

The Great Enemy Within

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What is the greatest enemy of a Christian's holiness? Is it the allurements of the world or the attacks of Satan? No. It is neither of these things. The greatest enemy of a believer's sanctification is the old sin nature that remains in Christians. In the New Testament when the subject of sanctification is considered there usually is a discussion of the remaining power of indwelling sin. A variety of terms are used to describe this inner enemy: the flesh (Gal. 5:17), the body of death (Rom. 7:24), the law of sin (Rom. 7:23) or of sin and death (Rom. 8:2), sin living in me (Rom. 7:17), and the old man (Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22).

God wants believers to understand the nature of the struggle that every Christian must undertake. The Bible says that we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). Therefore, we should take special note of the ever-present enemy that we find in ourselves. As a military officer gathers intelligence regarding his enemy and studies it and restudies it with diligence and care, every believer should learn everything that God says about the evils of our own hearts. The Puritan John Owen gave this warning:

Awake, therefore, all of you in whose hearts is any thing of the ways of God! Your enemy is not only *upon* you, as on Samson of old, but is *in* you also. He is at work, by all ways of force and craft, as we shall see. Would you not dishonor God and his gospel; would you not scandalize the saints and ways of God; would you not wound your consciences and endanger your souls; would you not grieve the good and holy Spirit of God, the author of your comforts; would you keep your garments undefiled, and escape the woeful temptations and pollutions of the days wherein we live; would you be preserved from the number of the apostates in these latter days;--awake to the consideration of this cursed enemy, which is the spring off all these and innumerable other evils, as also of the ruin of all the souls that perish in this world!¹

There are many terms used in the Bible to describe the problem of indwelling sin. What follows is a brief examination of each of these expressions. The more that one learns about the remaining power of sin in believers the more diligent one ought to be in the mortification of the flesh.

(1) A common scriptural term used to describe the corruption and pollution of human nature is the word flesh (*sarx*). This word is used in many different ways in the Bible.² The best method for

¹ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust 1967 [1850-53]), 6:162-163.

² There are at least nine different uses of the term flesh in the New Testament (1) One use of flesh is basically synonymous with the term "mankind." "All flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Lu. 3:6; Is. 40:5). "All flesh is as grass" (1 Pet. 1:24; Is. 40:6). "I will pour out my Spirit on all Flesh" (Ac. 2:17). (2) Sometimes flesh is used in the sense of person. "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:20). "No flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Cor. 1:29). (3) Flesh is used to describe the material flesh. "All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beast and other of fish, and another of birds" (1 Cor. 15:39). "That you may eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and of those who sit on them" ... (Rev. 19:18). (4) The term flesh is used to mean the body. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God" (Gal. 2:20). Flesh can refer to the human body as weak and mortal. "For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of

determining the meaning of flesh is to note the immediate context in which it is used and also to have a general understanding of its different uses in Scripture. "There has been much discussion concerning the meaning of this term 'the flesh'. Conflicting schools of theology have come into being simply because of different interpretations of this expression. It is therefore one of those important terms about which we must be quite clear."³ When the apostle Paul uses the term flesh in a negative sense with regard to believers he is describing the remaining depravity and corruption of the believer's human nature. "For you brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.... I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things you wish" (Gal. 5: 13, 16-17).

In order to properly understand this term (i.e. flesh) one must understand the effect of the fall upon man and the effect of regeneration upon fallen man. When Adam sinned the guilt of his sin passed unto all by imputation and the pollution (innate hereditary moral depravity) passed to all naturally born of Adam's seed. The fall has rendered man totally depraved (cf. Gen. 8:21; Ps. 51:5; 58:3; Jn. 3:6; Eph. 2:34); from birth man's heart is morally corrupt (cf. Matt. 15: 19). The word "heart" in Scripture represents every aspect of man's nature, including the intellect, will, and emotions. As a foul, poisonous spring pollutes the whole stream this inherent corruption extends to every part of man's nature. Therefore, man's whole nature is in rebellion against God (cf. Gen. 6:5). Unregenerate men are wholly under the dominion of sin.⁴ They are slaves to sin and Satan and swim *with delight* in the stream of iniquity. Paul says that "those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8). The apostle is not speaking merely about some of the baser lusts that are part of the unregenerate nature but of the *whole* state of the unregenerate nature. The flesh is the root cause of all sinful thoughts, words and deeds. Jesus said, "Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (Matt. 15:19). "The 'flesh' is the very *nature* of man as corrupted by the fall of Adam, and propagated from him to us in that corrupt state

Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:11). (5) In Philippians Paul used the word flesh to describe his descent from the Hebrews and the works he looked to for salvation. "Though I also might have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel..." (Phil. 3:4-5). (6) The word flesh is used in a unique sense to describe Christ's human nature. "For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:4). Christ assumed a human nature subject to infirmities and susceptible to pain, sorrow and death. But, He was totally without sin and did *not* have a sinful nature (cf. Heb. 4:15). (7) The term flesh is used to describe the self-effort of the flesh in keeping the law as a means of salvation. "Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh" (Gal. 3:3)? "The two principles, Spirit---faith and flesh works, are mutually exclusive" (Ronald Y. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 134). (8) In Romans 8:8 Paul uses the term flesh to denote the moral corruption of the unregenerate carnal mind; that is, the unregenerated sinful nature of unbelievers. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says of Rom. 8:8 "We can say, then that to be 'in the flesh' is to be unregenerate. It is the natural state of man in sin, a state in which sin has dominion over him. It means that the evil principle of sin is controlling the whole of his life. It means that he has a corrupt nature—man unregenerate in sin under the dominion of sin—and is polluted at the center of his being" (*Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 7:1-8.4* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973], 69.) (9) Flesh also denotes the remaining corruption in believers (cf. Gal. 5:17).

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 7.1-8.4* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 69.

⁴ The doctrine of total depravity does *not* mean that man is as wicked as he could be. This inward depravity makes all unregenerate men hostile to God, spiritual truth and in love with sin and self. Unregenerate men may act very religiously and outwardly good, but these actions do not flow from a true love of God and His glory; they flow from selfish, evil motives (cf. Heb. 11:6; Pr. 21:4).

by natural generation.”⁵ Thomas Boston writes, “The sin of our nature is, of all sins, the most fixed and abiding. Sinful actions, though the guilt and stain of them may remain, yet in themselves pass away. The drunkard is not always at his cups, nor the unclean person always acting in lewdness: but the corruption of nature is an abiding sin; it remains with men in its full power, by night and by day; at all times fixed, as with bands of iron or brass...”⁶

In order to understand how the term “flesh” applies to believers one must briefly consider what regeneration does and does not do to the human nature. Regeneration is a radical, all-pervasive change in man's heart that affects the whole human nature. Although regeneration affects the whole nature of man (i.e., the heart), it does not render man sinless or perfect. The Holy Spirit does not totally eradicate the sinful human nature in regeneration. If He did then sanctification would merely involve eliminating sinful habits. One then could reasonably expect to encounter believers who have achieved sinless perfection in this life. The Holy Spirit in regeneration infuses the principle of life into the corrupt nature. This new spiritual life is like leaven which when introduced gradually diffuses its influence throughout the whole mass. Regeneration is a once and for all act of God in which the principle of holiness is communicated to the elect sinner. Man is renewed but not perfectly renewed. “As an infant has all the parts of a man, but none of them come to a perfect growth; so regeneration brings a perfection of parts, to be brought forward in the gradual advances of sanctification.”⁷ Regeneration is the starting point while sanctification is a life long struggle. “That spiritual growth which is so essential lies in progressive sanctification, wherein all the faculties of the soul are more and more brought under the purifying and regulating influence of the principle of holiness which is implanted in the new birth.”⁸ Although believers are justified and definitively sanctified by Christ, God, according to the pleasure of His own will, has decided not to render man's nature perfect in regeneration. Therefore, Christians must engage in warfare with the flesh their entire lives.

The term “flesh” has been abused throughout church history by people who import their own presuppositions into the term, or who simply misinterpret its use in Scripture. There are a number of popular misconceptions regarding “the flesh”. One view is that the term “flesh” (when used as that which is opposed to the Spirit) represents the material aspect of man. This view is based on Greek and eastern philosophy which says that man's spirit is good but the materialistic aspect of man is intrinsically evil and degrading. In the early church there arose the problem of Gnosticism. Gnostics held to “the essential separation of matter and spirit, matter being intrinsically evil and the source from which all evil has arisen”⁹ This heretical view of the flesh led to a denial that Jesus Christ had a real physical body. It also led to asceticism and for many antinomianism. Many Gnostics reasoned that since the flesh is intrinsically evil then one could indulge it with relish without harming the spirit. Another fallacious view of “flesh” comes from the philosopher Manes (died A. D. 270). “He taught that sin is inherent in *matter*, in the flesh, in all that is tangible and visible. ‘The soul,’ he says, ‘is your friend, but the body your enemy...’ Manes taught that as an inherent and inseparable power sin dwells in the blood and muscles, and is transmitted by them.”¹⁰ Manes’ view of the flesh led him

⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification* (Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, 1975), 47.

⁶ Thomas Boston, *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, no date), 60.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Arthur W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification*, 89-90.

⁹ A. M. Renwick, gen ed., Geoffrey W. Bromley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:486.

¹⁰ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 254.

to prescribe special dietary regimes (usually involving the eating of herbs) to counteract the power of the sinful flesh. There also arose neo-Platonism. Many professing Christians following this philosophy regarded the material element of man as base, as on a lower scale of being than the spirit. This concept of flesh led many people into asceticism and all sorts of bizarre practices such as living on poles.

The view that the material aspect of man is intrinsically evil is thoroughly unscriptural. The Bible says that after God created Adam, He "saw everything that He had made and indeed it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). Also, Jesus was born with a real (flesh, bones and blood) human body. Yet He was ethically perfect (Jn. 8:46; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15). Furthermore, the salvation that Christ achieved for His people involves the whole man both body and soul (1 Cor. 15:12 ff.). Salvation is never presented in Scripture as liberation of the spirit from the material body. Christians should never succumb to the idea that the flesh refers only to the human body. In Scripture it refers to the whole human nature. "Flesh in this sense refers more directly to the soul than to the body. The works of the flesh are twofold: one class, touching the body, are the sins related to fornication and lust; the other, touching the soul, consists of sins connected with pride, envy, and hatred."¹¹

Another erroneous view which is rooted in secular humanistic mythology states that the flesh represents the lower animal nature in man. That is, man because of his evolutionary past has certain animalistic instincts built into his genetic code. According to proponents of this view man must use his newly evolved intellect to overcome these animalistic impulses, these predatory, animalistic passions. If one watches nature programming on public television one will be told that the present sexual practices of men (e.g. adultery, promiscuity, etc.) are the inner remnants of the sexual practices inherited from ancient "ape-men". The humanists and theological liberals who hold to this view have rejected the clear teaching of the word of God and replaced it with the unfounded fantasies of evolutionary theorists.

A view that is far better than those discussed above yet not totally biblical is the idea that flesh represents habitual sin patterns acquired through years of sinful behavior. This view says that flesh refers to the human body of a Christian that has been habituated to do evil. This view appears to be that of Christian counselor Jay. E. Adams. He writes,

Unfortunately, the translators of the NIV had a proclivity for settling exegetical questions in their translations, thereby becoming interpreters rather than translators. Among the most serious blunders resulting from this practice was the decision to translate the Greek word *sarx* ("flesh") by the theologically prejudicial phrase, "sinful nature." This is unfortunate, I say, because this obvious interpretive bias is *wrong*. The specialized use of the word flesh refers neither to man's sinful *nature* (i.e., the corrupt nature with which he was born) nor to the sinful *self* (or personality) that he developed (as some others think), but the sinful *body* (as Paul calls it in Rom. 6:6). When Paul speaks of the body as sinful, he does not conceive of the body as originally created by God as sinful (as if he were a Gnostic), but rather of the body plunged into sinful practices and habits as result of Adam's fall. There is no ultimate mind/body (flesh) dualism here, but only a tension in believers occasioned by the regeneration of the inner man and the indwelling of the Spirit in a body habituated to do evil. This leads to an inner/outer struggle. This activates the inner man, who helps the body to put off sinful patterns and to put on new biblical responses. Bodily members are to be yielded less and less to sin and more and more to God (Rom. 6:13, 16, 19).¹²

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jay E. Adams, *More Than Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979), 160, footnote 1.

Although Jay E. Adams' contribution to Biblical counseling has been unsurpassed, his view of the flesh does have its problems. Adams wants to avoid an "ultimate mind/body dualism" which is commendable; but, what does he mean when he speaks of the inner man being regenerated and having to deal with a body habituated with sin? Does this mean that man's soul or spirit is renewed and then must deal with a sinful body (flesh)? Apparently Adams has taken an interpretation of body (*soma*) from Romans 6:6 and used it to interpret the term flesh (*sarx*) in other sections of Scripture.

Although it is true that Christians must struggle against habitual sin patterns Adams' understanding of the term flesh is too narrow. Adams' interpretation of "the body of sin" in Romans 6:6 is also probably too restrictive. Charles Hodge writes,

1. Some say it means the sinful body, that is, the body which is the seat and source of sin. But it is not the doctrine of the Bible, that sin has its source in matter; it is spiritual in its nature and origin. The body is not its source, but its instrument and slave. Moreover, the design of Christ's death is never said to be to destroy the body. 2. Others say that *soma* means the physical body, not as the source, but as the appurtenance of sin, as belonging to it, and ruled by it. But this is subject in part to the same objection.¹³

As Cranfield observes, "Others have taken the phrase to mean the body i.e., the material physical body, as controlled by sin. But this is too narrow an interpretation in view of other passages where *soma* is used and of Paul's understanding of man generally. The phrase denotes rather the whole man as controlled by sin."¹⁴ James Fraser concurs, "Plainly, as the expression in the preceding clause, the *old man* is figurative, so is this other, the *body of sin*, and doth not mean the human body, but that whole system of corrupt principles, propensities, lusts, and passions, which have since the fall possessed man's nature, and is coextended and commensurate to all the human powers and faculties."¹⁵

Jay E. Adams' understanding of the flesh is a departure from the classical Reformed understanding of the term. The Bible teaches that all sinful lusts, affections, passions and appetites have their seat and root in the human heart. This obviously includes the soul or spirit of man. There is no question that the sinful body with its evil habits and appetites has an influence over the mind but is it not the mind which instructs the body to sin? And are there not many sins that have nothing to do with the body such as pride, hatred, malice, envy and deceit? When the apostle Paul lists the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21 does he not list a number of sins that have little to do with the body such as: "hatred, contentions, jealousies...dissentions, heresies, and envy"? Hormones in the body may strengthen hatred but they do not cause it. That occurs in the mind. Paul writing to Christians recognizes that both the flesh (i.e. the physical body) and the spirit are polluted. "Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1b). Furthermore, if sinful habits had their root solely in the body would not the souls of men cast into hell be more pure than believers' souls on earth? The souls of the wicked are completely

¹³ Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975 [1835]), 197-198.

¹⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 1:309.

¹⁵ James Fraser, *A Treatise on Sanctification* (Audubon, NJ: Old Path Pub., 1992 [1774, 1897]), 61. That the term flesh denotes the "whole nature as considered corrupt" is the standard Protestant understanding of the term can be observed in the following theologians and commentators: William Perkins, *Commentary on Galatians*, 352; John Calvin, *Galatians*, 21:162-163; Martin Luther, *Galatians*, 331; Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, 66-67; Gordon Clark, *Ephesians*, 62; John Edie, *Galatians*, 401; William Hendrikson, *Galatians*, 401; Ronald Y. K. Fung, *Galatians*, 244, etc.

separated from their evil bodies at death yet in hell their evil lusts, hatreds and so forth remain. It is true that Christians must struggle against sinful habits which become second nature to the body. But, the corruption that believers must deal with is much more extensive than habitual sin patterns or bodily appetites. Corruption still remains in the hearts of believers. If this was not true one could expect to encounter sinless Christians. John wrote, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 Jn. 1: 8).

Since the pollution of sin extends to the whole man, sanctification affects the whole man both body and spirit. "This follows from the nature of the case, because sanctification takes place in the inner life of man, in the heart, and this cannot be changed without changing the whole organism of man. If the inner man is changed, there is bound to be change also in the periphery of life. Moreover, Scripture clearly and explicitly teaches that it affects both body and soul, I Thess. 5; 23; II Cor. 5: 17; Rom. 6:15, 20. The body comes into consideration here as the organ or instrument of the sinful soul, through which the sinful inclinations and habits and passions express themselves"¹⁶

(2) One can learn more about the flesh by studying other terms which describe its nature. When Paul discusses the remaining power of indwelling sin in Christians he calls it "a law." "I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good" (Rom. 7:21). Paul refers to the inward, indwelling principle or tendency towards sin as "a law." Although Christ has achieved definitive sanctification for believers and has greatly weakened, impaired and mortified this inward condition it, still has enough force behind it to cause alarm and self loathing for the great apostle himself. All Christians must contend against this law. "Whoever contends against it shall know and find that it is present with them, that it is powerful in them."¹⁷ The unbeliever swims downstream in the pollution of sin. Being unregenerate he goes with the flow. He is totally insensitive to being under the dominion of sin. The Christian, on the other hand, struggles with and hates the sinful inclinations remaining in his heart. He swims upstream with much effort. "There is, and there is through grace, kept up in believers a constant and ordinary prevailing will of doing good, not withstanding the power and efficacy of indwelling sin to the contrary."¹⁸

There are a number of important truths that one can learn from Romans 7:21 regarding the Christian struggle with sin. First, this law or principle of indwelling sin is something that all Christians find in their own hearts. Paul says, "I find then a law." While any one can pick up a Bible and read about this law only true believers experience this law within them. Every professing Christian who wants to grow more and more holy, who seeks to obey God's word in every area of life has *personally* experienced this law. Those who have *not* personally experienced this law really are not concerned about holiness. They are still willing and content bondservants to sin. A study of God's word and of great Christians in church history reveals that the more a person grows in grace and personal sanctification the more he is conscious of this law of indwelling sin. Jonathan Edwards, who was one of the most knowledgeable and godly ministers that ever lived in America, wrote: "When I look into my heart and take a view of its wickedness, it looks like an abyss infinitely deeper than Hell. And it appears to me that, were it not for free grace, exalted and raised up to the infinite height of all the fullness of the great Jehovah, and the arm of His grace stretched forth in all the majesty of His power and in all the glory of His sovereignty, I should appear sunk down in my sins below Hell itself. It is affecting to think how ignorant I was when a young Christian, of the bottom

¹⁶ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 533.

¹⁷ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 6:159.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 6:160.

depth of wickedness, pride, hypocrisy, and filth left in my heart."¹⁹ The inner experience of this law should: (a) keep every believer in a state of humble reliance upon God's grace; (b) keep all professors upon their knees in prayer for the Holy Spirit's sanctifying power; (c) cause Christians to be more understanding of the defects in other believers. "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1).

Second, this law or principle of sin always abides in Christians—it is never absent. "It is always *ready* to apply itself to every end and purpose that it serves unto.... This law of sin "dwelleth" in us; that is, it adheres as a depraved principle, unto our minds in darkness and vanity, unto our affections in sensuality, unto our wills in a loathing of and aversion from that which is good; and by some, more, or all of these, is continually putting itself upon us, in inclinations, motives, or suggestions to evil, when we would be most gladly quit of it."²⁰ This ever-present law means that Christians must ever be on their guard regarding the flesh. There is never a time when believers can dismantle their defenses or cease from watchfulness. The fact that this principle always resides in us means "that our work in contending against sin in crucifying, mortifying, and subduing it"²¹ never ends. Paul says to "put to death your members which are on the earth" (Col. 3:5). As long as we live on earth in our mortal bodies the struggle continues. Some of the greatest trials of life come to those who have been saved many years. Even the greatest of saints such as David, Abraham and Moses were not exempt from this life long struggle.

Third, this law of sin resides in the heart of believers therefore "it is easy to insinuate itself into all that we do, and to hinder all that is good, and to further all sin and wickedness. It hath an intimacy, an inwardness with the soul; and therefore, in all that we do doth easily beset us."²² Jeremiah the prophet says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked; Who can know it?" (17:9-10). The heart is unsearchable. We do not even know our own hearts. How many Christians have thought that they had a victory over a particular lust only to discover that it still lies within, ready to strike? How many believers subdue one particular sin and then find that another has come to take its place? "Much of its security and, consequently of its stealth, lies in this, that it is past finding out."²³ The temptations that come before believers have no power in themselves, but only become strong when they tap into the depravity that was already present in the heart.

One can study his heart with all diligence to discover its trickery and deceit but one can never really learn how it employs all its deceits in the service of sin. "It abounds in contradictions, so that it is not to be found and dealt with according to any constant rule and way of procedure."²⁴ Because of its nature, its inscrutability, stealth and deceit Christians are often dumbfounded and ashamed at its speed and success in polluting the thought life. One moment a young man is instructing a beautiful woman regarding the grace of God and then, in an instant, lustful thoughts come to his mind. How many believers find themselves struggling against polluted thoughts of sexual lust or hatred or envy during the public worship of the thrice-holy God? A Christian's heart often appears to abound in contradictions. Before the fall into sin: "The mind's subjection to God was the spring of the orderly and harmonious motion of the soul and all the wheels in it. That being disturbed by sin, the rest of

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, quoted in Arthur W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification*, 116.

²⁰ John Owen, *Works*, 6:167.

²¹ *Ibid*, 6:174.

²² *Ibid*, 6:167.

²³ *Ibid*, 6:173.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

the faculties move cross and contrary one to another. The will chooseth not the good which the mind discovers; the affections delight not in that which the will chooseth; but all jar and interfere, cross and rebel against each other."²⁵ What was once wonderful and harmonious is now a polluted, jumbled mess.

The purpose of carefully noting the depravity of our hearts is not to despair or give up hope; and, it emphatically is not given as an excuse for committing sin. The purpose is to awaken Christians to diligent watchfulness, to dependence upon the Holy Spirit, to a diligent prayer life and a diligent life of putting off the old man and putting on the new. The accusation (common among those who hold to the possibility of sinless perfection in Christians in this life) that Calvinists give believers an excuse to sin by teaching such a negative view of man's heart even after regeneration is totally unfounded. The purpose has never been to excuse sin but to soberly evaluate the warfare within. In warfare it is those who underestimate the enemy's forces that often do not make adequate preparation for battle. The Calvinistic view of sanctification is a call to constant watchfulness, prayer and effort. Owen writes,

Upon this one hinge, or finding out and experiencing the power and efficacy of this law of sin, turns the whole course of our lives. Ignorance of it breeds senselessness, carelessness, sloth, security, and pride; all which the Lord's soul abhors. Eruptions into the great, open, conscience-wasting, scandalous sins, are from want of a due spiritual consideration of this law. Inquire, then, how it is with your souls. What do you find of this law? What experience have you of its power and efficacy? Do you find it dwelling in you, always present with you, exciting itself, or putting forth its poison with facility and easiness at all times, in all your duties, "when you would do good"? What humiliation, what self-abasement, what intenseness in prayer, what diligence, what watchfulness, doth this call for at your hands! What spiritual wisdom do you stand need of! What supplies of grace, what assistance of the Holy Ghost, will be hence also discover! If fear we have few of us a diligence proportional to our danger.²⁶

(3) Another term used in Scripture to describe the fleshly nature remaining in Christians is "the old man". Paul uses it in three of his epistles. "Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Eph. 4:22). "Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him" (Col. 3:9). "Knowing this that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Rom. 6:6) The expression "the old man" refers to the inherited sinful nature from Adam that remains in believers and the corruption or habitual sin patterns acquired from a life of committing sins. "The old man, then, is what we all are by birth and by nature: fallen, polluted, depraved, corrupt, sinful, with a bias against God and toward evil."²⁷ Charles Hodge writes, "This evil principle is called old because it precedes what is new, and because it is corrupt; and it is called 'man', because it is ourselves. We are to be changed, --and not merely our acts. We are to crucify ourselves. This original principle of evil is not destroyed in regeneration, but is to be daily mortified, in the conflict of a whole life."²⁸

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 6:168-169.

²⁷ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:17-5:17* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 121.

²⁸ Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1856]), 189.

There are a number of things that we can ascertain regarding the “old man” from the Ephesians and Colossians passages. First, note that the old man is set in opposition to the new man. A similar opposition is noted by Paul when he says, “The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Gal. 5: 17). When Paul discusses the new man in Ephesians 4:23-24 he says, “And be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, righteousness and true holiness.” The Colossians passage, which corresponds to the one in Ephesians, adds the word knowledge, “put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Col. 3:10). If Christians are being renewed unto knowledge which includes righteousness, holiness and truth which begins in the interior life (Eph. 4:23), then clearly the old man encompasses more than outward habits. The old man is the fallen nature without true righteousness, holiness and knowledge. “But while ‘the old man’ is wholly evil, ‘the new man’ is wholly good. He is created after (the likeness of) God...Day by day this new creation is advancing ‘in true righteousness and holiness.’”²⁹ Thomas Goodwin writes, “Therefore that old man that is exhorted to be put off, by law of opposition, is meant that opposite corruption of nature that came in the room of it; which must therefore be put off (as he exhorts), that this may be put on; which whilst it resides in the nature of man, it hinders is renewing, and the image of God from coming in.”³⁰

Second, the old man is intimately connected with the “former conduct.” This refers to the believer’s manner of life before he was a Christian when he was completely dominated by the old man. A depraved nature (which has lost righteousness, holiness and truth) leads to depraved life, a life in which actions are not done unto God but to self. A corrupt tree produces corrupt fruit. Everyone in the unregenerate state develops sinful habits. After a person is regenerated and definitively sanctified by Christ, the Holy Spirit progressively removes the sinful inclinations of our hearts and enables us to put off this former conduct. There is a daily mortification. Martin Lloyd Jones writes, “Although in my relationship to God it is true to say that my old man is dead, nevertheless, from the experimental standpoint, because of habits and practices and lack of knowledge and understanding, many of the characteristics of the old man still cling to me as the new man. Have nothing to do with the old man, do not go on doing that you used to do because he is dead!”³¹

Third, Paul describes the old man as that which is being corrupted. The present tense indicates that the corruption of the old man is not static but progressive. Men are born with a sinful nature and as a result engage in a life of actual sins. The practice of sinful behavior in turn contributes to the corruption of the whole man. There is a reciprocal relationship between who we are by nature and what we do. The inclination to sin leads to sinful behavior. Sinful behavior in turn strengthens the inclination to sin. Everyone is born with a sinful nature and thus is corrupt from birth. But as time progresses people become more and more corrupt. People become habitual whoremongers, drunks, child molesters, drug users, rapists, murderers, liars and so on. A study of unregenerate humankind is a study of the progression of this corruption. This is especially evident in people who have the means (such as the rich and famous) to fully indulge their fleshly natures. People often wonder how TV personalities, movie stars and rock stars could live such disgusting, destructive lives. The answer is quite simple: corruption leads to sin and sin leads to more corruption. It is a vicious cycle. It is no wonder that the unregenerate are described as slaves to sin

²⁹ William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967-68), 2:214.

³⁰ Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (Eureka, CA: Tanski Pub., 1996 [1861-66]), 10:278.

³¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light*, 122.

(Rom. 6:16). Paul teaches the same reality in his epistle to the Galatians. “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life’ (6:7-8).

This corruption of the old man which in turn is becoming more corrupt in the unregenerate (by way of application) teaches us a very important principle, that the corruption of one’s nature cannot be satisfied by committing sin, by making “provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Rom. 13:14). The common heathen notion that one should “sow the wild oats” before settling down with a family is utter foolishness. “Sowing the wild oats” leads to a greater rate of infidelity and divorce in marriage relationships. Christians who backslide and convince themselves that a season of indulging the flesh will satisfy fleshly lusts so that one can then return to a greater sanctification are living in self-deception. Committing sin does not subdue the flesh, but rather inflames it. One does not extinguish a fire by adding gasoline to it. Owen writes, “This is to aslake fire by wood and oil. As all the fire in the world, all the fabric of creation that is combustible, being cast into the fire, will not satisfy it, but increase it, so is it with satisfaction given to sin by sinning it doth inflame and increase.”³² The idea that one can satisfy the flesh by indulging in sins makes about as much sense as prescribing gluttony as the cure for obesity; or, taking a deadly bacterium as the cure for an infection; or, applying a flame as a cure for a serious burn. It is a satanic lie of the worst sort. Peter warns believers to “abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). Paul says, “For you brethren have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Gal. 5:13). Liberty is never to be used as an excuse; or a base of operations for the flesh.

Some commentators regard the verb *phtheiromenon*³³ (translated as “being corrupted”) to mean “being destroyed.” The verb in certain contexts can mean to destroy or perish. When used in an ethical context it usually refers to corruption or depravity. However, there is a definite connection in Scripture between moral depravity and destruction. “Whosoever commits adultery with a woman lacks understanding; He who does so destroys his own soul” (Prov. 6:32). Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, “There is another shade of meaning in the word that the Apostle used, and that is, *tending to destruction*. Normally, as we use the word *corrupt*, we carry that meaning in our minds, do we not? Corruption, and decay, pollution and putrefaction all go together. So that not only is a thing becoming corrupt, it is also disintegrating, and moving in the direction of destruction.”³⁴ A life apart from God, in the service of sin, is a life of self-inflicted soul destruction. Paul writes, “For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of women, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due” (Rom. 1:26-27). The more the unregenerate rebel against God the more corrupt and putrid they become. The souls of the unregenerate become old and hardened in sin. The punishment for sin is more sin, more corruption, more putrefaction. The unregenerate are their own worst enemies. “But he who sins against me wrongs his own soul; all those who hate me love death” (Prov. 8:36).

³² John Owen, *Works*, 6:178.

³³ “Which waxeth corrupt (*ton phtheiromenon*). Either present middle or passive participle of *phtheiro*, but it is a process of corruption (worse and worse)” (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, n. d. (1931)], 4:540.

³⁴ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Darkness and Light*, 129.

The fountain or seat of evil impulses and desires is the flesh, the old man. Paul gives us an important insight on how the flesh or old man moves toward sinful action and is further corrupted. He says the old man grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts. The sinful heart produces evil desires or lust; these evil desires lead to sinful behavior which in turn contributes to the corruption of the flesh. Thomas Goodwin writes, “When thou hast seen, therefore, corrupt flesh as the root of all, then go and look to thy lusts, all the corruption that is in thy life, it is from the stirring of lusts in thee; all the corruption in the world is said to be through lusts, 2 Peter i.4”³⁵ James writes, “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown brings forth death” (1:14-15). Christians cannot blame Satan or the delights of the world for their sinful behavior. They must always blame themselves. “The old nature, with which the Ephesians had been on such intimate terms for so many years, is not easy to shed. Getting rid of it is difficult and painful. It amounts, in fact, to a crucifixion (Rom. 6:6). This is true all the more because it is promising so much. It is being continually corrupted” through lust’s illusions, those deceptive evil desires with their mighty promises and minimal performances.”³⁶

It is very important that we understand this term “lust.” The word lust means a strong desire and can refer either to a desire of something lawful and good; or something unlawful and bad. There is nothing wrong with having a strong desire for one’s spouse or having a strong desire for food after not having a meal for many hours. Desires are a normal part being a human. They were given to man before the fall by God to help in the task of godly dominion, personal pleasure and worship. The term lust in our day has primarily a negative connotation because it is used in every day speech to describe sinful lusts, particularly those associated with illicit sexual activities. But lust or strong desire can be a lawful, wonderful thing. Christians should never regard lust or sexual thoughts about a marriage partner as wrong. It is positively good. When people, such as the Pope, declare all forms of lust as illegitimate they are not following Scripture but Greek heathenism.

Man in his original state was full of good desires, but because of the fall there is a natural hatred of God and spiritual good. The desires of unregenerate men are always directed away from God and toward self as a god. Before the fall men were to find their ultimate pleasure and satisfaction in God. After the fall, men apart from God seek ultimate satisfaction and pleasure in the service of self. The natural man walks continually according to his own ungodly lusts (cf. Jude 18). “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5).

When strong desires are continually directed toward unlawful activities the flesh becomes habituated toward evil. Lusts act as the intermediary between the corrupt nature and actual sins. The committing of sins leads to a development of sinful habits which in turn strengthens inner, improper lusts. There is a vicious cycle involved in committing sin. There is the corrupt nature. There are habitual inclinations and dispositions of the mind which flow from sinful habits. Also, there is lust which is the first moving of the mind and heart toward these unlawful deeds or objects. Of course, one must keep in mind that unlawful lust is itself a sin and the root or womb of sinful words and acts. Thus James places lust as the cause of all sin (Jas. 1:14-15). Also, Paul even says that heresies (which are sins of the mind, intellect or understanding) are properly reckoned among the lust of the flesh.

³⁵ Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, 2:84.

³⁶ William Hendriksen, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 2:214.

Conclusion

The Christian life is one of constant struggle and warfare against the old man, the flesh and inner lusts. There are a number of important things to remember in our battle against sin.

(1) Recognize that we must deal with the remaining depravity in our nature until the day we die. The corruption or pollution of sin will not be eradicated until we go to heaven and then finally when we receive resurrected bodies at the second coming. Paul describes the inward indwelling principle or tendency towards sin as “a law” that we must always contend with. It is always present, powerful and contrary to holiness. Professing Christians who do not recognize or experience this law are deceived hypocrites and liars.

(2) We must also recognize that by virtue of our union with Christ in His life, death and resurrection we have victory over the dominion of sin in our lives. We have definitive sanctification (i.e., an achieved and guaranteed full victory over sin in our lives by Christ) and the principle of holiness communicated directly to us by the Holy Spirit at regeneration. The principle of holiness implanted in the new birth grows in progressive sanctification where every aspect of our being is more and more brought under the purifying influence of the Holy Spirit and God’s law-word. We must constantly look upon Jesus’ finished work and recognize that Christ’s victory is our victory. All things have become new. The old man has passed away. To commit sin, therefore, is a contradiction to what we are in Christ. We must live a life consistent to what we are, not what we used to be (the old). We must continually put off our former conduct and put on righteous deeds or good works (biblically defined).

Recognition of the war within and our position in Christ should keep us on guard and in a humble state of reliance upon God’s grace. Yet, it also ought to fill our hearts with joy and hope; for Jesus has merited total victory for us. We must look to Christ by faith and recognize His past is our past. We must continually pray for the Holy Spirit’s assistance in this battle, for He enables us to obey, to put off the old and put on the new. We must constantly study God’s word for it defines sin and obedience. The Holy Spirit uses the Word to progressively sanctify our hearts (Jn. 17:17). May God enable us to fight the good fight and live in a manner that pleases our precious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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