

# **GOD'S CALL**

## **Major themes in the Scriptures**

### **Quality of being (16)**

#### **The flesh opposes quality of being**

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The Lord willing, today we will consider the subject, "Quality of being", the sixteenth message, in seeking to appreciate major themes in the Scriptures.

A short summary of today's message:

At the heart of sin is the choice to go our own way instead of God's way of righteousness. If we want to develop well, we must learn deeply to deny ourselves effectively, deal with the flesh fully, and become what we ought to be.

We will seek the Lord to appreciate more of what this means.

We all know that it is very, very important for us to develop true quality in our being. Otherwise, there is no true meaning in life and all the time we spend on earth will be in vain.

So how can we develop that quality?

We have seen that at the heart of sin is the self-life – we want to go our own way. Therefore, if we want to develop quality in our being, we have to learn to deal with the self-life; we have to learn to deny ourselves. So in the last message, we saw that the Lord Jesus denied Himself, but His manner of denying Himself is in the realm of true and the highest quality of being.

There are two different realms of denying ourselves. Before we can learn to deny ourselves like the Lord Jesus did in that kind of purity and goodness, we have to learn to deny ourselves in dealing with sin and the self-life. So we need to learn to deny ourselves both in dealing with sin and in the deepest level of self-giving love. These are two aspects that we must develop if we want true quality in our being.

When our lives are self-centred and self-seeking, we will not be able to follow the Lord Jesus in that kind of quality of His expression of His denying Himself. He gave up Himself not because He had to but because of love, because of His compassion, because of His kindness. So we must learn to deny ourselves in the realm of dealing with sin and the self-life before we can effectively deny ourselves in a spirit of true self-giving.

When we look at the Scriptures, we will realize that if we want to deny ourselves effectively, then we need to understand the seriousness of the life of the flesh, of being fleshly, and dealing with this fully.

If we do not deal with the life of the flesh, then even though we may want so much to develop quality in our being, we will find that we will fail and we will not succeed.

The term “flesh” as used in the Scriptures can refer to something that is neutral morally or it can refer to something morally bad. We need to appreciate both aspects so that we do not misinterpret and misapply. The flesh does not always refer to something bad, but it is very often used in that way – to refer to something negative, evil morally.

The flesh can refer to the physical body or living in this physical body. That is neutral. But when it refers to living according to the inclinations and abilities of this natural body instead of depending on God and receiving life from God, then it is an expression of going our own way and the self-life.

**2 Corinthians 10: 3-4**

- 3 For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh,
- 4 for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.

“For though we walk in the flesh” in this context, when the apostle Paul referred to walking in the flesh, he was not referring to anything negative. Walking in the flesh just refers to living in this physical body. So although we live in this physical body, we dwell in this natural body, we do not need to sin. So he says, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh”. That means you can live in the flesh, walk in the flesh and yet not live by the flesh in the sense of going your own way. We do not war according to the flesh.

He goes on to explain: “for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.” We see here the contrast between “of the flesh” and “divinely powerful”.

So when we war according to the flesh, it means we are using our natural, fleshly, physical abilities in order to fight the spiritual battle instead of depending on God. The weapons of our warfare must come from God. It must be such that we live our lives based on what is divinely powerful, and that can be true only when we live our lives in accordance with God's ways and in the direction of dependence on Him for His life and His power.

We see the negative aspect of the flesh very readily in the lives of believers. For those who reject God totally, of course their lives will be lived by the flesh. But even for believers who love the Lord to varying degrees, living by the flesh is a very common problem.

**1 Corinthians 3: 1-3**

- 1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.
- 2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able *to receive it*. Indeed, even now you are not yet able,
- 3 for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?

The reference to jealousy and strife shows us that the apostle Paul was referring to a sinful manner of life, a life of self-seeking. Jealousy and strife concentrates on what you want, what you like, what you desire regardless of how it affects others negatively. And this kind of life the apostle Paul describes in other words as men of flesh, infants in Christ, fleshly, mere men. These are various terms that he has used to describe this direction of life.

“Men of flesh”: because we live according to the desires of the flesh.  
“Infants in Christ”: still very much preoccupied with the self. “Fleshly”: expressing the desires and direction of the flesh. “Mere men”: refers to how people in this world generally live their lives – they are selfish, fleshly, motivated by what we desire for ourselves.

What then is the contrast?

The contrast is: spiritual men. “I... could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh”. But notice that when the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he expressed his gladness that they had come to know the Lord, that they were saints by calling, that they had many spiritual gifts, they could contribute in the kingdom of God. But in that state, they were still fleshly. There was still envy and strife, jealousy, various aspects of self-centred living that were very prevalent in their lives. They were not spiritual men. So that is the contrast: spiritual as contrasted with fleshly or natural.

With this background, let us then consider how we can effectively deal with the life of the flesh. This subject is a very vast subject and very difficult, but there are some major principles that are important for us to concentrate on to appreciate what is at the root of the problem and what is God’s solution for us.

A very helpful but difficult passage for learning how to deal with the flesh is found in **Romans 7**.

**Romans 7: 14-24**

- 14 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.
- 15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to *do*, but I am doing the very thing I hate.
- 16 But if I do the very thing I do not want *to do*, I agree with the Law, *confessing* that the Law is good.
- 17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.
- 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not.
- 19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.
- 20 But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.
- 21 I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.
- 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,
- 23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.
- 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

This passage has been quoted again and again in the context of Christian experience. Many Christians find it very difficult to live a righteous life and they can identify with **Romans 7**. They may cry out in this kind of direction: For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.

Many Christians do desire to be holy and righteous and good. They want to follow the Lord, they want to honour Him but somehow, in their daily living, they find that they do not live like that. Why is it so?

This passage as it is presented, it seems as if this person wants to live a righteous life but it is not possible to do so. The picture here is of a person who recognizes what is right and good and he desires to walk in that path and yet in reality, he walks in the opposite direction.

So what is the reason for this? It seems to come through that he has chosen to live a life that is righteous and yet, he does the opposite and it is beyond his control. He says, "For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin." It seems that he could not help but sin because he was sold into bondage to sin.

And in this context, the way he presents it seems as if he has no choice. He has been sold into bondage to sin and therefore, he cannot help but sin. And so he says: "no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I am not the one who wants to sin. I want to be righteous but it is sin that dwells in me that makes me sin." So it is as if it is not his responsibility. He wants to do good but it is sin that dwells in him that brings about a sinful life.

If we look at the Scriptures, if we ponder about moral meaning, if we listen to the words of the Lord Jesus, it should become very clear to us that that is not possible. That cannot be the meaning.

It cannot be that you have no choice but to sin. It cannot be that it is beyond your control to live a righteous life. That cannot be. If it were so, then God cannot judge us, God cannot command us to live a righteous life, He cannot say, "Be holy, as I am holy"; the Lord Jesus cannot say, "...be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect". If it is beyond our control, if it is something that we cannot help but we have to live like that, then God cannot command us in that way and He cannot judge us for our sins.

But this is the kind of situation where many Christians may say something along these lines: "Because of my background, I cannot help it. Because of my genetic composition, my constitution, my make-up, I cannot help it. I live like this. I know it is wrong but I cannot help it." Others may say: "The influences around me - there are so many people who walk in the wrong direction and they affect me - so I cannot help it."

When God confronted Adam for his sin, he did not acknowledge that he was the one who chose to sin. Instead, he said, "The woman that You gave to me gave the fruit to me..." Likewise, the woman did not acknowledge that she chose to sin but she said, "The serpent deceived me..."

And so it is that when we find life difficult, and we find that we are going the wrong way, we may take comfort in various of these areas that may seem as if they are the cause of our sinfulness, but we need to look at this carefully so that we can deal with it effectively.

The Lord Jesus makes it very clear that we become slaves of sin when *we* commit sin, when *we* choose to sin. We can never become slaves of sin because someone else makes us sin. This is not possible.

Sin is a moral choice. Whenever we sin, it is our choice, it is our failure, we are accountable, and God will judge us for it. Yes, others may have their responsibility. They may influence us negatively; they may have evil intentions, or sometimes even good intentions, but whatever influence it might be, that by itself cannot make us sin.

**John 8:34**

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin.

We become the slaves of sin because we commit sin. We all know that sin is a moral choice and it must be our own choice. If it were not our own choice, then it is not sin. If someone were to hold your hand, put a knife in there and use your hand against your will to kill someone, have you committed murder? No. You have not sinned because that was not your choice. You resisted it but you were too weak and someone overpowered you, used your hand to kill someone, but you are innocent. God will not hold you guilty. Your moral choice must be involved for it to be sin.

So this is very important for us to be very conscious of. We must never excuse ourselves whenever we sin because no matter what the factors may be, we are responsible for that choice.

So if we understand this, then we will appreciate that when the apostle Paul said, "For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin", the one who has sold us into bondage to sin is ourselves. We have chosen the path of sin and in so doing, we have sold ourselves into bondage to sin. When there is buying and selling, we get something and we give something. When we choose the path of the flesh, we sell ourselves into bondage to sin.

The Scriptures tell us the importance of making the right choice. A good example is that of Moses and in **Hebrews 11: 24-26**, we are told:

**Hebrews 11: 24-26**

- 24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter,
- 25 choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin,
- 26 considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.

These verses tell us very clearly the kind of choice that God expects us to make. We can choose the passing pleasures of sin or we can choose the path of obedience to God, following Him in the path of righteousness. That path can include situations like ill-treatment with the people of God, the reproach of Christ, but it is the path where it will lead to quality of our being.

So if we choose to walk by the flesh, then we are actually making a choice to sell ourselves to become slaves of sin. An example of this of a very serious kind is that of King Ahab. He is an example of a man who sold himself to sin in a very serious manner.

**1 Kings 21: 20**

Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" And he answered, "I have found *you*, because you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the LORD.

Elijah said to King Ahab: "you have sold yourself to do evil in the sight of the LORD." King Ahab was described as one of the most evil kings in the history of the nation of Israel. How did he become so evil? He chose to sell himself to do evil.

Of course, behind all this, we know the evil one is at work. He tempts us, he offers us what seems to be beneficial to us, enjoyable – the passing pleasures of sin – but there is a price to that.

When you choose to follow the evil one, accept his temptations, you come under his influence. He has power; he can bring you into bondage. So when we choose the path of sin, we will find that it becomes easier and easier to sin.

Every sin that we commit makes it such we become more vulnerable; it is easier to sin. So this is a serious matter. We cannot treat it lightly and say it is just a small matter. Every small matter will affect us.

So if we want to develop quality of being, we have to deal with this thoroughly. We cannot allow even a small element to remain. Of course, we have to first deal with the deeper issues, but we cannot be satisfied just to make some progress. We must go all the way to deal with the problem.

So going our own way is basically expressed in seeking for our own selfish desires and it is associated with depending on our own abilities, especially in relation to the natural body. We call that living according to the flesh.

So in order to be free from this, we have to deal with it. And so the apostle Paul mentions in **Romans 6: 12-13**:

**Romans 6: 12-13**

- 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts,  
13 and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God.

Notice, the apostle Paul says: "...do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness". This tells us very clearly we are the ones who presented the members of **our** body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness.

And the apostle Paul says we must not go on doing this; we must not continue in this path. This is the way we have lived our lives but we must change. “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts.”

How can the apostle Paul tell the Christians “...do not let...”, if it is beyond their control? If they are slaves of sin and they have no choice, they have been sold into bondage to sin, how can they be instructed not to let sin reign in their mortal bodies?

It is obvious the apostle Paul knew this very well: We can change the situation. We must not obey the lusts of the mortal body; we must deal with that. We must not go on presenting the members of our body to sin and the way to do it, he says, is first “present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God”.

So the first thing is: we must decide. Do we really want to follow God? Do we really want to live for what is righteous and good? If we do not decide on that decisively, there is no way we can overcome sin. We must first present ourselves to God and then having done so, present our members as instruments of righteousness to God.

That means this natural body that we have can be presented to God so that by the power of God, we can overcome sin; and not just overcome sin, we can communicate and express the holiness of God because the members of the body now become instruments of righteousness to God.

So although this body has very strong inclinations that can lead us to unrighteousness, we can in fact make use of this body to communicate righteousness – to transmit righteousness – and this is a very wonderful thing. God wants us to express His glory in this natural body.

But then when we look at **Romans 7**, we may wonder why the apostle Paul put it this way: “For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.”

**Romans 7** comes after **Romans 6**, and in **Romans 6**, the apostle Paul has exhorted us to present ourselves to God, to live for God. Why then he says, “I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin”?

The life of the flesh has to do with two primary elements.

One is the direction: What we choose, what we want. We choose that direction. Are we choosing a direction in which we are independent of God, we want to go our own way? Or we choose the direction of following God and honouring Him?

But choosing to follow God does not in itself make us righteous. We cannot become righteous if we just choose to follow God and exert all the power that we have to become righteous because the life of the flesh includes depending on ourselves, our natural abilities and our own natural power in order to be righteous, and in so doing, we will definitely fail. We cannot be righteous by our own power, abilities, without God.

So not only must we give our lives to God, seek to honour Him but also, we have to depend on Him in order to do so.

The Lord Jesus tells us very clearly that we do not have life in ourselves. We do not have spiritual life, spiritual power, spiritual glory to express in our being. We need God, we need His life; we must receive that life from Him. So although we may want to be righteous, although we may choose to be righteous, we will continue to fail unless we learn the importance of living by the power of God.

So the apostle Paul says: “the Law is spiritual“, that is, the Law has a very meaningful spiritual direction, it is morally good and right; but “I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.” What is the “I” here? The “I” that he is talking about is the natural “I”, that “I” that is not depending on the power of God and the life of God: so that “I” is sold into bondage to sin because we have chosen to go our own way, we have chosen the path of sin in the first place; having chosen the path of sin, we become slaves of sin; and in that state of being slaves of sin, we cannot fulfil the requirement of the Law.

The Law is spiritual but we are of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. So if we do not learn to depend on God and His power, we cannot overcome sin. It is not possible.

**Romans 7: 5** puts it this way:

**Romans 7: 5**

For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were *aroused* by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

So while we were in the flesh, if we live by the flesh, then we will experience the sinful passions, which were *aroused* by the Law, being at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. The Law tells us that we must not seek for the things of the world, but the members of our body desire that very much. The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the boastful pride of life in this world: we are not supposed to love these things; we are to abandon them, reject them, but the members of our body are inclined towards all this, and it will bear fruit for death.

As long as we live by the flesh, these sinful passions will overpower us and we will continue to walk in a path that will lead to spiritual death.

So the Law is spiritual, the Law is good – it tells us what is the right path. But the apostle Paul says the Law that is good has resulted in death for us. Why? It is because the Law shows to us our sins, our failures. The Law says you must be pure, you must be good, but then we are not pure, we are not good. So the Law cannot help us; it can only condemn us. When we have sinned, the Law will say, “You have sinned. The judgment is death.” So the Law cannot save us, it cannot help us because it tells us where we have gone wrong and how God is going to deal with us.

So in that state, as we live in the wrong direction of our hearts, in accordance with our own abilities, we will continue the life of sin.

But God is gracious; God is very kind to us. He sees that we have sinned, we have chosen to go our own way; He still cares for us.

Right from the very beginning, God has provided for us the path of righteousness and it is possible for us to live righteously.

The only way we can live righteously is first to choose to follow God and His ways, and second, to depend on God and His life. Then we will succeed; we will be able to live righteously.

But because we have chosen to go our own way, then God’s judgment falls on us, we cannot have access to the life of God. So there is no way by which we can effectively live righteously, if we have chosen to our own way.

God in His grace has made provision so that not only can we find forgiveness for having sinned, but we can find that power to live, to overcome sin.

And so we read in **Romans 8: 1-4**, a very meaningful expression of how God has resolved the problem if only we are willing to follow Him.

**Romans 8: 1-4**

- 1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.
- 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh,
- 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

This passage is so encouraging, is so uplifting if we can identify with the direction, the meaning, the potential and what God wants for us.

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Here, the apostle Paul is not referring to condemnation in the sense of having sinned and therefore, there is the judgment of God. That aspect was dealt with in **Romans 5**, where he tells us that having been reconciled to God, we have become righteous before God through the death of Christ. As we acknowledge Him as our Saviour, as we follow Him, we become righteous. So that condemnation is past. But here, he is referring to condemnation that arises whenever we sin.

As Christians who love the Lord, whenever we sin against the Lord, there will be that condemnation in our hearts: we have gone the wrong way, we have displeased God, so that condemnation will continue as long as we continue to sin.

And so the second verse tells us: For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. So he is telling us here that this is not a reference to the death of Christ on the cross so that we can be forgiven of our sins.

He is here talking about the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus that sets us free from the law of sin and of death in our daily living.

We can be set free from condemnation in our hearts by living a life of righteousness. And the way to live that life of righteousness is through the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. We need that life from the Lord Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit. As we walk by the Spirit, as He enables us, we find that freedom, and we can be free from the law of sin and of death.

And so he says, "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*". The Law cannot save us. It can only condemn us when we fail. It is weak... through the flesh. That means the Law tells us we must be good but because of the flesh, we walk according to the flesh, we cannot fulfil the Law. So the Law is weak in that sense.

The Law could not do, but God did. What did God do? He sent a Saviour. God did not just send the Law to tell us what we should be, but He sent a Saviour to help us to become what we ought to be. Sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin – this aspect, "*as an offering* for sin", can be translated as "and concerning sin"; "*as an offering*" is not in the Greek but that is placed there by the translators. In the Greek text, basically it can be translated as: "and concerning sin, He condemned sin in the flesh".

That is to say, God sent His Son into this world in the likeness of sinful flesh. That means the Lord Jesus lived as a Man like us. He experienced all these temptations, all these inclinations and passions of this natural body, but He condemned sin in the flesh. He overcame sin, He never sinned. He shows to us that it is possible, while dwelling in this natural body that is so inclined towards the wrong direction, for us to overcome and not sin in that direction.

So the Lord Jesus died on the cross not just to make it possible for us to be forgiven of our sins, but also for us to know the power to live a righteous life. In that sense, we can condemn sin in the flesh. That means the flesh will no longer have the power over us. We need not remain as slaves to sin.

Do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies, that you should obey its lusts. We need no longer obey the lusts of the flesh.

So he says in **verse 4**: “so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” That means in reality, we can fulfil the requirement of the Law. The Law tells us: “You must be pure, you must be holy, you must be good”, and we can be. The requirement of the Law can be fulfilled in us if we do not walk according to the flesh but we walk according to the Spirit.

The Lord Jesus Himself was tempted in every aspect like us, but He never sinned.

#### **Hebrews 4: 15**

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin.

The Lord Jesus came in the likeness of sinful flesh. His body was like ours, such a body that could so easily move in the direction of sin if we allow it. But the Lord Jesus never sinned. He was tempted in all things as *we are* – He understood what we went through, He experienced all these temptations and difficulties and yet, He was without sin. He shows to us that we need not sin. We do not have to be a slave to sin.

And so we see the apostle Paul in **Romans 7** puts it as if he could not help but sin. That is because if we do not depend on God, if we do not depend on the life of the Lord Jesus, if we do not walk by the Spirit, then this will be our experience.

“Nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not.” So, “the willing is present”, or “to will is present in me”. And “to will” here, or “the willing” refers to what he mentioned in **Romans 6**. Having chosen to follow God, now wanting to obey Him, wanting to walk in the path of righteousness, that is good; we must choose that. But that is not enough.

He says: “the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not. I want to be holy and righteous but I find that I am not holy and righteous.” And so, it is as if he had no choice, it is as if something is making him sin. What is that?

And so, he says in **verse 22**: “For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,” and then **verse 23**: “but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.” That explains why in **verse 21** he says, “I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.” He has a desire to do good – he wants to do good – but he finds no power to do so. And therefore, he fails again and again.

“There is a different law in the members of my body.” This natural body – this mortal body that has been transmitted to us from Adam and Eve after they sinned against God – is a body that easily leads us to sin.

Adam and Eve chose to sin and in sinning, their spirit was affected. But it also affected their body and the body now has inclinations in that kind of wrong direction. So if we follow the inclinations of this body, then our spirit will also become affected. But we need not do that. We need not follow the inclinations of this body.

So **verse 24**, the apostle Paul says, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”

So this body brings about spiritual death. This body does not of its own accord move in a direction that is positive and meaningful. It tends to draw us away from God. And so the apostle Paul expressed it in this way that when we live like that, this will be the outcome: a wretched man, dwelling in a body that will lead us in the direction of spiritual death.

Then **verse 25**, he says, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin”.

So he says: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” That means the Lord Jesus Christ is the One who can set him free from the body of this death. The Lord Jesus Christ is the One who can save him from being this wretched man. He need not continue to be the wretched man. He can be a free man. He can live a life that is truly meaningful and good

So he tells us: “Beware. These principles are constantly at work. What you choose will lead to the outcome.”

So he says: “So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin”.

As long as you allow the life of the flesh to continue, you will be bound by the law of sin, you will be a slave of sin.

But if you walk by the law of God, if you depend on the life of God, if you walk by the Spirit, you will not fulfil the lust of the flesh; you will be able to overcome.

And so the apostle Paul goes on to help us to appreciate why it is so very important that we must understand and deal with the life of the flesh.

**Romans 8: 5-8**

- 5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.
- 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace,
- 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*,
- 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

So it is our choice.

Do we want to walk by the flesh, or do we want to walk by the Spirit? This is the choice that we make. If we set our hearts to live for God, we want to honour Him, then we also cannot do it just by our own abilities in the flesh. We have to depend on God. So the mind set on the flesh (or it can be translated as “the mind of the flesh”) is death. The mind set on the Spirit (or the mind of the Spirit) is life and peace.

If we live by our natural abilities, we depend on ourselves and all our intelligence and cleverness, we will sin, we will fail. There is no spiritual life in us.

But if we walk by the Spirit, we depend on God, we are prayerful, we keep on worshipping Him, loving Him, trusting Him then our hearts will grow to be like Him, the fruit of the Spirit will be developed in us. Then we will find that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus will set us free from the law of sin and of death.

I want now just to make clear, that we do not misunderstand the issue of the flesh. And that is to help us appreciate that on the one hand, we must deal with the life of the flesh thoroughly, deeply, and without any degree of compromise. We must deal with it thoroughly. However, we must also appreciate that this does not mean that the inclinations and desires and the functions of the natural body are sinful and negative in themselves.

It is the spirit and direction and the meaning within our hearts that determine whether it is sinful or not. There can be various desires, inclinations in this body but it is our attitude, it is the reason for our choosing a certain path, it is the basis upon which we make that choice that determines whether it is sinful or not sinful.

**Matthew 11: 16-19**

- 16 "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places, who call out to the other *children*,  
17 and say, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.'  
18 "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon!'  
19 "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

In our natural body, we do have inclinations that are proper. We feel hungry, we feel thirsty and it is not wrong for us to eat or to drink in response to that. They are natural inclinations. John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking; he was often fasting and they say, 'He has a demon!' The Lord Jesus came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'

This is wrong interpretation of meaning based on outward forms.

John the Baptist appeared unusual. The way he lived his life, they could not understand it, so they interpreted him based on their own ideas. Likewise, the Lord Jesus lived His life with freedom. He could eat and drink when others may be doing it because of gluttony, but he did not do so. He could enjoy His eating and drinking with the right spirit. The same person who can eat and drink properly, enjoy in the right way may on another occasion, eat and drink in the wrong way. If within our hearts the meaning is wrong, then the action that we take will become wrong.

So we must be careful not to judge just by the outward forms of things but to understand the meaning, the purpose, the direction, the attitude behind it. Of course, we must beware of inclinations in the natural body that can be quite negative and disastrous. For example, a feeling may come to us to just hit somebody. It is just a feeling. But if we give in to that without thought, then we have sinned because we are not acting by meaning. So when we recognize that it is wrong for us to hit somebody in that situation, then we have to exercise ourselves not to do so.

So the principle ultimately is that we have to assess where it will lead us. When we do these things in this body, what would be the meaning, the outcome? We must be the master of our bodies. We must take control of this body to do the things that are useful, and that is why the apostle Paul mentioned how he buffeted his body and made it his slave so that he could fulfil the will of God.

The evil one can attack us in many ways in this body to hinder us from doing what is good in the eyes of God. But we have to overcome this and to overcome it requires a discipline of the body. We must live our lives so that we do not just give in to whatever our body desires, but we consider: Is this good or not? Is it meaningful, helpful or not? And if it is good, yes, we choose it.

And we must recognize that when we talk about the flesh and the body, it is not just necessarily only physical things. Whatever this natural body is capable of is still described as in the realm of the flesh. So when the apostle John in **1 John 2** says that we should not love the world nor the things of the world, "the things of the world" include the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, all these three items can be classified as walking by the flesh.

The lust of the flesh may concentrate on just bodily appetites, but that is part of the flesh. The lust of the eyes concentrates on the things that we see and we think about and what we desire; it is still in the flesh. The boastful pride of life refers to the things that we take pride in, in our natural abilities. The boastful pride of this life, our life in this world, and we take pride in our abilities, what we can accomplish, how intelligent we are: this is also the flesh.

So all this has to do with walking by the flesh. So we must give this up – all that the world can offer us – in order to follow the Lord. Otherwise, we may gain the world and lose our soul. So these are serious matters that we need to ponder about, consider.

If we want to learn to deny ourselves effectively, we have to deal with this aspect of the flesh. If we do not, we will constantly be a slave of sin. We may think that it is enjoyable but remember, these are passing pleasures of sin and one day, we will have to face God and give an account of our lives.

So, let us ask the Lord to help us to think through these issues carefully, to understand what is the right path, how to live it.

So we need to first give ourselves to the Lord and then present the members of our body to God as instruments of righteousness.

And that is why the apostle Paul says in **Romans 12** we must offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God, which is our reasonable service of worship. Having given ourselves to God, having chosen to follow God, that He is our Master, our Lord, we must offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. Everything we do in this body must be expressed as a living sacrifice to God.

A living sacrifice means we live out our lives in accordance with that which is most pleasing to God, in accordance with what will honour Him – not because we like it at a natural level, not because of what people expect and demand of us, but because it is an expression of our worship of God; we love Him, we want to honour Him.

So if we understand this, we may then appreciate why the apostle Paul says: “Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God”. Eat and drink is a very common thing that is expressed in this body. He says, “Whether... you eat or drink or whatever you do – everything that you do”, we must do it to the glory of God. How to do that?

It has to be first and foremost, our hearts fully belonging to Him and we are motivated by this in the things that we do, and so we express it by the way we live our lives in this body. Though it is a natural body, it can express spiritual realities of the highest quality.

And that is what the Lord Jesus did when He died on the cross. It was a physical event where He was being crucified, but beyond that physical event was a very significant spiritual reality: a life offered up to God, a life given to help mankind, going through the pain and suffering because of love and holiness. That is what we have to learn.

Let us then come before the Lord and ask Him to help us to ponder over these issues, to ask Him to help us to understand what they mean, how they apply in our lives and how we can live lives that are satisfying to ourselves for eternity, and meaningful to God and pleasing to Him. If we have not been living this way, let us ask Him to help us to recognize what we must do to correct the situation and ask Him to help us to live righteously.