

SPIRIT VS. FLESH

by Tracy Robinson, Hickory Christian Academy

Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do [God's] will, looks round upon a universe from which every trace of [Jesus] seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys. —C.S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters

There is much talk these days about the deterioration of American culture, and so much finger-pointing about who is to blame for our current mess, that I thought I would share some things that I believe God has shown me in recent days. It seems that we have become so comfortable with sin in our nation that all lines have been blurred, and all boundaries have been removed. In our race toward “freedom,” we have ended in indulgences. This should not be all that surprising as Scripture warns us, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9) The path of humanity will always continue in a confusing and sinful direction when left to its own volition. Flesh cannot heal flesh. Only Spirit can do that.

One critical point to make is that Christians need to refocus and decide whom their king really is. Churchgoing people are some of the worst to rely on a government election to fix spiritual issues. It should be a foregone conclusion that none of the current (or past, or present) presidential candidates is the answer to the spiritual freefall in our culture. Neither is any single person, nor group of people, the primary enemy. Again, the Bible is clear on this subject.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. —Eph. 6:12

But, with all the confusion on what is or isn't sin, and what is or isn't acceptable behavior, I find it important to continue to seek Scripture for clarity (as opposed to human opinion). Now, before we enter into this conversation, there are some preconceived ideas that must be addressed. First of all, we will go under the assumption that God exists. Second, we will assume that the Bible is actually communication from God to all of humanity, spoken through a select few writers, over a span of thousands of years. We are confident that this is true for many reasons, not withstanding the fact that the message over all those years and multiple authors is amazingly consistent and accurate across thousands of recovered ancient documents.

Please understand that if either of these points is in doubt, then there is no basis for determining sin. If God does not exist, then no one has the ultimate authority to determine what is right or wrong. Lying is sin because God says so. Murder is sin because God says so. Adultery is sin because God says so. If left up to man to determine, one may think adultery to be sin, while another finds it perfectly acceptable. Who is to say which is correct? God is the ultimate authority. Secondly, if the Bible is not an authentic word from God, then our faith has little to stand

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on. How would we even know that Jesus existed, and what words He spoke? If we cannot take Scripture literally, then we are left in the impossible position to determine which parts are figurative or inaccurate, which leads us back to each man's interpretation.

So, going on our assumption that the Bible is truth, let's look at our current culture in light of Scripture. What we see is a rush toward acceptance of any lifestyle or behavior. The argument is often made that, "While I may be committing sin, aren't other things sinful as well? Who is to say that my sin is greater than yours? Doesn't God hate all of them equally? Besides, most of the lists of sins are in the Old Testament anyway, and Jesus freed us up from being held accountable for those in the New Testament, right?"

There are dozens of dangerous holes in these arguments, but I will point out just a couple. Paul tells us in Romans 6:15-18:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

The grace that God has given us through the shed blood of Christ is not to be taken for granted or adulterated in licentiousness. The problem is that most people have no clue of the price that was paid for their sins, so instead of humble thankfulness, we respond with arrogant entitlement. Studying Scripture and understanding the nature of our Savior leads one to love Him to the point of complete submission, resulting in righteousness. Having a distant "head knowledge" of Jesus, but no real relationship with Him, often results in

a celebration of the flesh, disguised as living in "grace." As Paul tells us in Galatians 5:16-18,

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Take special note of the phrase, "so that you may not do the things that you please." We must understand that our flesh (every one of us) craves sin (see Rom. 1:24-32, I Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-21, Eph. 5:3-6 to see if you qualify as a sinner). We must also understand that apart from the Spirit's rescue, we are powerless to fight it. Each person on earth is born in sin, and in greater detail, every person has certain sins which are more powerful in their lives than others. Some are born with a special tendency toward bursts of anger, some are born with tendencies toward gossip, some toward lying, some toward sexual sins, and so on. You don't have to think too hard to know which one has you captive.

A true biblical worldview says that I recognize my sin nature, I admit that certain sins (ultimately all of them) hold me captive, and I know that my own sinful flesh (nor the sinful world around me) cannot free me from this addiction. So I surrender myself to Christ, asking Him to rescue me from myself. I also know that even after the blood of Christ covers me, the battle between flesh and spirit will continue to rage within me, but my ultimate desire is to reject the flesh and embrace the Spirit.

It really comes down to that last phrase: *embrace the Spirit*. We can talk all day about whose sin is worse, and who is hypocritical in their approach to sin (all of us, by the way). Let's face it, when Christians address the sins of the world around them, we have a hard time determining who is really saved sometimes. In the

Bible, we see Jesus addressing sinners every day of his ministry in a very patient and loving manner, but still finishing with the phrase, “Go and sin no more”. In other words, He exhibited grace, while keeping a standard of holiness. But, we see the sins of our neighbors and we gossip about them, slander them, and belittle them. It is critical that we focus on our own holiness, before pointing out everyone else’s sin (Matt. 7:1-5). When we go there, we are not embracing the Spirit, but embracing the flesh instead.

So, that is what it all boils down to. What are you embracing? The argument over what is defined as sin was over about 2000 years ago. The New Testament lists of sinful behavior referenced above are pretty clear. In addition, the question over whether you and I are personally sinners is also very apparent. We are. So, the real issue in each of our lives, and in society as a whole, is our response to our sin problem. Are we embracing the Spirit, or are we embracing the flesh? If I know that I am a serial gossip, do I parade that fact around with pride, and ask everyone to love me anyway, even though I might be gossiping about them as well? Or, do I understand that God is offended by that behavior in my life, causing me to repent and desire cleansing that can only come from His great grace and mercy?

For me personally, I am the greatest sinner I know. I can think of no one else who falls short of God’s glory more often than me. However, that fact produces humility and shame in my heart. I don’t want to try to defend my sin nature. I want to change. I want to grow in my faith. I want to know my Savior in a deeper, more intimate way. And, I understand that when I hold fast to my sin, I cannot gain in my relationship with God, because, in His holiness, He cannot fellowship with sinful man. If I pridefully embrace my sins, I will never open up the door for Christ to restore me into beautiful fellowship with the Father.

Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and you cannot look on wickedness with favor. —Hab. 1:13a

Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith. —Hab. 2:4

In summary, here are some key points:

1. Humanity is caught in sin. Always has been. Always will be.
2. We should fully expect a world without Christ to act sinfully. It is our nature, like a duck to water or a pig to mud. Anything else would be abnormal.
3. Christians, of all people, should be the leaders in knowing Scripture, understanding their own sin nature, grieving their own spiritual failures, and repenting of their behaviors.
4. We all have a choice to embrace flesh or Spirit. God asks us to embrace Spirit, as defined in His word.
5. The Church’s response to the sins of our culture needs to be focused on loving others well, and pointing them to righteousness—not griping, gossiping, and arguing with them, which further alienates the lost world to the church. I agree that truth is at stake here, but you will never win the truth war with bitterness. Let God be angry with sin, and pass judgment as He sees fit. We have been called to truth in love.

As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ. —Eph. 4:14-15

Our desire at Hickory Christian Academy is to be a true reflection of Jesus Christ, understanding truth, loving a lost world to repentance, and maintaining personal holiness in our daily lives. Each of our sin natures hinders this process, but ultimately, that is what we are embracing.