she conducts herself so that she can learn from her mistakes and successes. How much more should we live in such a manner as Christians, especially those who are falling under the bondage of habitual sin.

What are you thinking at the moment? Are you able to detach yourself from your thoughts and see what is happening in your mind and heart? It is necessary that we do not allow our thoughts and inclinations to run away with us, so that we are acting before considering what it

is that we are being led to do. This is why the practice of the Jesus Prayer is so important. It introduces a momentary pause into our thinking and acting, and this can be enough to prevent the enemy leading us astray.

Of course this is not a practice which is accomplished in a day. But one of the reasons that we have become bound by habitual sin is that we have not been observant of our mental and spiritual condition. We have become lazy and self-indulgent, even though it seems we are always thinking about sin. But to be often and always miserable because we keep giving way to the compulsion of our sinful habit is not spiritual at all. The one who is spiritual wishes is not concerned with the waves of emotion driven by pride and self-will, but wishes to seek that grace which is necessary to rouse themselves to spiritual action.

Try to become aware, for instance, of what you are about to say throughout the day. Do not speak hastily, do not seek to be the centre of attention, rather humble yourself to allow others to guide and lead the conversation. Wait a moment or two before saying anything, and consider whether you are speaking to promote yourself or for some genuinely useful purpose. Be strict with yourself. Are you ignoring what someone is saying because you are so busy already composing your witty reply? Then abandon what you were about to say, and give time and attention to the other person. Were you about to say something unkind about someone else? Then in the moment when you hesitate to allow yourself to consider what you are about to say determine that you will not say it. Instead of waiting to take over the conversation yourself, humbly ask a question of the other person to allow them to continue to speak.

Such a practice should become habitual to us, however difficult it might seem at first. It is necessary because it reveals to us just how much selfish regard we have, and how often we indulge ourselves. We should not doubt that pridefully having our own way in a conversation is also sin. We need to deal with it at some time or another. So we should deal with it now since it will help us learn to pause a moment before we act, and this is exactly what we require if we are to overcome our sinful habit.

We might think that this is a distraction from dealing with the compulsive behaviour that most concerns us, but in fact a practice such as this, where we may discover that we are not speaking a lot, but are harbouring hurtful and hateful thoughts, teaches us how self-centred we have become, and it is this self-centredness which is much of our problem.

We must learn by God's grace to be strict with ourselves in the matter of what we say and think about others. It can be very hard to be silent in a conversation when we are sure that we are right and the other is wrong. But to train ourselves to treat our own desires with violence is necessary if we are to be successful, with God's help, in the greater conflict with habitual sin.

At the season of fasting we should have the same hesitation when about to eat. We should not allow our natural passionate desire for food to act without control. Before you eat anything, before you drink anything, pause for just a moment and reflect in prayerfulness. Is this necessary for me at this time. We may well say, I really want to eat this food, but I can eat it later when the fast is over. It is not helpful for me to eat it now. One of the

aspects of the tradition of fasting in the Church is that it gives us opportunity to train ourselves and to treat ourselves with strictness.

The one who is bound by habitual sin should seek to keep the seasons of fasting as strictly as our spiritual fathers allow. This does not mean that we should adopt the diet of a desert hermit, but that we should strictly follow the rule which our spiritual father lays down for us in his personal experience of our needs. If we have not been able to overcome the compulsion to sinful habit on our own then we must seek to gain control over some aspect of our natural appetites with much prayer and grace, so that seeing victory there we might advance on the more difficult conflict.

If we wished to become an elite athlete we would be given a special diet by our coach. We would not consider this a punishment, on the contrary, we would understand that if we wanted to achieve our goal of competing at the highest level, and winning the most important awards, then we must follow the wise advice of the coach who provides even a rule for our diet so that we might succeed in our endeavour.

The fasting rules of the Church, applied by our spiritual father, are exactly of this character. They are not a punishment, and by following them we do not somehow please God by being miserable. On the contrary, fasting is a wonderful opportunity and invitation for us to lay aside the dominance of the body and enter into the freedom of the Spirit.

The one who is not strict with himself, in observing the movements of heart and mind, in learning to control how

we act, in submitting to the disciplines of the spiritual life, will surely not overcome habitual sin. It is by such means that we become more aware of ourselves, and of the assaults of the enemy, and indeed of God's sustaining presence with us.

There is a fourth and equally necessary step in the journey of repentance, and one which is required of all those seeking to be set free from habitual sin. It is that when we fall into this sin we immediately turn to repentance confessing our weakness and asking for the grace of God to rise up and set off on the journey again.

Every time that we sin in the way of this habit should be an occasion of turning more completely to God. In this way the enemy learns that far from leading us away from God, our increasing awareness of our complete weakness, and absolute need for grace, will lead us more and more frequently to turn to God, and this will frustrate his wicked intentions. God allows us to fall into sin so that we might become more aware that we are not able to resist sin alone, and so that discovering that we have no strength in ourselves we will turn all the more insistently to God for that grace of the indwelling Spirit which alone can save us.

It is the one who knows that there is no strength in him to even make a beginning, and who cries out, Lord, have mercy, without your help I cannot even desire to overcome this sin, who will find that grace which he needs.

You have sinned? Well what did you expect! You are a sinner. But rise up, turn to God in repentance and ask for more grace to see the way forward and to resist the

enemy. You have sinned three times, then rise up three times, and implore God for the grace to begin the journey. You have fallen after enjoying victory for some time. Then rise up in the same way. Abandon confidence in yourself, when you thought that you could resist on your own you were left to your own strength and fell into sin.

We must begin the journey of repentance with this day. We do not need to promise to abandon this sinful habit all at once. Indeed this is beyond us, and we should not promise what is beyond our strength. We need to offer ourselves, with all our weakness to God, and confess that we cannot hope to overcome even for a day without his grace. All that matters is today. We might sin tomorrow and the day afterwards. But can we offer this day to God. In the most difficult cases of habitual sin it might be necessary to have in focus only a morning or an afternoon, or an evening. But the intention must be that despite the feelings that are within us, that person who remains deep inside of us and is in a faltering relationship with God wishes to offer themselves to him for this day.

We must not begin the day as if we will succeed in our own strength. If we wish to try again, after hundreds of previous failures, then God will leave us alone to fail again. This time we will offer our inability to do anything that is good to God and ask that he give us the strength we need to overcome this sin just for the day.

Our day must begin with prayer, from the Agpeya and some time spent with the Jesus Prayer. We should read the Gospel for the day so that we have something spiritual to think over and be nourished by during the day. We should spend the day in prayer as often and as much as

possible, especially the Jesus Prayer, but also interceding for those people we live with, and work with, and meet in the street. We are seeking to turn our focus on God, and on experiencing his presence, rather than only on ourselves and our problems.

We should take every opportunity to serve others, in whatever manner such service presents itself. Watching over our speech, guarding our senses, putting others first. These are all necessary aspects of disciplining ourselves through this one day offered to God. At work we might volunteer to make the coffee, or take notes in a meeting. At home we may wash the dishes, or help with homework. In all things we offer such service to God, and conduct ourselves with the presence of God in mind.

There will undoubtedly be occasions of stumbling even during one day. We will be angered and frustrated by others, and tempted to turn to the habitual sin as a source of comfort. We must deny ourselves saying, tomorrow there will be plenty of time for this sin, but today, just for today, I am offering my time to God. Watchfulness is required at all times, and a constant calling out to God for help, especially if temptation to sin becomes severe. It is only one day, we must say to ourselves. We should especially be aware of that inner weakness we have identified, which is a trigger for our habitual sin, and also the dangers posed by boredom and idleness. Today is too serious for us to waste time. We must give ourselves to prayer and to service of others, filling the day with virtue.

And in the evening, or at the end of the period we have determined to give to God. We must pray the Agpeya again, finding a quiet place, and some of the Jesus Prayer,

being sure to give thanks to God for his strength and grace. We must confess that it is not our own will that has accomplished anything, and that it is hardly a great thing to avoid this sin for one day, but that even this little thing is beyond us, and we have succeeded in this only because of the mercy and love of God.

We must be careful not to throw victory away at the very end by indulgence. But even to the time of our retiring we must have the presence of God in mind. Read the Gospel again. Pray for friends and family. Turn to sleep with the words of the Lord's Prayer on your lips and ask for a peaceful sleep.

What do we do if we have fallen into this habitual sin on this one day? We must repent immediately. We must ask for forgiveness and more grace, confessing our own weakness, and we must give what remains of the day to God. If we often sin in this way two or three or more times, then we must give thanks if by his grace we have sinned only once. If we have sinned at the end of the day then we must also repent immediately, and give thanks that by the grace of God so much of the day was sanctified, and it was only when we took our eyes from God that we fell, relying on our own strength.

When tomorrow comes we must adopt the same attitude. We are not promising to avoid sin for ever. We cannot. But we will begin in the same way to offer this one day to God. We will pray. We will read some passage from the Gospel. We will practice the Jesus Prayer. We will seek the grace of God in prayer throughout the day and will seek to be always watchful and attentive. At the end of the day we will give thanks and will reflect on our experience.

How might we better be preserved from temptation? Do we have some greater sense of the presence of God? What should we be thankful for in the mercy of God?

We will continue in such a manner. Perhaps on the third day we will fall into sin. We are not surprised. We turn to God in repentance, and ask for more grace. We give thanks for what his grace accomplished even in the midst of our weakness. It has been three days, and in those days we have seen some success, and experienced some victory thanks to God and through nothing of our own strength. We had to make the effort, most certainly, but it was God who gave vigour to our spiritual muscles that had wasted away.

We start again. But now we have in mind that with grace it was possible to avoid this sin for three days, or four days. We now offer this same period to God. We tell ourselves, or rather that sinful flesh of ours, in three days you can sin again, but these next three days belong to God. We make every effort to always ask God for grace, we make every effort to be aware of our own weakness and the wiles of the enemy, and we commit ourselves to our little rule of prayer and fasting, of service to others, and of watchfulness over our mind and heart as far as we are able. All the while our prayer is, Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.

There is no magic formula. But if we abandon trust in our own strength, if we turn to God and become prayerful people, if we learn to be careful and watchful over our thoughts and speech, if we are nourished by the Scriptures and discipline ourselves in fasting, while receiving the grace of the sacraments, then day by day,

with God's help, it is possible to avoid the habit of sin that binds us. More than that, it is possible to develop godly and virtuous habits, and to experience the presence of God within the heart, as the essential substance of the Christian life.

When the habit has been broken for three or four days then offer a week. No more. And then another week. No more. And then just one month. Day by day, with prayer and grace filled effort it is possible to overcome the power of habitual sin, and having broken its power, to establish habits of virtue and the experience of God's unceasing presence. This is not the end of sin. We may still fall into the same sin, even after overcoming for a year or more. But it will no longer be a habit in the same way.

There is hope for all while there is still some small desire to know God and to be holy. But habitual sin hardens the heart, and we may not realise when we have lost the possibility of repentance. As the Scripture teaches, now is the day of salvation. May each of us always make the most of this day, given by the Lord for us to know him more perfectly, offering him even our weakness, to his glory and for our eternal hope.

Practical Activities

I have tried to pull together some practical activities that seem necessary to me if we are to overcome habitual sin. It might well be worth creating an Excel spreadsheet, or purchasing a little notebook, so that it is possible each day to record what has been accomplished, and when and why we have fallen.

Preparatory Activities

Reflect on the habitual sin which has bound you. What is the real need, within the heart, that gives this habit its energy? It is anger, loneliness, desire for intimacy, jealousy, envy, self-pity, something else? Try to consider what your real problem is that manifests as a sinful habit.

Offer yourself to God in a formal manner, in serious and earnest prayer, as you are, confessing that you are weak and sinful, and that there is no strength in you at all to even make a beginning in overcoming this habitual sin. Confess in prayer that you do not even have the desire to stop this habitual sin, and require even this grace of God. Pray that God will receive this offering of yourself, and will give grace and forgiveness even when you fall.

Attend the sacrament of Confession with your spiritual father, and as honestly as you can ask for his advice and for absolution so that you begin this effort with as much divine assistance as possible.

Attend the Liturgy, having received absolution. During the Liturgy repeat your prayers of self-offering, and of hopeful reliance on the strength and grace of God, and receive Christ Himself in the Communion of the Holy Mysteries, for remission of sin and eternal life.

Changing your circumstances

It was Einstein, I think, who said that the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over while hoping the outcome would be different. So it is necessary to make some changes if you are serious about overcoming habitual sin.

What are the influences you are allowing into your mind and heart? You need to change them or there is no possibility of overcoming habitual sin. In the first place it is a matter of cutting off harmful circumstances. Make a list of the TV programmes you watch. If there are any which routinely present anti-Christian attitudes, then cross them off your schedule. This may mean unsuitable sexual material, the promotion of materialistic attitudes or anti-Christian relationships. If you would not be happy watching with your spiritual father, then decide now that with God's help you will stop watching it too.

What else are you doing with your time? There are positive and helpful activities and those which promote self-indulgence. Make another list of all the things you are doing with your time. How many of them are encouraging a selfish attitude? Going out often late at night will not help develop spiritual discipline. Nor will smoking or drinking. It can be good and helpful to spend time with others, but not if we are being led into a false sense of what life is about. Look at your list and cut out those activities that are harmful and consider cutting down on any that are not leading to self-discipline.

But there are some positive changes that need to take place too. One of the main aspects of habitual sin is a negligent and self-indulgent attitude, however much we disguise this with various emotions.

You must make sure that you pray from the Agpeya every morning and evening. Create a log, using Excel or a notebook, and make sure that you pray when you get up, and in the evening before you retire. Pray one or two of the psalms set for the morning and evening. Pray with

care and attention. Try and find a quiet place. This needs to become a spiritual habit that continues. Pray the introductory prayers, one or two psalms and the Gospel, and at least the absolution and final prayer. But there is a blessing in praying all of the prayers, and we must be disciplined, we are asking God for grace to overcome a habitual sin, and if we do not pray we cannot be healed. Make a note in your log when you have prayed from the Agpeya.

It is also necessary to start using the Jesus Prayer as much as you can. You should pray for 50 times in the morning and 50 times in the evening, and also record this in your log. The Jesus Prayer is Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. But as well as praying this in the morning and evening, you will need to try and pray it through every day. The aim is to make this something habitual that comes to mind and heart. Try to pray it when you walk or drive somewhere, when you are on your own in quiet for a while, when you are out with the dog, or shopping, or between classes.

One last good habit which will be necessary is to read the Gospel of the day every day. Read it slowly and prayerfully so that you can be nourished by it, and feed on it through the day. There are useful websites where the lectionary is presented every day. Add this also to your log. This is an activity which must be completed without fail if we want to be healed. We should not think that this is too much, or tedious, unless we are not really serious about overcoming this habitual sin. On the contrary, it is the bare minimum, and when we feel bored or frustrated by these necessary spiritual habits we must pray urgently

and earnestly that God will save us and grant us the grace to persevere.

Tackling the habit itself

It is no good thinking that because we have sinned and fallen into the habitual sin again we should give up, and abandon the spiritual habits we have tried to start, and return to the activities we have rejected as being unhelpful to us. On the contrary we need to stick with it even more, even if we sin two or three or more times each day. Whatever you do, do not abandon the spiritual disciplines. Keep the log up to date and keep on praying and reading the scripture as if your life depended on it – it does!

Begin asking God for the grace to prevail for just one day over this habitual sin. It is going to take effort, attention and prayer. At any moment it is possible to lose our focus and fall into sin, and we will discover that as soon as we make this effort the enemy of our souls will step up his efforts to lead us astray.

Make sure the day begins with prayer. Use the Jesus Prayer even more than usual. Have the words of the Gospel for the day in your mind. Stay alert. If you were competing in an elite athletic event you would be focused, and this is just as serious an occasion. At least once every hour make touch with God in prayer if you have not been able to stay in a prayerful state. At each occasion continue to offer yourself to God, give thanks for the grace he has given, and ask for more grace to be preserved until the end of the day.

Have in mind throughout this day what influences are coming into your mind and heart. Be sure to avoid the programmes and influences you have already decided are having a negative influence on you. Be disciplined. But rely on grace at every moment. Cry out often, Lord, have mercy.

Towards the end of the day do not begin to allow your watchfulness to flag. Make sure that you renew your focus on God even when you have come home. Pray the evening prayers from the Agpeya carefully and with attention. Give thanks to God. Read the Gospel again and pray the Jesus Prayer again. This is a dangerous time. It is all too easy to relax and fall into sin. Be careful what you put on the television. Be careful what company you keep. Do not lose the race of this one day even as the finish comes into view.

When you are retiring make sure that you do so in prayer. Make the sign of the cross over the place where you will sleep. Pray the Lord's Prayer and then as you turn to sleep pray the Jesus Prayer again so that it is the last thing you are doing.

If this one day becomes almost too difficult then tell your unruly body that you will sin again tomorrow, but just today you will not sin in this way but will give it to God.

If you feel yourself falling under the power of the habitual sin then do absolutely whatever is necessary to avoid it, just for this one day. Run from the situation which is leading to sin. Join the company of others. Cry out in prayer, Lord, help me. But do not stay where you are and liable to fall.

Finally, if you do sin then make this also an opportunity to turn to God. Repent immediately. Not feeling miserable but seeking grace to turn things around. Standing in prayer turn to the Lord's Prayer, and then continue for the rest of the day as if you had not sinned, determined to redeem the rest of the day with God's help. Make a note of your sin in your log. Reflect on what it was that led you to fall. Be clear what happened, and be sure to change the circumstances, however drastically these need to be changed.

Moving on

When you have been given grace to overcome this habit just one day be sure to give thanks. It has not been because of your own effort but because of God's help.

Now you must seek the grace to repeat this success. You have shown that with God's assistance it is possible. So immediately follow the same disciplined approach to seek grace for a second day. Tell yourself again that tomorrow you can sin, but this one day is dedicated to God. The important thing is to take each day one at a time.

When you fall then complete that day, seeking God's grace always, and with repentance. Then begin again until you have completed one day and can think of completing a second. It is especially important to make the most of each time we fall so that we learn those lessons we have neglected. What is the situation that allowed us to fall, we must change it. Were we overcome by the inner need that we identified, then we must offer this need again to God and be more observant of when it is creeping up on us, seeking grace to find our need fulfilled in God.

We keep on going, one day at a time, in the same way. Our short term goal is to overcome by God's help for just one day. Then our medium term goal is to endure for a whole week. This may require us to start again many times. Confessing, receiving communion, considering our life and if we are too indulgent of ourselves. But it is possible because the saintly fathers of the Church teach us so, and because it is God's will for us. We can worry about the long term when we have thankfully seen God at work in our lives for the short term.

Keep the spiritual habits going. Keep the log up to date. Be always thankful for success as being from God's hand. Repent immediately. Reflect deeply on the mistakes you make, and the circumstances you have failed to change. Taking one day at a time, and relying only on God, it is possible to become a more prayerful person, and in the presence of God to become a more consecrated and holy person.

May this be so in your life, to the glory of God and for your salvation.

Appendix

Abba Moses says...

Thoughts inevitably besiege the mind. But any earnest person has the power to accept or reject them. Their origin is in some ways outside ourselves, but whether to choose them or not lies within us. But because I said it was impossible for thoughts not to come to the mind, you must not put all the blame upon the spirits who assault our integrity. Otherwise the will of man would not be free, and we could make no effort for our own improvement.

To a great extent we have the capacity to better the sort of thoughts we receive, to let holy thoughts or secular thoughts grow into our minds. This is the purpose of reading the Bible often and meditating upon it always, to attain a higher state of recollection: this is the purpose of singing psalms often, so that feelings of repentance may be continually elicited: this is the purpose of constancy in watchings or fasts or prayer, so that the mind, in its weakened body, may care nothing for the world but may contemplate the things of heaven. If we neglect these, the mind will surely creep back towards squalid sin and fall.

This movement of the heart may suitably be compared to a mill wheel spinning round under power from a waterfall. The wheel must revolve so long as the water flows. But the mill owner can decide whether to grind wheat or barley or darnel and the wheel will crush whatever he chooses. So, the mind cannot but move hither and thither under the impetus of external circumstances and the thoughts which pour in upon it

like a torrent. But which thoughts to reject or accept, an earnest and careful mind will determine.

If we are continually meditating upon Holy Scripture and lifting up the mind to desire a perfect life and to hope for a future blessedness, the mind cannot help receiving, and dwelling upon, the thoughts of the spiritual which thereby arise. If sloth and carelessness dominate us, and we spend our time in sinful and idle gossip or are busied unnecessarily with the cares of the world, a variety of tares will infallibly spring up and minister temptations harmful to the heart. As our Lord and Saviour said, where our treasure is of effort and intention there will our heart abide.

Abba Chaeremon says...

A man who is aiming at the perfect life will climb up from the first rung, the fear which is rightly called servile as it was said: "When ye have done all things, say "we are unprofitable servants." and will mount to the rung of hope. The man who hopes is like a paid servant, not a slave; for he is secure in his status and exemption from servile punishment, looks for a wage in return for his labour, is conscious of his services, and expects payment under contract and therefore cannot be like a son who loves his father, trusts his father's generosity, and never doubts that all his father's goods are his own.

The prodigal who had lost his father's goods and the name of son, did not dare to aspire to this state of Sonship - I am no more worthy to be called thy son. He fed upon the husks that the swine did eat and was not filled (it means, the squalid food of sin), and then he returned to his right mind, was stricken with repentance, and began to loathe

the filth of the sty and to fear starvation. So, like a slave, he began to want to be a paid servant, and said: 'How many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, while I perish with hunger. I will arise, and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. But his father ran out to meet him, and listened to his humble and penitent words with a family affection deeper than his son's, and lifted him above the state of a hired servant and restored him to his Sonship.

Abba John says...

God, who truly heals souls, will certainly offer a remedy to those who truly seek it: especially to repentant men who are not hopeless or neglectful of their faults nor conceal them, nor wantonly refuse the healing of penitence when the opportunity is offered; and to men who fly humbly and prudently to God to heal the sins they have contracted from ignorance or error or necessity.

St Ephrem says...

Do all in your power not to fall, for the strong athlete should not fall. But if you do fall, get up again at once and continue the contest. Even if you fall a thousand times because of the withdrawal of God's grace, rise up again each time, and keep on doing this until the day of your death. For it is written, 'If a righteous man falls down seven times' - that is, repeatedly throughout his life - 'seven times shall he rise again'

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