

## **THE BOASTINGS OF THE FLESH**

### **THE OTHER ASPECT OF THE FLESH**

Do the aforementioned items include all the works of the flesh? Besides these, are there any more works of the flesh? Is the flesh no longer active under the power of the cross? What has been said earlier mainly stresses the aspect of the sins of the flesh, that is, the lusts of the human body, but not yet the other aspect of the flesh. We have stated before that the flesh includes the works of the soul and the lusts of the body. Concerning the body, we have already had a thorough discussion. However, we have not spoken clearly concerning the soul. As to the body, the believer should be rid of all its defiling sins; as to the works of the soul, which are no less corrupt in God's eyes than those of the body, the believer should also reject them.

According to the Bible, the works of the "flesh" are divided into two kinds (although both are the works of the flesh): the unrighteous and the self-righteous. The flesh begets not only sins but also righteousness. The flesh is not only vile but can also be quite noble. The flesh not only has lusts but also good thoughts. This is what we shall consider now.

The Bible uses the word flesh as a designation of man's corrupted nature or life—the soul and the body. When God created man, He put the soul between the spirit and the body, that is, between what is divine or spiritual and what is sensual or physical. The responsibility of the soul is to blend the spirit and the body, giving each its proper place and enabling them to communicate with each other so that through this perfect harmony man may ultimately have the oneness of the spirit and the body. However, the soul, yielding to the temptations that arise from the senses, escapes from the authority of the spirit and comes under the control of the body. These two—the soul and the body—are then joined together to become "flesh." The flesh is not only "without the spirit," but also opposes the spirit. The Bible says, "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit" (Gal. 5:17).

The opposition of the flesh to the spirit and the Holy Spirit is of two sides. When the flesh commits sins, rebels against God, and breaks the law of God, it is clearly opposed to the spirit. When the flesh performs good deeds, obeys God, and does the will of God, it is also at enmity with the spirit. Since the "body" part of the flesh is naturally filled with sin and lust, when it expresses itself, it commits a multitude of sins and grieves the Holy Spirit. However, the "soul" part of the flesh is not as defiling as the body. The soul is the principle by which man lives; it is also his very self which is composed of the faculties of his will, mind, and emotion. From the viewpoint of man, the works of the soul may not be altogether defiling. The soul focuses only on one's own ideas, thoughts, preferences, and feelings. Its works may not altogether be the committing of defiling sins; it only centers upon the self. Independence and self-support are the characteristics of the works of the soul. Even though the conduct of this part of the flesh is not as defiling as that of the other part, it is still at enmity with the Holy Spirit. Since the flesh wants to have the self as the center, self-will rises above the will of God. Although it is serving God, it does not serve according to God's way but according to its own idea. It does whatever is good in its own eyes. Self is the principle of all its conduct. Although the flesh may not have committed anything that man considers as sins—on the contrary, it may try its best to keep God's commandments—"self" is the center of all the activities. The

deceitfulness and the strength of this self are beyond man's expectation. The flesh is at enmity with the Holy Spirit not only in the matter of sinning against God but even in the matter of serving God and pleasing God, for it is done out of its own strength, not by being led simply by the Spirit and depending entirely on the grace of God. Thus it is at enmity against the Holy Spirit and quenches the Holy Spirit.

We can find many people around us who are by nature very good, very patient, and very loving. What believers hate is sin, and if they could be delivered from it so that they would no longer have the things of the flesh as mentioned in Galatians 5:19-21, then that would be good. What they aspire to is righteousness, so with all their strength they try to do righteous deeds, desiring to have the nine-in-one fruit recorded in Galatians 5:22-23. But herein is the danger. The believers have not learned to hate their flesh—the entire flesh—but hope only to be freed from sins, which issue out from the flesh. They know to reject the activities of the flesh, but they do not know that the flesh itself should be destroyed. The important point is that the flesh not only commits sins, it can also perform good deeds. If the flesh is still doing good, then it is still alive. If a man were to die, his ability to do good as well as to do evil would die with him. If he is still able to do good, he is certainly not yet dead.

We know that all men are of the flesh. According to the teaching of the Bible, there is no one in the world who is not of the flesh, because all sinners are born of the flesh. But we know that many people before they are regenerated, or even many who never believe in the Lord and are never regenerated, have done many righteous deeds. They are very loving, patient, and good. It seems they have been like this ever since they were born. They may be so good, but, based on the word of the Lord Jesus in John 3:6, they are still of the flesh. This fact proves to us that the flesh can indeed do good.

The apostle spoke to the Galatians: "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (3:3). This word shows that the flesh is capable of doing good. The believers in Galatia fell into the error of doing good by the flesh. They had begun in the Holy Spirit, but they did not continue to be made perfect by the Holy Spirit. Instead they planned to do their own righteousness, even the righteousnesses of the law, in order to be made perfect. Thus, the apostle asked them such a question. Therefore, we see very clearly that the flesh is capable of doing good works. If the Galatian believers could do only evil by their flesh, Paul would not have needed to ask them, for they themselves would have known that the sins of the flesh could not make perfect what they had begun in the Holy Spirit. Since they wanted to perfect by their flesh the work that the Holy Spirit had begun, this proves that they wanted to arrive at a position of perfection through the righteous deeds of the flesh. They had truly tried to do righteous deeds with all their strength, but here the apostle shows us clearly that the righteous deeds of the flesh are greatly different from the works of the Holy Spirit. What one does by the flesh one does by himself; such works cannot perfect the works which the Holy Spirit has begun.

In the preceding chapter the apostle had spoken a weighty word: "For if I build again the things which I have destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor" (Gal. 2:18). This word is speaking of those who, having been saved and having received the Holy Spirit, wanted to depend on the flesh—the self—to do the righteousness of the law

(vv. 16-17, 21). "The things which I have destroyed"—this means that the apostle had always considered man as being unable to save himself by his own works. The apostle always tore down the works of sinners because he considered their works as being unable to save them. "If I build again"—this means to build again now. The apostle seemed to be saying, "You cannot be saved by your own works, but you have been justified by believing in the Lord." If we build anew the righteous deeds which have been torn down previously, thinking that we should now do righteousness by ourselves, we prove that we are transgressors. Just as we sinners cannot receive life through the works of the law, so also, after having received life we cannot be perfected through the righteous deeds of our flesh. If there were such a thing, it would prove that he, the apostle, is a transgressor. This proves to us how vain are the righteous deeds of the flesh!

Moreover, we see in Romans 8 that "those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (v. 8). Thus we know that those who are in the flesh have tried to please God. Of course, trying to please God is also a righteous deed of the flesh, except that such deeds cannot please God. We should have a deep realization that the flesh is quite capable of doing righteous deeds. In fact, it is very capable of doing righteous deeds. Because we often think that the "flesh" means the lusts, we consider it altogether as defiling as lusts. Of course, as far as the body is concerned, the flesh includes the lusts. But as far as the soul is concerned, all the activities of the will, the mind, and the emotion are not necessarily as defiling as lusts. Moreover, the term lust in the Holy Bible is not necessarily one of defilement, because Galatians 5:17 says, "The Spirit against the flesh," meaning that the Holy Spirit lusts against the flesh. Therefore, lust in the Bible is not altogether defiled; to lust simply means to have a strong desire.

All that a man has done or is able to do before regeneration is the work of the flesh. Therefore, the flesh not only can do evil but also can do good. The mistake of the believer is here: he only knows that he should eradicate the evil in the flesh, but he does not know that he should also eradicate the good in the flesh. He does not realize that as the evil acts of the flesh belong to the flesh, so the good deeds of the flesh also belong to the flesh. The flesh is flesh and remains flesh whether it does good or does evil. Hence, the danger of the believer lies in that he is ignorant of or unwilling to get rid of all that belongs to the flesh; he only knows or is willing to get rid of the evil in the flesh. The lesson now is that the good of the flesh is no less fleshly than the evil of the flesh. Both belong to the flesh. If the goodness of the flesh is not eradicated, no matter what the believer does, he cannot be delivered from the power of the flesh. Moreover, since the flesh can do good and if the believer allows it to do good, he will soon see the flesh doing evil also. If self-righteousness is not eradicated, unrighteousness will soon follow.

### **THE NATURE OF THE GOOD WORKS OF THE FLESH**

God is very much against the flesh because He knows the actual condition of the flesh. God's purpose is that the believers would be completely free of the old creation and enter completely into the new creation in experience. Whether good or evil, the flesh belongs to the old creation. There is a big difference between the good that the flesh does and the good that comes out of the new life. The flesh is centered on the self; it can do good by itself and does it with its own strength. It has no need to depend on the Holy Spirit, no need to be humble, no need to wait upon God, and no need to pray and beseech God, but only has to decide by itself, think by itself, and

perform by itself. Naturally, it is inevitable that it accredits glory to itself, telling itself, "Now I am much better than before!" "Now I am really quite good." Moreover, such deeds do not lead people to come to God but instead cause them to become puffed up in secret. God wants man to come completely helpless before Him, submitting wholly to His Holy Spirit and waiting on Him humbly and trustfully. The goodness of the flesh which centers on the self is always evil in the eyes of God because it is not the work of the Holy Spirit, and it does not issue from the life of the Lord Jesus. Rather, it is the work of man's own self, and the glory is ascribed to himself.

In Philippians 3:3 the apostle mentioned "confidence in the flesh." "Confidence" in the original text is "belief." He said that he himself did not "believe in the flesh." The greatest work of the flesh is self-confidence! Since one thinks he is able, he does not need to trust in the Holy Spirit. Christ crucified is the wisdom of God, but a believer trusts in his own wisdom. He can read the Bible, preach the Bible, hear the Word, and believe in the Word; however, all of these are done through the power of his own mind, and he does not think that he absolutely must ask for the Holy Spirit to teach him. Many people believe they have received all the truth, even though what they have is something which they have received from others and from their own searching and what they have is more of man than of God! Furthermore, they do not have a teachable heart that is willing to wait on God and to let Him reveal His truth in His light.

Christ is also the power of God. But how much self-reliance there is in Christian work! The time spent in the employment of human methods and arrangements is more than the time spent waiting before God. The time spent on preparing the items and sections of the message far exceeds the time spent on receiving the power from above. It is not that we do not proclaim the truth or that we do not confess the person and work of Christ as our only hope or that we do not want to glorify His name, but that, because our confidence is in the flesh, many of our works are dead before God. In our speaking we rely on human wisdom to present a doctrine in a full way. We use appropriate illustrations and various kinds of expressions to stir up men's emotions. We also use wise exhortation to cause men to make a decision. However, where is the real result? In this kind of work, how much is the reliance on the Holy Spirit and how much is the reliance on the flesh? How can the flesh give life to man? Does the old creation actually have sufficient power to help man become the new creation?

Self-confidence and self-reliance are the nature of the good works of the flesh. "Dependence" on God is something the flesh cannot have. The flesh is too impatient to tolerate the delay of being dependent. The flesh can never depend on God as long as it feels it has the strength. Even in a time of hopelessness, the flesh is still busy planning, trying to think of a way out. The flesh never has the sense of utter helplessness. If the believers want to understand the works of the flesh, there is no other need than to put the flesh to the test. Anything that does not issue from waiting on God is of the flesh. Anything that can be produced and done without depending on the Holy Spirit issues forth from the flesh. Anything that one can decide according to one's own will and for which one does not need to seek God's will is of the flesh. Whenever one's heart does not have a sense of utter helplessness and a need for complete dependence on the Lord, one's doings are the works of the flesh.

However, this does not mean that all these things are wicked or improper. No matter how good they are or how godly they are—even reading the Bible, praying, worshipping, and preaching—if they are not done in complete dependence on the Holy Spirit, then they issue forth from the flesh. As long as the flesh is allowed to live and is given the opportunity to be active, it is willing to do anything, even submit to God! In all the works of the flesh, however good they may be, "I" is always a big factor, the only difference being that sometimes it is hidden and other times it is manifested. The flesh never acknowledges its own weakness and uselessness. Even should it become a laughingstock, the flesh will still not believe in its inability.

"Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" This word reveals a great truth—what is proper and of the Spirit in the beginning may not necessarily continue to be so. Moreover, the experience of the believers shows us that what is of the Spirit in the beginning can easily become something of the flesh. Oftentimes when one receives a truth, one receives it of the Holy Spirit, but after a while this truth becomes the boasting of his flesh. Such was the case of the Jews in those days. So often in the matters of submitting to the Lord, of denying oneself afresh, of receiving power to save people, one may really depend on the Holy Spirit in the beginning, but after a while, he begins to consider God's grace as his own glory and reckon what is of God as his own. It is also like this in the matter of one's conduct. In the beginning, it is really the work of the Holy Spirit so that one experiences a great change—loving what he previously hated and hating what he previously loved. Yet not long after, "self" creeps in. He either considers the changed conduct as his own achievement and commends himself, or he loses the heart of dependence on the Holy Spirit and becomes careless, relying on himself as he continues to go on. In the experience of believers, there are hundreds and thousands of cases which at the outset had the Holy Spirit as the center and then after a while had the flesh as the center.

What is the reason that so many dear children of God fail while they try their best to seek a perfect, consecrated life and desire to obtain a more abundant life? Often while the believer is listening to a message, talking to others, reading spiritual books, or praying, God Himself may appear to show him that it is perfectly possible to have a satisfying life in the Lord. The believer also feels that this life is very simple and very sweet and that henceforth nothing will hinder him from obtaining this life. Then the experience really comes! At this time he receives the blessings, power, and glory which he had never before received. How wonderful this is! However, it passes away quickly. What a pity! Why? Is his faith imperfect? Is his consecration not single-hearted? His faith and consecration are truly and definitely for the Lord. Why then does it become this way? The reason for the loss and the way to be restored seem perplexing. Actually, there is no other reason than that he trusts in his flesh. He thinks he can perfect by the flesh what was begun by the Spirit. He substitutes self for the Holy Spirit. The self takes the lead and hopes that the Holy Spirit will come along to help. The work and the position of the Holy Spirit have been usurped by the flesh. He does not depend completely on the leading of the Holy Spirit to accomplish all the work, nor does he wait on the Lord. This means that he wants to follow the Lord Jesus without denying himself. This is the root of all the failures.

## **THE SINS WHICH COME IMMEDIATELY AFTER**

If the believer is so self-confident as to perfect the work of the Holy Spirit with the strength of his flesh, he not only will not be able to attain a perfect spiritual living but also will always be drifting about. Soon afterward, he will also see that the sins which he had overcome previously are coming back. Perhaps when we read such a word for the first time we are surprised. However, it is true that wherever the flesh is serving God, the power of sin is strengthened therein. Why were the Pharisees so puffed up yet still the slaves of sin? Was it not because they had so many righteous deeds and served God so zealously? Why did the apostle reprove the Galatians? Why did they have the deeds of the flesh? Was it not because they wanted the righteousness by works? Was it not because they wanted to perfect by the flesh the good work which the Holy Spirit had begun? The danger for a young believer is that when he understands the salvation of the cross from the flesh and sins, he stops short of putting to death his self and his strength for doing good. Eventually, he falls again into the sins of the flesh. The greatest error of a believer is that after having overcome sins by the Lord, he does not continue in the same way to sustain this. Instead, unconsciously he tries to sustain it with his own works and determination. Perhaps this is effective for a little while, but soon he finds himself falling into the former sins again. His present sins may vary somewhat from his former sins, but just the same they all are sins. At this time, he is either discouraged, knowing that he is not able to have a long-lasting experience of victory over sins, or he becomes a hypocrite, trying to hide his sins and not honestly confessing that he has sinned. What is the reason for such failure? If the flesh can be your power to do good, so it can also be your power to sin. Whatever is of the self, whether good or evil, is merely the expression of the flesh. If it does not have the opportunity to sin, it is willing to do good. But since it has the opportunity to do good, soon it will sin.

It is here that Satan deceives the children of God. If the believers would maintain the attitude of the "flesh" being crucified, Satan would have no way because "the flesh is the workshop of Satan." If the "flesh"—not only a part of the flesh—is really under the power of the Lord's death, then Satan will be unemployed. Therefore, Satan is willing to allow the believers to put to death the sinful part of the flesh, but he deludes the believers into retaining the good part, realizing that if the good part of the flesh remains, the life of the flesh will be kept. Then he still has the workshop to do his work, so that eventually he will regain that which he lost. He knows that if the flesh can overcome the Holy Spirit in the matter of serving God, the flesh can also obtain and maintain the victory in the matter of serving sin. This is the reason why many believers fall back to serving sin after they have been freed from sin. If the Holy Spirit is not actually in complete and uninterrupted control and directing them in the matter of worship, He will not have the power to direct and control them in their daily life. If I have not denied myself toward God, neither will I be able to deny myself toward man; I will not be able to overcome hatred, temper, and selfishness. These two matters are linked together and cannot be separated.

Since the believers in Galatia did not know this, they fell into the state of biting and devouring one another (Gal. 5:15). They not only wanted to perfect by the flesh what they had begun in the Spirit, but they also desired to "make a good show in the flesh" (6:12), to boast in the flesh (v. 13). Naturally their successes in the aspect of doing good by the flesh were many, but their failures in the aspect of the flesh doing evil were also many. They did not realize that as long as the flesh can serve God with its own ability and its own ideas, it can serve sin as well. If the believer cannot forbid

the flesh to do good, neither can he forbid the flesh to do evil. The best way to not sin is to not do good by the self. Since they do not realize the degree of the corruption of the flesh, in their foolishness they want to utilize the flesh, not knowing that whether the flesh follows the lusts or boasts in doing good, it is similarly corrupt. On the one hand, they want to perfect by the flesh that which the Holy Spirit has begun, but on the other hand, they want to eradicate the passions and the lusts of the flesh. Consequently, they cannot do what God wants them to do.