

THE FLESH

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Bracketed comments following some scriptures assist the reader in understanding the intended meaning of these verses

We acknowledge the additional works of the various Scholars and Bible Commentaries used in conjunction with the College material. This is not to say that we agree with all their theology, but we certainly value their contribution to the Body of Christ.

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THE FLESH

This teaching on this subject is designed to help us understand the scriptural term “the flesh” - what it means to be led by the flesh and the consequences of doing so, and what it means to be led by the Spirit. We will also look into God’s way of gaining victory over the flesh.

There are various Biblical definitions of the term “the flesh.” The primary ones are as follows:

1. The physical body or mortal flesh is the suitcase in which we live on the earth until we die (Galatians 2:20, Philippians 1:22). This in itself is not sinful, but responds to hunger, tiredness, pain, discomfort etc., with signals which affect the mind to varying degrees, both positively and negatively.

2. The flesh can also be defined in terms of the weakness of man which needs to be continually overridden if man’s potential is to be realized. For example, the flesh has a natural inclination not to want to exercise and not to want to be subject to discipline. In other words, it will attempt to avoid effort and exertion. This weakness of man promotes negative thinking and hinders positive action. This part of our nature is not sinful in itself, but will help lead us in the direction of sin.

3. The flesh also refers to the lower weaker nature of man, the inherited sin nature (also called the fallen Adamic nature) which in Christians is present for the period of their earthly existence (Galatians 5:16-17). The degree to which this negative element in man affects us will depend on the choices we make and the degree to which we allow God’s grace to empower us. At best, we are able to crucify the flesh and walk daily in the power of the Spirit. At worst, we can allow the flesh or sin nature to dominate our lives in many and various areas. In the extreme, this can lead to the forfeiting of one’s salvation (Galatians 5:19-21).

4. The term “the flesh” can also be defined in terms of self-will, being used in the context of people being led by their own senses and desires. This definition of “the flesh” is probably an extension of

that described above in point (2), and is not actually found in scripture. It is used often, however, by Christians who are well acquainted with its meaning! In this context, to operate in the flesh in our Christian walk is to “do things for the Lord in one’s own strength.” This includes undertaking ministry work outside God’s plan or timing. It also includes trying to overcome particular weaknesses by trusting in man’s methods of deliverance, e.g. psychology. (Once we know God’s leading and direction in any area of our lives, however, we then need to apply ourselves wholeheartedly, purposing to bring His plans to fruition by His power.)

The flesh therefore expresses itself as an opponent of God’s will, to different degrees and in various areas. As we flow with the leading of the Holy Spirit, we will cancel out the flesh, not allowing it to have its say or its way.

Jesus warned Peter, James and John in the Garden of Gethsemane:

MATTHEW 26:41 “Watch and pray, that you enter not into temptation (the temptation will be to forsake Jesus): the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

In these words, Jesus is referring to “*the flesh*” in terms of self-will. Man continually wants to “do his own thing” and self-rule, a drive which was exposed in the Garden of Eden. If we self-rule, we cut ourselves off from God, the dependence we were created to have on Him and the power to do His will. This area of self-will becomes a primary battleground for Satan, an area in which he is able to attack us. Indeed the fleshy (self-rule) areas of desire, passion and emotion etc. cannot be trusted in regard to even seemingly “good” things or ideas (intentions, deeds, plans etc.), let alone “evil” things. When Jesus spoke about “*the spirit*” here, He was talking in advance about the regenerated spirit of the Believer (this of course was to become possible only after the Cross), empowered by the Holy Spirit. The self-will of “*the flesh*” opposes the regenerated and Spirit-energized spirit of man, and remains the Christian’s primary problem. To subdue the flesh (our desire to self-rule) we need to yield and receive the empowerment which comes through the graces and energies of God’s Divine Nature. Indeed when the Saint’s spiritual focus is right

and they absorb the graces of the Divine Nature, then will come both the desire to do God's will and the power to do it. This is to rely on God, not ourselves, and this is God's way of walking in righteousness - to His glory. **Amen.**

THE INWARD STRUGGLE WITH THE FLESH

Background Reading: Romans 7:14-25

In Romans Ch.7, Paul gives an account of the conflict between his desire to serve God and the opposing nature of the flesh. (The term "flesh" as we will use it here is referring to the sin nature which can affect the mind of the Believer but is not in the spirit of the Believer. Remember that the spirit is washed clean from all darkness at regeneration). Note that while the inner man delights to do God's will, the flesh always seeks to oppose God's laws.

ROMANS 7:22 For I delight in the Law (Word) of God after the inward man (spirit):

ROMANS 7:23 But I see another Law in my members (the Law of sin and death desiring to use my physical body as an instrument of unrighteousness), warring against the Law of my mind (this is the Law of desire and willpower), and bringing me into captivity to the Law of sin (the Law of sin and death) which is in my members (which will function through my members, and make me a slave to the Law of sin and death; this will happen to the most consecrated Christian if that Christian doesn't constantly exercise faith in Christ and the Cross . . .) (E.S.B.).

Another version reads:

ROMANS 7:23 But I see a different kind of a law in my members, waging war against the law of my mind, making me a prisoner of war to the law of the sinful nature which is in my members. (Wuest)

The greatest problem faced by the Christian will always be concerned with self. Here we find Paul struggling with self-dependence. Paul found himself wanting to do certain things in the flesh but being unable to do the right he desired. Therefore Paul knew the laws of God but found that he by himself could not live in them. Failure always came because of the weakness of man in regard to having the power within himself to live righteously. Ultimately Paul was to learn that only by depending on the Lord, and allowing His grace to work in and through him, could failure be avoided. Only when the human nature of man is energized by God can man (and this included Paul) hope to have the power to live a righteous life.

Paul found this out after failure - as most of us probably do. He then searched for the truth of the matter, as we must, and God did not let him down but gave him the answer. Paul discovered that only in Christ, and through Calvary's truths written on man's heart by the finger of God, can man have his human nature energized by the very Divine Nature that Christ had and has. Only according to this, the prescribed order, is man guaranteed victory, as well as the means of pleasing the Father. Indeed the Cross has provided this grace to all those who are in Christ.

So, as a Believer in his own strength, Paul was unable to overcome the flesh and serve God, as he desired, in the inward man. This internal conflict within Believers is still evident today. As Galatians 5:17 states:

GALATIANS 5:17 For the flesh (with its sinful desires) lusts against the Spirit (opposes the Holy Spirit), and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other (they are never in unity but always in direct opposition): so that you cannot do the things that you would (in your own strength, without the Holy Spirit's empowerment - it is only as we yield to the Holy Spirit and believe for the grace required that the flesh can be subdued).

Another versions reads:

GALATIANS 5:17 For the evil nature constantly has a strong desire to suppress the Spirit, and the Spirit constantly has a strong desire to suppress the evil nature. And these are entrenched in an attitude of mutual opposition to one another so that you may not do the things that you desire to do. (Wuest)

Another writer comments on Galatians 5:16, 17 and 18 as follows:

GALATIANS 5:16 This I say then, Walk (order your behaviour) in the Spirit (we do so by placing our Faith exclusively in Christ and the Cross, through which the Spirit works exclusively [Romans 8:1-2]), and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. (This proves the existence of the sin nature in the Believer. It declares the consciousness of corrupt desires. As stated, the only way to not fulfill the lust of flesh is for our Faith to be placed exclusively in the Cross.) (E.S.B.)

GALATIANS 5:17 For the flesh (in this case, evil desires) lusts against the Spirit (is the opposite of the Holy Spirit), and the Spirit against the flesh (it is the Holy Spirit Alone, who can subdue the flesh; He does so, as we have repeatedly stated, by our Faith being placed exclusively in the Cross): and these are contrary the one to the other (these two can never harmonize; as Paul has stated, the old nature must be cast out, which the Holy Spirit Alone can do): so that you cannot do the things that you would. (Without the Holy Spirit, Who works by the Cross, the Believer cannot live a Holy life.) (E.S.B.)

GALATIANS 5:18 But if you be led of the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (One cannot follow the Spirit and the Law at the same time, but regrettably that's what most modern Christians are attempting to do. Unless one properly understands the Cross as it regards Sanctification, one cannot be properly "led of the Spirit," Who works exclusively within the framework of the Finished Work of Christ.) (E.S.B., underlines added)

So we, in our own strength, are unable to live the way that God desires because of the internal conflict within us. We will always need the Spirit's empowerment if we are to do so.

The fuel for the sin nature is evil intent. This includes the desire of man to self-rule, and even to do righteous works in his own strength (which is nothing but religion). All this gives legal ground for the sin nature to have ascendancy, and the Divine Nature to remain dethroned. Another way to describe this is to say that the Divine Nature is denied spiritual expression in the mind and heart of man and therefore his life.

The fuel for the Divine Nature is righteous intent, which incorporates walking according to God's prescribed order. Under these conditions, the Divine Nature is enthroned and we have access to God's empowerment. What will activate the graces and energies of the Divine Nature of God in the heart and life of the Saint is:

1. The intent of the heart - that being to yield to God and obey Him (acceptance of God's Word and will).
2. Having a proper faith focus (with this comes spiritual understanding - 1 Corinthians 2:12-14).

These two requirements make proper demands on the graces of God afforded to us through the Cross. The Divine Nature will therefore remain dormant in its expression (its supply of spiritual energy) unless these conditions are met.

What takes us over the line that separates light and darkness is the INTENT of our thoughts and us yielding to that intent (at least in the heart, e.g. Matthew 5:28; 12:34).

- concerning sin, it is the desire and then the yielding to that which we are desiring, being against God's will.
- concerning righteousness, it is the desire and then the yielding to that which we have knowledge of, being God's will.

Both these alternative pathways are triggered by the will by which we choose to take the road leading to either position or state (when the opportunity presents itself). Then comes a deeper desire,

to more fully embrace sin's dominion (which is darkness) or the empowerment of righteousness.

Our choice in this matter is clearly expounded by Paul:

ROMANS 6:12 Let not sin (the sin nature) therefore reign (rule) in your mortal body (which in itself is neutral), that you should obey it in the lusts thereof (which are expressed through the mortal body if we yield to the sin nature).

ROMANS 6:13 Neither yield ye your members (the parts of your body) as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin (the sin nature): but yield yourselves unto God, as those who are alive from the dead (and empowered by the Divine Nature), and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God (by His grace).

ROMANS 6:14 For sin (the sin nature) shall not have dominion over you: for you are not under the law (means that if we try to live this life by any type of law, no matter how good that law might be in its own right, we will conclude by the sin nature having dominion over us: E.S.B.), but under grace (only by grace can we have this victory).

Romans Ch.8 tells us that we who are in Christ have been legally set free from the law of sin and death. Therefore we should no longer walk according to the dictates of the flesh (sinful nature), but rather, according to the desires of the Spirit. This is only possible for those who have the Spirit of God dwelling within them.

ROMANS 8:5 For they (this can apply to both saved and unsaved) who are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they who are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit.

ROMANS 8:6 For to be carnally minded is death (either separation from God or, for the Christian, bondage and lack of grace); but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

ROMANS 8:7 *Because the carnal mind is enmity against (in opposition to) God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.*

ROMANS 8:8 *So then they who are in the flesh (saved or unsaved) cannot please God.*

“The words “carnally minded” are to phronēma tēs sarkos (το φρονημα της σαρκος), literally, “the mind of the flesh.” “Flesh” here refers to the evil nature. It is the genitive of possession. The mind is possessed by, thus controlled or dominated by the evil nature, a description of the unsaved person. That person is dead in trespasses and sins, dead in the sense that he is separated from God and His life, for death is separation, and is on his way to a final and everlasting state of death in eternity. The words “spiritually minded” are to phronēma tou pneumatos (το φρονημα του πνευματος), literally, “the mind possessed by the Spirit,” thus a mind controlled or dominated by the Holy Spirit. That person possesses the life that God is, and peace, the Greek word for peace in its verb form meaning “to bind together that which has been separated,” thus, the believing sinner, bound together with God and His life after having been separated by sin.

The reason why the mind dominated by the evil nature represents a state of death in the person so constituted, and results in final death, is that it is at enmity against God. “Subject” is hupotassō (ὑποτάσσω), a military term meaning “to arrange in order under” a commanding general, for instance. Such a mind is not marshalled under the command of God, but of Satan. Consequently, those who are within the sphere of the evil nature, are not able to please God. These are, of course, the unsaved. Denney explains: “The reason why the mind of the flesh terminates so fatally: it is hostility to God, the fountain of life. Alienation from Him is necessarily fatal. It is the flesh which does not (for indeed it cannot) submit itself to God; as the seat of indwelling sin it is in permanent revolt, and those who are in it (a stronger expression, yet substantially identical with those who are after it, verse 5), cannot please God.”

Translation of Romans 8:5-8. For those who are habitually dominated by the flesh, put their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are habitually dominated by the Spirit, put their minds on

the things of the Spirit. For to have the mind dominated by the flesh, is death, but to have the mind dominated by the Spirit, is life and peace; because the mind dominated by the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not marshal itself under the command of the law of God, neither is it able to. Moreover, those who are in the sphere of the flesh are not able to please God."¹

(underlines and scriptural reference added)

It is quite clear, therefore, that the unregenerated man with a mind which is dominated by the sin nature, being hostile to God, is unable to please Him.

It is obvious, however, that the sinful or fallen Adamic nature is also still a reality in Christians' lives, and we are quite able to allow the sin nature to dominate us at a conditional level. When this is the case, we do not come again under the wrath of God, for positionally we have been declared righteous through the Blood of Christ. However we:

1. Open ourselves up to enemy attack when we, as Christians, allow the sin nature to dominate us - for sin gives the enemy legal ground to enter our lives and do whatever harm he can : John 10:10a.

2. Block the blessings of God from flowing into our lives (Deuteronomy 11:26-28). This is a universal principle which still applies today.

So although we are in Christ, and are legally seated in heavenly places, we can, by choice, still yield to the sin nature (Romans 6:11-14). We are told, nevertheless, that we are no longer obliged to live according to the sinful nature. (Remember that the power of sin was broken at the Cross and that this was demonstrated at the Resurrection). Rather, we should serve the One Who has set us free.

THE ONGOING BATTLE PLAN

As we have learned, in this earthly life, we can never eradicate the sin nature from our lives. Although the sin nature has been dealt with legally, during this life we, as Christians, need to continually

deny its expression by not yielding to it. It is quite obvious then that as Believers, we cannot afford to be passive. We need to put this nature to death by denying its expression. To do this we need to recognize whatever fleshly weaknesses we may have (be they problems with anger, resentment, unforgiveness, pride, egotism, etc.), and to know and apply the Word of God to each situation in which we find ourselves responding in an ungodly way. Then as we yield to God, applying His Word (according to His prescribed order of victory, which includes having a proper focus for our faith) and seeking His empowerment, we will gain the victory we seek. This may take time, particularly if we have a persistent weakness, or need to be taught or refreshed in God's Word according to that need. Nevertheless, the victory will eventually come as we put in a concerted and consistent effort against the flesh, by choosing to yield to the Spirit of Truth within us, and refusing to allow the flesh to dominate us. In this way the Divine Nature will enmesh with our human nature and give us the power to live a holy life.

The Word of God gives us this assurance:

ROMANS 8:12 So then, brethren, we are debtors, but not to the flesh - we are not obligated to our carnal nature - to live [a life ruled by the standards set up by the dictates] of the flesh. (Amp.)

ROMANS 8:13 For if you live according to [the dictates of] the flesh you will surely die. But if through the power of the (Holy) Spirit you are habitually putting to death - making extinct, deadening - the [evil] deeds prompted by the body, you shall (really and genuinely) live forever. (Amp.)

COLOSSIANS 3:5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. (N.I.V.)

COLOSSIANS 3:6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. (N.I.V.)

COLOSSIANS 3:7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. (N.I.V.)

COLOSSIANS 3:8 But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy (or coarse) language from your lips. (N.I.V.)

It is not so much that we need to say “No” to sin, but that we need to be continually yielding to the Spirit. In fact the desires of the flesh will not be fulfilled if the Believer walks in the power given by the Spirit.

However, if you do not continue to renew your mind and feed your spirit with the Word of God, your resolve to do what is right will become weakened so that you will choose less of what God desires and more of what the flesh desires. We all need to feed ourselves with the milk and meat of the Word on a daily basis so that we will be equipped to deal with all that comes against us, including fleshly lusts. Without proper nourishment, our tank will be empty and we will fail more often.

As Christians we still need to continually reject the influence of the inherited sin nature that is still attached to us. The only way to avoid yielding to our fleshly desires is to keep walking in the Spirit. And as we have learned, walking in or after the Spirit involves following the leading of the Holy Spirit and allowing God to empower us, through the Divine Nature, to conquer sin - in other words, to deny its expression. We are, in fact, in full dependence upon Him and His Resurrection power, to deny the sin nature’s expression and never to give it a start in the race. Our spirit has been illuminated by His Light, and we receive His empowerment to live in this Light as long as we trust in and rely on Christ and what He has given to us through the Cross. Being fed on and thus built up in God’s Word will help us choose to take this righteous pathway, day by day.

THE BIRTHPLACE OF SIN

Sin begins in the heart of man, so no other person or thing can be blamed. The Word of God says to “*Keep your heart with all*

diligence; for out of it are (come) the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23). Another versions reads:

PROVERBS 4:23 Keep your heart with all vigilance and above all that you guard, for out of it flow the springs of life. (Amp.)

As we have seen in Mark’s Gospel, we find a similar account in Matthew’s Gospel:

MATTHEW 15:18 But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man (making him “unclean”).

MATTHEW 15:19 For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies

What does this mean? It means we cannot blame our problems on the sin nature, the devil, other people or adverse circumstances. Rather the blame lies with ourselves, for sin begins in the heart. We own our hearts and we are responsible for what proceeds from our hearts, whether it be good or bad. From the heart comes intent which, if evil or wrong, is the beginning of sin. For example, Adam sinned even before he ate of the tree because of his intent to do so. While the mind thinks, from the heart comes intent which is to plot one’s course. We must therefore be careful of our thought life and what we meditate on, good or evil, for the heart is the rudder of our very being. The Lord in this light has given good counsel:

PROVERBS 4:20 My son, attend to my words (here Solomon is speaking to his son as well as to you and I, imparting wisdom taught to him by his father, David, wisdom given by the Holy Spirit); incline your ear unto my sayings.

PROVERBS 4:21 Let them not depart from your eyes; keep them in the midst of your heart. (We are admonished here to continue to read the Bible and to

study it daily. As well, its teachings are to embed themselves into our hearts.) (E.S.B.)

Scripture tells us where sin begins in man.

MATTHEW 5:28 But I say unto you, That whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her (with strong desire) has committed adultery with her already in his heart (Jesus here addresses the root cause of the problem which is in the heart).

The man first had to look at the woman before he committed the sin of lust. Conscious intent to lust then brought the thought across the sin line. (To meditate on the thought of lust is to sin. To cast off the thought of lust is to avoid sin). The man in this scripture did not look upon the woman casually, but with intent to lust. As we have learned, this prior intent also constitutes sin, being an evil desire. The intent of the thought is the key to whether we sin or not, for sin proceeds from intent to sin. In regard to the Believer, at the stage before sin, the sin nature is not at work promoting the sin. In the Believer, the sin nature, though present, is dormant until he or she steps over the line. This differs from the non believer who is dominated at all times by the sin nature.

Much of the time it is only willpower which keeps the non believer from committing sin. Mostly the thought of the cost or the loss if he commits the sin that knocks at his door stops him from doing it. The picture of the non believer is that they are forever weighing up the net return. This is their character as a sinner - what's in it for themselves!

At times they yield to their conscience for moral direction, but it is so they can feel good about themselves - it is not to please God. We as Christians were once caught in this cycle, for we all were born in a state of sin, within us residing a sin nature that made us sinners by nature! Now the order should be reversed. Because we now have access to the power to do so, and because we do not have to be dominated by the sin nature, we should be living to please the Father, not self.

Once the Believer steps over the threshold (the line that makes the thought sin), then and only then do they bring the sin nature into

action. Once the sin nature is enthroned and brought to life, this strengthens the desire to sin and gives power to sin, thereby bringing us into bondage to that sin. The sin nature will promote, push, bring under compulsion and flood our minds with evil desire at every given opportunity. One can apply this to all sin. Some sin may not be so obvious or so controlling as other sin. However all in all, sin is sin, and the sin nature is at work promoting and expressing itself through yielded Christian vessels who have first kick-started the process!

The more we yield ourselves to the Holy Spirit and allow Him to govern our lives, the easier it will become to override the desires of our fleshly nature and live in harmony with God's Word.

To briefly sum it up we could say:

ROMANS 7:24 O wretched man that I am! (Paul was failing because he was trying to gain victory over the flesh outside of God's prescribed order) who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

ROMANS 7:25 I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord (that He will - the answer is to yield to God and believe for His grace). So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God (the will is the trigger, the power to gain victory comes from the Holy Spirit via the Cross); but with the flesh the law of sin (if we try to serve God through the self-effort of the flesh, we will only serve the law of sin).

BEING LED BY THE FLESH

Apart from the flesh being the sin nature and we as Christians being led by it if we yield to it, the saying "Being led by the flesh" can also mean allowing circumstances, senses and/or emotions to control and govern our actions and attitudes. While such actions may seem at times both noble and altruistic, being led by the flesh is contrary to God's Word - for if we are being led by the flesh, we are not being led by the Spirit. If we trust in our own thinking and our own plans and schemes, this too becomes fleshly - it is also called "operating in one's own strength."

As Proverbs 3:5 and 6 tells us:

PROVERBS 3:5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart; and lean not unto your own understanding (very limited insight!)

PROVERBS 3:6 In all your ways acknowledge Him (the omniscient One), and He shall direct your paths (and make them straight).

The opposite of this would be:

1. Not to acknowledge God.
2. Therefore not to be directed by Him.
3. Therefore to have to trust in our own emotions, thought processes and understanding.

However, we are told not to rely on our own understanding or strength but to wait on the Lord.

ISAIAH 40:31 But they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength (for the Lord gives power and strength to the faint); they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. (The word “wait,” in the Hebrew, is “qavah,” and means “to bind together by twisting.” The sense is that if we really “wait upon the Lord,” we will be constantly seeking His face and, being bound together with Him, we will be desirous of carrying out His will: E.S.B.)

Acts Ch.16 tells us that Paul would have gone into Asia prematurely, according to his own thoughts and desires. His intent was admirable but he was being led by the flesh, not the Spirit, to do so, even though he was desiring to serve God and win souls. Fortunately Paul was able to discern the leading of the Spirit, and instead of going into Asia, he entered the region of Macedonia where

he experienced great success. If he had gone into Asia he would have done so in his own strength, for this was not of the Lord's leading.

This is not evil in itself, but if our desires, dreams and plans are not taken to the Lord in prayer and we do not also wait upon the Lord to direct us in these areas, then we are in self-rule, and the Lord is shut out. It is in this dangerous position that the sin nature will roar back into life, promoting sin against God and also giving the power to carry it out.

A by-product of this is that in many areas such people become unteachable because of their bias and desire to self-rule.

The empowerment to fulfill their goals comes from self and as a consequence God is shut out, however much in ignorance they may be. Can we see what this will lead to? In this situation the sin nature enthrones itself and promotes such darkness as deception, pride and unteachability. It must be us in Christ, not only positionally but experientially, if we are to have the victory by which we please the Father through His grace at work in us. And this means we must rely on the Lord and depend on Him for all we need - direction, correction, empowerment etc. This is the way we were created to function.

The moment we resort to being led by anything other than the principles contained in God's Word and personal direction from the Spirit of God, we will be led by the flesh. We cannot afford to do this, for our emotions and senses, etc., cannot be relied upon, this being the realm in which our enemy readily operates. Satan will try to use people's senses and emotions (e.g. what feels good or right or comfortable) to lead them away from the path that God desires them to take. Sometimes this false path may seem right, with natural circumstances confirming it. Taking a wrong path, however, will have negative consequences. For this reason we must be careful of the direction in which circumstances and emotions lead us.

When people resort to being led by the flesh, they will eventually experience frustration and/or a sense of failure and inadequacy - for being led by the flesh, otherwise known as our thinking, can never match the wisdom and truth of God.

There are some Christians however, who, because of their arrogance, religious ideas or legalism, do not even realize they are in bondage to the flesh. These people can sometimes be the hardest to help, for they will not admit that they have problems in their lives.

Because of this, they remain in deception, thinking they are doing well when in fact the opposite is evident. In these situations, people need to be ruthlessly honest with themselves. To receive help they need to:

1. Acknowledge they have a problem (are in bondage). Only the Holy Spirit - as He illuminates the Word of God (giving knowledge of His standards of truth and wisdom) - can reveal this deception (Hebrews 4:12).

2. Repent and ask God for help, seeking His Word for the answer. (This may be found with the aid of a mature Christian.) (Proverbs 3:6; Psalm 66:18; Matthew 7:7- 8).

3. Act in faith on the direction God gives (Hebrews 11:6; James 1:22-25).

To be overcomers, we must yield to God which will bring about humility, meekness and lowliness of heart (James 4:6-7; 1 Peter 5:6-7). This in turn will allow God to empower us with His strength to defeat whatever evil is before us. If we try to overcome evil (pride, deception, self-righteousness, etc.) in our own strength, we will always fail.

In order to gain the strength needed to overcome, we must become weak in our own strength by allowing ourselves to be humbled, therefore relying solely on God.

1 PETER 5:6 Permit yourselves therefore to be humbled under the mighty hand of God, in order that you He may exalt in an appropriate season (Wuest).

Humility comes when we, in ourselves, acknowledge that we have nothing with which to fight the fight, and that only in Christ can we be empowered by the Spirit of Grace to be more than overcomers.

People in this strong position of humility of the heart will no longer focus on themselves but rather, through the empowerment of the Divine Nature, will desire to do that which God wills. With this desire then comes the strength needed to carry out God's will, for the

Lord empowers such people to do so. People in this position will have changed from being self-centred to being God-centred, from being a failure to being a success. Then Christ's yoke is easy and His burden is light. We only experience this reality in our lives, however, when we are empowered by the Spirit of God through a heart of humility - which causes us to have a total dependence on God in all areas of our life.

MIXING CHRISTIANITY WITH RELIGION

Background Reading: Colossians 2:16-23

Many confuse the terms “religion” and “Christianity,” not realizing there is a vast difference in the meanings of these words. Christianity is having a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Religion is conforming to a man-made (demonically inspired) system of ethics or a set of traditions which are relied upon to produce the goal of pleasing God. Of course, as the Bible states, this goal can never be achieved in this way.

When people mix Christianity with any form of religion, they are saying that the finished work of Christ is insufficient to achieve anything in God. The Bible tells us clearly, however, that there is nothing to be added to the finished work of Christ - it is complete in itself. Therefore we find the warning:

COLOSSIANS 2:8 Beware lest any man spoil you (take you captive) through philosophy and vain deceit (empty and hollow ideas and philosophies), after the tradition of men (man-made, not from God), after the rudiments (basic principals) of the world, and not after Christ.

Obeying the commandments of men will neither please God nor move Him. And we certainly cannot force God's hand by saying certain prayers, or doing things in a certain way. All our efforts, however noble they may seem, will not move God. He can only be moved by us having faith in His Word. Then by allowing God's grace to work through us, we can have victory over all the trials of life.

Beware therefore of a religious attitude, for it is one of Satan's greatest weapons in the Body of Christ. Religious people are often self-righteous and don't even consider a need for repentance because they are conforming to a set of religious traditions, usually based on denominational loyalty. The root of this religious attitude is pride. This was Satan's downfall, man's downfall, and today constitutes the downfall of many Christians - in relation to living a victorious life. When they turn their faith into a set of formulas, even Pentecostals become guilty of having religious attitudes. Their faith is then turned into a religion. For instance, God must bless them in the way they desire, if they conform to certain prosperity principles! This is to fail to recognize the sovereignty of God - Who alone has foreknowledge, understanding our weaknesses and strengths, and what our tomorrows hold. He alone knows what is best for each Christian, and if a particular "blessing" may become a stumbling block in time. Therefore we need to trust in our Maker and rely on Him rather than trying to keep a tight hold on the steering wheel of our life.

Some think they impress God by raising their hands and speaking in tongues in so-called praise and worship. But God sees their lives and their hearts, the way they live and the way they treat their fellow man. And often, sadly, He is not pleased.

God desires repentance from all sin, including the sin of self-righteousness. Even though some Christians may operate in this sin in ignorance, God still desires repentance and obedience to His Word rather than holding fast to the doctrines of men (Mark 7:7,9,13).

So when confessing your sins according to 1 John 1:9, you may need to repent of the sin of your own self-righteous efforts to try to gain victory in your life or to please God.

The fact remains that until we join our Lord in heaven, we will always be involved in spiritual warfare. The greatest conflict can be within ourselves as the desires of the sinful nature, when given a voice, fight against our desire to serve God. The basis of this conflict will always be self - self-will, self-desire, self-reliance, self-rule, self-gain, etc. Indeed the greatest source of one's problems in the Christian walk is usually reflected in one's mirror. And the real internal battle can be fiercer, at times, than any external struggle.

God, knowing us better than ourselves and knowing the future, may sometimes reveal to us something that is very hard to digest. For example, let us consider the story of the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22. The rich young ruler came to Jesus, asking how he could

serve God better. The direction from Jesus to sell all that he had and give it to the poor was a price beyond that which he was prepared to pay. And *“he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions”* (Matthew 19:22). Had he taken heed of the call, he may have become a mighty man of God in the Kingdom, for often only those called to positions of authority within the church are required to lay everything down to this extent. The internal struggle was obviously fierce but this particular man lost the battle with the flesh, and so whatever opportunity would have become his through walking in the Lord’s perfect will for his life. God knows the future, and had the rich young ruler decided to trust Him with his future, who knows what the result may have been!

As we perceive that there is a war going on within us, we need to ask “What does God want and how does He want me to respond?” He may tell us to take those evil desires and nail them to the Cross. He may tell us to surrender our wants and desires so that we can do His will, not the will of self. Whatever the context, armed with the knowledge of God’s will plus a previous decision to serve Him, not in our own strength but in the Holy Spirit, we can allow God’s empowerment to strengthen us so that we can then go forward in the right direction.

So let us always be watchful (no matter how mature we think we are in Christ), and not slow to ask for help from mature Christians when it is needed. Let us not allow pride or embarrassment to rob us of our rightful victory over the flesh.

Indeed it is true that we all, from babes in Christ to mature Christians, need the fellowship of other Christians - not to pull one another down but to edify one another in the faith. This is the fellowship we should have with each other, for even mature Christians need the help, from time to time, of other Christians (Hebrews 10:25). We cannot function effectively as islands because we are not equipped to handle isolation. Not only do we have to contend with the sin nature, the devil knows our weaknesses only too well and will concentrate his forces on those areas of our lives which he can most readily attack and which are most vulnerable. Thus our need is always to remain in fellowship with other Christians, and together we can help direct and pray for one another when necessary. Remember the instruction of God’s Word - that there is safety in a multitude of Godly counsellors:

PROVERBS 11:14 Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors (giving direction based on the Word of God) there is safety.

CONCLUSION

The world does not have a sin problem, for Christ's finished work on Calvary dealt with the sin of the world once and for all. The world does, however, have a "receiving" problem - for receiving God's grace does seem to be a stumbling block for most people. Many acknowledge sin and try to stop sinning in their own strength. But this is where they finish, for this recipe for disaster will cause them to fail, time and time again.

As we have learned, it is not to be denied that even mature faith-filled Christians will continue, to some extent, to have a battle with the flesh (the sin nature). But if we allow ourselves to be led and empowered by the Spirit of God, acknowledging our dependence upon Him, the flesh will not control us, and we will gain the victory we seek. If we do not allow the Spirit of God to lead and empower us, however, we will find ourselves yielding to the desires of the flesh - for our willpower will be no match for the dictates of the sin nature or our enemy the devil.

Our willpower can achieve things in the natural at times, but it will not cause a Godly character to be developed. This can only happen through God's grace, as we flow in His ways and His will for our lives, in that grace.

For the Believer, good works which will not be rewarded by God are those that are motivated by self-desire alone, and for which no Divine approval has been obtained. For example, when confronted by an opportunity to sin because of fleshly dictates, we can, by willpower, choose not to sin - and this is good. The alternative is to come to a position where we thank God in faith for the grace of the Divine Nature that then energizes us to have both the holy desire and power to say "Yes" to God's will. This sin then no longer has any sway or power in the Believer's life. But the added blessing of Calvary for that day is that the Believer will flow in this grace so that his character changes a little. In other words, his potential in this area will be realized, and he will grow a little in maturity. Note that the young or immature Christian should be very

Careful in regard to placing himself in situations where sin is given an opportunity to overcome him, e.g. attending heathen parties where alcohol flows freely, visiting pubs, watching sensual movies, etc. The mature Christian will know better than to do this.

PROVERBS 13:19 The desire accomplished (by righteous living) is sweet to the soul: but it is abomination to fools to depart from evil.

PROVERBS 13:20 He who walks with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:33 Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners (should have been translated, "evil occasions corrupt excellent morals": E.S.B.).

The only time we can truly succeed in God is when we choose by our will to do it "God's way." Our will is then the trigger which leads us to the Spirit's empowerment - if our spiritual focus is right. The very moment we rely on willpower to overcome or to do God's will, we will be defeated in some way. For example, we could develop a false sense of control or mastery of our own lives. Through being able to succeed in a small area, we could gain self-confidence which then causes us to be defeated in a tough situation - for there is no real power in self to overcome. When we are in this position of self-reliance, God is unable to show us our enemy or the true path to victory. The devil knows this, God knows it, and we should also know it. However, THERE IS NO DEVIL, EMOTION OR CIRCUMSTANCE THAT CAN STOP US FROM SAYING "YES" TO GOD IF WE CHOOSE TO DO SO. Anyone, no matter how oppressed by circumstances, emotions or the enemy, will always have enough willpower to say "Yes" to the help Jesus offers (1 Corinthians 10:13).

When God's saving presence comes to surround our spirit and death's presence leaves, the nature of God is potentially free to operate in our lives. As we know, mankind was originally created with a Divine connection to God's Divine Nature. Through Adam's sin, man lost this connection and hence access to the graces and energies of this nature. Thus before regeneration, people live

according to the fallen Adamic nature, and are unable to live the way God desires them to. But through regeneration, the Cross has made the way for us to live according to God's desire, for we are now partakers once again of His Divine Nature.

All that we need do is follow the sign posts in the Bible, our "Manual of Life." This simply means living according to true Christian priorities, putting God first, our fellow man second and ourselves last. When we are willing to do this and follow God's directions, we will be empowered to carry out our Master's will. Living according to these true Christian priorities constitutes true love.

Within the context of a surrendered life comes, by God's grace, love, humility, faith and obedience. These are the keys which open the door to the empowerment which enables us to overcome and be victorious in all that we undertake. So let us do as Paul instructed by the Spirit of God:

EPHESIANS 6:12 For we wrestle (fight) not against flesh and blood (man), but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Satan and his forces of evil).

EPHESIANS 6:13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God (spiritual armour needed for the fight). Then when the evil day (of danger or trouble) comes, you will be able to resist the enemy whenever he attacks, and after fighting to the end, you will still hold your ground.

EPHESIANS 6:14 Therefore stand (in faith), having your loins (waist) girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness (be operating in faith motivated by love);

EPHESIANS 6:15 And your feet shod (well established) with the preparation of the Gospel of peace (by living in it);

EPHESIANS 6:16 *In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows (of temptation and persecution) of the evil one.*

EPHESIANS 6:17 *And take the helmet of salvation (comes from renewing the mind), and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God:*

EPHESIANS 6:18 *Praying always (praying with persistence) with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit (being Spirit-led), and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication (making requests) for all Saints;*

May you have the victory in Christ. Amen!

For further information or teaching material to help you grow in the Christian faith, please visit:

CROSSROADS INTERNATIONAL
FULL GOSPEL MINISTRIES
crossroadsministries.org.au

NOTES

NOTES

- 1 Wuest, K. S., Word Studies From The Greek New Testament, Romans 8:5-8.

*"We have a vision
to see people living
in abundant life
by the power of God
through Jesus Christ"*



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