

# How to Wage War on Self Pity

Adapted from July, 2020 - 'Ask Pastor John' Audio Transcript

*How do I wage war against my self-pity? Michael, a listener from Portland, wants help in the battle he's facing. "Pastor John, thank you for this podcast. I struggle with self-pity, and often self-justify my self-pity by rationalizing it in my own head. Have you experienced this too? If so, what are the best arguments you have made from your flesh to justify your own self-pity? And what biblical arguments do you use to make war against those selfish arguments?"*

Well, Michael asked, "Have you ever experienced this?" So, let me put my answer to his question in an autobiographical form. Ten years ago this year, I took a leave of absence from my then pastoral ministry. And the reason I asked the elders and the church quite openly for this leave was to do what I called a "soul check." And during that leave, I tried to be very specific in identifying my own characteristic, besetting sins. It became evident that they were an ugly cluster of selfishness, proneness to anger, self-pity, quickness to blame, sullenness. That's the cluster.

## Wretched Reflexes

At the root of that was what I called *selfishness*. And selfishness had five reflexes that I could discern very clearly. I'll tell you in a minute why I call them *reflexes*.

1. The reflex of expecting that I be served
2. The reflex of feeling I am owed
3. The reflex of wanting praise
4. The reflex of expecting that things will go my way
5. The reflex of feeling that I have the right to react negatively to being crossed in my desires

## Rate Yourself on These Five Internal Reflexes

1. The reflex of expecting that I be served



2. The reflex of feeling I am owed



3. The reflex of wanting praise



4. The reflex of expecting that things will go my way



5. The reflex of feeling that I have the right to react negatively to being crossed in my desires



Now, the reason I call those five things *reflexes* of selfishness is because I don't premeditate any of them. They just happen in my head, in my heart. I didn't decide for any of those to happen; they just are there. That's how rooted our unmortified corruption and remaining, indwelling sin and selfishness is. And I noticed, as I kept my sin before my own eyes, that these selfish reflexes gave rise to four characteristic things that were manifest for others to see — not just in my head, but obvious to everyone.

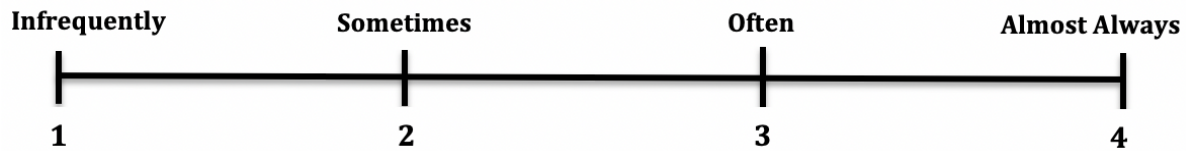
1. **Anger** — the strong emotional opposition to the obstacle that just got in my way

2. **Self-pity** — a desire that others feel my woundedness and admire me for being so mistreated (and that’s the one Michael is asking about)
3. **Quickness to blame** — a reflex to attribute to others the cause of my frustrating situations
4. **Sullenness** — a sinking discouragement, moodiness, hopelessness, unresponsiveness, withdrawn, deadness of emotion

That’s the cluster of John Piper’s besetting sins as I identified them ten years ago.

### Rate Yourself on These Four External Sins

1. **Anger** — the strong emotional opposition to the obstacle that just got in my way



2. **Self-pity** — a desire that others feel my woundedness and admire me for being so mistreated



3. **Quickness to blame** — a reflex to attribute to others the cause of my frustrating situations



4. **Sullenness** — a sinking discouragement, moodiness, hopelessness, unresponsiveness, withdrawn, deadness of emotion



## No Passivity in Pursuing Holiness

So, what did I learn about the defeat of these monsters in that leave, which has, I believe (you'd have to ask my wife, probably), gotten me more victory in the last ten years than I had before?

What the Bible showed me was that there was a disconnect between Christ's cancelation of my sins on the cross and my conscious, willed opposition and conquering of my own sins through blood-bought, Spirit-empowered effort; there was a disconnect. In other words, God blasted a pattern of passivity that had developed in me toward that particular cluster of sins. He forced into my face the biblical reality that canceled sins — that is, blood-covered sins — must be killed consciously with effort, by faith, in the Spirit — not coddled. And one of the ways God forced this discovery on me was to expose the inconsistency between the very active way that I fought sexual temptation and the fairly passive way that I handled the temptation to self-pity.

Now, right there is the nub of the matter: I had the unspoken assumption that sexual lust must be attacked directly, consciously, forcefully, with effort of my mind and my will, since Jesus said, "Tear out your eye, Piper. Cut off your hand if you have to when it comes to the temptation of lust" (see [Matthew 5:29–30](#)). But for some crazy, demonic reason, I assumed I could not attack these other besetting sins in the same vicious way, and they would somehow just dry up and disappear by some inner, unconscious work of the Holy Spirit, without any Spirit-empowered, conscious, ruthless, vicious, angry, "Get outta my life, devil!" effort to cut my hand off or gouge my eye out.

But it became increasingly clear during this leave of absence that the link between the cancelation of my sin on the cross and the conquering of my sin was sanctified effort. Now, to be sure, the only effort that avails is blood-bought effort, Spirit-wrought effort; but it is, nevertheless, a conscious effort of the sanctified will. Passivity in the pursuit of holiness is not what the Bible teaches. I knew that in relation to sexual temptations; I was playing like it didn't exist in relationship to self-pity temptations. Oh my goodness.

## Kill Sin — Consciously and Intentionally

Here are the texts of what I mean; I mean, there are lots of them. I'll just mention two to show the connection between cancelation and conquering.

- In the death of Christ, we died to sin, Paul says ([Romans 6:2](#)). Therefore, put sin to death ([Romans 8:13](#)).
- In the death of Christ, we were forgiven. Therefore, now, forgive others, just like you've been forgiven ([Ephesians 4:32](#); [Colossians 3:13](#)).

Clearly, if you just take those two cases, victory over sin in the death of Christ for my sin is decisive. But they're followed immediately not by the minimizing of human effort, but by the empowering of the will: Don't let sin reign in your mortal body. You have died to it; don't let it reign (Romans 6:12). Forgive one another.

In other words, God intends for my sanctification to include conscious, willed opposition to specific sins in my life. I had applied that to sexual temptation, and I think with significant success over the last forty years or so, but for some reason, I failed to apply the same brutal intentionality of sin-killing to my selfishness and anger and self-pity and quickness to blame and sullenness. So, I began to use the same strategy toward self-pity that I was using toward lust. Let me give you an example.

### **'I Beat It Down'**

I came home one Lord's Day evening, and I was tired. I was hoping to do something with my wife and daughter, Talitha, who was still at home. And my wife and my daughter were on the couch with the computer, watching something together. They announced, "We're watching this, and we're going to watch this." They didn't say anything about me — poor me, poor hardworking pastor me, right? They just said, "We're enjoying this. Welcome home; do what you want." My reflexes were immediate: frustration, anger, and especially self-pity.

With my new, God-given resolve, I did with that temptation what I do with sexual temptation regularly: I said, "No. No, self-pity. No, get out of my head. Get back to hell, where you belong." And I went upstairs to my study, and I waged war for maybe ten or fifteen minutes. I waged war — effort. I turned my mind and my heart toward the promises of God, and the surety of the cross, and the love of my Father, and the wealth of my inheritance in Christ, and the blessings of the Lord's Day that had just gone by, and the patience of Jesus.

And I held them there in front of my mind, where I could see them. I cried out to the Lord for blood-bought help. And I consciously, intentionally — not passively — beat it down. I beat it down, the anger and self-pity and blaming and sullenness, as utterly out of character with who I am in Jesus. And I kept beating until they were effectively dead.

So, Michael, there you have it. You asked, "Do you ever experience this?" Oh my, yes, I have shared your experience. And that's what the Lord taught me ten years ago. I think if you were to ask my wife today, "Is Johnny different in that regard from, say, twenty years ago?" I think she'd say yes. And I give God great glory.

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