



## NOT AGAIN SIN

*By Brad Hambrick, M.Div., Th.M.*

Have you lived the book of Judges lately? Not have you *read* the book of Judges lately, but have you *lived* it? The chorus of Judges is, “The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord their God.” Then there is a new verse of a different Judge who God sends to deliver Israel from its sin bondage—Othniel, Deborah, Gideon, most famously Samson and several others—before the chorus begins again.

When we *read* the story of Judges, we shake our heads with a pious grin and confused chuckle. Could they not learn from the mistakes of one generation to the next? Could they not be satisfied with God’s blessings to the intermittent generations of faithfulness?

When we *live* the book of Judges we feel dumb, ashamed, embarrassed, like hiding, and defeated. We did know better. We had been there, done that, and still bear the scars to prove it; yet we did it again. After a moment of God’s gracious deliverance—whether it be conviction or more commonly exposure—we see the foolishness of our actions for what they really are.

Now the big question: WHY DO WE DO IT AGAIN, AND AGAIN! AND AGAIN? The short answer: we domesticate sin. We view sin as just the bad things that we do. It is there when we do it, but otherwise it is a non entity. We do not believe sin has a lasting presence, personality, or agenda. We believe sin is there to serve us (if we could get away with it), rather than seeing its desire to rule our lives.

This article has two purposes—to teach you to take your sin seriously and attack it effectively. “Taking your sin seriously” could mean many things: (1) to perfect your sin through practice and repetition, (2) to not exaggerate other people’s sin as more significant than your own, (3) to pay attention to the times you sin and not dismiss it, (4) to identify the unique aspects of a particular besetting sin and work to exterminate it by the grace of God, or (5) to be over-whelmed by guilt and shame of your sin in an emotionally self-mutilating form of penance.

The goal of this article is definition number four. Numbers one and five are two extremes that must be avoided if sin is to be conquered. Numbers two and three will play in a key role in preparing us to complete our objective.

### **What is Sin?**

Sin is an active force in our world and our life. Shortly after the Fall, God said to Cain, “Sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it (Genesis 4:7).” Do you hear the tone of God’s warning? Sin is a predator. We are its desired prey. Sin takes pleasure in the taste, smell, and sound of our destruction. It is essential for our survival that we learn to master sin; we “*must* rule over it.”

Peter warns the early church, “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8).” We must be realistic in our assessment of the adversary and stay alert. Sin is like a lion who intends to rule and will devour those who try to stand in its way. Sin does not wait for us to stumble upon it. Sin prowls, hunts, and schemes for the ideal moment, context, or situation to overcome us. Luke 4:13 reads, “And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him *until an opportune time.*”



Jesus warned, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin (John 8:34).” Sin has no intention of being domesticated. It is no one’s pet. Any attempt we make to trivialize or dismiss our sin is an error of the gravest degree. Sin has an appetite to rule a world marked by the character of its sovereign, Satan. We must enter this battle, with equal intensity to live in a world marked by the character of Lord, Christ.

### **How is Sin Defeated?**

If that is the nature of our adversary, then what is our strategy? Simply stated, our strategy is to learn sin’s lies and unveil its false promises. Sin lures us to its lair by deception. John identifies Satan by the title of “the deceiver” in his epistle and the book of Revelation. 2 John 1:7 says, “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is *the deceiver* and the antichrist.” Revelation 12:9 says, “And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, *the deceiver of the whole world*— he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.”

Sin is foolishness. Theologian Wayne Grudem (1994) says, “All sin is ultimately irrational. It did not make sense for Satan to rebel against God in the expectation of being able to exalt himself above God... Though people sometimes persuade themselves that they have good reasons for sinning, when examined in the cold light of truth on the last day, it will be seen in every case that sin ultimately just does not make sense (p. 493).”

In order to root out sin from our lives we must admit we are fools who have believed lies, bought false promises, and loved idols which were not God. As John Piper (1995) says, “Sin is what we do when we are not satisfied with God (p. 9).” It is not pleasant to think in this manner, but this is the implication of saying that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23); that we struggle with a flesh nature that battles against God’s Spirit in us (Gal 5:16-26); that we must put to death the deeds of the body (Rom 8:14).

To think otherwise is a denial of the effects of the Fall upon our mind, our world, and our hearts. More than that, to think about ourselves and our sin in other terminology is to diminish our need for grace and further distance ourselves from God’s solution to this malady.

### **STEP ONE: Make a List**

Many of us can say “Amen!” to all the warnings that have just been uttered, because we truly believe what the Bible says about sin. However, if we do not take the time to carefully reflect the corrosive effects of our own sin upon our own lives, Satan smirks at our “Amen!”

Before you begin, make a list of the sins you want to see eliminated from your life by God’s grace. Keep the list to three or less so that you do not become distracted or over-whelmed.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

As you prepare to answer the questions that follow, be honest. In answering these questions you will have to acknowledge Jeremiah 17:9 as more real than is comfortable to admit: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” Part of ridding our life of sin is unmasking sin’s hideous presence



in our own flesh. The deceitfulness of our hearts and sin (Hebrews 3:13) may mean these questions are hard to answer.

Prepare now to brace against the thought, “I don’t think that way. My sin is not that intentional, malicious, awkward.” There are many things we do intentionally without conscious thought. If this were not the case, most of us could not get ready in the morning or drive a stick shift, while changing the radio station, and talking on our cell phone. When we sin we are demonstrating that we have some answer to these questions. Discipline yourself to pay attention to the logic of your “natural” sin.

What follows are questions designed to help you reflect upon the irrationality of your sin. The goal is not to burden you with guilt and shame. To the contrary, as we come to understand the perversity and depravity of our own hearts better, it should cause us to step back with renewed wonder and awe as we savor the sufficient grace of God. The purpose of this exercise is to help you become thoroughly versed in the deception tactics sin has used to lure you, so that in the future you will see sin for what it really is.

An illustration from the world of athletics may be helpful at this point. It was the 1988 World Series, a classic moment in the history of professional baseball. The Oakland A’s were heavily favored over the Los Angeles Dodgers. As in any professional sport, scouting played an important role. The Dodgers coaches noticed that Dennis Eckersley always threw a backdoor slider when he was ahead of left-handed batters.

In the last inning of Game 1, Kirk Gibson limped to the plate as a pinch hitter. The Dodgers star left-handed slugger was so injured it was difficult for him to make it to the plate. Eckersley quickly got two strikes. Gibson stepped into the batter’s box, but then stepped out. He looked in the dug out and grinned. He remembered the scouting report. With confidence Gibson stepped back in, got the pitch he was expecting, and hit a home run to win the game. Announcer Jack Buck proclaimed, “I can’t believe what I just saw!”

True story. This article is designed to help you scout how sin has “gotten you out” in the past, so you know what to expect in the future. As you see sin’s deceitfulness and maliciousness, grow in your hatred for that sin. Create a desire in your heart to destroy it that rivals the desire it has to destroy you.

Implications for each set of questions will be explained by providing illustrative answers which might accompany various sins. As you prepare to answer, consider the deception or distraction found in each response. The italicized portions of each answer highlight statements that are indicative of that question.

Repentance statements are included to reinforce the idea that when we sin, we are not merely mistaken or misinformed, we are aligning ourselves with an agenda that is opposed to truly loving God and loving our neighbor.

**A. How have you seen this sin as your friend? What “benefits” has it provided you? How have these “benefits” become an integral part of your daily routine or handling a particular aspect of life?**

We sin because we think it will get us something we want. In the cold light of truth and conviction we do not like to admit this, but it is true. We think of our sin as something that will cooperate with us based on our agenda. We see it as an ally.

In order to understand our battle with sin we must realize that sin is not just something we do, it is something we have a relationship with. As you think about your battle with the sin(s) you listed, think of it in terms of a



break up. In order for the break up to be final, you must eliminate the connection points this activity, emotion, or disposition has in your life.

**STEALING:** “It was nice to be able to have things that I knew my family could not afford. *Stealing helped me feel better about myself by giving me nice things. I repent for basing my identity in things more than in God.*”

**ANGER:** “Nobody messed with me when I was in a rage. *Anger protected me. Getting mad every so often kept other people from getting comfortable telling me what to do. I repent for valuing power more than people.*”

**SMOKING:** “It didn’t even seem like I was making a choice. When something bad happened or I wanted a break, I lit up. It was hard to even say I was making a choice because it seemed so natural. *Smoking gave me a five minute vacation. I repent for finding refuge in something other than God.*”

**B. What has this sin convinced you that you could not live without? What do you often call a “need” that is in fact a legitimate desire grown to idolatrous proportions and distorted practices?**

This is one of the ways that sin sticks, and one of the ways our culture inadvertently promotes sin—expanding the definition of the word “need”. As you listen to yourself talk about or think about your sin, pay attention to the language that makes it sound necessary or inevitable. Until you change the vocabulary of your mind, this sin will have a permanent foothold.

**ALCOHOL:** “*I can’t handle all that I have to do without being able to escape at the end of the day with a few beers. It’s too hard. Maybe when my life settles down a little bit I will be able to quit. I repent for denying God’s ability to bring peace and order.*”

**SOCIAL FEAR:** “*Everybody gets nervous in front of people. Mine’s just a little bit worse. God hasn’t called me to be a preacher, so I shouldn’t have to do anything that requires me to get in front of people. I repent for making people’s opinion of me the most significant thing in my life.*”

**PORNOGRAPHY:** “*I need affection. If my spouse won’t be affectionate with me, then I have to get it from some where. I repent for exaggerating the role of sex in marriage and basing my contentment upon the warmth and availability of my spouse.*”

**C. What promises does this sin make that it will never be able to keep? What is the payoff you keep hoping for? Where else do you see the pursuit of this payoff in your life?**

We feel foolish after our sin is exposed because we realize that there is no way our sin could deliver what it promised. Yet in the moment we wanted this payoff so badly that we were willing to make the ill-advised gamble. The view of “need” makes it easier to believe sin’s lies. The more essential we believe something is the greater risk we are willing to take to acquire it.

Until we identify what we were after in our sin, the best change we can produce is symptom removal or context avoidance. Identifying what we are pursuing when we sin enables us to be wiser.



**SILENT TREATMENT:** “I was tired of an unfulfilling relationship. I thought if I were cold and distant, *it might force them* to give me attention and bring us closer together. I repent for trying to manipulate my spouse.”

**PREMARITAL SEX:** “I wanted to be loved and know that he wouldn’t leave me. I thought if I gave him what he wanted, *then I could make him* stick around and care about me. I repent for using the good desires God gave to couples to cover my insecurities.”

**OVER SPENDING:** “I knew I couldn’t really afford it, but I thought some new clothes would *make me feel better about myself and forget about how hard things are right now*. I repent for foolishly believing that stuff could satisfy.”

**D. How has this sin made you more selfish? What is untouchable when you are committing this sin?**

Sin always makes us more selfish. This is one of the most consistent principles of human motivation. From the beginning, excessive self-interest has been both the fuel and motor of sin. Genesis 3:4-6 reads, “But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not surely die. For God knows that *when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.*’ So when the woman saw that the tree was *good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise*, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.”

Often we try to portray our sin as being an act of selflessness. Even if you are aware that a sin will benefit someone else and harm you, the sin is still based in selfishness. Why? You believe pleasing this person is worth sinning. You believe pleasing this person will make you happy or give you peace. Pleasing others is still about you.

**ANGER:** “I learned *I could get my way* when I got angry. It became hard not to get angry when I didn’t get my way. Self-control was like having a magic genie and not using it. I repent for looking scornfully at a fruit of the Spirit as weak and ineffective.”

**CHEATING:** “Once I learned to cheat well, I liked being able to use the time I would be studying *for whatever I wanted*. To not cheat meant not only that I had to risk bad grades, but also that I had to give up a lot of *my ‘me time.’* I repent for demanding that whole world accommodate itself to my agenda.”

**POUTING:** “As I pouted, the only thing that ran through my mind was all the bad things anyone had ever *done to me*. Ten minutes of pouting made it seem like *the world owed me everything*. I repent for losing sight of loving God and loving others.”

**E. How has this sin made you more foolish? What mistakes have you made as a result of this sin?**

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” says Proverbs 1:7. Sin takes our eyes off of God and places other things at the center of our priorities. We cannot sin and say that God is the most important thing in our life—at least not at the moment we are sinning. Jesus said, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching (John 14:23).” The absence of this God-ward priority means we are foolishly following idols.

**LYING:** “I knew I couldn’t get away with it. There were too many stories of too many people. Eventually it had to unravel, *but I kept playing the game*. I knew the consequences were mounting and the clock was



running out, but I would not come clean. I repent for foolishly discarding the values of what is most important.”

**EATING DISORDER:** “I knew it was only hurting me, but I wanted to have control of something. *It seemed like I was showing them how strong I was as I kept making myself weaker and weaker.* I repent for demanding control and being blind to its effects on me.”

**LAZINESS:** “There was too much to do to start now. I kept thinking there would be a better time or I would be more motivated later, but *I always do this* with big projects. I should have known better. I repent for not believing that God could accomplish His will through my normal obedience.”

#### **F. Who has this sin hurt or neglected? Who has it isolated or brought into your life?**

Sin blows up like shrapnel. If it were like a rifle bullet and would only take out one person at a time, then our sin, while still devastating, would not wound so many people around us.

Sin also has a selective audience. It brings people into our life and eliminates others. A part of the process of overcoming sin is changing our social circles. Part of the commitment necessary to overcome sin is to value honoring God more than keeping friends.

**SUICIDE:** “I thought no one would care. To be honest, I thought everyone would be better off. I never knew it would create such *fear and guilt for my family.* I keep trying to tell them it’s not their fault and I won’t try it again, but they can’t get over it. I repent for being so self-involved I could not envision the pain of others.”

**GAMBLING:** “I lost our life savings. *I lost our life savings. My wife* worked with me for all these years and now she has nothing because of me. We can’t pay for *our kid’s* college like we planned. Now they’ll carry student loans we wanted them not to have to be burdened with because of me. I repent for being a slave to desire and thrill.”

**AVOIDANCE:** “We never addressed things growing up. If something went wrong or someone got their feelings hurt, we just ignored it and acted like everything was o-kay. I’ve talked with my brothers and sister about it. None of us have good marriages because we don’t have a clue how to handle conflict. I repent for perpetuating a life style that I knew to be ineffective and not actively pursuing God-honoring alternatives.”

#### **G. What or who has this sin deemed “not real” or “unimportant”? What becomes “irrelevant” when you are sinning?**

Sin shapes our priorities. Some things become less relevant that ought to be of primary importance. This was Jesus’ primary point through the early portion of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-37). Jesus kept reminding his early disciples that big sins (murder, adultery, divorce, lying) are not larger than their roots (anger, lust, hard hearts, hiding behind details).

**JEALOUSY:** “I’m *not actually* hurting any body. I just want what they have. I could be stealing or running up my credit card. Instead I just can’t get them and their easy life off my mind. I repent for accusing God of not being fair.”



WORRY: “I know that the Bible says God will meet all my needs, but does anyone really not worry? I mean worry is *not one of the big commandments*. The only one it hurts is me: a little sleep loss and slightly higher blood pressure. I repent for demanding that God allow me to be in control.”

GOSSIP: “It’s not like I am attacking anyone. And some of it is needed information. In the moment of talking, it is *hard to distinguish* necessary from unnecessary information. I don’t want to be a Pharisee about what I say. It would be too socially awkward. I repent for allowing ease to dull my conscience.”

#### **H. What valuable part of your life has this sin put in jeopardy? What dreams has this sin killed or put at risk?**

Sin destroys. The goal of sin’s author is to disrupt everything that is good and right. Sin doesn’t care about you, your family, your career, or your dreams. Well, maybe it does, but the concern that it has is the concern of an arch rival, not an ally.

ADDICTION: “*I lost it all*: my spouse, my kids, my job. I thought I had it under control, or even if it wasn’t under control that I could hide it. Everyone got tired of stories, excuses, and lies. Everything I have worked for the last 23 years is gone and all I’ve got to show for it is guilt and shame. I repent for worshipping the escape from stress.”

LYING: “I realized that without integrity you’ve got nothing. My boss and my clients second guess everything I say. The more I try to clear my name the more skepticism arises. I *had no idea how valuable* my words were. I repent for not accepting the value of work and suffering, but instead opting for the easy way out.”

EATING DISORDER: “I couldn’t function. I got to the point my body was so depleted that I couldn’t do anything with the appearance or control that I was striving for. *My method of achieving beauty and control left me unable to enjoy them*. I repent for risking the future God has for me, for the present that I want.”

#### **I. What ugly things has this sin taught you to view as beautiful? What daydreams or rewards do you indulge in as relief that should be considered torment?**

Sin has alternative definitions to words like good, beautiful, worthy, pleasurable, and excellent. When we sin, it teaches us these new definitions. Our vocabulary may not change, but what we mean by our words does change. Our goal is still to do a “good job,” but what we mean by good is different. We still want to “enjoy life,” but what enjoyment entails is not what it used to be.

BAD BUSINESS DEALS: “I got a kick out of the size of the profit. I knew people were not getting what they really needed, but all I could think about was the bonus. I could honestly walk away from the table and *feel pleased* with what I had achieved. I repent for valuing money more than people.”

REBELLIOUS ATTITUDE: “I liked seeing the fear in other people’s eyes. The sense of power and *intimidation was a rush*. There were times that the issue wasn’t that big of a deal to me; I just wanted the rush of seeing an adult cower. It was like a high. I repent for being ruled by power. I thought I was in control of everything, but control had control of me.”

COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOR: “My hobby was *my reward*; actually it was my only reward. Every good thing that I did, every project that I completed I rewarded myself with my hobby. Other things that I should have



enjoyed—like my family—didn't matter. If I spent time with them, that was another good thing I did that I thought earned me more hobby time. I repent for worshipping the good gifts of God, rather than worshipping the Giver of good gifts."

### **STEP TWO: Share the List**

Answering the previous nine questions will help you see the distortedness of your sin. Chances are that exercise in self-reflection will not eliminate that sin from your life. Sin does not give up that easy. As you answered those questions, some of the answers probably seemed somewhat plausible or at least "not completely dangerous." Even if your conviction is strong and clear at this moment, Satan will find a "more opportune time."

We need other believers in our battle with sin. Hebrews 3:12-13 says, "Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But **exhort one another every day**, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." A significant part of the cure for the deceitfulness of sin is candid, vulnerable discussion of the distorted logic of our hearts.

We believe our own lies most. That is why the second step involves discussing your list with at least one other person. Do not just allow them to read your list, and then avoid eye contact with them for the next month. That is an exercise in shame, and neither honors the intent of Scripture nor grasps the grace of God.

Ask the other person to read this article. That way they will be prepared for the type of material you will be sharing and what you are trying to accomplish. When you give them the article share with them the particular sin(s) you are trying to overcome. After they have read the article, read your responses to each question and allow them to ask you questions. Hearing yourself speak the deception you believed should reinforce how hollow it was to begin with. Answering questions about your logic should bring additional perspectives as to why it was wrong and empty.

This is an exercise in redemption. Your responses should not be in a "I know I was an idiot" tone, but rather "It is good to be free from the bondage of sin; thank you for helping me see more clearly" tone. Again, sin is more than the bad things that we do. It is the deceptive lies we believe and the distorted priorities that we hold, which make our unexamined sinful choices seem logical.

Think of these conversations as planting lamp posts. You are planting lamp posts in your mind in the dark places previously ruled by sin's deception which are now being exposed to the light of God's truth. You are also planting lamp posts in your social network. There are now other people who know that you are actively engaging this sin and who are keenly aware of the nature of the battle. Their presence and insight takes away the darkness of anonymity.

As you share your answers, be sure to include the following logistical information which may not be covered in the nine questions on the sinfulness of sin:

- A. When do you commit this sin, specifically?
- B. What conditions in your surroundings promote this sin?
- C. What steps have you taken to cover up this sin?
- D. Where is this sin most prevalent?





### **STEP THREE: Change Your Tastes**

The goal of putting sin to death is true and lasting joy. The pleasure of sin comes with the bitter aftertastes of guilt, shame, fear, isolation, regret, and other similar emotions or consequences. God did not create us to live like that; Jesus came to deliver us from such an existence. Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10).”

Now that you have assessed the distortions of your own heart that made it seem reasonable to sin and have gained the perspective of another on the foolishness of your sin, you are in a place to be free. At this point it would be good to define freedom. Sin is enslaving. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin (John 8:34).” When caught in repetitive sin, it is easy to forget what true freedom is.

Freedom is living as God intended, both generally and specifically. Generally, in the sense that we are living in increasing obedience to the commands, principles, and priorities of Scripture. Specifically, in the sense that in the absence of this sin, we are no longer inhibited or distracted from pursuing the good works for which God created us (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Ephesians 4:22-24 lays out a three part process of change. It reads:

*[You were taught] to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*

The first two portions of this process—to put off your former manner of life and to be renewed in the spirit of your mind—are addressed in the first two steps of this article. Understanding the errors of logic and priority that lead to the sin allows us to thoroughly remove it. To neglect this step would be like not assessing the size of a cancerous tumor before removing it. Sharing our heart with other concerned believers challenges our thinking further and solidifies our commitment to change.

The job is not yet done. Still we must put on the new self which is described as being like God in our actions (righteousness) and character (holiness). The question that must echo in your mind as you review your answers to the nine questions of step one is: “What does God have to replace this with? Now that I am not wasting my time with this sin, what would God have me devote myself to?”

This changing of tastes involves studying Scripture to see how God created our hearts to be satisfied. As you discuss your answers to the nine questions in step one, you should arrive at some of the most powerfully personal and practical understanding of doctrine and Scripture that you have ever known. Unveiling the emptiness of sin’s lies should create an insatiable appetite and appreciation for God’s truth.

Jesus warned against what it was like to neglect this final part of the process of change. In Matthew 12:43-45 he says:

*“When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation.”*



The goal of removing sin is to enjoy life as God intended—to the fullest. Do not settle for moralist duty. Complete the process. Learn to savor the pleasures for which sin was a counterfeit or a distraction. New tastes sometimes take time. Allow the focus of forsaking your besetting sin to be the pursuit of these greater joys.

Let this final question guide your thinking as you reflect on the appropriate “put on”: what is the pleasure or joy that my sin is trying to counterfeit? How can I become a connoisseur of the pleasure God created me to know, namely Himself?

### QUESTIONS TO ASK OF YOUR SIN

A. How have you seen this sin as your friend? What “benefits” has it provided you? How have these “benefits” become an integral part of your daily routine or handling a particular aspect of life?

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B. What has this sin convinced you that you could not live without? What do you often call a “need” that is in fact a legitimate desire grown to idolatrous proportions and distorted practices?

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I. What ugly things has this sin taught you to view as beautiful? What daydreams or rewards do you indulge in as relief that should be considered torment?

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