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A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php

Fighting Corruption in the Human Heart

(Proverbs 4.23-27)

Kenneth L. Hall

I. Introduction

The Bible says that the human heart is “deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17.9).¹ This is a bold statement. When we look at the human condition in the early 21st Century, it is not difficult to be persuaded that God’s evaluation of mankind’s inner spirit is correct. Something is desperately wrong with mankind,² we hardly have to turn our eyes or ears to notice the effects of mankind’s fallen condition. Terrorism, prostitution, murder, theft, fraud, political corruption, well-thought out deceptive enterprises, and other crimes are in the news and in our back yards almost daily. Not only do we observe such outward and obvious acts of wickedness, but we also know all too well the inner, subtle perversions of the human heart: jealousy, greed, gluttony, lust, and pride, to name a few. Corruption in the heart of man has been around since the day Adam and Eve sinned, and as we admit at all the outward evils and inner evil thoughts that there are in the world today, it doesn’t seem that there has been any noticeable improvement in man’s basic inner condition over the centuries. We need to face the fact that sin is a worldwide problem affecting every culture, every nation, and every human that has ever been born, and the problem isn’t going away.

Meanwhile, God commands Christians to be holy, because he is holy (Lev. 11.44; 1 Pet. 1.15). The Lord expects his people to live godly lives (Tit. 2.12) and to stop sinning. Jesus told the woman caught in adultery, “Go, and from now on sin no more” (John 8.11). In fact, 1 John 3.9 says, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.” In other words, for those who have been born again, they are supposed to gain victory over sin.

On the one hand, the word of God tells us that our heart is sinful, and the

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¹ All Bible quotes are English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

² In this article, terms referring to the human race (man, mankind, humankind) are used generically to include both genders – male and female.

facts of history confirm that indeed we humans are inherently sinful. You don't have to teach a four-year old child how to be bad; he has discovered it already! But parents do have to teach their children to do right. Even a tiny baby, screaming because he is hungry, looks like he could kill for food. Thus we have evidence of an inherent disposition in the human heart that wants to live contrary to God's expectations. Yet on the other hand, Christians are expected not to sin; we are told to obey God, to live righteously, to return good for evil, and to love our enemies. Do Christians sin? Once a person believes in Jesus Christ, is all desire to do bad suddenly gone, so that Christians are instantly immune from this corrupt nature?

No, it will not suffice to say that Christians are a special group of people who don't sin; we know they do. We hear of corruption in the church, pastors using their position of power to get what they want, and Christians getting divorced. Students in Bible schools have been caught stealing from the supermarket; Christians have lied in order to protect themselves. The Crusades, a series of seven major military campaigns and numerous minor ones between 1095 and 1291, were an attempt in the name of religion by Western Europeans to deliver Asia Minor and the Holy Land from Muslim control. In the first crusade, "Antioch and Jerusalem were among the places that fell to the Crusaders; victory in the Holy City was followed by frightful slaughter of their enemies."³ In the third crusade, Constantinople was conquered and sacked by the West.⁴ Thus in the Crusades we have an example of mass slaughter and destruction done in the name of Christian religion. In the modern scene, how many Christian televangelists and pastors have been publicly exposed for falling into sexual immorality? How many church splits have occurred in presumably strong, sound Christian churches over issues that could be worked through if individuals on both sides were patient and loving? How many times have individual Christians reasoned, "God wants me to do this" even though God himself has given clear commands to the contrary in his word? No, Christians are not a group exempt from the corruption of the human heart; they are guilty of sin, just as non-Christians are.

Thus we have a paradox for the Christian. We are told not to sin, yet we sin. In this article I will explore the challenge for the Christian of living a pure and holy life in spite of the presence of the sinful nature. Is there any hope for the Christian of overcoming the sinful nature? We are called to be holy, yet we

³ Robert G. Clouse, "Crusades, The," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Revised Edition (J. D. Douglas, general editor, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), 274.

⁴ *ibid.*

struggle to live pure lives. Can we really gain victory over sin? Can we succeed in our hope and desire to be like Jesus? What is the answer to this dilemma? How can God expect us to be truly holy if we still have this sinful nature? Do we have to struggle with this problem until we die? Are we hopeless and helpless to improve our lot?

II. Corruption in the human heart

As noted earlier, Jeremiah 17.9 informs us that the heart is corrupted and deceitful. Corruption in the human heart began in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve willfully disobeyed God (Gen. 3.1-6). It quickly became apparent that the human race was drastically affected by that initial sin. Adam and Eve, no longer innocent, immediately felt shame over their nakedness (Gen. 3.7), and they were both quick to shift the blame when challenged about their disobedience (Gen. 3.11-13). God had told Adam and Eve that the consequences of their action would include death (Gen. 2.17) and indeed, everyone since then is born to die. Soon came suffering and pain, and neither has not stopped since. A person earns a living only at the price of sweat and tears; a woman gives birth to a child only in great pain; there are relational tensions in the family – all of this just as God said would happen (Gen. 3.16-19).

We see from Gen. 3 that sin is essentially disobedience – when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, sin and death entered the world. To hide their embarrassment, God needed to make skins to cover them. The skins came from animals that had to be slaughtered, thus death entered the world. When Cain killed Abel (Gen. 4), hatred had clearly entered the world, as the New Testament observes (1 John 3.11-12).

Sin is not merely a 'mistake' or 'criminal offense,' or even just a 'horrible deed.' It is an inner disposition to resist and defy God. "Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature."⁵ Sin is lawlessness (1 John 3.4), that is, not abiding by God's law. Thus when God says "do not steal," but we steal, we are sinning; or if God commands us to show kindness to the poor (e.g., Deut. 15.7-8; Matt. 19.21) and we don't, we are sinning. Thus sin can be either sin of commission or omission. In other words, if we do something that God says *not to do* (such as stealing), we are guilty of a sin of commission. On the other hand, if we fail to do something that God commands us *to do* (like loving our neighbor), it is a sin of omission.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 490.

We have a sinful nature because of Adam's sin – an “inherited corruption.”⁶ Grudem clarifies this corruption as both a total lack of any spiritual good before God and a total inability to do spiritual good before God.⁷ In biblical terms this corruption is described as being dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2.1-2) or being a slave to sin. If we sin, we are a slave to sin (John 8.34). From “a human standpoint people might be able to do much good”⁸ but from the biblical perspective all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags (Is. 64.6; cf. Rom. 3.9-20). Thus we cannot become a Christian by our own effort. The Holy Spirit has to convict our hearts (John 16.8), and we have to come to God by faith, believing that what he says is true. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2.8-9). As an old saying goes, “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling.”⁹

Once we become Christians, we do not automatically stop sinning, as we have already seen. We do not lose the inner disposition to sin; it is still there. However, becoming a Christian involves a new birth, which includes a new power – the power NOT to sin. We are a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5.17); we have God's seed in us (1 John 3.9); and the love of God is poured into our hearts (Rom. 5.5). The apostle John loves to describe the Christian as one who is born of God (1 John 3.9; 4.7; 5.1, 4, 18). This new birth is through the Holy Spirit (John 3.5-8; Gal. 4.29), and it is essentially the Holy Spirit who is the author of our new life in Christ.¹⁰

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. We will deal with overcoming sin, but the fact is, Christians struggle with sin. Old Testament believers had the

⁶ Grudem, 496.

⁷ Grudem, 497.

⁸ Grudem, 497-498.

⁹ This saying is a paraphrase from a verse of the hymn, “Rock of Ages.” The line in the hymn says, “In my hand no price I bring; simply to thy cross I cling.” See *Praises to the Most High: A Selection of Christian Hymns, Gospel Choruses, and Swahili Choruses for East Africa* (Nairobi: AGLC, 1986), # 26.

¹⁰ He gives us understanding of spiritual things, 1 Cor. 2.12; he pours God's love into us, Rom. 5.5; he gives us life, John 6.63; he frees us from the law of sin and death, Rom. 8.2; it is the Spirit who makes us aware of our relationship with the father, Gal. 4.6; Rom. 8.15. We receive the promised Spirit through faith, Gal. 3.14, and once we are born into this new relationship with God, it is expected that we will grow spiritually to maturity (cf. 1 Pet. 2.2; Heb. 6.1-3) and live godly, holy lives, worthy of our calling (cf. Eph. 4.1).

same struggle. King David, the man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13.14; Acts 13.22; cf. Psalm 89.20), sinned grievously on two major occasions. First, he committed adultery with Bathsheba (1 Sam. 11), and then later he took a census of Israel without God's approval (1 Sam. 24; 1 Chron. 21). David confessed his sin with Bathsheba and acknowledged his own human tendency to sin in Psalm 51. Seeing the corruption in his heart, he said,

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin. For
I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me. Against You,
You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight... Behold, I
was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me...
Hide Your face from my sins
And blot out all my iniquities. Create in me
a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me... Restore to
me the joy of Your salvation (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 12).

Believers in the New Testament had the same struggle. Peter, the disciple so eager to serve God no matter what the cost, thought he possessed the courage to lay down his life for his Lord (John 13.37), but in the very next verse Jesus said that he would deny him three times that very night – and that's exactly what Peter did. Only years later after much training in the school of discipleship did Peter willingly lay down his life for Jesus (by being crucified upside down, according to tradition). The apostle Paul struggled greatly with sin; let's observe him wrestling in his bondage to sin as he describes it in Romans 7:

¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.

¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being,

²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

I acknowledge that in Romans 7 it is disputed whether Paul's struggle was before he became a believer or afterward. Let us observe the overall logical progression in Romans from condemnation (1.18-3.20) to justification (3.21-5.21) to sanctification (6-8). In Romans 6-8, Paul discusses our sanctification – our growth toward Christian maturity, becoming more like Christ. He makes three major points: don't sin (ch. 6); we can't stop sinning on our own effort (ch. 7); we can overcome sin through the Holy Spirit (ch. 8). In this context, I understand Romans 7 to refer to the common Christian problem of living by the power of the flesh – attempting to live the Christian life through our own effort (which is an impossibility). I also believe Romans 7 has a wider application to any person, even an unbeliever, trying to please God through his own efforts (also an impossibility). Paul and any Christian, for that matter, will fail to please God if he doesn't live the Christian life by faith. I believe that one reason for so many problems in the church and in individual Christians' lives is that they do not consistently live by the power God gave them. We take matters into our own hands rather than availing ourselves of the Holy Spirit. Although he is the very one who empowers us to gain victory over sin, we fail to tap him as our power source. We fall into the same cycle of bondage to sin that we found ourselves in before we believed.

Galatians 5.17 says there is an inner struggle in the believer's heart between good and evil – between the (Holy) Spirit and the flesh: "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." Every believer struggles to let the Spirit gain victory over the flesh. The tendency to sin is still there in the believer, and it doesn't go away. We become like the Galatians, having begun by the Spirit, but trying to become mature by the flesh, by our own natural, human effort, rather than by faith (cf. Gal. 3.1-7). Sin is "a power that seeks to destroy,"¹¹ and instead of us ruling over sin, it rules over us. We have not adequately come to grips with the fact that we as Christians can accomplish no spiritual good by any effort of our own.

III. God's standard and expectation of pure living for Christians

As Christians we instinctively know we are not supposed to sin. Our conscience tells us not to commit evil in thought, word, or deed. We know we should be

¹¹ Edward Pollasch, "The Problem of Sin," unpublished article, obtained from the author October 2005.

upright and moral in a decadent society. Eunice Kamaara observed the declining social state of Africa: "In Kenya, for instance, social evils such as rape, robbery, sexual promiscuity, and murder are common features of social life... We are living in a world whose moral fibres have decayed to an extent that it is threatened with collapse."¹² Kamaara rightly gives a call to be salt and light even though it is difficult to apply the Bible's summary teaching to love your neighbor as you love yourself. In suggesting how to live morally, she advises us first of all not to join the world's bandwagon, but rather to speak out against and correct moral evils. Secondly, she adds, we should love our neighbour.¹³ This is hard to do! Yet the whole Old Testament Law, given by God in order to lay out his standard of righteousness for his people, is summarized by the statement, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19.18). The same standard carries on into the New Testament: Jesus tells us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as our self (Matt. 22.39-40). Not only that; Jesus' standard of righteousness is even higher than the letter of the Old Testament law. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus went beyond the actual deeds of evil that the Old Testament forbade (such as murder and adultery) and got to the root issue of our heart attitudes and desires. If the Old Testament said "you shall not murder," Jesus said, "everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" (Matt. 5.21-22). If the Old Testament said, "you shall not commit adultery," Jesus said, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5.27-28). The truth is, God didn't expect his people in the Old Testament merely to keep the letter of the Law; he was after their heart! God was looking for the right heart motives *behind* their keeping of his commandments. Not only did Jesus explain this in Matthew 5; in numerous places in the Old Testament, God says so himself. Doesn't Micah 6.8 say, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Doesn't Psalm 24.3-4 ask rhetorically who may stand in God's holy place, and answer with "He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully"? God's standard of righteousness includes not merely our outward acts, but our inner thoughts – our heart. He wants clean hearts, the fruit of which will be proper outward morality. So it is not as though God was merely a God of law in the Old Testament and a God of love or grace in the New; his standard of righteousness covers both our outward actions as well as our inner motivations, both in the Old Testament and the New. God hasn't changed. His commands to love one another, to deal justly in our

¹² Eunice Kamaara, "Being a Christian in an Immoral Society," *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 14 (1) 1995, 25, 29.

¹³ Kamaara, 29.

relationships, to do good, to help the poor, to love our enemy, and all other commands are all derived from the foundational commands to love God and to love our neighbor as our self. This is his standard; this is what he expects from Christians.

IV. Man's inability to fulfill God's standard of righteousness, and God's solution

Did God give the Law through Moses expecting that man would be able to obey all the Laws and thus deserve to be counted righteous in God's sight? It is sometimes thought so, however, that is not what the Bible teaches. God never expected the Law to be a means of righteousness. Three key verses in the New Testament state the purpose of the OT Law. "The law was added so that the trespass might increase" (Rom. 5.20, NIV); "Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made, and it was put in place through angels by an intermediary" (Gal. 3.19, ESV); "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3.24, NIV).

First of all, God gave the Law not to suggest that by our efforts in keeping the Law we could be considered worthy of getting to heaven when we die. Rather, God wanted us to see that we *couldn't* keep his perfect standard. The Law came not at the beginning of history, but a long time after creation. From the beginning, the quality of being counted righteous before God came not by keeping the Law, but rather by faith. The father of the faith, Abraham, "believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15.6). Paul expounds on this point in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. If God had meant for mankind to earn righteousness by keeping his standards, he might have given the Law in Genesis 2 rather than Exodus 20. "[T]he Law is unable to deal with the sinful inclinations which have been ours since our first parents sinned."¹⁴ It is very interesting to consider that in the Old Testament, only the priests and the Levites were allowed to enter the temple. Why was this? "Let no one enter the house of the LORD except the priests and ministering Levites. They may enter, for they are holy, but all the people shall keep the charge of the LORD" (2 Chr. 23.6). The implication is that anyone who wasn't a priest wasn't holy. If this was literally true, then all those who weren't Levites could never meet up to

¹⁴ John N. Oswalt, *Called to Be Holy: A Biblical Perspective* (Nappanee, Indiana: Francis Asbury Press, 1999), 106.

God's standard of holiness, because they weren't descendants of Aaron, from whom the Levites came. In actuality, the laws relating to the temple (such as the restrictions on entering the temple) were really a shadow of the reality of Christ; they portrayed in symbolic form our relationship to God through Christ. In the OT anyone could indeed be counted righteous by faith, as Hab. 2.4 states ("but the righteous shall live by his faith"). That verse is quoted and expanded on in three New Testament books – Romans (1.17), Galatians (3.11), and Hebrews (11.38). So the Law was given so that people could realize God's standard was too hard for them to keep, and that they needed help. According to Rom. 5.20, our trespass increases – we realize that our sin is worse than we thought. The law arouses sin. For example, if God says, "don't covet," we automatically start thinking about coveting. To use an absurd illustration, if I say, "Don't think about pink elephants for the next five minutes," what are you going to be doing for the next five minutes? The Law showed us what we should and shouldn't do, and God was hoping that people would realize, "I can't keep God's law, and nobody else can either – I need help! God, only you can help me! I need you!"

The thrust of Romans 7-8 and Galatians 3-4 is that we are unable to fulfill the requirements of the Law: this is a truth of life for the Christian and non-Christian alike. The problem comes when *we* think *we* can do something toward living the Christian life – we sort of 'help God.' But the whole point of the gospel is that we can't help God with anything, ever. The OT Law tried to tell Israel that. Anything we ever accomplish is by grace, start to finish. Jesus said, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for *apart from Me you can do nothing*" (John 15.4-5, italics mine). We can do no spiritual good; we can accomplish nothing toward providing our own righteousness, ever. It is by grace through faith from beginning to end, "for we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5.7).

So this leads us to the second major purpose of the Law – the Law didn't merely point out our problem: it promised a solution through the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ. The whole point of the Law, after showing us that we could not keep the Law, was point us to the divine intervention that would one day come. The only way we could keep the Law is if God did it for us. So, in the Old Testament scheme, Israel needed to realize that they needed a Messiah, a Savior, to redeem them from their bondage to sin. It is worth noting that Israel's deliverance from literal bondage in Egypt prefigured the redemption from our greatest bondage, bondage to sin available through Christ:

In the New Testament reflections on and developments of the Old Testament concept of redemption, the bondage in view is always and everywhere the demonic power known as sin. Whereas iniquity lies dimly in the background of every ancient form of slavery, Christ and his disciples made it explicitly clear that sin is our real enemy.¹⁵

So by our own human, natural efforts, we cannot keep God's law. But what we cannot do, God did by sending his son and giving us his Spirit so that we will live by the Spirit, not by 'the flesh' (Rom. 8.1-11). It is important to look at this key New Testament term, 'the flesh,' for this term is used to identify this natural human effort that fights against God's way of living the Christian life. The word 'flesh' (Gk. *sarx*) has four uses in the NT:¹⁶

- (1) 'Flesh' can be used in an entirely physical sense – this has a good connotation. For example, in Col. 1.21-22, Paul explains that Christ had reconciled the readers to God from a state of alienation and hostility of mind "in his body of flesh by his death." Here the reference is to Christ in his human body, and 'flesh' has no negative connotation.
- (2) 'Flesh' can refer to desires related to bodily needs such as sleep, food, water, sex, etc. The connotation can be good or bad depending on whether these desires are under control. For example, in Eph. 2.3, Paul states that "we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." In this case, the term refers to bodily desires that characterize a person before he becomes a Christian, and which can get out of control. Before a person believes in Christ, he has no supernatural help available to deliver him from such passions. This is not to say that unbelievers never have self-control, only that they do not have the Holy Spirit's presence to guide and deliver them. Hence, it is possible for some non-Christians to appear more 'righteous' than some Christians – a fact well observed by non-Christians!

¹⁵ Ronald Youngblood, *The Heart of the Old Testament: A Survey of Key Theological Themes*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 109.

¹⁶ Oswalt, 114-116. I am indebted to John Oswalt's book for the following explanation of 'the flesh' and for his in-depth discussion of the Christian calling to a holy life.

- (3) 'Flesh' can also mean "that attitude which says that all there is to life is the satisfaction of bodily desire, and the acquisition of physical possessions." This is "the attitude that dominates much of the modern media culture." This use of 'flesh' is what 1 John 2.16 refers to as the lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. It has a bad meaning.¹⁷
- (4) 'Flesh' can also refer "to human pride and self-will." This is a bad meaning,¹⁸ and this is the sense that is meant in passages dealing with the sinful nature such as Rom. 7.14-23; 8.4-8; 1 Cor. 14.26; Gal. 5.16-17.

Oswalt's explanation of 'the flesh' is telling:

This New Testament concept of 'the flesh' is similar to the Old Testament ideas of the 'spirit of prostitution' or the 'evil imagination.' It is that in us which predisposes us to want our way instead of God's way. It is that which insists upon determining all matters of right and wrong for itself, and since it is in rebellion against God, it inevitably calls evil, good and good, evil."¹⁹

Our natural tendency is to live by our own effort. We are self-driven. Yet once we believe in Christ, we have a new birth (John 3.3) into God's family: we are a new creation (2 Cor. 5.17). In other words, we have been transformed out of Satan's kingdom of darkness into God's kingdom of God's son (Col. 1.13). We have a new power to overcome the self-drivenness. We are God's adopted children and have the rights as his children (John 1.12). This new birth gives us an element of God's divine nature because we have God's seed in us (2 Pet. 1.4; 1 John 3.9). In other words we are enabled to escape the corruption that is in the world and we are able not to practice sin (again, referring to 2 Pet. 1.4 and 1 John 3.9). This is because we have been given the Holy Spirit who enables us to practice righteousness (Rom. 8.1-11). To rephrase it, we can live the 'exchanged life' – "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2.20).

The Lord uses two means to give us the grace to live righteously and not sin: the Spirit of God and the word of God. First, the Spirit gives us life (Rom.

¹⁷ Oswalt, 115.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

8.11); God saved us “according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the *Holy Spirit*” (Tit. 3.5, italics mine). Second, we have born again of imperishable seed. the *word of God* (1 Pet. 1.23, italics mine), through which we grow in respect to salvation (1 Pet. 2.2). “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is of no avail. The *words* that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6.63, italics mine). Jesus is the living word and as we have fellowship with him by faith. we find the power to live the way God commands us to – even to love others as much as we love our self, which in practice is quite hard to do!

Sincere Christians don’t intend to sin; we just find our selves doing it (as Paul in Rom. 7.17-25). It’s like a player in a professional soccer game who knows the rules so well but discovers himself being given a flag for going offside. He didn’t intend to do it. but he did it. Christians just discover themselves sinning. But there is a solution to the problem of sin; the solution is *surrender*. We need to give up trying on our own effort and let God work through us by his divine power. We should stop trying and start trusting.

Paul sums the whole Christian life well with his call to self-sacrifice in Rom. 12.1-2: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” We need to be a living sacrifice and thus consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God through Christ (Rom. 6.11).

But there is one problem with a living sacrifice – it wants to crawl off the altar! We don’t like to ‘let go and let God’ – but we have to in order to please God. Without faith it is impossible to please him (Heb. 11.6)! But the whole point is that we won’t taste those rivers of living water (John 7.37-39) until we give up our own efforts. That is what Jesus meant when he talked about taking our cross daily and hating our own life. It isn’t our life anyway; God gave it to us and he has a right to ask for it back. God wants a personal relationship with us through Jesus Christ, and it’s available for the asking – but at a cost. No other religion offers the power to live rightly. and no other religion has a living Savior like we do. Yes, the gospel tells us we’re sinners and need forgiveness, but yes, the gospel brings a full, abundant life through Christ.

*To walk and run the law commands,
But gives us neither feet nor hands.
Yet better news the gospel brings;*

It bids us fly – and gives us wings.

We have a higher calling than the world offers. Our God has transferred us into his spiritual kingdom, a kingdom that will one day become an earthly kingdom when Christ returns. And not only can we can have ‘pie in the sky when we die’; we can begin slicing in this life! Jesus came that we “may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10.10). The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3.6). The Law came through Moses but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1.17). In spite of our natural inability to fulfill God’s standards, we are nonetheless able to fulfill his demands perfectly, since he has given us all the grace and resources we need. All we have to do is cease striving in our own effort and lay hold of the divine power already there and waiting to be tapped.

How do you account for the seeming weakness within the church and in many individual believers? Is God selective in granting his power for righteous living; is the Spirit impotent to perform his ministry; or are believers negligent in appropriating the power made available to each of us? Read the opening chapters of Acts to see how the Spirit was unleashed upon the church with power.²⁰

V. An apparent contradiction?

All of this raises a concern. If God has indeed enabled his people to live righteously by giving the Spirit, his word, his Son, and his grace, then *why don’t Christians live consistent lives? Why do we still struggle with sin?* I believe it is because our redemption is not complete in this life. Though everything we have said so far is true, and we do have full capability not to sin, there is another side to the coin. Yes, we have been given the new nature; yes, we are a new creation in Christ; but we still have the sinful nature. It was not taken away when we believed in Christ. There is still a flaw in the human spirit (the flesh) that makes us prefer the impure to the pure.²¹ We have the principle of sin within us; nothing good dwells in our flesh (Rom. 7.14-18). If we probe into our heart we find we not only have the Spirit, but we also still have the flesh, and the Spirit and the flesh fight against each other to gain control over us (Gal. 5.16-17).

We are only partly redeemed in this life. There are three stages of redemption: At the moment of salvation we were redeemed from the penalty of sin (Rom.

²⁰ R. C. Sproul, *Before the Face of God, Book 1: A Daily Guide for Living From the Book of Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 189.

²¹ Oswalt, p. 121.

6.23); during this life we are daily redeemed from the power of sin as we walk by faith (2 Cor. 5.7; Gal. 2.20-3.11); and when we see Christ we will be redeemed from the very presence of sin (cf. 1 Thess. 5.23). In this life we still struggle to live purely, yet at times we fail. This does not give us any excuse to sin, however! We must constantly purify ourselves, fixing our hope on Christ's return (1 Pet. 1.13), confess our sin when it becomes known (1 John 2.1-2), and stand firm in the grace that gives us victory in this life (1 Pet. 5.10; cf. Heb. 4.16). To the degree that we set our mind on things above – on Christ and on the Spirit, we will avoid sinning, and will have life and peace (Col. 3.1-4; Rom. 8.4, 6). But to the extent that we divert our minds to the vain pleasures of this world, we will live according to the flesh, which is death (Rom. 8.6). We have the capacity not to fulfill the lusts of the flesh (Gal. 5.18; Rom. 8.6, 13), and yet we find ourselves occasionally sinning. Yet we should always strive to grow in grace. This does not mean more human effort to live right, however! That is the very danger we have to overcome! Remember the Galatians? “[T]he Christian life is never one in which our own human effort secures the relationship.... No, the Christian life is one of grace through faith operating from end to end.”²²

This is “the crisis of the deeper life.” to quote the title of a book on this very issue.²³ In essence, we need to continue living by faith rather than by sight, rather than our own human effort – and as is evident from the condition of the church and our own Christian experience, it is not easy! Christians are capable of every sin that non-Christians are capable of. But lest we despair and think that there is no hope and that the sinful nature will defeat us, let us remember two facts. First, God is at work in us to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2.13). He has begun a good work in us and will keep changing us and making us grow into Christ-likeness (Phil. 1.6). Second, Jesus Christ will build his church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it (Matt. 16.18). The whole idea of becoming a Christian and being part of the body of Christ was God's idea, not ours. He started the church, he saved us, and it is his power that will keep us going and deliver us safely into his kingdom (cf. 2 Tim. 4.8).

Yet we have a part to play. We are not robots; we *do* have a free will. We have to choose daily and hourly and moment-by-moment to follow him. It is because God is at work in us that we need to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2.12-13). God works with us in a cooperative way. Victory over sin is by God's power and doing, yet in God's sovereignty he has chosen to use our free will. “Whatever experiences with God we may have had,

²² Oswalt, p. 113.

²³ George P. Pardington, *The Crisis of the Deeper Life* (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, 1991).

he never removes our capacity for free will, and unless we continue to cooperate with the Spirit who is filling us, there is always the possibility of regression.”²⁴ It is we who live the Christian life, but he lives it through us (Gal. 2.20) – this is a paradox that is hard for our finite minds to grasp. Our problem is not really a contradiction as it is a mixture of the two natures – the presence of two opposing natures – in our inner being. This presence of the sinful nature means we cannot reach sinless perfection in this life – a fact that God knows and accepts (cf. 1 John 1.8), and a fact that we should live with, too. But this is no excuse to be complacent about sin! We cannot say, as some did, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6.1) Of course not! God expects us to settle for nothing less than holiness. And it is not so much that we *must* obey God; it is more that we *may* obey him.²⁵

VI. Practical considerations in living the exchanged life

Both Scripture and the realities of life teach us that there is an ideal standard of sinlessness that we won’t actually reach in this life. God doesn’t condemn us for being imperfect; he God knows and understands, and he cares for us (Ps. 55.22; 1 Pet. 5.7). He knows we are but dust (Ps. 103.14). He loves us just the way we are – but too much to let us stay that way. He works with us where we are, not where we should be, yet he steers us on toward the goal of Christlikeness (cf. Rom. 8.28-30), always wanting and expecting us to gain victory over sin in new areas of life. A significant reality of the Christian life is that once we gain victory in one area, God will conveniently reveal a new area of weakness for us to work on!

Christian hymns are full of the reality of needing to walk by faith and yielding ourselves to him, accepting his good and acceptable and perfect will for our lives. “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”²⁶ Another songwriter expresses his sacrificial commitment of himself to God in the hymn, “Take My Life and Let It Be.” The last stanza says, “Take my will and make it Thine – it shall be no longer mine; Take my heart – it is Thine own, It shall be Thy royal throne”²⁷

Practically speaking, how can we truly be fully consecrated to God so that we can live exemplary lives, choosing consistently to obey God and to love our

²⁴ Oswalt, 74.

²⁵ Oswalt, 121.

²⁶ The chorus of “Trust and Obey” (*Praises to the Most High*, # 68).

²⁷ *The Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship* (USA: Word / Integrity, 1997), # 597.

neighbor? I don't believe there is any magical formula or guarantee that will ensure us success; it seems to depend on a daily humbling of oneself before God. If there were a guaranteed formula for spiritual success, surely some early Christians would have found it. After all, we are what we are by the grace of God, and ultimately if it weren't for God's grace you and I might be out there as violent criminals.

Having said that, some scattered suggestions may help us when we struggle with sin:

- Accept the fact the God will never love you more than he does right now. Our holiness doesn't "cause his love and acceptance; it is the glad response to that love"²⁸
- We should cleanse ourselves very frequently from impurity, so that we may be "a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work" (2 Tim. 2.21). We have the hope of heaven, so we should purify ourselves as we prepare to spend eternity with Christ (1 John 2.28-3.2).
- Distinguish between *sin* and *temptation to sin*. It is not a sin to be tempted, but what you do with the temptation? Do you linger on it or do you renounce it?
- Sources of temptation include not only our sin nature but also the world and the devil. This topic would take another article to develop, but suffice it to say here that the evil one tries to capitalize on our weaknesses in order to destroy us. 1 Peter 5.8 says, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour". Satan does tempt us, but if we yield to his temptations, we cannot shift the blame to him as Eve tried to do in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3.13). We cannot blame the devil when we sin. James 1.14 puts it this way: "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire."
- Realize that sanctification is a process as well as an event. We *grow* in Christlikeness. Growth takes time, so we shouldn't expect perfection instantly. Holiness is a result of both crisis and process.
- Let me say immediately, however, that God is in the business of changing us, and gives victory over sin, so we must never underestimate God's power to do a miraculous work in our lives. We can make a clean break with sinful habits by his power. It is not merely

²⁸ Oswalt, 195. This thought, as well as some others listed in this section, are adapted from Oswalt's last chapter, "Walking in Holiness."

psychological help or slow progress that brings change. We can suddenly and drastically be different from what we used to be. In my estimation, a failure in the church is that we do not realize this very fact. We often set our sights too low on what to expect of Christian growth. We sometimes tend to tolerate and excuse sin, not believing in God's power to alter us radically.

- Cry out to God for mercy and beseech him to change you.
- Realize that God's ways are not our ways. Greatness in God's kingdom comes through humility (Matt. 18.1); strength comes through weakness (2 Cor. 12.10), and the way to a crown is through a cross. God's kingdom is an upside-down kingdom.²⁹
- Knowing all that God has done for us, we can treat the old body of sin as dead (Rom. 6.11). We have been baptized into Christ's death (Rom. 6.3); the death he died, he died to sin (6.10), and as he was raised to life, so we partake in his resurrection power (Rom. 6.4; 8.11; Phil. 3.10).
- We must have the Holy Spirit's power in order not to sin. Romans 8 is particularly relevant here. We cannot ultimately assure victory over sin by anything *we* do; we must let God do it through us, as Gal. 2.20 so clearly explains. It is the grace of God, which ultimately God controls, not we our selves.
- Stop trying to live by the law. No amount of ritualistic obedience to laws or following religious expectations will make you more holy. This does not mean, of course, that you shouldn't go to church. However, to say that going to church will make you a Christian is like saying that walking into a car parking spot makes you a car. Holiness is a passion, not a performance.
- Avoid pharisaic dangers such as paying attention to the minutiae of the law while overlooking major concerns like justice, mercy, and love.
- We should take practical precautions by avoiding places and scenarios that we know will encourage us to sin. For example, if you are a former alcoholic and struggle with being tempted when you are around alcoholic beverages, don't loiter around the bar quoting "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"! Instead, flee youthful lusts (2 Tim. 2.22), which is far wiser. Run from sin, like Joseph did when Potiphar's wife tried to entice him (Gen. 39).

²⁹ Cf. the book by that name: Donald Kravbill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, 25th Anniversary Edition (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2003).

- Foster fellowship with God. This comes through solitude and silence, meditation, prayer, and intercession.³⁰
- Guard your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life (Prov. 4.23). Ask God to search your heart and expose any sin (Psalm 139.23) – and be willing to accept whatever God reveals. Are you serious about living for God? We can't tap God's power until our wills are broken so that we can accept God's will. "To be broken is the beginning of revival. It is painful, it is humiliating, but it is the only way."³¹
- Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for him (Ps. 37.1).

Can a Christian stop sinning? I believe we can. God commands not to be enslaved to sin (Romans 6). Not only that; he has given us the power not to sin: the Holy Spirit, who sets us free from sin (Romans 8). The problem comes when we try in our own effort not to sin (Romans 7). We fail unless we let God live out his life in us through the Holy Spirit. It is a matter of whether we set our minds on the Spirit or on the flesh (Rom. 8.5-6). In spite of the apparent thinking in some quarters that we are in large measure doomed to a life defeated by sin, I believe we can live a life of righteousness as we trust God by faith to manifest his power over sin through us.³²

God's word says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5.3) A. W. Tozer, in his famous book, *The Pursuit of God*, concisely sums up what it means to have the blessing of the kingdom of heaven in one's life:

The way to deeper knowledge of God is through the lonely valleys of soul poverty and abnegation of all things. The blessed ones who possess the Kingdom are they who have repudiated every external thing and have rooted from their hearts all sense of possessing. These are the 'poor in spirit.' They have reached an inward state paralleling the outward circumstances of the common beggar in the streets of Jerusalem. That is what the word *poor* as Christ used it actually means. These blessed poor are no longer slaves to the tyranny of things. They have broken the yoke of the oppressor; and this they have done not by fighting by surrendering.

³⁰ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together*. Translated, and with an Introduction by John W. Doberstein (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), 76-89.

³¹ Hession, Roy and Revel, *The Calvary Road* (Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Christian Literature Crusade, 1990), 21.

³² Cf. 2 Cor. 5.7; Gal. 2.20.

Though free from all sense of possessing, they yet possess all things.
“Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”³³

VII. Significance for the modern African church

Paul Kisau has published an important article, “The Key to the African Heart.”³⁴ He, like many others, discusses the saying that “African Christianity is a mile long and an inch deep,” commenting that this common phrase is both a compliment that African Christianity has had enormous growth in the past several decades, and a criticism that “[t]his growth in numbers has however not been accompanied by spiritual depth.”³⁵ He goes on to say, “The depth here refers to the quality of African Christianity. To say that it is an inch deep is to imply that Africans in general have not allowed the gospel to control every part of their life.”³⁶

The church in Africa will certainly benefit from a full submission to the gospel. Kisau cites two examples of big challenges that faced Africa in the 90’s: inadequate discipling and syncretism. “Africans accept the gospel but still cling to African traditional beliefs.”³⁷ *Operation World* agrees: “Thoroughgoing repentance and renunciation of sin and the works of darkness is often lacking and many Christians are not free from the fear of witchcraft and evil spirits.”³⁸

These same challenges still face the African church a decade later, and the need for repentance and revival is still paramount. Yet the challenges seem to have grown. Now we are faced with alarming inroads of immorality among churchgoers and church leaders in some denominations. There are power struggles, pride of position, pressuring of people for money for building projects, and so forth. We are not serious enough about our faith; we are trying to serve both God and man, and the love of the world is in us (1 John 2.15-17). We are trying to be friends with the world, but that is enmity toward God – spiritual adultery (James 4.4).

³³ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, Inc., 1982), 23.

³⁴ Kisau, Paul. “The Key to the African Heart” (*Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 17 (2) 1998), 85-106.

³⁵ Kisau, 93.

³⁶ Kisau, 95.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ quoted in Kisau, 95.

The Christian life should consist of a love relationship between the believer and God. Yet in African culture there appears to be an element of African traditional religion carrying over into the Christian faith that squelches the inner (and intimate) love relationship we should have with him and that focuses merely on the outward keeping of God's laws. If African traditional religion involves appeasing the spirits in bribe-like manner in the hope of manipulating the spirits to help the worshiper or to do good things for him, perhaps in our Christian worship some similar attitudes carry over. For example, there seems to be a lot of emphasis on keeping Christian rules and attending church merely as a duty, rather than enjoying the blessing of fellowship and worship together with other believers. Do most churchgoers really enjoy their Christian life? In other words, do we as Christians truly sense God's presence in our life, and are we happy as a result? Are we spiritually fed, both through our own personal devotional life and through meaningful worship services? Do we sense the power of the Holy Spirit giving us his grace and guiding us to obey him with pleasure? Or, on the contrary, is our experience more like a grievous task that we almost resent because to be a Christian means just trying (and failing) to follow a burdensome list of rules and regulations? When we realize the extent of God's love for us and all he has done to secure our salvation, it should be easier to respond with love and joy, surrendering our heart and will to his good plan for our lives.

As an expatriate westerner in Kenya, I have heard that "Africans don't change." For example, many still use bows and arrows after thousands of years. Yet in Christ we are changed into a new creation, and God enables us to live new and joyful lives, victorious over the control of sin through the power of Christ. How can we cultivate this joyful, victorious life? Proverbs 4.23-27 gives us a concise and sure three-step guideline. *First*, we must keep our heart vigilantly, for "from it flow the springs of life" (4.23). Our heart is a garden, and we must keep weeding it of sin, just as the farmer diligently weeds his garden in order to keep the fruit growing. We must diligently cultivate righteousness in our heart so that we can grow spiritually and have a fruitful Christian life.³⁹ *Second*, we must put away crooked speech (4.24). In other words, confessing sin is followed by a life that is pure in speech. When our inner thoughts are made right, so are our words. *Third*, we must pursue a straight path for our feet, turning away from evil (4.25-27). That is, not only are our thoughts and our speech transformed, but also our deeds. When we turn from sin, our whole life is

³⁹ Weeding our heart of sin involves humbling ourselves before God, exposing our inner motives to him, and letting him point out sin in our lives so that we can confess it.

affected.⁴⁰ The imagery of feet and a path in Proverbs reminds us that the normal Christian experience is a walk – an ongoing lifestyle of pursuing righteousness and walking in newness of life.⁴¹

VIII. Conclusion

So what is the conclusion to the matter of corruption in the human heart? For the Christian, God's "divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire" (2 Pet. 1.3-4). God has not shortchanged us; he calls us to live righteous, exemplary lives of integrity, and he has given us everything we need to live in keeping with this high and holy calling. When we do stumble and sin, it is because that element of corruption, the sinful nature, has successfully lured us away from faith in Christ. The temptation to sin will always be there (and in full force) even in the godliest of Christians, until the day we meet the Lord. But we have a power in us greater than our sinful nature – we have the power of Christ's resurrection, which comes by the grace of God through the Holy Spirit when we trust him for it. God expects us to fight and win. "Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4.4).

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⁴⁰ As 1 John 1.9 says, when we confess sin to God, we are forgiven and cleansed from unrighteousness. We will live righteously in thought, word, and deed.

⁴¹ Cf. Rom. 6.4.

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