My backyard was a battlefield. Crouching underneath my kids’ old play fort was a platoon of nasty weeds: roaring dandelions, sly creeping Charlie, cantankerous crabgrass. They didn’t scare me. I waded into the fray to do battle when I spied one more vine lurking among the ranks, one more ivy uniting that axis of evil, one more three leafed soldier laying claim to the fort. “Poison ivy,” I sneered. “Prepare to meet your antidote.”

Like Sherman going through Atlanta, I utterly wiped out every last creeper and crawler and stuffed them in a bag. Now a wise gardener prepares for such a battle with long sleeves and long pants. Not me. In only shorts, T-shirt and a pair of gloves, I recaptured the fort and went in to celebrate my victory. That was on a Monday.

On Tuesday, still basking in the glow of my triumph, I noticed a small rash on my right arm. “All right poison ivy,” I conceded, “you left your mark.” I considered those few tiny bumps a battle scar of honor. But Wednesday brought a patch on the left arm. By the end of the day, tiny boils set up camp all over both arms. “I can handle this,” I concluded between scratches. Then they laid siege to my legs, captured my stomach and advanced up my chest. By the end of the day my face began to swell so that I looked like the Elephant man. The burning itch became all consuming, I couldn’t think of anything else.

“Stay calm, Hoglund,” I told myself. “You can handle this.” First I tried denial. “It doesn’t itch. It doesn’t itch. It doesn’t itch,” I repeated while rubbing my rash against the edge of the desk, the door, the computer. Then I turned to anger. “I’ll show you who is boss,” I shouted as I scraped my arms with guitar picks. Bargaining was next. “Listen, rash. If I just gently stroke you will you please leave me alone?” Then came depression. “I’ll never get rid of this. Just send me to the leper colony.” Finally, after two weeks, I reached acceptance. My arms and legs may look like a war zone. But oh it feels sooo good to scratch!

Losing my war with poison ivy left more than scars and scabs. It taught me I daily face a battle. It reminded me there are poisons in me and around me. And above all it proved to me if I try to fight these battles on my own, I’m going down. I know I do not have the antidote to these poisons. But I know the One who does. You and I are fighting on two fronts.

The first battlefield is Within Me

The battle on the surface of my body taught me a few lessons about the war that rages within. If you are like me, a fight sometimes erupts in your soul between your mind and your desires. I knew, in my head, that I should not touch the rash. Scratching only makes it worse. Yet this knowledge did not keep me from going to town on those little
landmines. I was on fire. The only relief came from a good scraping. But it was a temporary relief. Soon my skin felt raw. Though I knew I shouldn’t do it, though my arms and legs were sore, I couldn’t go sixty seconds without scratching. Knowledge didn’t save me. Pain didn’t prevent me. Poison Ivy forced me to make war on myself.

The same is true inside your skin and mine. Often there is a war between our minds and our desires. The battle lines are drawn between the right thing to do and the wrong thing we do.

- Your mind tells you, “Don’t get in the middle of that argument.” But your mouth opens up and gives advice, passes on gossip or tells someone off.
- The bills and the budget all scream, “You must cut back.” But your hand automatically pulls out the credit card.
- It’s Sunday and you know God wants you to come to worship. But the bed feels so good.
- Your cholesterol count tells you to exercise and eat healthy meals. “I will,” you tell yourself as you drop onto the couch, “right after I finish this chocolate.”
- You are starting to suspect that you might be drinking too much. “But after all,” you say while taking another sip, “I’ve had a hard day.”
- You promised you would not lose your temper with your spouse or your kids. Now you have to go and apologize again.
- The Dare program and your parents taught you not to start. You were just curious. It would only be one time. Now you want to know how to stop, but you’re afraid to ask for help.
- You look at his success, at her promotion, at their possessions with envy. “Why can’t it be me?” you grumble.

The itch is unbearable. You’re burning up inside. “Don’t scratch,” you mind yells. But you can’t help yourself. Your conscience says, “Stop!” Your desire shouts, “Go!” They struggle for every inch of your soul. Poison Ivy merely spreads oil on your skin. The rash and reaction is your body’s response. Temptation is the poison ivy oil but your response is what the Bible calls sin.

Sin is not a popular concept today. Psychologists, educators, government officials, even pastors avoid that issue. Dr. Howard was a distinguished Australian minister who preached very powerfully on the subject of sin. After a particular service, an elder came to him and said, “Dr. Howard, we don’t want you to talk as openly as you do about man’s (sin). Call it a mistake if you will, but do not speak so plainly about sin.” The minister took down a small bottle. “Do you see that label?” he asked the elder. “It says strychnine and underneath in bold, red letters the word, ‘Poison!’” Do you know, man, what you are asking me to do? You are suggesting that I change the label. Suppose I paste over it the words, ‘Essence of Peppermint’; don’t you see what might happen? Someone would use it, not knowing the danger involved, and would certainly die. So it is, too, with the matter of sin. The milder you make your label, the more dangerous you make your poison!”

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1 Illustration from Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman
We treat the poison of sin as I handled the poison ivy. We use:

- **Denial** – There’s nothing wrong with what I’m doing and I can stop any time.
- **Anger** – Don’t tell me what to do, this is my life and I’ll do whatever feels good.
- **Bargaining** – Okay, I know this is not good for me. But what if I cut back, keep a lid on it, do it just on the weekends?
- **Depression** – I can’t stop it. What’s wrong with me?
- **Acceptance** – Yes, I know I have a problem. But that’s just the way I am.

Brothers and sisters, if you identify with one of those five, then you are playing with poison. Don’t indulge it. Don’t scratch it. No matter how good it feels right now, it will only get worse.

Jesus came to wage war against sin. But on Good Friday, the disciples were certain he lost the battle. Scarred and scourged, they took His limp, lifeless body down from the Cross, wrapped it up in a sheet and rolled the stone over the entrance to His tomb. Jesus lost. Sin won. That was Friday. But on Sunday there was a different story.

When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. (Mark 16:9-13)

The disciples refused to believe Jesus won the war against sin. Who can blame them? Dead is dead. Every time a human being fights sin and death they lose – without exception. Sin and death were batting 1000. Sin and death had the longest running winning streak in history. And that is still true...with one exception. The disciples should have known that the Master they followed for the last three years, the One who fed thousands with a little boy’s lunch, the One who stood up and told the storm to shut up, the One who sent two thousand deviled hams into the sea, the One who opened blind eyes and mute mouths, who raised up the paralyzed and even raised up other dead people, was the only One who could break sin and death’s winning streak once and for all.

If you believe Jesus truly defeated sin, death and the devil and rose from the grave, it changes the world, it changes history, it changes eternity and it changes you. How? Well up until Easter morning, the only alternative to falling for temptation was fighting it. Use all your will power to resist. When the burning of temptation begins, when the itch is overpowering, just grit your teeth and hang on until the temptation passes. Many good Christians flex their will power muscles. Some succeed in stopping one habit – only to find it appear in a different form. It’s like a ground hog: plug up one hole, it surfaces somewhere else.
There is only one antidote to the poison of sin within: surrender. Admit defeat and ask Jesus Christ to come in and set you free from sin. According to Greek Mythology, Hercules wrestled a giant whose mother was the goddess of earth. Every time Hercules got the upper hand and slammed the giant to the ground, it rose up stronger. The more times Hercules threw him down, the more powerful he became. Then it dawned on Hercules that the giant drew his strength from the earth. So Hercules raised the giant above his head until he weakened and died.

You and I can wrestle with sin. We can try to resist it or scratch it until we turn raw. But the only real solution is to stop fighting it and lift it up to Jesus Christ in prayer. Ask Him to come into your war zone, to fill you with His Holy Spirit. Don’t do it just once. Every time a temptation arises, lift it up in that moment to the Lord. Surrender it immediately to God. We need everyone to be free because there is another battle God wants us to face.

The second battlefield is Around Me

When Jesus finally appeared, He had some pretty strong words for his doubtful disciples. But in spite of their unbelief, He still wanted to send them out to fight for Him.

He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.” (Mark 16:15-18)

I know that part about handling the snakes caught your attention. There are about 125 churches, mostly in Appalachia, that handle rattlers and copperheads during their worship services. NPR actually did an interview last month with two snake handling pastors in Kentucky. They said their services are just like other Christian churches.

“We sing, we preach, we testify, take up offerings, pray for the sick, everything like everybody else does,” he says. “Just, every once in a while, snakes are handled.”

The article also mentioned the church only has 20 members.

I interpret this passage differently. I believe Jesus is saying, ‘The world is full of poison. I’m sending you out to fight a battle – not with weapons but with the antidote.’ What is the poison in this world?

[^2]: [http://www.npr.org/2013/10/04/226838383/snake-handling-preachers-open-up-about-takin-up-serpents](http://www.npr.org/2013/10/04/226838383/snake-handling-preachers-open-up-about-takin-up-serpents)
• There is the poison of unbelief – too many people are fighting the battle of sin on their own strength. Too many people are giving in to it.
• There is the poison of poverty – too many people don’t stand a chance to climb out of the hole of hunger, debt and unemployment.
• There is the poison of addiction – too many people are losing the battle against drink, drugs or some other substance.
• There is the poison of poor education – too many children, teens and adults don’t have the knowledge or skills to find a better life.
• There is the poison of human trafficking and abuse – too many people are used and discarded like trash.
• There is the poison of affliction – too many people are suffering from physical, emotional or spiritual diseases.
• There is the poison of stress – too many people racing to keep up on the hamster wheel of the world and they are wondering what is the point?

There is only one antidote to all these poisons and it is the Good News, the Gospel, the message of healing, wholeness and salvation Jesus wants us to go out and share. It’s going to be a battle but the best news is you are not alone.

After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:19-20)

The Lord is watching over you and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Lord is working through you.

Last Sunday, you did just that. You applied the antidote to the poison in the world around you.

• 18 of you led a worship service at Manor Care Nursing home and, for the first time celebrated Communion. The people loved it and now some of the first time servants want to go back again.
• Four went to the Gift of Life House to bake treats for families and patients waiting for an organ transplant. Among them was Bruce Cossaboom who just received a kidney transplant himself. He wanted to give thanks to God by helping others.
• Twenty-six workers, including many Junior Highs, made dresses, pillow cases and barrettes for children in Haiti and other needy locations. “The women who participated were so excited about doing this, that they asked if we could do this on a regular basis. The camaraderie, laughter and fun were contagious and prayers were said for all the children who will be receiving these items.”
• Nine people collected bags of trash along Edgewood and Black Rock Roads while another crew cleaned up the NOVA memorial garden in Core Creek Park.
• A team of guys filled four pickups and one 33’ box truck full of furniture for the Sunday Breakfast Rescue Mission thrift store.
• 150 meals were made for homebound residents through AID for Friends while 6,000 utensils were wrapped for the homeless at the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen.
• 45 blessing bracelets and 65 cards were created for those in Hospice.
• Single moms and elderly neighbors received much-needed home improvements. Home renovations were performed by our Senior Highs at the Philly Project.
• Senior Highs also joined disciples from the Middletown and Yardley campuses to paint four hallways and one classroom in the Foundations Academy Charter School in Trenton. A crew of guys built four bookcases for the library and just about the time they were done, Gloria and the Junior Highs showed up with enough books for twenty bookcases.
• And at a worship service at the Eliza Shirley House in Philadelphia led by 25 believers from Woodside and CLPRM ministries, six women came forward to surrender their lives to Jesus.

This quick recap doesn’t include all Woodside’s projects and it doesn’t even scratch the surface of what the 25 other churches did when they left their buildings. But when all these disciples of Jesus truly “Go into all of the world and preach the good news to all creation” they apply the antidote of Jesus Christ to stop the poison. It’s a long journey and there is a lot of poison.

Don’t sit. Don’t stop. Don’t stand still. Go!

As one of the Woodsiders said:

"God willing, I plan to volunteer again next year. Thank you for this opportunity to serve. I feel God’s presence in the Christian Life Prison and Recovery Ministry services... Given the trials and tribulations of my life, an ego-centric life without God and Jesus, I am finding myself drawn toward this ministry even though I feel out of my element. But even the journey of 1000 miles, starts with the first step and continues, step by step."

Keep walking His talk from now on.