

Which side are you on?

Part of an article "[Leaving Despair and Entering Joyful Perseverance](#)"

A new Spirit in an old body

Thru Christ, God's Spirit enters into us and regenerates our hearts (Ezekiel 36:26-27). We are born-again and have new affections for the LORD and His laws. We are restored to God and freed from sin's domain.

However, at this point in God's plan of redemption, our flesh remains unregenerate, and we live life with sin-impacted bodies in an evil environment.

When I use the term flesh, I am speaking about more than our physical bodies. The flesh is the part of us that is not transformed by God. Our flesh can include our will, mind, thought patterns, and emotions, just to name a few.

Whatever weakens your reasoning, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes away your relish for spiritual things, in short – if anything increases the authority and the power of the flesh over the Spirit, that to you becomes sin, however, good it is in itself. – Susanna Wesley, mother to John and Charles Wesley

The Holy Spirit's presence initiates an internal confrontation with our flesh, resulting in a spiritual battle within (Galatians 5:7; 2 Corinthians 10:3-6).

Unfortunately for many Christians, the presence of this conflict becomes a stumbling block to their faith. Conflict and Christianity don't seem like they belong together because we are called to be holy (1 Peter 1:16), equipped to live godly lives (2 Peter 1:3), and destined to perform good works (Ephesians 2:10).

To come to grips with this tension, we must examine two things: (1) our view of this conflict and (2) how we align ourselves with each side.

The nature of our conflict

Given our victory over sin and our call to holiness, many Christians believe righteousness is the proper context for a healthy Christian life. The spirit-flesh conflict is considered to diminish over time as one matures in Christ.

The Christian gauges success on (1) the level of righteousness achieved or (2) how our flesh behaves itself. This way of gauging turns our focus toward sin, leading to a performance-based faith.

To have a more accurate view, we must remember our flesh is not redeemed. It is still cursed, and its character does not change. If anything, its nature grows more evil (Proverbs 6:18).

Additionally, as we grow and see God's holiness more clearly, we will begin to understand our flesh is more depraved than we ever imagined. Thus, the life of a Christian is not characterized by righteousness, but one of conflict.

As believers, we are no longer dominated by sin, nor are we

governed by righteousness. Conflict dominates us.

Our first birth was into sin, our second birth into righteousness. Our first birth was physical; our next birth is spiritual. Our first birth made us sinners until we leave this world. Our second birth makes us righteous and fit for the world to come. We are then the product of these two births. We live two lives melded into one. And that is the source of our conflict – John MacArthur

This conflict should not lead one to question their faith. Experiencing this tension should provide assurance of faith.

Our hearts now love God and His ways, but we find ourselves struggling to behave accordingly. This experience is familiar to Christians. Paul and David expressed these lamentations (Romans 7:14-25; Psalm 119:176).

Which side are you on?

As with any conflict, we typically identify ourselves with one side or the other, but what about this one? In a sense, we are on both sides, often referred to as sinners-saints.

The sinner-saint label can lead us to think our true identity is a blend of the flesh and spirit. As such, sanctification becomes a process where this ratio moves from predominantly fleshly to mainly spiritual.

Since we feel the pull of both sides, our experience lines up with this thinking, but is this view the most accurate one? We must think very carefully about this, for as we think within ourselves, so are we. (See Proverbs 23:7)

The problem with this dual identity viewpoint is that it grounds our identity in our first birth. We still see ourselves in-Adam with the goal of changing as we learn to become more spiritual.

If our focus is on sin, we are in an unfortunate position to respond correctly. For example, when sin is not present, we feel good about our progress; we gain confidence in our flesh, and we can drift into self-righteousness.

When we do see our sin, we tend to hold onto it too tightly. We condemn ourselves for lack of Christian growth, and experience shame and guilt.

Because we can act as though we base our relationship with God on our performance, we are reluctant to turn to Him, leaving our souls to feel the full weight of our sin. This wrong approach leaves us hurt and tempted.

Additionally, this dual identity maintains an unhealthy relationship with our flesh, which is always close by and has an equal voice at the table. Its desires mix into our thinking and tempt our vulnerable souls.

A better view

When we think about ourselves, we must place more weight on God's work in us rather than Adam's curse on us. Yes, we still live in our flesh and should grieve over our sin, but our sin-nature is no longer our truest identity. We are an entirely different type of creature compared to our old selves.

We are new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

We are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit (Romans 8:9).

We are born again with purified souls (1 Peter 1:22-23).

We are children of God (1 John 3:1).

We must remember the purpose of our salvation is not for our flesh to behave and flourish in God's fallen creation, but for us to become restored worshippers (John 4:23).

As new creations, we must disconnect ourselves from our flesh. Just as we are called to live as aliens in this world (John 15:18-19), we must also see our flesh as a foreign intrusion into our new lives.

Detached from our humanity, we start to loosen our attachments to this world (Philippians 3:12-14), and its pleasures begin to fade. The knowledge of what is to come softens the brokenness of this world (Romans 8:18).

We have freedom from the physical cravings of our bodies and gain a position to properly steward them for service unto the LORD (Romans 12:1).

We now process sin through a Gospel lens. We recognize and own the depravity of our flesh without burdening our souls. In secular terms, we can own our depravity without lowering our self-esteem.

We interpret a guilty conscience as a loving God graciously warning us of potential harm. With no condemnation (Romans 8:1), we are free to confess our sins and repent (1 John 1:8-9).

As we separate from our flesh, we can see its complete spiritual bankruptcy. We rightly recognize how we are capable of committing great sins, and thus lose all confidence in ourselves. We develop a healthy suspicion of our hearts while looking for ways our flesh attempts to impose its will on us.

Our spiritual bankruptcy evokes an ongoing attitude of the “poor in spirit” mindset, which is the entrance into walking in the Spirit (Matthew 5:3). Having an “in Christ” mindset positions us to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

The path of joyful perseverance

At the beginning of this article, I spoke of the two paths that Christians find themselves on when struggling with the brokenness of life: the first is one of despair and the second is joyful perseverance.

Those who believe their identity still lies in Adam will likely head down the path of despair. An Adamic-driven focus is on the flesh and sins.

Their vulnerable souls will miss the opportunity to draw close to God and receive His transformation. They will seek changes in their circumstances as a way to pull out of their tailspin. Their spiritual life will waver.

Those who believe their identity is now in Christ will head towards joyful perseverance. Their focus will be on their eternal life and the joy of living as children of God.

They minister to broken souls by spiritual means that do not require

fleshly solutions. When troubled, they can reorient their minds back to the Gospel so they can joyfully persevere, while also serving others.

It takes faith to transition our thinking towards our new identity, and it takes time too. Our new identity requires us to die to ourselves while turning away from fleshly idols.

Many times these idols and thought processes have deep roots. They are always self-reliant attempts to protect us from the evils of this world. Our man-made solutions seem to offer so much, but we must remember they have broken cisterns (Jeremiah 2:13).

While living in the modern world and experiencing the many blessings of God's common grace, we often fail to recognize the true nature of this world. It is cursed and ensconced in a conflict between good and evil.

In many ways, it is similar to the mythological setting J. R. Tolkien created in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* novels. We are just like the characters in the books, too weak in ourselves (flesh) to do right and resist evil, but blessed with an external grace.

Instead of giving into moral cynicism, we must recognize we are in a spiritual battle where our actions matter. We must continue to fight the good fight of faith (1 Timothy 6:12) and remain strong in the Lord (Ephesians 6:10-12). We can achieve this kind of faith if our identity is in Christ (John 15:5).

Which side are you on?

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