

Some of the Different Meanings of the Word 'flesh.'

by Daniel Steele

The sermon explores the concept of 'flesh' in the Bible, examining its different meanings and implications for the Christian life.

Scripture: John 3:6, James 4:5, 1 Peter 5:10, 1 John 1:8

Topics: "Human Nature", "Holy Spirit"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the misinterpretation of John 3:6 by the Plymouth Brethren, emphasizing that the term 'flesh' in the Gospels does not refer to sin but to human nature apart from the Spirit. He clarifies that the new birth affects the immaterial part of human nature, freeing believers from the dominion of the animal nature and filling them with the Holy Spirit. Steele also addresses the misinterpretation of 1 John 1:8 by gnostics, explaining that confession of sin leads to forgiveness and cleansing by God. Additionally, he discusses the true meaning of James 4:5, highlighting the indwelling Spirit's role in guarding believers' fidelity to God and the importance of undivided love for Him.

Transcript

It is quite a remarkable fact that none of the words of Christ have been perverted into proof-texts in support of sin in the heart of the believer. The only exception is the twist given by the Plymouth Brethren school of teachers to John 3:6: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." They interpret the Greek perfect tense "has been born" as implying that the flesh remains unchanged till physical death. Hence they infer that the sin-principle must inhere in the believer so long as he dwells in a house of clay. Their fallacy lies in transferring to the Gospels the Pauline use of the term *sarx*, "flesh," as a synonym for sin. It is never so used in the four Gospels. Cramer, in his *Biblico-Theological Lexicon*, arranges the meanings of this word under six classes. In the first five there is no hint of sin. The sixth definition embraces the peculiar Pauline signification: "The sinful condition of human nature in and according to its bodily manifestation." Then follows an exhaustive list of quotations, filling more than one quarto page, all taken from the epistles, chiefly from those of St. Paul. There is not one taken from the four Gospels, which are abundantly quoted under the five shades of meaning which do not imply sin. He classifies John 3:6 under his third definition: "That which mediates and brings about man's connection with nature." In this text, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh," the term flesh means the whole of human nature apart from the life-giving Spirit. This can but produce flesh."-Alex McLaren. Says Pres. Timothy Dwight, "The flesh is to be understood here in

the physical, not in the moral sense."

Meyer insists that the Pauline view should not be "attributed to John, because it is strange to him." With Weiss and Julius Muller, we understand Jesus to say that the new birth has for its sphere the immaterial part of human nature, "as the corporeal birth only produces the corporeal, sensual part." Henceforth the regenerate is free from the dominion of the animal nature; and if he claims the full heritage of the believer, he is entirely filled with the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, and walks in the newness of the Holy Spirit as the efficient principle of the Christian Life.

Turning now to the apostolic epistles, we find in 1 John 1:8, a text which every doctrinal opposer of entire sanctification as a present possible experience hurls with an air of triumph against its advocates, as deceiving themselves and not having the truth in them. Just what St. John means will be seen when we find what great errors he is writing against. He lived long enough to see the germs of so-called gnosticism springing up to corrupt the church. Their basal error was dualism, two eternal, uncreated principles in conflict, good and evil, the latter making its abode in matter, and identifying itself therewith in such a way as to be inexpugnable by God himself.

One branch of the gnostics taught that spirit is perfectly free from sin, and cannot be tainted or soiled by it, since sin is limited to the sphere of matter, and there is no bridge nor pontoon from one to the other. Hence the human spirit is sinless, though its material envelope may be foul with lust, debauchery, gluttony, and drunkenness. The favorite simile of the gnostics was, the sinless soul in a polluted body is like a golden jewel in a pigsty, encompassed by filth, yet without mixture with it.

He who embraced this philosophy had no need of the blood of Christ as the ground of forgiveness of sin, because his spirit, his real personality, had no sin to be forgiven, no pollution to be cleansed. This is exactly what St. John means when he says. 1 John 1:8, "If we" -- i.e., any gnostic -- "say we have no sin," needing the atonement. "we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." But if any one abandons his false philosophy, confesses his sin, and makes a clean breast by his full acknowledgment and genuine repentance, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

This exegesis is in perfect harmony with the announced purpose of the epistle, 2:1, "That ye sin not." It avoids making John flatly contradict himself when he says (3:9), "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." Above all, it avoids the absurdity of recommending a medicine as a perfect cure, and in the same breath branding every testimony to such a cure through its use as a piece of self-deception, or an unmitigated lie. John advertises the blood of Christ as the perfect antidote for all unrighteousness.

Is he now so illogical and demented as to denounce as untrustworthy every one who declares himself healed through the application of this antidote? Is this the way to interpret a writer of ordinary common-sense? Does such an exegesis honor the Spirit of inspiration by which John wrote? Let him answer who perverts this text into a divine negation of holiness of heart and life in this world. In this very epistle St. John writes: "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil."

What are these works of the devil but human hearts defiled by sin through the wiles of Satan? Who are more evidently protecting the works of the devil than they who deny the power of the Son of God to accomplish the purpose of his mission, and decry the witnesses to his perfect saving grace?

We have seen writings in which James 4:5 is quoted in proof of the impossibility of living without sin. Let us examine this text. The R. V. hints that there is a different reading in the Greek. Instead of "dwell," it has the causative "made to dwell." There are two marginal readings, from which we are quite sure of the meaning. The fourth verse, in Old Testament style, stigmatizes the apostasy of the righteous as spiritual adultery, the divine covenant being viewed as the marriage of God's people to himself: "Ye adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?" To preserve Christians from this worldward tendency, which is spiritual adultery, God has caused his Spirit to abide within them, to watch over their fidelity, most jealously desiring our undivided love for the heavenly Bridegroom. This exegesis of the fifth verse brings it into beautiful harmony with the fourth, by carrying out the figure of spiritual wedlock by the appointment of the indwelling Spirit as its guardian, to keep believers faithful to their marriage vow. There is no reference to the human spirit in this verse; much less is there permission for envy to dwell therein. It is the Holy Spirit jealously desiring our perfect love to God.

1 Pet. 5:10. It is alleged that St. Peter in this text intimates that this perfect heart loyalty to God cannot exist here and now, but only "after ye have suffered a while." Our answer shall be a quotation from Dean Alford's notes: " 'His eternal glory in Christ Jesus' belongs to 'hath called'; and 'when ye have suffered a while' belongs to the same words, 'hath called,' not to what follows, as is decisively shown by the consideration that all four verbs -- perfect, stablish, strengthen, and settle -- must belong to acts of God on them in this life, while these sufferings would be still going on." Our paraphrase conveys the exact meaning, "May the God of all grace, who hath called you unto his eternal glory in Christ [not now, but], after ye have suffered a little while, himself [now, immediately] perfect, stablish, strengthen, and settle you [without waiting to do or to suffer more]."

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