

# The Fleshly or Carnal Believer

by Watchman Nee

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*A fleshly believer is one who remains long as a babe in Christ and is controlled by their fleshly desires, while a spiritual believer is one who has grown in their faith and is governed by the Holy Spirit.*

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 3:1

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "The Nature of the Flesh"

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## Description

Watchman Nee addresses the condition of fleshly or carnal believers, emphasizing that many Christians, despite being filled with the Holy Spirit, remain controlled by their flesh and fail to live in the reality of Christ's death and resurrection. He points out that this state of being is not new, as evidenced by the Apostle Paul's observations of the Corinthians, who were still behaving like ordinary men due to jealousy and strife. Nee stresses the importance of spiritual growth and warns against remaining as 'babes' in Christ, urging believers to allow the Holy Spirit to lead them into a deeper spiritual life. He concludes that the flesh cannot be improved or educated; it must be put to death for true spiritual freedom to be realized.

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## Transcript

ALL BELIEVERS could, like Paul, be filled with the Holy Spirit at the moment of belief and baptism (cf. Acts 9.17-18). Unfortunately many still are controlled by the flesh as though not dead and raised up again. These have not truly believed in the accomplished fact of Christ's death and resurrection for them, nor have they sincerely acted upon the call of the Holy Spirit to follow the principle of death and resurrection. According to the finished work of Christ they have died and have been resurrected already; according to their responsibility as believers they should die to self and live to God; but in actual practice they do not do so. These believers may be considered abnormal. This abnormality is not to be understood as being limited only to our day, however. Long, long ago just such a condition among believers had confronted the Apostle Paul. The Christians at Corinth were one example. Listen to what he said of them:

But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving like ordinary men? (I Cor. 3.1-3)

Here the Apostle divides all Christians into two classes: the spiritual and the fleshly or carnal. The spiritual Christians are not at all extraordinary; they are simply normal. It is the fleshly who are out of the ordinary, because they are abnormal. Those at Corinth were indeed Christians, but they were fleshly, not spiritual.

Three times in this chapter Paul

declares they were men of the flesh. Through the wisdom given him by the Holy Spirit the Apostle was made to realize that he first must identify them before he could offer them the message they needed.

Biblical regeneration is a birth by which the innermost part of man's being, the deeply hidden spirit, is renewed and indwelt by the Spirit of God. It requires time for the power of this new life to reach the outside: that is, to be extended from the center to the circumference. Hence we cannot expect to find the strength of "the young men" nor the experience of "the fathers" manifested in the life of a child in Christ. Although a newly born believer may proceed faithfully, loving the Lord best and distinguishing himself in zeal, he still needs time for opportunities to know more of the wickedness of sin and self and occasions to know more of the will of God and the way of the spirit. However much he may love the Lord or love the truth, this new believer still walks in the realm of feelings and thoughts, not yet having been tested and refined by fire. A newly born Christian cannot help being fleshly. Though filled with the Holy Spirit, he nevertheless does not know the flesh. How can one be liberated from the works of the flesh if he does not recognize that such works spring from the flesh? In assessing their actual condition, therefore, newly born babes are generally of the flesh.

The Bible does not expect new Christians to be spiritual instantaneously; if they should remain as babes after many years, however, then their situation is indeed most pitiful. Paul himself points out to the Corinthians that he had treated them as men of the flesh earlier because they were new born babes in Christ, and, that by now-at the moment of his writing them-they certainly should be growing into manhood. They had instead frittered away their lives, remained as babes, and were thus still fleshly.

It does not necessitate as much time as we think today for one to be transformed from the fleshly into the spiritual. The believers at Corinth came out from a strictly sinful heathen background. After the lapse of only a few years the Apostle already viewed them as having been babes too long. They had been too long in the flesh, for by that time they ought to be spiritual. The purpose of Christ's redemption is to remove all hindrances to the Holy Spirit's control over the whole person so that he can be made spiritual. This redemption can never fail because the power of the Holy Spirit is superabundant. As a fleshly sinner can become a regenerated believer so a regenerated yet fleshly believer can be changed into a spiritual man. How lamentable to find modern-day Christians achieving no progress in their spiritual walk after several years, nay, even after decades. These moreover are filled with amazement if they find some who do enter upon a life of the spirit after a number of years. They consider it most unusual, not aware it is but normal the regular growth of life. How long have you believed in the Lord? Are you spiritual yet? We should not become aged babes, grieving the Holy Spirit and suffering loss ourselves. All regenerated ones should covet spiritual development, permitting the Holy Spirit to rule in every respect so that in a relatively short period He may be able to lead us into what God has provided for us. We should not waste time, making no progress.

What then are the reasons for not growing? Perhaps there are two. On the one hand, it may be due to the negligence of -those who, watching over the souls of the younger believers, may only speak to them of the grace of God and of their position in Christ but neglect to encourage them to seek spiritual experience. (Nay, those who watch over others may themselves be ignorant of life in the Spirit. How then could such ones ever lead others into more abundant life?) On the other hand, it may be because the believers themselves are not keen on spiritual affairs. Either they assume that it is sufficient enough merely to be saved or they have no spiritual appetite or they simply are unwilling to pay the price for advancement. As a

deplorable consequence the church is overstuffed with big babes.

What are the characteristics of the fleshly? Foremost among them is remaining long as babes. The duration of babyhood should not exceed a few years. When one is born anew by believing that the Son of God atoned for his sins on the cross, he simultaneously ought to believe that he has been crucified with Christ in order that the Holy Spirit may release him from the power of the flesh. Ignorance of this naturally will keep him in the flesh for many years.

The second characteristic of the fleshly is that they are unfit to absorb spiritual teaching. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready." The Corinthians grossly prided themselves on their knowledge and wisdom. Of all the churches in that period, that at Corinth was probably the most informed one. Paul early in his letter thanked God for their rich knowledge (1.5). Should Paul deliver spiritual sermons to them they could understand every word; however, all their understandings were in the mind. Although they knew everything, these Corinthians did not have the power to express in life that which they knew. Most likely there are many fleshly believers today who grasp so much so well that they can even preach to others but who are themselves yet unspiritual. Genuine spiritual knowledge lies not in wonderful and mysterious thoughts but in actual spiritual experience through union of the believer's life with truth. Cleverness is useless here, while eagerness for truth is insufficient too; the sine qua non is a path of perfect obedience to the Holy Spirit Who alone truly teaches us. All else is merely the transmission of knowledge from one mind to another. Such data will not render a fleshly person spiritual; on the contrary, his carnal walk actually will turn all his "spiritual" knowledge into that which is fleshly. What he needs is not

increased spiritual teaching but an obedient heart which is willing to yield his life to the Holy Spirit and go the way of the cross according to- the Spirit's command. Increased spiritual teaching will only strengthen his carnality and serve to deceive him into conceiving himself as spiritual.

For does he not say to himself, "How else could I possibly know so many spiritual things unless I were spiritual?" Whereas the real touchstone should be, "How much do you truly know from life or is it merely a product of the mind?" May God be gracious to us.

Paul wrote of yet another evidence of being fleshly when he affirmed that "while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving like ordinary men?" The sin of jealousy and strife is eminent proof of carnality. Dissensions were rife in the church at Corinth, as is confirmed by such declarations as "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," "I belong to Cephas," "I belong to Christ" (1 Cor. 1.12). Even those who were contending for Christ by saying "I am of Christ" were included among the fleshly, for the spirit of flesh is always and everywhere jealous and contentious. For these to hold themselves up as being of Christ, but in that attitude of spirit, is inescapably carnal. However sweet the word may sound, any sectarian boasting is but the babbling of a babe. The divisions in the church are due to no other cause than to lack of love and walking after the flesh. Such an individual, supposedly contending for the truth, is simply camouflaging the real person. The sinners of the world are men of the flesh; as such, they are not regenerated; they are therefore under the rule of their soul and body. For a believer to be fleshly signifies that he too is behaving like an ordinary man. Now it is perfectly natural for worldly people to be fleshly; it is understandable if even newly born believers are fleshly; but if, according to the years during which you have believed in the Lord you ought to be spiritual, then how can you continue to behave as an ordinary man?

It is evident that a person belongs to the flesh if he comports himself like an ordinary man and sins often. No matter how much spiritual teaching he knows or how many spiritual experiences he purports to have had or how much effective service he has rendered: none of these makes him less carnal

if he remains undelivered from his peculiar temperament, his temper, his selfishness, his contention, his vainglory, his unforgiving or unloving spirit.

To be fleshly or carnal means to behave "like ordinary men." We should ask ourselves whether or not our conduct differs very radically from ordinary men. If many worldly manners cling to your life then you are doubtless still of the flesh. Let us not argue over our being labeled as either spiritual or carnal. If we are not governed by the Holy Spirit what profit will the mere designation of spiritual be to us? This is after all a matter of life, not of title.

## THE SINS OF THE FLESH

What the Apostle was experiencing in Romans 7 was a war against the sin which abides in the body. "Sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me ... It was sin working death in me ... sold under sin ... but sin which dwells within me" (vv.11,13,14,17,20). While still in the flesh a believer often is overcome by the sin within him. Many are the battles and many, the sins committed.

The necessities of the human body may be classified into three categories: nourishment, reproduction, defense. Before man's fall these were legitimate requirements, unmixed with sin. Only after man fell into sin did these three become media for sin. In the case of nourishment, the world uses food to entice us. The first temptation of man is in this matter of food. As the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil enticed Eve, so drinking and feasting have become a sin of the flesh today. Let us not lightly regard this issue of food, for many fleshly Christians have stumbled on this point. The carnal believers at Corinth stumbled their brethren on just this matter of food. All who were therefore to be elders and deacons in those days were required to have overcome on this point (I Tim. 3.3,8). Only, the spiritual person appreciates the unprofitableness of devoting himself to eating and drinking. "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10.31).

Second, reproduction. Following the fall of man reproduction was changed into human lust. The Bible especially connects lust with the flesh. Even in the Edenic garden the sin of covetous eating immediately aroused lusts and shame. Paul puts these two together in his first letter to the Corinthians (6-13,15), and definitely relates drunkenness to unrighteousness (vv. 9-10).

Now as to defense. When sin has secured control, the body exhibits its strength in self-defense. It opposes anything which may interfere with its comfort and pleasure. What is commonly called temper and such of its fruits as anger and strife issue from the flesh and are therefore sins of the flesh. Because sin is the motivation behind self-defense, there has flowed forth directly and indirectly from it numerous transgressions. How many of the darkest sins in this world spring from self-interest, self-existence, self-glory, self-opinion, and whatsoever else there is of self.

An analysis of all the world's sins will demonstrate how they each relate to these three categories. A carnal Christian is one who is dominated by one, two, or all three of these items. While it amazes no one for a worldling to be ruled by the sin of his body, it ought to be viewed as very abnormal should a born-again Christian remain long in the flesh, fail to subdue the power of sin and live a life of ups and downs. A believer ought to allow the Holy Spirit to examine his heart and enlighten him as to what is prohibited by the law of the Holy Spirit and the law of nature, as to what hinders him from gaining temperance and self-control, and as to what rules him and deprives him of liberty in his spirit to serve God freely. Unless these sins are taken away, he cannot enter richly into spiritual life.

## THE THINGS OF THE FLESH

The flesh has many outlets. We have learned how it is hostile to God and cannot possibly please Him. Neither believer nor sinner however, can genuinely appreciate the

complete worthlessness, wickedness, and defilement of the flesh as viewed by God unless he is shown by the Holy Spirit. Only when God by His Spirit has revealed to man the true condition of the flesh as God sees it will man then deal with his flesh.

The manifestations of the flesh manward are well-known. If a person is strict with himself and refuses to follow, as he once did, "the desires of body and mind" (Eph. 2.3), he will detect easily how defiled are these manifestations. The Galatian letter of Paul gives a list of these sins of the flesh so that none can be mistaken-"Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit (literally, "sect"), envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like" (5.19-21). In this enumeration the Apostle declares that "the works of the flesh are plain." Whoever is willing to understand certainly shall recognize them. To ascertain whether one is of the

flesh, he need but inquire of himself if he is doing any of these works of the flesh. It is of course unnecessary for him to commit all in the list in order to be carnal. Were he to do merely one of them he would establish himself beyond doubt as being fleshly, for how could he do any one of them if the flesh had relinquished its rule already? The presence of a work of the flesh proves the existence of the flesh.

These works of the flesh may be divided into five groups: (1) sins which defile the body, such as immorality, impurity, licentiousness; (2) sinful supernatural communications with satanic forces, such as idolatry, sorcery; (3) sinful temper and its peculiarities, such as enmity, strife, jealousy, anger; (4) religious sects and parties, such as selfishness, dissensions, party spirit, envy; and (5) lasciviousness, such as drunkenness and carousing. Every one of these is easily observed. Those who do them are of the flesh.

In these five groups we distinguish some sins as less sinful and others as more defiling; but however we may view them, whether more ugly or more refined, God discloses that all of

them derive from one source-the flesh. Those who often commit the most defiling sins naturally know themselves as of the flesh, yet how difficult for those who triumph over these comparatively more defiling sins to acknowledge that they are carnal. They usually consider themselves superior to others and as not walking according to the flesh. They do not realize that however civilized the appearance may be, the flesh is still the flesh. "Strife, dissensions, party spirit, envy" convey a much cleaner appearance than that of "immorality, impurity, licentiousness, carousing." All nonetheless are fruits from the same tree. May we pray over these three verses until our eyes are opened to see ourselves. May we be humbled through prayer. Let us pray until we cry with many tears and mourn for our sins, until we know that we are only in name Christians-even "spiritual" Christians, but that our actual walk continues to be replete with the works of the flesh. May we pray until our hearts are aflame, willing to remove every carnal element.

The first step in the work of the Holy Spirit is to convince and convict us of our sins. As without the illumination of the Holy Spirit a sinner initially will never see the sinfulness of his sin and flee from the coming wrath into the obedience of Christ, so a believer subsequently needs to see his sin a second time. A Christian ought to blame himself for his sin. How can he ever become spiritual if he does not discern the utter wickedness and despicability of his flesh, so that he even abhors himself! Oh, in whatever way it may be that we sin, our belonging to the flesh remains the same. Now is the hour we should humbly prostrate ourselves before God, willing to be convicted afresh of our sins by the Holy Spirit.

## THE NECESSITY FOR DEATH

To the degree that a believer is enlightened by the Holy Spirit into apprehending something of the pitiful condition of being fleshly, to that extent will his struggle with the flesh be intensified; and more often will be manifested his failures. In defeat he will be shown more of the sin and frailty of his

flesh in order that he may be aroused to an increased indignation at himself and an ardent determination to contend with the sin of his flesh. Such a chain reaction may extend protractedly until at last, through experiencing the deeper work of the cross, he is delivered. That the Holy Spirit should lead us in just this way is truly fraught with meaning. Before the cross can do its deeper work there must be an adequate preparation. Struggle and failure supply just that.

Apropos the believer's experience, although he may agree mentally with God's estimate of the flesh that it is corrupted to the core and irredeemable, he nevertheless may lack that clear spiritual insight which accurately appreciates the defilement and corruptness of the flesh. He may suppose what God says to be

true. But though the believer still would never say so, he still tries to tinker with his flesh.

Many believers, ignorant of the salvation of God, attempt to conquer the flesh by battling it. They hold that victory depends upon the measure of power they have. These therefore earnestly anticipate God will grant them increased spiritual power to enable them to subdue their flesh. This battle normally extends over a long period, marked by more defeats than victories, until finally it seems complete victory over the flesh is unrealizable.

During this time the believer continues on the one hand to wage war and on the other to try improving or disciplining his flesh. He prays, he searches the Bible, he sets up many rules ("do not handle, do not taste, do not touch") in the vain hope of subduing and taming the flesh. He unwittingly tumbles into the trap of treating the evil of the flesh as due to the lack of rules, education and civilization. If only he could give his flesh some spiritual training, thinks he, he will be freed from its trouble. He does not comprehend that such treatment is useless (Col. 2.21-23).

Because of the Christian's confusion in apparently desiring the destruction of the flesh while concurrently trying to refine it, the Holy Spirit must allow him to strive, to be defeated, and then to stiffer under self-accusation. Only after

he has had this experience over and over again will the believer realize that the flesh is irredeemable and his method futile. He then will search out another kind of salvation. Thus he now has come to appreciate in his experience what before he merely came to know in his mind.

If a child of God faithfully and honestly believes in God and sincerely entreats the Holy Spirit to reveal God's holiness to him so that he may know his flesh in that light, the Spirit certainly will do so. Henceforth he may perhaps be spared many sufferings. But such believers are few. Most trust in their own method, assuming that they are not that bad after all. In order to correct this incorrect assumption, the Holy Spirit patiently leads believers into experiencing little by little the futility of their own devices.

We have observed that we cannot yield to the flesh; nor can we repair, regulate, or educate it, because none of our methods can ever alter in the slightest the nature of the flesh. What then can be done? The flesh must die. This is God's way. Not through any other avenue but death is it to be. We would prefer to tame the flesh by striving, by changing it, by exercising the will, or by innumerable other means; but God's prescription is death. If the flesh is dead, are not all problems automatically solved? The flesh is not to be conquered; it is to die. This is most reasonable when considered in relation to how we became flesh in the first place: "that which is born of the flesh is flesh." We became flesh by being born of it. Now the exit simply follows the entrance. The way of possessing is the way of losing. Since we became flesh by being born of the flesh, it naturally follows that we shall be freed from it if the flesh dies. Crucifixion, is the one and only way. "For he who has died is freed from sin" (Rom. 6.7). Anything less than death is insufficient. Death is the only salvation.

The flesh is most defiled (2 Peter 2.10-22); God accordingly does not attempt to change it. There is no method of deliverance other than to put it to death. Even the precious blood of the Lord Jesus cannot cleanse the flesh. We find in

the Bible how His blood washes our sin but never washes our flesh. It must be crucified (Gal. 5.24). The Holy Spirit can not reform the flesh; therefore He will not dwell in the midst of sinful flesh. His abiding in the believer is not for the purpose of improving, but for warring against, the flesh (Gal. 5.17). "It (the holy

anointing oil which is a type of the Holy Spirit) shall not be poured upon the bodies of ordinary men" (Ex. 30.32). If such be the case, how absurd for us frequently to pray that the Lord will make us good and loving so that we may serve Him! How vain is that hope which aims at a holy position some day wherein we may be daily with the Lord and are able to glorify Him in all things! Indeed, we should never attempt to repair the flesh in order to make it cooperate with the Spirit of God. The flesh is ordained to death. Only by consigning the flesh to the cross may we be liberated from being enslaved permanently by it.

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