

Dealing with the Flesh

“We aren’t glorified yet!”

This simple admission describes a profound tension Christ-followers experience in our walk with Jesus. We know we belong to God. We want to be good and to do good, and yet, we keep stumbling over temptation and sin.

We still feel the tugs of greed and envy; anger and meanness; arrogance and pride, laziness and gluttony. Our lusts and passions still wage war with our souls. Harsh words, and gossip and slander linger on our tongues.

We aren’t glorified yet. And that tension both grieves and confuses us. We wish we were better than we are and sometimes we aren’t sure of a path forward.

The Apostle Paul identified with our experience. In his own confession he wrote this: “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Romans 7:18-23 ESV).

Can I get an “Amen”? We aren’t glorified yet.

As believers in Jesus, we have been mercifully and graciously forgiven, accepted, washed clean, and given new life. God’s Spirit has taken up residence in our inner person giving us new desires, new capacities, fresh perspectives. But something of our old self lingers and causes us to be endlessly conflicted.

So we can say, on the one hand, we are forgiven, holy, justified and heaven bound, and at the same time, we aren't glorified yet. We are neither the old person we used to be, nor the perfect person we one day will be. It's not hypocrisy, pretending to be something we're not. We're simply not yet as we should be. And in this present moment, we aren't always sure about how to come to terms with those not-yet-glorified parts of ourselves.

It is this very issue Paul takes up in the middle of his letter to the Colossians: How do we deal with those sinful inclinations that still plague us? In chapter two, Paul wrote: "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been *filled* in him, who is the head of all rule and authority" (Colossians 2:9-10). Some translations render verse 10: "...in Him you have been made complete..." (NAS).

If we are complete in him, how is it that we're still not glorified? How do we cope with sin that even yet attaches itself to us?

This issue is where the false teachers in Colosse claimed to offer their most compelling insights.

The Bible describes those sinful parts of us in a couple of ways. Sometimes it talks about our "old man," or "old self." **This represents all that we were "in Adam."** Adam is the old man—all of humanity defined by our participation in Adam's sin. When we were born again by God's Spirit, we were joined to Christ. He is the "new man" in whom we have our new identity. We are either "in Adam" or "in Christ."

But the Bible also describes our sinful nature with the term *flesh*. Before we came to Christ, we were spiritually dead, cut off from the life of God and non-responsive to God. All we had was our physical bodies interacting with this physical world. As embodied souls, we sought to define ourselves and satisfy ourselves in the context what lay immediately around us: this physical world. It was the most natural thing in the world for us to seek the only pleasures available with what our bodies could enjoy on this earth. It's all we had.

The result, as Paul reminds us: "...we all once lived in the passions of our *flesh*, carrying out the desires of the *body* and the mind..." (Ephesians 2:3 ESV).

We're still in these bodies of flesh and bones. So it was quite reasonable for the biblical writers to use the term 'flesh' as a metaphor for the location of sinfulness in our nature.

Paul wasn't saying that our physical bodies are sinful or evil in and of themselves, or that there is something inherently wrong with our bodies. That has been an all too common misunderstanding. Rather, he intends for us to understand that by satiating our physical, bodily appetites in a vain attempt to satisfy the longings of our soul, we are, as he wrote, "...[living] in the passions of our *flesh*, carrying out the desires of the *body* and the mind..."

We reflexively want what we want and so we indulge the desires of our minds and physical appetites through our bodies. As expressive individualists we feel the freedom to use our bodies and our environments to create a personal universe of one. We call ourselves brave and heroic for crafting our own identify—"You do you!"

As a result, our bodies developed a kind of soul-body muscle-memory, reflexively responding as if by habit to the temptations of our self-made worlds and self-focused desires.

No wonder "the flesh" becomes a way of talking about our sinful natures. God gave us bodies to be vehicles for expressing our inner selves. Because of our inner commitment to our own selves, we use these bodies not to honor and please our Creator, but to satisfy and please ourselves.

The answer of the false teachers to our struggles with the flesh was to devote all their energies to subduing it. They taught that the way to handle our sinful nature—our fleshly desires—was to crush it with stern measures: fasting, strict rules for living the way a Christian should, and severe disciplines.

Their heirs are legion, even in our own day.

Paul takes us in a very different direction. He will say that this kind of rules-based approach simply is inadequate—it doesn't work. We need rather to invest ourselves in understanding and living into what God has done for us in Christ.

This is the burden on Paul's heart as he writes beginning in Colossians 2:6, and on through the middle of chapter 4. We're breaking it up into bite sized pieces, but we need to remember the thread that ties all this together. Let me encourage you to spend some time reading through this larger context as we move through this material.

Turn to Colossians 2:11 and listen to Paul's words: "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:11-12).

These two verses sound strange to us. Paul refers to a Jewish rite, circumcision, given to God's covenant people as a sign in their flesh marking them as God's own. He applies it to us in ways that seem confusing. What is Paul talking about when he refers to the circumcision of Christ and the putting off of the body of flesh? Why does he relate it so closely to baptism? And what in the world does this have to do with our struggles with sin?

Let's think our way through this.

Circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of the covenant God made with his people. The cutting away of a piece of Abraham's flesh was intended to signify Abraham's separation from his old life, and his separation unto God. The rite was performed in the flesh of every Jewish male but it pointed to a deeper work God desired in the hearts of his covenant people.

Moses explained that deeper work this way: "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deuteronomy 30:6 ESV).

This is something Israel often failed to understand. They emphasized the necessity of the physical act, neglecting the heart work God desired.

That's why, for instance, God, through the Prophet, Jeremiah, pled with his people: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds" (Jeremiah 4:4 ESV).

God's wasn't looking for superficial, outward changes but a deeper heart transformation.

When Jesus came, he consistently directed people's attention to the heart obedience and heart righteousness God always sought. And by what he did in his death on the cross and his resurrection, Jesus accomplished everything necessary to provide that heart righteousness for us and restore us to the Father. In him, our self-seeking and wrongdoing were condemned and the penalty paid in full.

As a result, by faith in Jesus, we are made new: forgiven, reconciled to God, free from condemnation, free from the domination of our old sinful selves, and free to pursue obedience to God from the heart. By faith in Jesus, we have been united with him in such a way that his death for sin became our death—our deadly offenses against God have been judged and their sentence carried out. There is therefore no longer any condemnation. **All that we used to be went into the grave with Jesus and we have been raised with him into new life.**

Listen to how Paul describes this to the church in Rome: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our **old self** was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin" (Romans 6:3-7 ESV).

There's just a ton of stuff here, but pour all of this understanding into our verses from Colossians 2: "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead."

We have been buried with Jesus in his death and raised with Jesus in his resurrection. We are people who have new life in Jesus: we are in Jesus and Jesus is in us by his Holy Spirit. By his Spirit, Jesus empowers us to live into our new identity as sons and daughters of God.

So how does baptism figure into all of this? Some teach that all the benefits of salvation become ours at the moment of our actual immersion in water. They point to verses like this one to demonstrate the necessity of baptism as the act that *completes* our salvation.

We believe baptism is an outward act looking back on the inward connection with Jesus that took place at the moment we placed our faith in Jesus. We were united with Jesus, immersed in Jesus in his death and resurrection. Since salvation is solely by grace, through faith, we believe baptism is our public witness to what Jesus has done; our public confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Then why does Paul make it sound like our union with Jesus takes place when we are immersed in Baptism?

Paul is using baptism here as a figure of speech known as *metonymy*. Metonymy is a verbal shorthand in which a part of a thing represents the larger reality. It's one way we use language to communicate.

For instance, we often refer to 'Washington' as verbal shorthand for our entire federal government; or "the White House" as symbolizing the President and his staff. When we say that Washington is in chaos, we're saying that our national government from the top down is dysfunctional.

That's metonymy: a part speaks for the whole.

Coming to faith can be described many ways. Some years back I went to Minsk, Belarus to teach the Bible to some Belorussian students training for ministry. While I was there I heard believers talk about when they “repented.” I had to ask what they meant. They used “repentance” in the same way we talk about our conversion.

Repentance, conversion, faith, accepting Christ, coming to Christ, putting our faith in Christ, being forgiven—these are all words we associate with our salvation experience. Baptism is too, especially in the early church. They couldn’t conceive of an un-baptized believer. The concept would have been an oxymoron.

Because we are careful to teach that baptism does not save us, but looks back on our salvation, we sometimes separate baptism too much from conversion. In the New Testament era baptism was a significant *first step* of obedience in which believers publicly identified with Jesus.

In this way, Paul uses baptism as metonymy, verbal shorthand for our entire salvation experience. This is especially apt since baptism pictures for us a burial and resurrection. We are immersed into Christ’s death and burial and emerge as those who desire to live a new life: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4 ESV).

This is why in Colossians, Paul pointedly underscores our separation from our old life. “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.”

So the Christian life is a resurrection life. We are a people whose old sinful natures have been robbed of their dominating power. We have been made new and given something new in Jesus. We are still in the flesh—our old sinful nature is still part of who we are—but it is no longer in charge and that’s no longer all we are: merely flesh. We have been raised to new life in the Spirit by our resurrection with Jesus.

We are, as Paul would say to the Philippians: "...the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh..." (Philippians 3:3 ESV).

This has profound implications for how we come to terms with those sinful parts of our very selves. Since we died with Jesus and Jesus stripped away from us the domination of our old sinful natures, spending all of our energies trying to discipline the flesh and subdue it with ascetic practices is literally beating a dead horse. We are focusing on exactly the wrong thing entirely.

For instance, if I told you, "Don't think about chocolate," what's the first thing you begin to think about? Spend all your energy trying to crush the flesh and you will be obsessed with the flesh.

Paul will say at the end of the chapter, that kind of approach, promoted by the false teachers, has "...no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."

Simply put, you don't overcome your sinful nature by investing all of your attention on your sinful nature.

Then what do we do? How do we cope with our not-yet-glorified selves? We will pick this up again next week in verses 12-15 as Paul continues to unpack the benefits of our faith in Christ. It is one of my favorite parts of Colossians and I can't wait to explore it with you.

Benediction:

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14).