

Striving Against Sin

by David Servant

David Servant's sermon emphasizes the necessity of human effort in overcoming sin while recognizing God's empowering presence in the sanctification process.

Scripture: Genesis 4:7, Romans 8:5, Galatians 5:16, Philippians 2:12, 2 Peter 1:3

Topics: "Sanctification", "Holiness"

Description

David Servant preaches on the importance of understanding the joint effort between God and believers in sanctification. Believers are called to cooperate with God, renew their minds with His Word, and actively pursue holiness. The sermon emphasizes the balance between human responsibility and divine empowerment, highlighting the need for believers to actively participate in their sanctification process.

Transcript

"Sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Gen. 4:7, emphasis added).

As was pointed out in the previous chapter, our sanctification is a joint effort on the part of God and ourselves. We grow to be progressively more like Jesus as we cooperate with the Father. He provides our ability and motivation to be holy. His "divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3, emphasis added). He gives us a new nature and leads us by His indwelling Spirit. But He still leaves something for us to do. We still have a free will. We must follow the Spirit who indwells us, and this every true Christian does to some degree. Otherwise, he shows himself to be a counterfeit believer (see Rom. 8:5-14).

It is also our responsibility to renew our minds with God's Word, for we must know His will before we can do it. Even in that, God helps us through the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit and through divinely-anointed human teachers. As our minds are renewed with His truth, we are transformed (see John 8:31-36; Rom. 12:2). And, of course, we also have the responsibility of being not just hearers of the word, but doers (see Jas. 1:22).

This balance we must maintain. Although Scripture speaks of both human and divine responsibility, too many emphasize one at the other's neglect. Historically, to the one side are the pietists, who strive to be holy in their own strength. To the other side are the quietists, who are abhorred with the idea of human striving, and who leave everything in God's lap. Both sides are armed with long lists of scriptures, and if they'd each only take a look at the other side's list, they'd realize they're both right and both wrong. The

truth lies in the middle, where both lists are given equal honor. Perhaps no single scripture expresses this balance better than Philippians 2:12-13:

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (emphasis added).

The fruit that the Spirit produces within us is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, but only with our cooperation will these fruit be manifest in our lives. We must do something, because, according to Scripture, there are at least three forces that oppose the fruit:

(1) God has allowed us to remain "in the world," a world that tempts us to be unloving, downcast, anxious, impatient, unkind, evil, unfaithful, harsh and self-indulgent.

(2) Although God has filled us with His Spirit, given us a new nature and broken sin's power over us, He has also allowed a residue of the old sinful nature to remain in us, what Paul called "the flesh."

(3) Although we have been delivered from Satan's kingdom and are no longer his spiritual offspring, we find ourselves, like the Christians of old, in an arena filled with roaring lions who desire to devour us (see 1 Peter 5:8). Satan and his demons harass and tempt us to do what God forbids.

These three are our enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Why Has God Left Us in Enemy Territory?

If God desires our holiness, why has He allowed these enemies to live among us? What divine purpose do they serve?

Like the wicked nations God permitted to remain in Israel's land after Joshua's death, our enemies are also allowed to remain that God might test us (see Judges 2:20-3:1). By them our love and obedience, and thus our faith, are tested. Faith can only be tested where unbelief is possible. Love can be tested only when hatred is an alternative. Obedience can only be tested where disobedience is possible.

To the ancient Israelites God said:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him (Deut. 13:1-4).

Incredibly, God tested His people by means of a false prophet! But does He not possess all knowledge as well as perfect foreknowledge? Why then is there need of a test?

The reason is this: in order for God to foreknow the outcome of a free moral agent's test, that free moral agent must be tested at some point in time. Only what can be known in time can be foreknown before time. Consequently, our temptations, tests and trials, limited by time and space, serve a purpose in the plan of the One who lives outside time and space. They provide the means whereby our faith is proved genuine. Peter wrote to Christians under fire:

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ....Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation (1 Pet. 1:6-7; 4:12-13, emphasis added).

If for no other reason, we should rejoice under persecution because it allows us the opportunity to show our enduring faith. Saving faith perseveres, but faith can persevere only if there is opposition and temptation not to persevere.

What is Our Responsibility?

Because modern evangelical theology has become so contaminated with antinomian ideas that distort God's grace and nullify human responsibility, today too many professing Christians piously pass off their biblical responsibilities to God. Beguiled by false teaching about grace, to them any mention of human effort is considered anathema, and under the subtle guise of defending God's glory, they label any teaching about holiness as legalism. Works is a dirty word that doesn't belong in a Christian's vocabulary. And certainly we don't want to entertain any thought that we must do anything now that Christ's work is finished. That would be adding works (God forbid!) to our salvation!

In hopes to remedy this unscriptural reasoning, I've compiled a list of what a significant portion of the New Testament says that believers should do. The essential component of human responsibility in the sanctification process is easily understood from the many scriptures that contain commandments and instructions. When we read them, we can no longer doubt that Christians are free moral agents who can will to be holy. Likewise, exposed is the folly of those who want us to believe that God is robbed of glory when we add our efforts toward sanctification. Clearly, God expects those who possess His Holy Spirit to do certain things by the power of the Spirit. Stated succinctly, we must strive against sin in all its forms (see Heb. 12:4). We must pursue the sanctification "without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14).

The following list reveals, from the four Gospels and the book of Romans, God's expectations for our behavior. If the New Testament states that a certain behavior is wrong or sinful, then God obviously holds people accountable for such behavior, indicating that human responsibility is a factor in that wrong behavior.

Although you might be tempted to skip over the following list, for your own benefit I ask that you read it slowly. It can impact you in a way that could be life changing.

What does God expect us to do? Here is a list. Clearly, none of these things will happen in our lives unless we do what God says.

God expects us to:

Not tempt Him (Matt. 4:7).

Worship the Lord our God and serve Him only (Matt. 4:10).

Repent in order to be saved (Matt. 4:17).

Rejoice and be glad when we are persecuted (Matt. 5:12).

Let our lights shine before men so they may see our good works (Matt. 5:16).

Keep and teach God's commandments, even the least of them (Matt. 5:19).

Not murder, hate, or harm another person in any way (Matt. 5:21-22).

Work toward reconciliation with those we've offended (Matt. 5:24-25).

Not commit adultery or be lustful (Matt. 5:27-28).

Remove anything that causes us to stumble into sin (Matt. 5:29-30).

Not divorce except for cases of unrepentant unchastity (Matt. 5:32).

Make no swearing oaths and never lie, but always keep our word (Matt. 5:33-37).

Not take our own revenge, but be extremely tolerant of others, even doing good to those who mistreat us (Matt. 5:38-42).

Love our enemies and pray for our persecutors (Matt. 5:44-47).

Strive to be perfect (Matt. 5:48).

Do no good deed for the purpose of receiving the praise of others (Matt. 6:1).

Give alms (Matt. 6:2-4).

Pray (Matt. 6:5-6).

Not use meaningless repetition when we pray (Matt. 6:7).

Pray after the pattern of "the Lord's prayer" (Matt. 6:9-13).

Forgive others (Matt. 6:14).

Fast (Matt. 6:16).

Not lay up treasures upon earth, but lay them up in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21).

Serve God and not money (Matt. 6:24).

Not worry about our material needs (Matt. 6:25-32).

Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33).

Not judge others (Matt. 7:1-5).

Not give what is holy to dogs (Matt. 7:6).

Ask, seek and knock (Matt. 7:7-11).

Do for others what we want them to do for us (Matt. 7:12).

Enter by the narrow gate (Matt. 7:13).

Beware of false prophets (Matt. 7:15-20).

Do what Jesus said or face destruction (Matt. 7:24-27).

Beseech the Lord to send out workers into His harvest (Matt. 9:38).

Confess Jesus before others and not deny Him (Matt. 10:32-33).

Love Jesus more than our closest relatives (Matt. 10:37).

Take up our cross and follow Jesus (Matt. 10:38).

Lose our life for Jesus' sake (Matt. 10:39).

Take Jesus' yoke upon us (Matt. 11:28-30).

Be "for" Jesus and gather with Him (Matt. 12:30).

Not blaspheme the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:31).

Do the will of the Father (Matt. 12:50).

Honor our parents (Matt. 15:4-6).

Not be defiled by evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, lying and slandering (Matt. 15:19-20).

Deny ourselves (Matt. 16:24).

Be converted and become like children, humbling ourselves (Matt. 18:3-4).

Not cause any child who believes in Jesus to stumble (Matt. 18:6).

Cause no one to stumble (Matt. 18:7).

Not despise any children (Matt. 18:10).

Rebuke in private any brother who sins against us (Matt. 18:15).

Obey Jesus' instructions regarding church discipline (Matt. 18:16-17).

Forgive our brothers from our hearts (Matt. 18:35).

Love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 19:19).

Be the servant of others (Matt. 20:26-28).

Pay our government's rightful taxes and give to God what is His (Matt. 22:21).

Love the Lord our God with all our hearts, souls and minds (Matt. 22:37).

Allow no one to call us "teacher," or "leader," and call no one our father but our heavenly Father (Matt. 23:8-10).

Not exalt but humble ourselves (Matt. 23:12).

Hinder no one from entering God's kingdom (Matt. 23:13).

Never take advantage of widows (Matt. 23:14).

Never influence others to act hypocritically (Matt. 23:15).

Not neglect the weightier provisions of the law, such as justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23).

Not be hypocritical in any way (Matt. 23:25-28).

Not be frightened about wars and rumors of wars prior to Jesus' return (Matt. 24:6).

Not fall away, or betray or hate a brother (Matt. 24:10).

Not allow ourselves to be misled by false prophets (Matt. 24:11).

Not allow our love to grow cold because of the increase of lawlessness (Matt. 24:12).

Endure to the end (Matt. 24:13).

Not believe false reports about the return of Christ (Matt. 24:23-26).

Recognize the true signs of Christ's return (Matt. 24:32-33).

Be on the alert for Christ's return (Matt. 24:42).

Always be a faithful and sensible slave, anticipating our Lord's imminent return, never backsliding but always obeying Him (Matt. 24:45-51).

Utilize the time, talents and treasures that God has entrusted to us for His service (Matt. 25:14-30).

Provide food, drink, shelter and clothing for impoverished Christians; visit sick and imprisoned Christians (Matt. 25:34-40).

Partake of the Lord's Supper (Matt. 26:26-27).

Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded (Matt. 28:19-20).

Take care what we listen to (Mark 4:24).

Not neglect the commandments of God in order to keep traditions (Mark 7:9).

Not be ashamed of Jesus or His words (Mark 8:38).

Be at peace with one another (Mark 9:50).

Not hinder children from coming to Him (Mark 10:14).

Have faith in God (Mark 11:22).

Believe that we have received all things for which we pray and ask (Mark 11:24).

Beware of religious teachers who wear clothing that makes them stand out, who like respectful greetings, chief seats and places of honor, who take advantage of widows and pray long prayers for appearance's sake (Mark 12:38-40).

Not be anxious about what we are to say when put on trial for our faith, but say what the Holy Spirit tells us in that hour (Mark 13:11).

Be baptized (Mark 16:16).

Bless those who curse us (Luke 6:28).

Give to everyone who asks of us, and not demand back what others have taken from us (Luke 6:30).

Lend to others, expecting nothing in return (Luke 6:35).

Be merciful (Luke 6:36).

Not condemn others (Luke 6:37).

Give (Luke 6:38).

Not point out the speck in a brother's eye when we have a log in our own (Luke 6:41-42).

Not call Him "Lord" unless we do what He says (Luke 6:46-49).

Receive God's word in our hearts and hold it fast so that we bear fruit with perseverance (Luke 8:12-15).

Hear God's word and do it (Luke 8:21).

Receive children in Christ's name (Luke 9:48).

Not look back after putting our hands to the plow (Luke 9:62).

Ask for the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13).

Watch out that the light in us may not be darkness (Luke 11:35).

Not love seats of honor and respectful greetings (Luke 11:43).

Not weigh down other people with hard burdens that we are unwilling to personally bear (Luke 11:46).

Not persecute His prophets (Luke 11:49).

Not take away the key of knowledge or hinder people from entering into true knowledge of God (Luke 11:52).

Beware of hypocritical religious leaders (Luke 12:1).

Not be afraid of those who can only kill us physically (Luke 12:4).

Fear Him who after He has killed has authority to cast into hell (Luke 12:5).

Not speak against or blaspheme Jesus or the Holy Spirit (Luke 12:10).

Beware and be on guard against every form of greed (Luke 12:15).

Not lay up treasure for ourselves but be rich toward God (Luke 12:21).

Sell our possessions and give to charity (Luke 12:33).

Bear fruit (Luke 13:6-9).

Strive to enter by the narrow door (Luke 13:24).

Never take a place of honor, exalting ourselves. Rather, we should humble ourselves, taking the last seat (Luke 14:8-10).

Love Him much more than our loved ones (Luke 14:26).

First count the cost of becoming His disciple (Luke 14:28-32).

Put all our material possessions under His control (Luke 14:33).

Rejoice when God shows mercy to sinners in saving them (Luke 15:1-32).

Be faithful in small things and with money (Luke 16:9-11).

Have compassion on the poor (Luke 16:19-31).

Rebuke a brother if he sins and forgive him if he repents (Luke 17:3-4).

Consider ourselves unworthy slaves even when we've done everything we've been commanded (Luke 17:7-10).

Pray at all times and not lose heart (Luke 18:1).

Not trust in ourselves that we are righteous, nor view others with contempt (Luke 18:9).

Receive the kingdom like a child (Luke 18:17).

Keep on the alert at all times, praying in order that we may have strength to escape the trials preceding Christ's return and stand before Jesus (Luke 21:36).

Proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins in Christ's name to all nations (Luke 24:47).

Be born again (John 3:3).

Believe in Jesus (John 3:16).

Worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24).

Honor Jesus (John 5:23).

Seek glory from God (John 5:44).

Believe Moses' writings (John 5:46-47).

Not to work for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life which is given by Jesus (John 6:27).

Eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ (John 6:53-54).

Not judge according to appearance, but with righteous judgment (John 7:24).

Abide in Jesus' word (John 8:31).

Keep Jesus' word (John 8:51).

Serve Jesus (John 12:26).

Love one another, even as Jesus loves us (John 13:34).

Believe that He is in the Father and the Father is in Him (John 14:11).

Do the works that Jesus did and greater works (John 14:12).

Love Jesus and keep His commandments (John 14:15).

Abide in Jesus' love (John 15:9).

Ask Him for anything in Jesus' name (John 16:24).

Take courage in tribulation (John 16:33).

This ends Jesus' commands found in the Gospels. These are the things that we're supposed to be teaching Christ's disciples to obey (see Matt. 28:20).

The commands and instructions given to believers in the epistles are essentially no different than what is found in the Gospels. We next consider human responsibility from just the book of Romans.

God expects us to:

Not suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18).

Not be guilty of idolatry (Rom. 1:23).

Not exchange God's truth for a lie (Rom. 1:25).

Not be involved in homosexual behavior (Rom. 1:26-27).

Not be greedy, envious, deceitful, malicious, insolent, arrogant, boastful, disobedient to our parents, untrustworthy, unloving or unmerciful (Rom. 1:29-31).

Not gossip or slander (Rom. 1:29-30).

Not give our approval to those who practice sin (Rom. 1:32).

Not think lightly of the riches of His kindness, forbearance and patience (Rom. 2:4).

Persevere in doing good (Rom. 2:7).

Seek for glory, honor and immortality (Rom. 2:7).

Not be selfishly ambitious (Rom. 2:8).

Not to curse or speak bitter words (Rom. 3:14).

Consider ourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ (Rom. 6:11).

Not let sin reign in our bodies, obeying its desires (Rom. 6:12).

Not go on presenting the members of our bodies to sin as instruments of unrighteousness (Rom. 6:13).

Present ourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and our members as instruments of righteousness to God (Rom 6:13).

Not covet (Rom. 7:7).

Not live according to the flesh, but put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit (Rom. 8:12-13).

Present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice (Rom. 12:1).

Not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2).

Not think more highly of ourselves than we ought (Rom. 12:3).

Exercise our gifts according to the grace given to us (Rom. 12:6).

Love others without hypocrisy (Rom. 12:9).

Abhor what is evil and cling to what is good (Rom. 12:9).

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love, giving preference to one another in honor (Rom. 12:10).

Not lag behind in diligence (Rom. 12:11).

Be fervent in spirit as we serve the Lord (Rom. 12:11).

Rejoice in hope (Rom. 12:12).

Persevere in tribulation (Rom. 12:12).

Be devoted to prayer (Rom. 12:12).

Contribute to the needs of the saints (Rom. 12:13).

Practice hospitality (Rom. 12:13).

Bless those who persecute us and not curse them (Rom. 12:14).

Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep (Rom. 12:15).

Not be haughty of mind but associate with the lowly (Rom. 12:16).

Not be wise in our own estimation (Rom. 12:16).

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone (Rom. 12:17).

Respect what is right in the sight of all men (Rom. 12:17).

Be at peace with all men as far as possible (Rom. 12:18).

Never take our own revenge (Rom. 12:19).

Feed our enemy if he is hungry and give him a drink if he is thirsty (Rom. 12:20).

Not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21).

Be subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1).

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another (Rom. 13:8).

Lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light (Rom. 13:12).

Behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, sexual promiscuity and sensuality, strife or jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts (Rom. 13:13-14).

Accept those who are weak in faith (Rom. 14:1).

Not judge our brother or regard him with contempt (Rom. 14:10).

Not put an obstacle or stumbling block in a brother's way (Rom. 14:13).

Pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another (Rom. 14:19).

Bear the weakness of those without strength if we are strong, not just pleasing ourselves (Rom. 15:1).

Accept one another, just as Christ accepted us (Rom. 15:7).

Keep our eyes on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to biblical truth, and turn away from them (Rom. 16:17).

Now, may I ask, is there such a thing as human responsibility for Christians? What should we say to the person who says he's leaving his sanctification completely in the hands of God, lest he rob God of glory and be guilty of adding his own works to his salvation?

Spiritual War

Every one of the commandments and instructions listed above not only prove the concept of human responsibility but also imply that all of us are faced with alternate choices. We can choose to do or not do what Jesus said. From within our regenerated spirits, the Holy Spirit leads us to obey, while other forces, namely the world, the flesh, and the devil, tempt us to disobey. Thus we find that we're caught in a war.

Two points about this war need to be made. First, false Christians sometimes mistakenly suppose they are experiencing this spiritual war. In reality, however, they are experiencing a somewhat similar war between their conscience and their sinful nature. As Paul wrote, even unsaved people possess a conscience that alternately accuses or defends them (see Rom. 2:15). Because they have violated it so many times,

however, their conscience is defiled (see Tit. 1:15), and its voice grows more dim as they continue to ignore its nagging. The true Christian, on the other hand, has a conscience that has been fully awakened, that speaks to him constantly and is not easy to ignore. The Spirit of God is leading all the true children of God (see Rom. 8:14).

The second point is that professing Christians often use the fact of the spiritual war as an excuse to sin. "We're in a war," they quip, "and so it's inevitable that we're going to lose a lot of battles." This excuse is in the same category as, "No one is perfect, you know! (So I'll be pathetic.)"

God is the one who has sovereignly permitted this spiritual war to exist, and His purpose in allowing it is not that His children would yield to sin. Rather, His purpose is that we would prove ourselves to be overcomers to His glory. Consider what Paul said about the war between the flesh and the Spirit in Galatians 5:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal. 5:16-24).

Christians are obviously two-natured, possessing a sinful nature that opposes the indwelling Holy Spirit. But is this an excuse to yield to sin? Absolutely not. Paul warns that those who practice the sins of the flesh will not inherit God's kingdom. In fact, no true Christian habitually yields to the flesh, because, as Paul said, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (5:24). This occurred at the initial point of salvation, when heart faith was manifested in repentance and submission to Christ's lordship. At that point, metaphorically speaking, we nailed the old sinful man to a cross. And there he must stay. He is still very much alive and may cry out to have his way, but by the power of the Spirit, his calls go unheeded.

In the Flesh or in the Spirit?

In the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul contrasts the unsaved person, whom he describes as being "in the flesh," with the regenerate person, whom he describes as being "in the Spirit." This is very important for us to understand. Read Paul's words carefully as we consider this passage of Scripture:

For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:3-4).

Notice that already Paul has described believers as those who "do not walk [live their lives] according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."

For those who are according to the flesh [the unsaved] set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit [the saved], the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh [what the unsaved do] is death, but the mind set on the Spirit [what the saved do] is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh [what the unsaved do] is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. However, you [the believers] are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him (Rom. 8:5-9, emphasis added).

Clearly, Paul is not contrasting two kinds of Christians, those who set their minds on the flesh and those who set their minds on the Spirit. He is contrasting those who are indwelt by the Spirit and who thus set their minds on the Spirit, with those who are not indwelt by the Spirit and whose minds are set on the flesh--Christians and non-Christians.

Christians can be said to have Christ in them, by the indwelling Spirit, even though they still possess the sinful nature of the flesh:

And if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you (Rom. 8:10-11).

Our body, what Paul calls the "outer man" in 2 Corinthians 4:16, is "dead" or "decaying" (2 Cor. 4:16) because of sin. But our spirit, the "inner man" (2 Cor. 4:16) is now alive because we've been made righteous. It is being renewed every day (see 2 Cor. 4:16). Yet we can look forward to the day when the Spirit within us will give life to our "mortal bodies," and our bodies will also be made new. Obviously, God intends that the indwelling Spirit dominate the flesh. It is destined to dominate to the point of changing our bodies and eradicating the sinful nature completely.

Finally, Paul warns the believers to whom he was writing about yielding to the flesh. By the power of the Spirit within them, they can put "to death the deeds of the body." This they must do:

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh--for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Rom. 8:12-14).

Do you fit the description of the one Paul said will not die, but live--the one who is "by the Spirit...putting to death the deeds of the body"? Then you are an authentic Christian. Clearly Paul believed that true Christians act differently than non-Christians. As he said, it is those who are being led by the Spirit who are God's true sons (see Rom. 8:14).

The Answer to an Objection

Some may object: "But didn't Paul confess that he himself practiced the very evil he hated, referring to himself as a 'wretched man'?"

Yes, he did. In fact, Paul said those words in the seventh chapter of Romans, just prior to what we've just been considering in the eighth chapter of Romans. Christians have debated if Paul was speaking of his experience before or after his conversion. Antinomians, in particular, love to set Paul's word in Romans 7 as the standard for normal Christian experience.

However, once we read Romans 7 in context with the two adjacent chapters, all of Paul's other writings, and the rest of the New Testament, there can be only one reasonable interpretation. Paul could only have been speaking of his experience before being indwelt by the Spirit. Otherwise, in chapter 7 he contradicted what he himself wrote about normal Christian experience in chapters 6 and 8. As has been appropriately asked, "If the man in chapter 7 is a born-again believer, who is the man in chapters 6 and 8?" They are obviously two vastly different people.

First, we note that the main theme of chapter 6 is the incompatibility of sin with the new creation. Paul began with the rhetorical question, "Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?" (6:1). His reply? "May it never be!" He then wrote of the impossibility of a believer being in such a condition: "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (6:2).

In the verses that follow, Paul made it ever so clear that all believers have been united with Jesus in His death and resurrection that they might "walk in newness of life" (6:4) now that they are no longer "slaves of sin" (6:6, 17, 20). Rather, they are now "freed from sin" (6:7, 18, 22), are "slaves of righteousness" (6:18), and "enslaved to God" (6:22), having become "obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which [they] were committed" (6:17). Sin is no longer "master" over them, and so they should not let it "reign" in their bodies, obeying its desires (6:12). Rather, they should present their members as "slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification" (6:19).

How does this chapter 6 Christian compare to the man in chapter 7, whom Paul describes as "of flesh, sold into bondage to sin" (7:14), who practices the very evil he does not want to do, doing what he hates (7:15, 19), a virtual "prisoner of the law of sin" (7:23), and a "wretched man" (7:24)? Is the man of chapter 6, set free from sin, the same wretched man of chapter 7 who is a prisoner of sin? Is the man of chapter 6, whose old self was crucified with Christ that his "body of sin might be done away with" (6:6) the same man of chapter 7 who longs for someone to set him "free from the body of this death" (7:24)? This certainly doesn't seem likely, does it?

Moreover, the first 14 verses of chapter 8, which we've already considered, raise even more questions if the chapter 7 man is a Christian. In chapter 8, Paul described the true Christian as one who does "not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (8:4), whose mind is set on the Spirit, and not the flesh, unlike non-Christian minds (8:5-6). The true Christian is one who is not "in the flesh" but "in the Spirit" because the Spirit dwells in him (8:9). Paul even warned those who are living according to the flesh that they must die, and promises that those who, "by the Spirit...are putting to death the deeds of the body" (8:13) that they will live. If Paul was speaking of his own present experience in chapter 7, we'd be tempted to tell him to read his own letter so he could find out how to be saved and set free from sin! And in light of all his many other exhortations to holiness directed to others, we'd have to classify him as a hypocrite who preached "Do as I say, not as I do."

Paul in Context

If Paul was presently practicing the very evil that he hated, then by his own description of unbelievers in this and other letters, he was not saved (see Rom. 2:8-9; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5-6). According to what John also wrote, Paul would not be saved: "The one who practices sin is of the devil....No one who is born of God practices sin....anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God..." (1 Jn. 3:8-10).

If Paul was speaking in chapter 7 of his present condition as a wretched prisoner of sin, practicing evil, it greatly surprises those of us who have read what he said about himself in other places. Although he admitted that he had not reached perfection (see Phil. 3:12), he wrote to the Corinthians that he was "conscious of nothing against [himself]" (1 Cor. 4:4), and further stated,

For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you (2 Cor. 1:12).

To the Thessalonian Christians, he wrote:

You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers (1 Thes. 2:10).

He testified to Timothy that he served God with a clear conscience (see 2 Tim. 1:3). One gets the impression as he reads Paul's story and his letters that Paul was a very, very Christ-like man.[1] His devotion is unparalleled to anyone else in the New Testament other than Jesus. How then can we imagine him practicing evil?

The only reasonable conclusion we can draw from all this evidence is that Paul was speaking in Romans 7 of his experience prior to his salvation.

"But didn't Paul write chapter 7 in the present tense? Does that not prove he was writing about his present condition?" some ask.

No, the tense Paul used does not prove anything. We often use the present tense when telling of a past experience. I might tell a fishing story that happened ten years ago by saying, "So, here I am in my boat, at my favorite spot on the lake. Suddenly I feel a little tug on my line--I'm not sure if it's a fish or a snag. Then it strikes! I start reeling in the biggest fish I've ever caught! Right as I bring it up to the boat, the line snaps, and off swims a monster-sized bass. Oh, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this crazy sport?"

"But didn't Paul say in Romans 7 that he didn't want to do wrong, but wanted to do right? Didn't he even say, "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man" (7:22)? How could he say those things as an unsaved man? Aren't unsaved people wicked to the core and totally depraved?"

You must remember that Paul was a very zealous Jewish Pharisee before his salvation. He, unlike the average unsaved person, was doing everything he could to obey God's laws, to the point of even persecuting the church! But he found that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't measure up to God's standards. He was a slave to sin. He eventually realized that he couldn't be holy without the Holy Spirit's supernatural help. Truly, there is no more wretched person than the one who is trying to live by God's standards but who is not born again!

Romans 7 "Christians"

It is to be greatly regretted, in spite of all that Jesus, John, James, Peter, Jude and Paul said that contradicts the idea that the Romans 7 man is born again, that so many today think he is. The reason is not because of the scriptural evidence for such a view, but because of the multitudes of professing Christians who identify with the Romans 7 man, practicing what they hate, in bondage to sin. They

interpret the Scripture from their experience with a logic that says, "I identify with the Romans 7 man, and I'm a Christian, so the Romans 7 man must be a Christian."

This wrong interpretation of Romans 7 bolsters the shaky and spurious faith of many, who have not yet experienced the freedom from sin's power that Paul promised in Romans 6 and 8 and personally enjoyed throughout his Christian life. This is a great tragedy in light of the wonderful grace of God that is freely available to all through Jesus Christ, if people will only come to Him on His terms, with a living, submissive faith.

Footnotes

[1] See, for example, Acts 20:24; 23:1; 1 Cor. 4:11-13, 17; 10:32-33; 2 Cor. 5:9; 6:3, 6-7; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thes. 2:3-7.

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