

## **THE ULTIMATE ATTITUDE OF THE BELIEVER TOWARDS THE FLESH**

### **GOD'S VIEW OF THE FLESH**

At this time, it would be good for the believers to refresh their memory concerning God's verdict on the flesh. The Lord Jesus said, "The flesh profits nothing" (John 6:63). Both the sins of the flesh and the righteousnesses of the flesh are of no profit! All that is born of the flesh, regardless what it may be, is flesh and can never become "non-flesh." Whether it be the flesh in preaching, the flesh in listening, the flesh in praying, the flesh in offering, the flesh in reading the Scripture, the flesh in singing the hymns, or the flesh in doing good, God has told us that all these have no profit! No matter how much the believers trust the flesh, God has said it is of no profit and does not help the spiritual life. The flesh cannot fulfill the righteousness of God.

"For the mind set on the flesh is death" (Rom. 8:6). From God's point of view, there is spiritual death in the flesh. There is no other way except to commit the flesh to the cross. No matter how capable the flesh is of doing good, of thinking and planning, and of gaining the commendation of man, in God's eyes, all that originates from the flesh has the inscription in capital letters, "DEATH."

"Because the mind set on the flesh is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7). The flesh is completely against God and has no possibility of being mingled with God. This is not only so with the evils which originate from the flesh, but even the most noble thoughts and conduct from the flesh are enmity against God. Even doing righteous deeds, not to mention committing sins, is doing them independently, apart from God.

"For it is not subject to the law of God, for neither can it be" (Rom. 8:7). The better one does, the farther away he is from God. In the world, how many good men are willing to believe in the Lord Jesus? Actually, self-righteousness is not righteousness; it is unrighteousness. No matter what, man himself can never do what is taught in the Bible. Whether good or evil, he is never subject to God's restriction. If he is evil, he offends the law. If he is good, he sets up another righteousness apart from the Lord Jesus and loses the original purpose of the law. "For through the law is the clear knowledge of sin" (3:20).

"And those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Rom. 8:8). This is the final resolution. No matter how good man's conduct may be, if it originates from the self, it can never please God. God can only be pleased by His Son. Aside from Him and His work, neither man nor man's work can please God. What is done by his own flesh may seem to be good. However, because it is done by his own strength and originates from his self, God is not pleased. Man can think up many ways to do good deeds, to improve, and to advance, but since these actions originate from the flesh, God is not pleased. This not only applies to the unregenerated man, but also to the regenerated believer. If he has accomplished something on his own, no matter how good and how effective the work is, God can never be pleased. What is God's pleasure or displeasure is not a matter of good or evil but a matter of the source. The conduct may be quite good, but where does it come from?

Having read these few verses, we can really see how vain man's conduct according to flesh is. Believers should see God's evaluation of the flesh precisely; then they will

not err. Although we human beings make a distinction between good and evil concerning behavior, the distinction God makes is not limited to behavior but also touches the source. Before God, a very defiled, evil deed is the same as the most excellent work of the flesh. Both are of the flesh and cannot please God. To the same degree that God hates unrighteousness, He also hates self-righteousness. Before God, all the natural good deeds that a man can do—not through regeneration, union with Christ, and dependence on the Holy Spirit—are no less of the flesh than adultery, corruption, and licentiousness. No matter how excellent man's good deeds may be, unless they originate from complete dependence on His Holy Spirit, they are of the flesh and are rejected by God. Regardless of the outward appearance of the flesh and regardless whether the flesh is of the sinners or of His believers, God opposes, rejects, and hates everything that is of the flesh. His decision is that the flesh must die.

### **THE EXPERIENCE OF THE BELIEVERS**

But how can the believers see what God sees? God hates the flesh and the conduct of the flesh so much, yet, except for the evil acts of the flesh, the believers still are lenient with the flesh and cannot be as absolute as God is. Moreover, the believers still do many things in the flesh with self-trust, self-reliance, and self-confidence, considering that they have received God's grace to the full and are able to utilize the flesh to have righteous acts. Because of this, the Holy Spirit of God must lead the believers through the most shameful pathway that they may know the flesh and thus have God's view. Therefore, God allows the believers to fail, become weak, and sometimes even to commit sin, so that they will know whether or not there is any good in the flesh. Frequently, when the believers think that they are progressing spiritually, the Lord tries them in order that they may know themselves. Often the Lord reveals His holiness to them to cause them to judge the corruption of the flesh. Sometimes the Lord allows Satan to attack them so that they may see their self in suffering. However, this lesson is the most difficult one to learn, and even while learning, success cannot be attained overnight. Actually, it is after having gone through many years that the believers gradually realize the unreliability of their own flesh. At best, it still has some mixture of corruption; perhaps God often permits the believers to experience Romans 7 so that they will finally be willing to say as Paul said, "For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, nothing good dwells" (v. 18). How difficult it is to learn to say this word! Unless the believers have gone through many painful failures, they are always self-dependent and always think that they are capable. It is after one has failed a hundred or a thousand times that he realizes that all self-righteousness is totally unreliable—in the flesh nothing good dwells.

However, this is not the end. Such self-judgment must be continuous. Whenever the believers do not judge themselves and do not consider the flesh so useless and so disgusting, but rather are slightly self-confident and self-glorifying, God has no choice but to let them pass through the fire again to burn up all the dregs. How few are those who humble themselves and acknowledge themselves as unclean! If they do not, God will not stop His working. Because the believers cannot be rid of the influence of the flesh for a moment, self-judgment cannot cease for a moment. Otherwise, they will fall back again to the self-boasting of the flesh.

Many people think that the Holy Spirit's convicting men of sin pertains only to the people of the world—He convicts sinners of their sins that they might believe in the Lord Jesus. We ought to know that this kind of work of the Holy Spirit is as essential

in the saints as it is in the sinners. He must convict the saints of their sins not only once or twice, but daily without stopping. Oh, may we have more of the conviction of the Holy Spirit so that we may forever place the flesh under judgment and may not let it take control. May we not forget, even for a moment, the true facts of our flesh and God's evaluation of it! May we never again trust ourselves (that is, the flesh), thinking that it can do anything to please God! May we forever depend upon the Holy Spirit and not give the slightest place to self.

If ever there was one in the world who could boast according to his flesh, that was Paul because, as to the righteousness of the law, he was blameless. Even today, if anyone could boast according to his flesh, that must be Paul also because he was an apostle who had seen the Lord with his own eyes and was greatly used by the Lord. However, he did not do this because he knew the flesh. In his experience of Romans 7, he already knew what his self was like. God had opened his eyes in the experience of life, and he knew that in his flesh was nothing but sin. Whereas he had boasted in the past of the righteousness of the self, he now realized that it was nothing but dung and nothing but sin. He had learned this lesson, and having learned, henceforth he did not dare to trust the flesh. In fact, he did not forget what he had learned, and he still continued to learn. Therefore he could say, "Have no confidence in the flesh, though I myself have something to be confident of in the flesh as well. If any other man thinks that he has confidence in the flesh, I more" (Phil. 3:3-4). Although there were many reasons for him to trust his flesh, he not only knew God's view towards the flesh but also knew how undependable and untrustworthy his flesh was. If we read the following verses, we will see how humble he was: "Not having my own righteousness" (v. 9); "If perhaps I may attain to the out-resurrection from the dead" (v. 11); "Not that I have already obtained or am already perfected, but I pursue, if even I may lay hold of that for which I also have been laid hold of by Christ Jesus" (v. 12). If the believers want to attain to the state of being completely spiritual, they must have the thought of not having obtained and not have the slightest self-confidence, self-satisfaction, and self-pleasing, which are the proofs of trusting the flesh.

If God's children sincerely seek after the more abundant life and are willing to accept God's evaluation of the flesh, they will not consider themselves stronger than others no matter how advanced they are. Neither will they say such words as, "I have always been different from others," but they will be willing to let the Holy Spirit reveal to them God's holiness and the corruption of their flesh and will not be afraid to see these clearly. Then the Holy Spirit will be able to cause them to realize the corruption of the self at the proper time. Perhaps in this way their failure may be lessened some. How pitiful it is that, although the intention of the believers may not completely be to trust the flesh, they may be impure and still regard their self as having some strength. Therefore, God cannot avoid allowing them to go through failure in order to remove that little bit of self-dependence.

### **THE CROSS AND THE DEEPER WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Because the flesh is very subtle, the believers must moment by moment have the deeper work of the Holy Spirit through the cross. Once the believers see the standing of their own flesh before God, the cross and the deeper work of the Holy Spirit are

indispensable. By the cross the believers are delivered from the sin of the flesh. By the cross the believers are also delivered from the righteousness of the flesh. By walking according to the Spirit, the believers will not follow the flesh to commit sin. By walking according to the Spirit, the believers will also not follow the flesh to do righteous deeds.

In fact, the work of the cross has been accomplished absolutely, perfectly, and infinitely; it cannot be deepened. However, the process of a Christian's experience of this fact can be deepening step by step. Little by little, the Holy Spirit teaches the believers more of the principles of the cross. If one is faithful in submission, gradually he will experience more deeply what the cross has already accomplished. This means that the cross, from the objective side, is absolute, and nothing can be added to it. However, from the subjective side, it is progressive and can advance deeper and deeper.

Now the believers should see more clearly their having died with the Lord Jesus on the cross because the Holy Spirit can only work through the cross. Besides the cross, the Holy Spirit has no other instruments. The believers should have a fresh understanding of the teaching in Galatians 5:24. Not only the "passions" and "lusts" of the flesh have been "crucified," but "the flesh" (including all its righteousness and ability to do righteous acts) has also been "crucified." The cross is the place not only for crucifying the passions and lusts but also for crucifying the flesh, which brings forth the passions and lusts, no matter how it is respected and loved by man! When the believers see this and willingly reject all that is of the flesh (whether good or evil), they are able to walk according to the Holy Spirit and please God and attain to a completely spiritual life. This "willingness" is indispensable. What the cross has accomplished in fact is complete, but how much man has realized in experience is determined by his knowledge, willingness, and faith.

If the believers do not reject all goodness in the flesh, they will see that in many things, although the flesh seems to be very powerful and very capable in working, when the real calling of God comes, calling them to prepare to go to Golgotha to suffer, they will be as weak as water, shrink back, and not be able to go forward. No matter how good or how strong the flesh is, it can never satisfy the requirements of God. Why did the disciples fail in the garden of Gethsemane? Because "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:41). It is the weakness here which causes greater failure later. The flesh with its power and work may be excellent, but it can only manifest its capability in matters suitable to its own taste. As to the actual requirements of God, the flesh inevitably backs away. Therefore death is unavoidable; otherwise, God's will cannot be done.

Our flesh is whatever comes from within us—our desire, our opinion, all that aims at developing ourselves so that we may be seen and respected by others—all is of our flesh. In this flesh, there is natural evil and natural goodness. John 1:13 mentions the "will" of the flesh which can will, decide, and plan to do good to please God. Nevertheless, this originates from man's flesh and needs to go to the cross.

Colossians 2:18 speaks about the "mind" of the flesh. All the self-confidence that Christians have is actually their trust that they have wisdom and that they know how to serve God and understand the teaching of the Scriptures. Second Corinthians 1:12

speaks of fleshly "wisdom." It is very dangerous for a man to receive the truth of the Bible with his wisdom because this is the most hidden and subtle method which causes the believers to perfect the work of the Holy Spirit by their flesh. A very precious truth may be stored only in the memory, which is merely in the mind of the flesh. Only the Spirit gives life; the flesh profits nothing. All truths, if not continually enlivened by the Lord, profit neither ourselves nor others. We are not speaking about sins here; rather, we are speaking concerning the things that come out of man's natural life, even though it is a life in union with Christ. This kind of doing is natural and not of the spirit. We should not only reject our righteousness, but also deny the wisdom of our mind. This must be put on the cross.

Colossians 2:23 speaks about a "worship" in the flesh. Such worship is according to our opinion concerning the things of God's Spirit. All the methods we use to stir up, seek, and acquire the sense of worship are all worship in the flesh. If we are not willing to worship according to the teaching of the Bible nor to be led by the Holy Spirit in Christian work, biblical knowledge, and saving souls, it is always possible to walk "according to the flesh."

The Bible often speaks about the "life" of the flesh. If this life of the flesh has not undergone the work of the cross, it lives in the believers just as it lives in the sinners. The only difference is that in the believers there is opposition from the life of the Spirit. The life of the flesh can become the vitality of the believers; they can draw strength from it to live on the earth. It can help the believers to have strength in serving God, in meditating on the truth, and in consecrating themselves for the work. It can become the motivation for doing many good works. In fact, it can cause the believers, on the one hand, to have it as their life and, on the other hand, to think that they are keeping the word of God's will as their goal.

We must truly know that in man's life there are two different principles of living. Many believers have a mixed life, sometimes obeying this and sometimes obeying the other. Sometimes they completely depend on the power of the Spirit, while at other times they also have a heart of self-reliance. There is no steadfastness. "The things which I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, so that with me there should be Yes, yes and No, no?" (2 Cor. 1:17). The characteristic of the flesh is its fickleness—Yes, yes and No, no. The will of God is to not walk according to the flesh even for a moment but to walk according to the spirit (Rom. 8:4). We should accept the will of God.

"In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11). We should be willing to allow the power of the cross, as a knife of circumcision, to completely cut off from us everything which is of the flesh. This kind of "cutting" should be deep and should make a clear separation so that nothing of the flesh can be hidden or remain. The cross and the curse cannot be separated (Gal. 3:13). If we commit our flesh to the cross, we commit it to the curse, acknowledging that there is no good thing in the flesh and that it has no other destiny except to be cursed by God. If we do not have such a heart, it will be difficult for us to take the circumcision of the flesh. The love, desire, thoughts, knowledge, mind, worship, and work of the flesh must go to the cross.

To be crucified with the Lord means to accept the curse the Lord endured. Christ being nailed to die on the cross was not a glorious thing (Heb. 12:2). His being hung on the tree means that He was cursed there (Deut. 21:23). Therefore, the flesh being crucified with the Lord means that it is cursed with the Lord. We not only accept the accomplishment of the cross, but we also need to have the fellowship of the cross. The believers should acknowledge that their flesh is qualified for nothing but to suffer the death of the curse. Once the believers see the value of the flesh as God sees it, they can have the experiential fellowship of the cross. Before the Holy Spirit can gain complete control in the believers, the flesh must be committed completely to the cross. We pray that God may show us the true picture of the flesh and the necessity of its being crucified.

Brothers, how lacking in humility we are, and how unwilling we are to accept the cross of the Lord! We do not want to admit that we are helpless, useless, and corrupt and that we deserve nothing but death. Brothers, what we lack now is not a perfect living but a perfect death. We need to die perfectly and completely. We have already said too much about life, power, holiness, and righteousness. Let us now pay attention to death! May we let the Holy Spirit pierce deeply into our flesh with the cross of Christ so that the cross may become a real experience in our life! If we die properly, we will live properly. If we are in union with Him in the likeness of death, we will also be in union with Him in the likeness of living. May we call upon the Lord to open our eyes that we may know how essential death is. Should He do such a work? Are you ready for such a work by Him? Are you willing to let the Lord point out your weakness? Are you willing to be crucified openly outside the gate before the public? Will you let the Spirit of the cross work in you? Oh, may we have more of the Lord's death! May we die thoroughly!

We should see clearly that the death of the cross should be continuous. We cannot enter into the stage of resurrection and forsake the stage of death. The degree of the experience of the resurrection life is according to the degree of the experience of death. Lately there has been a danger among those believers who pursue an ascended life and forget that the death of the flesh cannot be interrupted. They forsake the position of death and go on. The result is that they either take the works of the flesh lightly or consider that which is of the flesh to be of the spirit and thus spiritualize the flesh! Oh, death is the foundation for everything! Man may proceed, but he should not destroy the foundation. If the death of the flesh is not genuinely maintained, the resurrected and ascended life is merely a falsehood. We should never consider that we are already spiritual and advanced and that the flesh has no power to seduce us any more. The enemy wants us to leave the realm of the cross in order that we may become those who are outwardly spiritual but inwardly fleshly. Many statements such as, "I thank the Lord because we are now such and such, and not such and such," are nothing but echoes of the prayer in Luke 18:11-12. It is while such ones are thinking that they are delivered from the flesh that they are being deceived by the flesh. We should always abide in the death of the Lord.

Our security is in the Holy Spirit. The safe way is to be completely willing to be taught, to be extremely fearful to follow the flesh even slightly, and to be happy to yield to Christ, trusting that the Holy Spirit will control our lives with the power of God that the life of Christ's death will live out from us. As much as the flesh filled us formerly, so we also must let the Spirit fill us. We must let the Holy Spirit rule and



completely overthrow the power of the flesh so that He Himself can become our new life and manifest Christ as our life. Then we can say, "And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." However, this life is still based on "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20).

If we live with a heart of faith and submission, then we can expect the Holy Spirit to do a most divine and marvelous work in us. "If we live by the Spirit"—this is the faith which we must have to believe that the Spirit dwells in us—"let us also walk by the Spirit" (5:25)—this is the submission which we must have. We should simply and restfully believe that the Lord has given us His Spirit and that He is living in us. We should believe in His gift and believe that the Holy Spirit is living in us. Take this as the secret of Christ's life in us—the Holy Spirit dwells in the deepest part of our being, our spirit. Meditate on this, believe in this, and remember this until, before God, due to the glory and the reality of this truth, a holy fear and wonder emerge within us that the Holy Spirit dwells in us! We should follow His leading. This leading is not in our mind or thoughts but in our life and will. We should surrender to God and let the Holy Spirit regulate all our conduct. He will manifest the Lord Jesus in our life. This is His work.

### **EXHORTATION**

If we let the Spirit do a deeper work by the cross, then the circumcision which we have received will become more real day by day. "For we are the circumcision, the ones who serve by the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). The trust in the flesh has been lost due to the receiving of the circumcision not done by man's hand. Here the apostle makes the boasting in Christ Jesus the center of everything. He clearly points out to us the danger on the one hand and the security on the other hand. To have confidence in the flesh is very damaging to the boasting in Christ Jesus, but to worship in Spirit affords us the blessed joy of life and truth. The Holy Spirit exalts the Lord Jesus, but He abases the flesh. If we truly want to boast in Christ and let Him boast in us, and want always to truly glory in Christ Jesus alone in our experience, then, on the one hand, we must have the circumcision of the cross, and on the other hand, we must learn to worship in Spirit. It is not to strive, because striving is the work of the flesh. There is no need of using methods because only when they have the help of the flesh can they be useful. It is to absolutely distrust the flesh, however good or capable it may be. Only trust the Holy Spirit and obey Him alone. With this kind of trust and obedience, the flesh will be abased and kept in its position of curse and will lose its power. May the Lord grant us grace that we may increasingly despise ourselves, regard ourselves as undependable, and realize how useless we are—absolutely not trusting our own flesh. This is the real death. Without death, this is not possible.

"Only do not turn this freedom into an opportunity for the flesh" (Gal. 5:13). Death is the flesh's position. We have already obtained freedom in the Lord, but let us not give any opportunity to the flesh. We must not again unconsciously regard the work of the Spirit as our own. We should always be watchful and not allow the flesh to be rekindled from the ashes. We must not give the glory of the victory to ourselves. Otherwise, the flesh will have the opportunity to work again. After you have gained a victory, do not consider that you are now safe, lest you give opportunity to the flesh and your fall become imminent. Since the flesh has long lost its power, do not consider that you have now learned everything and that you now have the strength

to fight with the flesh and will always be able to win. If you entertain this kind of self-strength and lose your heart of utter dependence, the flesh has already gained the opportunity and will bring you again into a distressing experience. The attitude of helplessness should be guarded with holy diligence. This is the place where the flesh will attack. Just having a little intention of utilizing the self is an occasion for the flesh to gain an opportunity. Do not be afraid to lose face before man. Right after the teaching of the crucifixion of the flesh and of walking in the Spirit, the apostle says, "Let us not become vainglorious" (v. 26). If we know how useless we are before God, we must not boast before man either. If we cover the weakness of the flesh before man because we want to receive glory, we will give the flesh an opportunity to work. The Holy Spirit can help us and strengthen us, but He cannot replace us. We ourselves must steadfastly maintain an attitude of not giving any occasion to the flesh.

"Make no provision for the flesh to fulfill its lusts" (Rom. 13:14). The work of the flesh always has its forerunner. Therefore, we must never leave any ground for it. We should always be watchful to see whether the flesh is placed in the position of being cursed and should also examine whether any provision has been made for it in our thoughts. A little thought of our own goodness can give the flesh the opportunity to work. The thought is very essential here. The reason is that, although one may only make provision for the flesh in his thoughts, the secret thought will come forth openly in words and deeds. The flesh must not have any ground. In conversing with people, we must also be careful lest, when words are many, the flesh will do its work. Although there is much that you love to talk about, if you are not depending on the Spirit in speaking, you should not say anything. Otherwise, you will make provision for the flesh to work. It is more so in our deeds. The flesh has many plans, expectations, and methods. The flesh has its own opinion, strength, and capability. All these may be excellent before man as well as in your own eyes. However, never be lenient; never retain even the best and consequently transgress the commandment of the Lord. We should put to death what we think to be the best without any consideration, not for any other reason than because it is of ourselves (the flesh). The righteousness as well as the sins of the flesh should be equally hated. A good deed done by the flesh should be repented of just as much as a great sin committed by the flesh. We must always maintain God's view towards the flesh.

If, unfortunately, one fails, he must examine himself, confess his sin, and ask for the cleansing of the precious blood. "Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh" (2 Cor. 7:1). Never be lenient, concerned, or reluctant to cut off what you love lest you fall more deeply into the flesh. The teaching of the apostles is that we "cleanse ourselves." It is not the work of the Holy Spirit alone nor that of the precious blood alone, but you yourselves also must do the work of cleansing. You search out all the filthinesses of the flesh and commit them to the cross of the Lord. Although what you have done may not be sinful according to man's view, if it is done by yourself, even the best is also filthy in the eyes of God. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Whether people or things, it is all the same. God does not care for whatever shell or covering it has. It is the source that God takes heed to. Therefore, one should not only cleanse himself from his sinfulness but also cleanse himself from all the deeds of the flesh. "Beloved, I entreat you as strangers and sojourners to abstain from fleshly lusts" (1 Pet. 2:11).