



Wretched Man I Am

Introducing the struggle of the nature of man and sin.
by Don Hooton

Lesson 6 | The Works of the Flesh

April 12, 2023

Another aspect of our study is the question about free will. Does the Bible teach that once Adam and Eve left the Garden of Eden, did all of their heirs lose the ability to choose freely?

As we have noted, God commanded Adam to not eat from Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil – leaving him with the choice. His choice was not available to him because he was in the garden; it was available to Adam (and Eve) because God had made him that way. Even after their sin in the garden, Adam and Eve realize their nakedness **and choose to cover themselves**. Adam and Eve feel shame, **and they choose** to hide themselves from God when He is in the garden. At Creation, God pronounced His creation, man included, “good” (Genesis 1:31). Nevertheless, Adam sinned when he transgressed God's Will (1John 3:4). He fell because he was “drawn away of his own lust and enticed. Then when lust has conceived, it bringeth forth death” (James 1:14,15).

Even after the sin, when Cain chooses a sacrifice for which the Lord “had no regard,” God said to Cain: “Why are you furious? And why do you look despondent? If you do what is right, won't you be accepted? But if you *do not do what is right*, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but *you must rule over it*.” (Genesis 4:5-7).

So for our study, we want to embark upon how it is that, like Cain, we must rule over the sin we are confronted with. This is not to teach perfectionism – we will all sin (c.f. 1John 1:6-2:2). This is not to teach that we are not born into a sinful world that adversely affects our ability to choose good (c.f. Psalm 51:4). Instead, it is to move forward with the point that we can, by the grace of God, continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (2Peter 3:18).

After outlining the churches of Galatia, Ephesus and Colossians, the Apostle Paul outlines two possible ways of life we can pursue. It is significant to me that the demand to choose between those paths are given to Christians. This means Christians choose. It is not a miraculous experience – it is a choice we make based on the testimony the Spirit has provided in the revelation given by Christ's ambassadors. It is the same for us today.

So what Paul says in Galatians 5 is that there is one life that is lived in the flesh (with its wicked deeds manifested in verses 19-21). The other life brings forth the fruit of the Spirit (producing the beautiful characteristics described in verses 22-23).

So what is this life of living in the flesh look like?

“Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

What is the life of the old man?

“Therefore, I say this and testify in the Lord: You should no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thoughts. They are darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts. They became callous and gave themselves over to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more. But that is not how you came to know Christ, assuming you heard about him and were taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus, to take off your former way of life, the old self that is



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corrupted by deceitful desires, to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, the one created according to God's likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth. Therefore, putting away lying, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, because we are members of one another. Be angry and do not sin. Don't let the sun go down on your anger, and don't give the devil an opportunity. Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need. No foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need, so that it gives grace to those who hear. And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, anger and wrath, shouting and slander be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ" (Ephesians 4:17-32).

"So, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Therefore, put to death what belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, God's wrath is coming upon the disobedient, and you once walked in these things when you were living in them. But now, put away all the following: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and filthy language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self. You are being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator. In Christ there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all." (Colossians 3:1-11).

And what is this New Life like?

"For those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit have their minds set on the things of the Spirit. Now the mindset of the flesh is death, but the mindset of the Spirit is life and peace. The mindset of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it is unable to do so. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him. Now if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, then he who raised Christ from the dead will also bring your mortal bodies to life through his Spirit who lives in you. So then, brothers and sisters, we are not obligated to the flesh to live according to the flesh, because if you live according to the flesh, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:5-12).

When Paul writes about the works of the flesh, he uses the Greek word *ergos* for "works." This word signified some kind of action, deed, or activity. Very often it referred to a person's occupation, to one's labor, or to the things produced by someone's effort or life. It described a person's line of work, his career, his labor, or his profession. It denoted the results of his hard work.

Because Paul connects this word to the flesh, he is telling us something very important! Just like a person has a career or profession and works hard to achieve results, the flesh — if it is allowed to go its own way and do what it wants — will work very hard to produce fleshly results. When the flesh is not surrendered to God, it will work around the clock, twenty-four hours a day, to produce fruit that is hurtful, damaging, and even deadly. This is the occupation of the flesh.



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The word “flesh” used in Galatians 5:19 is the Greek word *sarx*, which is used mostly in Paul’s epistles to depict sinful impulses and carnal cravings. Paul uses the phrase “works of the flesh” to suggest that the flesh operates against our desires. If a believer doesn’t crucify the flesh and keep it under control, it will eventually manifest those evil desires. In other words, the flesh will go to work!

Sarx is used in Greek translations of the Old Testament for living men and even animals in general (Genesis 6:13; 7:15,16), and used to refer to a blood relative (Genesis 37:27). In I Corinthians 15:50, “*the flesh and the blood*” that cannot inherit the kingdom of God refers to the corruption to which our bodies are subject in this life. When Paul speaks of *living in the flesh* in another context (Philippians 1:22,24), he has the present, earthly life, in mind. And so, Ishmael was “*born after the flesh*” is an allusion to the fact that he was born according to the course of nature. However, in Romans 7:18; 8:1,4-7, Paul says that *in the flesh* means a capability of wrong of both body and mind.

By *nature*, humans are neither fleshly or spiritual. But by choices, a human is one or the other. He has the capacity to choose which way he wants to go. This leads to the conclusion that the flesh which “desires against the Spirit” (Galatians 5:17) and “those in the flesh [who] cannot please God” (Romans 8:8) represents that perverse desire that captures our hearts and leads us away from God. Paul said to put to death this “earthly nature” (CSB), “parts of your earthly body” (NASB) or, “what is earthly in you” (ESV). These are “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5, ESV). These desires are what Christians must choose to “mortify” (KJV), “put to death” (CSB) or in Galatians 5:24, Paul says that Christians have “*crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*”.

In one verse it is in the **past tense** of the Christian’s life (Galatians 5:24) and in others it **is a present responsibility** (Ephesians 5:25).

Is crucifying the flesh easy? It is as painful as crucifixion is. Even in the process of yielding our will to God, there is suffering through that self-denial. Jesus said there is a cross to bear daily (Luke 9:23). The body must be kept under and brought “under strict control” As a matter of fact, Peter said that we must “arm yourselves also with the same understanding [of Christ, dh]—because the one who suffers in the flesh is finished with sin—in order to live the remaining time in the flesh no longer for human desires, but for God’s will” (1Peter 4:1-2).

Paul says, “*Now the works of the flesh are obvious...*” The word “obvious” (translated as “manifest” or “self-evident” in other translations) is the Greek word *phaneros*. It means to appear, to manifest, to become visible, to become apparent, to become seen, to be well known, or to become conspicuous. By using this word, Paul tells us that we can see its presence in our evil desires and carnal cravings.

Yet, we are not to admire sin in any form. Instead, we are to hate it (Jude 23, c.f. Psalms 97:10). We hate it’s consequence, yet the point here is to despise the act in us. Yet, old habits die hard, people say. Perhaps because of this, some may find it easy to return to the practices they to which they should have died but is pictured by Peter like the proverbial dog who return to their own vomit (2Peter 2:22). But when a person decides to become a Christian, he becomes “*a new creature; the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new*” (2Corinthians 5:17). We should say together with Paul, “I am crucified with Christ” (Galatians 2:20).

On the other hand, some of us lapse into these fleshly lusts because of carelessness or forgetfulness. Peter says that forgetting that we have been purged from our old sins will bring barren or unfruitfulness in the knowledge of our Lord (2Peter 1:8,9). He likewise commands us to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2Peter 3:18). But it should be very obvious to everyone that when growth



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is not evident or it is stunted by inadequate spiritual nourishment, the result will be a life saturated with the practices of the flesh.

How can we crucify the flesh? Surely we can because Paul says those who are Christ's *have crucified the flesh* (Galatians 5:24).

First, **fearing the Lord will be the beginning of it.** "One turns from evil by the fear of the Lord" said the wise man (Proverbs 16:6). When questioned by Abimelech, king of Gerar, as to why he did not disclose that Sarah was his wife, Abraham replied that "I thought, 'There is absolutely no fear of God in this place. They will kill me because of my wife.'" (Genesis 20:11). Moreover, what prevented Joseph from committing adultery with his master's wife? The fear of God. Period. Listen to Joseph: " So how could I do this immense evil, and how could I sin against God?" (39:7-9). " To fear the Lord is to hate evil...." (Proverbs 8:13). If we, in naivete, associate glamor or fun with sin, it will find it's appeal in our hearts.

Second, **we have to be willing to put on our running shoes**, so to speak. Still drawing from Joseph's example, when the woman got hold of him and asked him to "lie with me," Joseph, "*leaving his garment in her hand,... escaped and ran outside*" (Genesis 39:11-13). The Bible says: "*flee fornication*" (I Corinthians 6:18). Paul warned Timothy about youthful lusts and said the way to overcome it was to flee (2Timothy 2:22). Do you want to overcome and crucify the flesh? One good way of doing that, according to the Scriptures, is to flee, to abstain.

Next, by believing God's interest in us **we should develop optimistic attitudes.** It is the promise of God that He "*will also make a way of escape*" out of temptation for His children (1Corinthians 10:13). Paul says, "*those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh ...*" (Galatians 5:24). Remember, it is His promise that will empower us. The certainty of that promise is in the character that is God's that the Spirit has revealed and Jesus has explained. Every where we look at God we see His will that we can.

And last, **pray.** Without God we are nothing – and we can do nothing (John 15:5). Paul said that he could "do all things." How? "*Through Christ who strengthens me*" (Philippians 4:13). In fact He makes us conquerors (Romans 8:37) and leads us in triumph (2Corinthians 2:14).

In future lessons, we will group the works of flesh to address the temptation that they pose, the demise they will bring and the power we still have to choose freely against those wiles of the devil.

1. **SINS of IMPURITY:** sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity (April 19, 26)
2. **SINS of IDOLATRY:** idolatry, sorcery (May 3)
3. **SINS of HOSTILITY:** hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, and envy (May 17, 24, 31)
4. **SINS of INTEMPERANCE:** drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar (May 10).

And we should finally be reminded that Paul said, "*I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God*" (Galatians 5:19-21).