

Living a holy life : spiritual balance, faith and self-control

This is the substance of a letter to a correspondent seeking to grow in grace and fight sin; someone who was anxious to escape legalism.

Background

When you were born again you had no impression of an obvious change in your life; you did not grow two heads or change the colour of your skin. There was a change in sensibilities, desires and attitudes but there was no physical evidence that you were now a new type of human being. Yet Scripture tells us that we were born again as a new creation, a new type of being, one that is in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). However, you also continued to sin, despite this new nature; indeed anyone who denies this is a liar (1 Jn 1:8, 10); yet the new nature is constituted in holiness (Eph 4:24; 1 Jn 3:6-7). How does all this make sense?

The reason is that the Christian now has two natures, the old man which is his sinful, Adamic, natural life; and the new man which is the new nature, Christ dwelling in the believer's spirit that was once dead to God. When you were born again you were given a new spirit and a new heart, but not a new soul (which is the organ of personality, the mind, emotions and will; Ezek 11:1, 18:31, 36:26). The soul, or personality, is a neutral vessel which assumes the character of that which drives it. The heart is the controlling centre of the man, situated at the junction of the soul and the spirit (Heb 4:12). When the soul follows the voice of God in the renewed human spirit via the heart, it manifests the character of Christ; when it listens to the temptations of Satan in the old nature it becomes flesh and lusts after sin. The progress of sanctification regards the battle in the soul about which will be revealed: the Spirit or the flesh. The winning of this battle is called the salvation of the soul and it is gradual and determined by our choices (1 Pt 1:8-9, 22; Heb 10:39; Jm 1:21). This is why we are told that we must guard our heart:

Keep [lit. guard, watch over] your heart with all diligence, for out of it *spring* the issues of life.
Prov 4:23

To live a holy life we must guard our heart, and this means ensuring that our soul is directed wisely, that our personality reflects God's will. To do this means first that we must not live from our old nature but from our new nature, manifesting God's Spirit in the new man. This is living a spiritual life, not a fleshly life.

Self Control

Self-control is vital in order to grow in grace. There are no short cuts and no mystical ways to ascend to a more holy life – it involves struggle and battles. Those who teach that there is some mystical experience, or piece of special knowledge, that will suddenly make one more holy forever are lying. [People who teach such things include Wesleyan perfectionists; many Holiness teachers; and many Higher Life preachers.] Any kind of passivity or mysticism is dangerous; holiness involves activity. While faith is vital, it has to be accompanied by determination, self-control and effort. There is no magic bullet; no situation where a sudden glimpse of faith makes holy living easy.

Note:

Striving against sin. Heb 12:4

Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ ... striving together for the faith of the gospel. Phil 1:27

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. 1 Cor 10:14

Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. 2 Tim 2:22

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 2 Tim 4:7

Hold fast to my name, and [do] not deny my faith. Rev 2:13

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. Rev 12:11

These show that living a holy life is no picnic and involves striving, self-denial, and self-control. However, these must be based upon the truth of God's word and must be acting upon grace not human strength. Christians do not exercise self-control because they are Stoics but because they have a new nature.

Faith

Firstly, the Christian life is to be lived by faith; whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. Our best efforts are only sin; our best self-control is only sin – without faith.

The just shall live by faith. Rm 1:17

But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *he does not eat* from faith; for whatever *is* not from faith is sin. Rm 14:23

So, any effort towards doing right that is not based upon faith but upon dogged strength of character will fail; otherwise holiness would depend upon the strength of human character and would vary from person to person.

Biblical self-control is a fruit not a work

We must notice that the self-control demanded of the believer is not from the strength of the old nature, which grows in corruption, but is a fruit of the Spirit in the new man.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. Gal 5:22-23

Self-control emanating from the flesh, the strength of the old nature, is under law and is not spiritual. It will not achieve God's righteousness, and perfection is what we are called to (though never attain to in this life):

As He who called you *is* holy, you also be holy in all *your* conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.' And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay *here* in fear. 1 Pt 1:15-17

Note that we conduct our lives in fear of God; we need to take care over how we behave. Thus we must use God's grace by faith to live a holy life, not the strength of the flesh.

The need to understand our dying with Christ

Since we must undercut human strength and ability to live right, we must first learn how to do this. Paul explains this in Romans 6

1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?

2 Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

3 Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death?

4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be *in the likeness of His* resurrection,

6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with *Him*, that the body of sin might be done away with [lit. 'made unemployed' it is not destroyed until the Second Coming], that we should no longer be slaves of sin.

7 For he who has died has been freed from sin.

8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him,

9 knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him.

10 For *the death* that He died, He died to sin once for all; but *the life* that He lives, He lives to God.

11 Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.

Only after explaining our death and resurrection with Christ does Paul demand that we use self-control to live right and refuse lust. We must walk in newness of life, resurrection life, not the old life's strivings. Freedom from sin arises from death, not personal effort. After reckoning on our death we can live unto God, but not before.

Our old man/nature was crucified with Christ and we were given a new nature, which lives with Christ and sits with Christ in heavenly places (Eph 2:6) in glory (Rm 8:30). It is the new man in our spirit which makes us spiritual people (1 Cor 2:15, 3:1; Gal 6:1). The battle and struggle in our lives is not with the outside but the inside; it is between our old and new nature. Living in the new nature is the same as abiding in Christ, living by faith, walking in the Spirit, putting on the new man, putting on the armour of God etc. Each item illustrates the point from a slightly different perspective to enable different people to see the facts. It is of first importance that we learn how to put off the old nature, reckoning it to be dead to us (as the world is dead to us) so that we are alive to God and live by grace. Read this passage several times to see what Paul is saying.

The battle for righteousness is the inward struggle of faith to consider your old life dead and to walk in newness of life; to die to the flesh and to walk in the Spirit.

For this reason Paul continually insists that we:

Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. Eph 4:22-24

The renewing of the spirit of your mind is the effect of receiving the truth which helps us learn more about how to live right, how to put on the new man. Truth renews us. Renewal and resurrection are key issues in living righteously since the power to do right comes from God's Spirit in the new man, resurrection life. Righteous living arises from a putting off and a putting on by faith, a renewal of spirit, walking in the new man in righteousness

(Eph 6:11; Rm 13:14; Gal 3:27; Col 3:9-10). Striving in the old man is doomed since the old man only ever gets worse and grows in corruption.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. Rm 8:5-8

The mind that is set on the flesh, i.e. where the old nature controls the person, cannot please God and produces death, i.e. dead works. Dead works are something we are supposed to have left behind in our repentance (Heb 6:1, 9:14). An example of dead works and a dead testimony is the church at Sardis:

And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, 'These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God."' Rev 3:1-2

The fleshly mind is the enemy of God; no fleshly works can please God. Those who honour the Lord are those who live according to the Spirit, who are spiritually minded; who live a resurrected life in Christ. It is only spiritually minded people who can praise God in pain, submit to the Lord in deep suffering, trust that God works all things for good when under attack and be joyful and long-suffering in weakness and tribulation. Righteous living is super-human and not the fruit of human self-effort.

This is the background to Paul's elegy about love in 1 Corinthians 13. The good works that Paul describes are all of no value if they are not done in love. We could say that here 'love' is the same as saying 'in Christ' since God is love. If love, or the Spirit of Christ, is not at the source of our actions, then no matter how seemingly good the action, it is of no spiritual value. It is the heart motivation that determines whether an action is good or not (Matt 12:35; Rm 6:17; Eph 6:6; 1 Tim 1:5). This is the reason why all the good works of sinners are merely sin and not good; not even their honest daily work is of value to God (Prov 21:4) because the root of their lives is not holy, is not spiritual, is not Christ, is not love. [This is one reason why the idea of Common Grace is fallacious.]

The outward work is no determination of whether something is spiritual and good; the fleshly mind cannot please God and only deserves condemnation. Only what arises from the Spirit of God, through the human spirit and heart, is of value. Thus a person can be a famous preacher, have a large church, have thousands that listen to his every word, have an honoured reputation, do great impressive works, and yet at the end of his life be found wanting so that Christ could say, 'I never knew you; depart from me' (Matt 7:23).

Resurrection life

Thus Paul's goal was to live a perfectly resurrected life where his old nature never appeared at all (a goal impossible to fully attain in this life as he explains in Rm 7):

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended. Phil 3:10-13

Only by being conformed to Christ's death (dying to our old nature) can we be conformed to his life. It is not by self-effort from the old nature but faith that God has undermined the

principle of the flesh in my life. Attaining the resurrection of the dead does not mean being saved, since Paul was assured of his crown. The Greek word is 'out-resurrection', meaning that Paul wanted to see Christ resurrected out of his life continually, every moment. So that Paul's old nature was not seen but Christ was revealed through Paul. He mentions this in another context:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the *grace* of God; for if righteousness *comes* through the law, then Christ died in vain. Gal 2:20-21

The goal is that it is no longer I who live in my old nature, but because I have died to this nature I can now live as Christ leads; Christ lives in me by his Spirit and directs my actions. As a result of my faith that God's word is true, that my old nature has died with Christ and has been rendered useless, I can trust in his grace and his Spirit to direct me to do that which I could not have done before. Thus I can rejoice in my sufferings, for instance.

The flesh is ruled by law, the old man is under law, the law was made for sinners not the righteous (1 Tim 1:9). Grace comes where law has been cancelled (Heb 8:13) and where new life in Christ resides – i.e. in the New Covenant (i.e. in Christ's death and resurrection). Where a person trusts in God's word that the old nature is dead, the Spirit gives grace to live right and produces the spiritual fruit of self-control. There is no spiritual blessing on the works of the flesh, only on the works of faith by the Spirit. Those in the Spirit then fulfil the Law of Christ (Gal 6:2).

The righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Rm 8:4

Those who teach that we live a holy life merely by rigorous self-effort, strenuously following the Mosaic Law, without any application of faith in the truths of Romans 6, will lead pointless lives in the old nature; doomed to failure and frustration. The law is not of faith (Gal 3:12) and righteousness does not come from its fleshly observance (Gal 2:21). Fulfilling the moral law, the law of Christ as the standard, is only achievable through putting off the old man, putting on the new man and walking in the Spirit.

The command of Jesus

Thus Jesus puts self-denial in the context of dying (carry cross, like a grain of wheat etc.). Seven times in the Gospels he mentions carrying the cross (dying) in order to be a true disciple (Matt 10:38-39, 16:24-25; Mk 8:34-35, 10:21; Lk 9:23-24, 14:26-27; Jn 12:24-25). We cannot follow Christ without dying to ourselves and the world. The mistake legalists make is that they simply apply self-control out of their own normal strength of character. Those who teach this find that some are able to comply (who have strong characters) while others keep failing (who have weaker characters). This is not the answer. The beginning of discipleship is dying to ourselves.

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Jn 12:24-25

But how do we walk in the Spirit?

Having observed all that I have explained above, we can walk in the Spirit continually; but if we fall and sin we have an advocate with the Father and can be restored through confession and repentance, fresh obedience (1 Jn 1:9, 2:1).

We walk in the Spirit in this way:

- We need to understand God's word (as the Scriptures expounded herewith) and obey it.
- We must recognise our great need of grace and spiritual help. We must be dependent people, absolutely reliant upon God and not ourselves, recognising that we are poor in spirit by nature.
- We must believe what God says. We must consider ourselves dead to the old man and alive in the new man; thus we put off what is characteristic of the old nature and put on Christ. For instance: if we were impatient and angry before conversion, we must now cease being so. This is not possible by human effort but it is if we consider that the anger is part of that which is dead in us; we are dead to anger and then we appropriate grace by the Spirit to put on the patience of Christ. As we trust in God's provision, we will receive it; if we struggle and strive to be less angry without prior faith, we will fail.
- Pray daily to be filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18). Expect to receive his grace.
- Refuse to walk in the flesh, and then walk in the Spirit (Rm 8:1, 4). Paul gives lists occasionally of what the flesh is like (e.g. Gal 5:19-21 – notice that this includes heresies, envy, anger and partying as well as murder and adultery), this is what should be avoided. As we walk in the Spirit we will automatically fulfil the law of Christ (Rm 8:4).
- As we walk in the Spirit we will not fulfil the lusts of the flesh (Gal 5:16).
- We must refuse to tolerate any sin, no matter how small or brief and we must keep swift accounts by confessing known sins.
- Walking in the Spirit is thus relying upon the Spirit of God to guide us, lead us and empower us, as we do not trust ourselves.

The same can be said of putting on Christ or abiding in Christ, or living by faith.

To live a holy life we must be Biblical and put first things first; the truth makes us free.

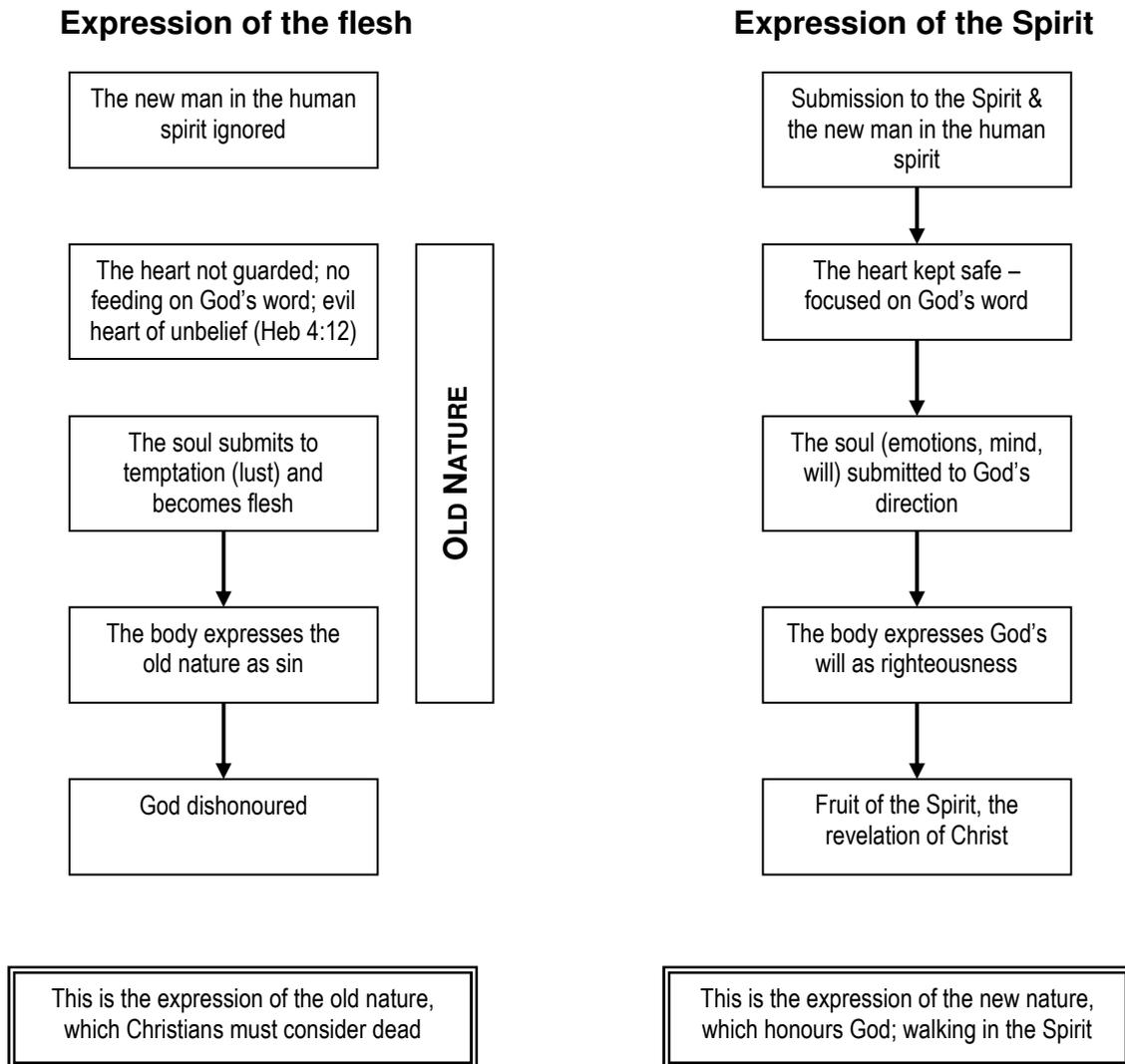
I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do *them*. Ezek 36:27

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Figure One

A diagram showing the difference between righteous and fleshly decisions in Christians



But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to *fulfil its* lusts. Rm 13:14