

The Struggle between Flesh and Spirit

There's a bumper sticker that says, "*Christians aren't perfect. We're just forgiven.*" What it means is that we don't claim to be better than anyone else, because we're not. We didn't earn our grace – that's what makes it grace. Unfortunately, the bumper sticker also implies that nothing changed when we came to Christ. It suggests that there is no visible difference between believers and non-believers, no before and after pictures to show to our friends and family. We received grace, but not power. That's certainly not what the bible teaches.¹ Yet, that's what the world often thinks about us and our behavior. In today's evangelical church, if we suggest that there is a standard of behavior, an inherent righteousness² that ought to set us apart from those without hope in the world, we're labelled "legalists." That's not what legalism means at all.³ Our salvation depends entirely upon the righteousness of Christ. But our sanctification is a mutual endeavor between the Holy Spirit and the believer to produce visible fruits of righteousness. Sanctification is both a process, and a struggle.

That struggle is not between an old nature and a new nature competing side by side in us, as if we were some kind of Jekyll and Hyde.⁴ The struggle is between the flesh, which has always been with us, and the Spirit who has been given to us in Christ.⁵ That struggle did not begin until we took on our new nature at conversion. There was no spirit to overcome the flesh when we were apart from Christ, when we were *by nature* children of wrath.⁶ Now we are in Christ. But we are not yet perfected (or matured) in him, at least not while we live.⁷ Nonetheless we strive toward it.⁸ What limits our success is that we are still “tainted” by the desires of our flesh, which the bible calls “corruption.” Curiously, the flesh is not described as sinful in itself. It is described as having sinful desires.⁹ This is where the misunderstanding begins. Without the spirit, the flesh cannot offend us. But once we are imbued with the Spirit, our fleshly desires can grieve him, and they can offend our own spirit.¹⁰ The flesh becomes a stumbling block, a snare to us in our submission to the Spirit. God said to Cain, “If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. It desires to dominate you, but you must master it” Gen. 4:7.

¹ NKJ **2 Timothy 3:5** having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

² Inherent righteousness refers to our own righteousness, our overtly good behavior. It is distinguished from the righteousness of Christ by which we are saved. Inherent righteousness is what James is referring to when he says that faith without works is dead. He doesn't mean that we are saved by works, or that we can earn Christ's perfection. It is simply that good behavior is to be expected of those who are in Christ.

³ Legalism, strictly speaking, refers only to salvation by works; it never refers to the righteousness produced by sanctification.

⁴ **Ephesians 4:22-24** ²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

⁵ ESV **Galatians 6:8** For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

⁶ NIV **Romans 8:9** You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

⁷ **Philippians 3:12** ¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

⁸ **2 Corinthians 13:11** ¹¹ Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace.

⁹ ESV **Ephesians 2:3** among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were **by nature** children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

¹⁰ ESV **Matthew 5:29** If your right eye causes you to sin [i.e. stumble – the KJV says “if it offend thee”], tear it out and throw it away.

In Christ, we no longer have a “sinful nature” in the sense of being bound by it.¹¹ The “nature” of something is its essence. It is what characterizes and defines it. As believers, we are no longer characterized or defined by our sin. We are no longer its slaves. Instead, our nature in Christ is being a child of God, an heir to the kingdom.¹² This is what our journal describes as our “Identity in Christ.” So what about sin? Are we supposed to be able to lead a sinless life? Hardly. John rejects the very possibility. We all sin, and often.¹³ Even when we do the right thing, we tend to do it for the wrong motive.¹⁴ But doesn’t that make our sin an essential characteristic of us as believers? No. And here’s why: the bible describes the believer’s tendency to sin in terms of external clothing, not internal attributes. We are to remove the garment of sin, and “sink into” a garment of righteousness.¹⁵ While we were slaves to sin, not only could we not remove the garment, but we had no inclination to remove it. We didn’t have the Spirit. We were ruled by our passions.¹⁶ But in Christ, we have been set free from the Law of Sin and Death, and from our servitude to sin.¹⁷ We have been given everything we need for life and godliness (2Pet 1:3).

The Old Self was Crucified with Christ¹⁸

Our old *self* was a slave to the desires of the flesh, and so the old self was *by nature* a child of wrath (Eph. 2:3). Our new self is a slave to righteousness.¹⁹ It is free to set its mind on the things of the Spirit.²⁰ However, it is still tainted by the flesh. The difference is that now the flesh is

¹¹ **Col 1:13** Who has delivered us from the power of darkness, and has translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son. **Joh 8:34** Jesus answered them, Truly, truly, I say to you, Whoever commits sin is the servant of sin. 36 If the Son therefore will make you free, you will be free indeed. **Phi 2:13** For it is God which works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. **Rom 6:18** Being then made free from sin, you became the servants of righteousness. 22 But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, you have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.

¹² **Rom. 8:8-9,14** Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you... ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

¹³ **1Jo 1:10** If we say we do not sin, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

¹⁴ **Gal 5:17** For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that you cannot do the things that you would. **Rom 7:15-23** For what I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. 18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwells no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform what is good I find not. 19 For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. 21 I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

¹⁵ **Isaiah 61:10** I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. **Zechariah 3:4** And the angel said to those who were standing before him, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And to him he said, "Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments." **Romans 13:14** But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

¹⁶ **Romans 7:5** For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. **Galatians 5:24** Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

¹⁷ **Romans 8:2** because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. **Romans 6:18** You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.

¹⁸ **Romans 6:6-7** For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

¹⁹ **Romans 6:17-18** ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

²⁰ **Romans 8:5** ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

merely *persuasive*; it is no longer *controlling*.²¹ That means we can overcome it in large part. And so we must put to death the deeds of the body.²² We are free *not* to sin. We don't have to gratify the desires of the flesh.²³ However, God's Spirit isn't going to do that for us. He is our teacher, helper, and comforter, not our magic genie.²⁴ He guides us into paths of righteousness.²⁵ He doesn't drag us there. He has thrown open our prison door and beckons us out into the light. We follow him there in order to glorify Christ. As we learned, obedience doesn't earn our place in the kingdom. It is a reflection of the place that Christ has already earned for us.²⁶

Flesh and Spirit Distinguished

In John 3:6, the flesh is distinguished from the spirit: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (ESV). It implies that we are either born of the flesh, or born of the spirit – but that wouldn't be correct. It actually describes two sequential births. The context is Christ's admonition that we need to be "born again." We are already born of the flesh. We need to be born of the spirit. None of this is to say that we have two natures. Our nature is such that we are either under the wrath of God because we are not in Christ (Eph. 2:3),²⁷ or we are God's adopted children because we are in Christ (Eph. 1:5).²⁸ We cannot be under his wrath at the same time that we are his children, because we cannot simultaneously be apart from Christ, and also be in Christ. Christ moved our "estate" from the one to other on the cross.²⁹

In lesson 8, I said that "the bible describes what we are like in our sinful nature, and what we are supposed to be like in our spiritual nature. As we move away from the one and toward the other, we grow in grace, and together we glorify God." In lesson 9, I said that we do not put off the old man while putting on the new, as if the old man were still alive and the new man was yet to be. These two statements do not contradict one another. We are not *becoming* children of God. We *are* children of God. Compare these two supporting verses: "Whoever is in Christ is a new creation. Old things have passed away. Behold, everything has become new" (2Cor. 5:17). And then there is a second apparently competing verse. "Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in

²¹ **Romans 7:5-6** ⁵ For when we were controlled by the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶ But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

²² **Romans 8:13** ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

²³ **Romans 13:14** ^{NIV} Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.
^{NIV} **Galatians 5:16** So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ^{NIV} **Ephesians 2:3** All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.

²⁴ **John 14:16** ^{NKJ} "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever; ^{NIV} **John 14:26** But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

²⁵ **John 16:13** ^{NIV} But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.

²⁶ **Colossians 1:13** ^{NKJ} He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed *us* into the kingdom of the Son of His love,

²⁷ **Ephesians 2:3** ^{NIV} Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

²⁸ **Ephesians 1:5** ^{NIV} he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will--

²⁹ **Colossians 1:13** ^{NKJ} He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed *us* into the kingdom of the Son of His love – the word for "delivered" is *rhōmāi*. It comes from a root word meaning "to flow." The idea is to be transported to another place, away from trouble.

the fear of God” (2Co 7:1 ESV). Thus, I said in lesson 10 that our corrupt nature remains with us, distorting our understanding of God’s word and coloring our behavior.³⁰ These two verses from 2Corinthians do not contradict one another either. They are from the same book, written by the same author, and both are true.

How can we be a new creature, and yet be defiled by the flesh? How can all the fullness of Christ dwell in us,³¹ and how can we have the mind of Christ,³² and yet continue to behave and think as if that were not true – unless the old man lives? The answer is found in the term “old man” or “old self.” It is literally, “man-faced” or having the external countenance or facial appearance of a man. This fits the idea of exchanging one outer garment (or appearance) for another. Some have tried to reconcile the two by saying that the fleshly struggle in Romans 7:23-24 describes us before our conversion, and the spirit-driven life in Romans 8:3-6 is afterward.³³ I disagree. The struggle between flesh and spirit doesn’t begin until conversion. Before that, we are slaves to our fleshly desires, ignorant of the spiritual life, and lacking the power to overcome sin. The issue before us is how to conduct ourselves in this life-long struggle between flesh and spirit.

In lesson 9, I offered a way to compare our identity in Christ against our actions in the world by journaling. What we see is that our actions are sometimes spirit-driven, and sometimes flesh-driven. The purpose of the Journal Index is to expose, address, and hopefully reconcile the tension that arises between the spirit and the flesh. As we begin to recognize it, track it, assess it, and then conform our flesh to the likeness of Christ by the Spirit, we participate in the process of sanctification. It is, let me repeat, a cooperative effort. Our salvation is what we call *monergistic* – entirely in the hands of God. But our sanctification is *synergistic* – a combination of the Spirit acting on us to will and to act according to God’s purposes (Phil. 2:13), and our own willingness, in fact, our enthusiasm, to respond as God desires. Here’s a one-liner that I’ve used for a number of years: ***our duty is to create a cooperative environment in which the Holy Spirit is free to act.*** This is derived from the command not to grieve the Spirit (Eph. 4:30).

What does “the flesh” mean? The Greek word is *sarx*. We ought to begin with what that word does *not* mean. It does not mean the physical realm, or the physical body as a whole (the Greek for that would be *soma*). It is not implying that physical is bad while spiritual is good. That’s the ancient heresy of *dualism* which is part of eastern mysticism. It says that the world is an illusion, and only the spiritual realm is real. Christianity rejects such a notion. The Christian faith is a very down-to-earth, practical, and experiential belief system. There’s nothing so mystical in it that we should strive to leave or denigrate our body. The word *sarx* can refer to the sensuous nature of man (i.e. the five senses), or our “animal nature,” without any suggestion of depravity.

³⁰ NKJ **1Jn. 1:8, 10** If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (see also Gal. 5:17; Rom. 7:15)

³¹ NIV **Ephesians 4:13** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. NIV **Colossians 2:10** and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

³² NIV **1 Corinthians 2:16** “For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

³³ There are two basic flavors of those who divorce the flesh from the spirit. Some acknowledge grace, but embrace the idea of sinless perfection in this life (spirit-only legalism). Their bumper sticker reads, “I was a sinner. But I’m over it now.” Easy-believism, at the other end of the spectrum, refers to those who rely so heavily on grace that they ignore the problem of ongoing sin (flesh-only grace). Their bumper sticker reads, “I’m not perfect, just forgiven.” The bible teaches that sin continues (1Jn. 1:10), but we are not to abuse grace or our freedom in Christ by being libertine. “Shall we sin all the more that grace might all the more abound?” (Rom. 6:1). We are to exercise self-control.

In other words, the sex drive is not inherently sinful, but adultery is. Hunger is not wrong, but gluttony can be. And so *sarx* describes the cravings or appetites which incite us to sin, or the senses that cause us to suffer. It denotes basic human nature, which is an earthly nature lacking divine influence. Without divine influence or intervention (i.e. the Spirit), our human nature is prone to sin; it is opposed to God. Like a wild horse, it needs to be tamed, “reined in,” and directed by the Spirit. Our old self did not have the Spirit to master it. Our new self does.

What does “corrupt” mean? There are two primary words used in Greek that are translated “corrupt.” The first means something is unfit for its intended purpose. A shovel with a broken handle is corrupted in this sense. The second word means to perish. That doesn’t mean “die” necessarily. When fruit begins to perish, it means that it becomes rotten and inedible. It cannot nourish us, and it may well make us sick. Both words imply that what is corrupt cannot be properly used. And if we try to use it as if nothing were wrong, we might pervert or misuse it. It might not accomplish its purpose. We are corrupt in our flesh. We have to take that into account. The desires of the flesh compete with the desires of the Spirit, making us unfit for his use. Thus we must bring our flesh into conformity with the Spirit.

What does “nature” mean? As I mentioned earlier, the nature of something is its fundamental character or disposition. It refers to its essential characteristics and qualities. “Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature” Romans 13:14 NIV. Of all modern translations, only the NIV and NLT translate the Greek word *sarx* as “sinful nature” here. They wanted to convey the idea of corrupted flesh, and not just our human nature unaffected by sin and the Fall. And yet, Paul is speaking to believers. If believers have a “sinful nature,” then sinfulness is our essential character. If that is true, then despite being “in Christ” it implies that our nature did not change, that the old self did not die. We might be saved, but our depravity remains total. Is that true? Do all the biblical imperatives to submit and obey fall on deaf ears that cannot hear?³⁴ Do we remain blind and unable to see the kingdom of God as if we were unbelievers and non-elect?³⁵ Hardly.

Then do we have two natures? Do we have a sinful nature in which we are children of wrath, and a redeemed nature in which we are children of God, with Christ bridging the gap between the two? I suppose that’s a conceivable image, but not one that I’m comfortable with. I don’t think we have two natures, one sinful, and the other righteous. If our nature is sinful, it cannot be pleasing to God. It would make no sense for Paul to command us to make ourselves pleasing to God, because our sinful nature would prevent it. And yet he does exactly that.³⁶

God will not live in an unholy temple. And yet God lives in us and we live in him (Jn 17:21; 1Tim 1:14; 1Jn 3:23-24; 4:12). Obviously we are cleansed or sanctified (made holy) by the

³⁴ **Romans 6:16** ¹⁶ Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey-- whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? **James 4:7** ⁷ Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. **Hebrews 5:9** ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. **1 John 3:24** ²⁴ Those who obey his commands live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

³⁵ **2 Corinthians 4:4** ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. **Romans 8:7** The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

³⁶ **Romans 12:1** ^{NIV} **Romans 12:1** Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.

presence of the Spirit and the work of Jesus Christ, and not by anything we do. But does God live in a creature that has not essentially changed its rebellious nature? What does repent mean if not that we have changed course? What we're trying to wrap our minds around here is what the presence of the Spirit and the work of Jesus Christ accomplished in us, and not just for us. Is the Spirit merely appended to our sinful nature, or was our nature fundamentally changed?

It seems to me that the Bible teaches we are God-incarnated, which is the very nature of Christ. He is fully God and fully man without distinction or separation. He was born from above of the Holy Spirit³⁷ (Mat 1:20), just as we must be born from above (Jn 3:3). If we are clothed with Christ, then our nature will increasingly reflect the nature of Christ. We are being made into his likeness. Our human nature, our appetites, did not die when we came to Christ as we can all testify. And we experience for ourselves that sin continues in the life of a believer, just as John says in his first epistle. So what died? What is "the old man"? I believe it is our *bondage* to sin. Sin lives in us (see Rom 7:17, 20). Sin took up residence in our nature when Adam fell. But its residence in us does not mean that it is still our nature. Sinning means gratifying our flesh when its desires oppose God's commands. If we had no alternative to sin, no ability to say no, that would make sin our nature. But we *can* say no. Let's look at Christ's nature as a prototype for us.

Christ was really and actually tempted in the desert by Satan (Lk 4:1ff). The tool that Satan used was Christ's own flesh. It is the same flesh we wear, with the same potential to sin that we inherited from Adam.³⁸ Christ was tempted in every way, yet he was without sin (Heb 4:15). How could he be tempted if he did not inherit the same potential to sin that we inherited? Yet he overcame it. If his nature was sinful, then he was in *bondage* to his flesh and could not overcome it. But he didn't have a *sinful* nature. That's part of the necessity of his virgin birth. To him the Spirit was given without measure (Jn 3:34). Thus his nature was dual, but it was not double (split). His nature was fully human, including the seed of free will that resulted in our Fall. But unlike Adam, Christ was absolutely filled, consumed, and dominated by the Spirit of God. And so he did not sin because he chose to do the will of his Father at all times, in all places, despite every temptation and provocation placed in his path.³⁹ There's the goal towards which all believers strive: not sliding back from what we've already attained (Phil 3:14-17); we persevere.

³⁷ A question might arise here as to whether Christ was born of the Spirit at birth rather than at the beginning of his ministry. It seems clear that his physical birth itself was "of the Holy Spirit." He knew from the start who his Father was (Lk 2:49). So what happened at the river when John the Baptist saw the Spirit of God descending on Jesus like a dove? (Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22). It was the sign given to John, and it was the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in all his fullness in Christ. I would suggest it was not the receiving of the Holy Spirit by Jesus. If it were, it intimates that Jesus was without the Spirit his whole life, and managed to be perfect by human effort alone. I think not.

³⁸ Please do not misunderstand! This isn't referring to the seed of Original Sin nor to the consequence of actual sin that "corrupted" our flesh. See Lesson 12a. That will address federal headship and describe free will as *potential* sin. That potential was in Christ just as it was in Adam. Yet Christ was "without sin" so that his flesh is not corrupted, and his perfect righteousness is imputed to us by faith.

³⁹ I realize this may seem a controversial statement, even unbiblical to some. There are a number of questions involved. (1) If Jesus did not inherit our sinful nature, then how was he "in all points tempted as we are," Heb 4:5? As I explained above, his temptations were the same, and to the same extent, and from the same fleshly desires. The issue here is Jesus' ability to *withstand* those temptations. If he was born into *bondage*, like us, then he would have been *unable* to withstand them, and would have sinned. (2) Jesus was born of sinful woman. How did he *not* inherit the sinful nature from her? Is it only passed down through the father? That's a possibility (Ex 20:5). It's clear that "what was conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Mat 1:20). God is the father of Jesus Christ, and not Adam. (3) If Jesus was born with a sinful nature, meaning he inherited the sin of Adam, and was born guilty and tainted by sin, how could his sacrifice have been acceptable to God? He was not "without blemish." (4) If Jesus was born with a sinful nature, and his sacrifice was acceptable (which it was), then how was that sinful nature atoned for? Did Christ somehow atone for himself? That would make him like an earthly priest who first atoned for himself, and then for the people (Heb 5:3); and that would contradict Heb 9:14. (5) Did the Holy Spirit atone for (sanctify) Adam's original sin at Christ's conception? If so, what was the basis of that atonement? These and similar questions are most easily and plausibly answered with this: Christ did *not* inherit the sinful nature from Mary – because Adam was not the father of Christ. Rather, holy God is Christ's father, and ours (Mat 16:16; Joh 1:12; 20:17). For more on this, see John Owen, *On the Holy Spirit (Pneumatologia)*, Bk. II, chaps. III and IV (London, 1674).

In summary, sin is not our nature as children of God. Rather, sin uses the appetites of our human nature to tempt us to sin. Sin lives in us because of our fallen human nature. Sin uses the natural desires of the flesh to tempt us into sinning. But we are no longer slaves to sin (Rom 6:14), even though we sin (1Jn 1:8). *Sinning is no longer our nature*, even though it may still be our habit.⁴⁰ The Spirit leads us to master our flesh more and more as we learn to put to death the deeds of the body *by the Spirit* (Rom 8:13). We are out-working our salvation (Phil 2:12-13), our true nature, our redeemed nature, which is a Spirit-controlled human nature that still contains the seed of sin. But the chains that sin had on us in our old self have been broken, thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ (Rom 7:25). Otherwise there would be no struggle in our soul.

Flesh and Spirit in the Believer

The bottom line is that the flesh is influential in the believer, but it is not determinative – it does not control us.⁴¹ The influence and distortion that sin exercises over our flesh is what we mean by “corrupt.” If it were determinative, it would be our “nature.” Only the Spirit of Christ who lives in us is determinative. That is why, if we submit to the Spirit, our flesh will be brought into submission as well. That struggle between the will of the Spirit, and the desires of the flesh, is what characterizes our Christian walk. It distinguishes us from those who are without Christ and hope in the world. Here is Paul’s description of that walk:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ! — assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, {*Greek man*} which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Eph. 4:17-5:5

⁴⁰ Do not confuse this with the teachings of Neil T. Anderson who believes not only that our sinful nature died, but our corruption as well.

⁴¹ ^{NIV} **Colossians 1:13** “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves” – the word for “dominion” is *exousia* (permissiveness – lack of self-control); it refers to having sway or influence over someone. The word for “kingdom” is *basileia*, which is in fact “dominion,” but in the sense of sovereignty or royal power – here it means being ruled over by the Son. So we have been rescued from the sway of darkness and brought into the dominion of Christ.

We need to remind ourselves that we no longer live in the world. We are sojourners.⁴² We need to act like we are joint heirs to the kingdom (Rom. 8:17), because that's what we are. The "old self" is dead. It was buried with Christ (Rom. 6:6). The "new self" is alive. It was resurrected with Christ (Rom. 6:5; 1Pet. 1:3). So let's put off the filthy rags that belonged to our old self, and put on the rich robes that reflect our identity in Christ. Let's enjoy our freedom from sin by abstaining from it, by choosing not to gratify the desires of the flesh – just for today (Jos 24:15).

⁴² NKJ **1 Peter 2:11** ¹¹ Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul,