

SANCTIFICATION AND THE CHRISTIAN CONFLICTS¹

- In this section, the hope is to shed some light on the continual conflict which rages on within the person and life of the believer.
- At the onset, the struggle *is the normal Christian life*.
- Our continue struggle is not proof of the absence of New Birth, in fact, it is the very proof of it.
- “But the harmony of true Christian living cannot be sustained by an emphasis on only one aspect of Christian experience. It is possible to move among Christians who regard anything but a tranquil freedom from the ravages of sin as an indication of little faith. On the other hand there are those whose view of Christian pilgrimage is so gloomy that one might almost be forgiven for thinking they believed the only salvation worth having lay somewhere in the future. But being a Christian is not meant to be a rather miserable prelude to a future bliss which is not quite sufficiently certain enough to shed a ray of light upon the present!” (133)
- To consider the new life of the believer to be all smiles or all hardship, or free from sin or living in constant defeat of sin is simply not biblical.
 - It is never as bad as it looks; but it is never as good as it looks either.
- **The Christian life is “a continual and irreconcilable war.”** (133, *The Confession of Faith*, 1647, XIII. ii.)
 - This means that there is a war that takes place within each believer.
 - We still have our active and unredeemed humanity (the sinful flesh) that will not be completely eradicated until death.
 - The Holy Spirit has begun His work of holiness in us which is in direct contradiction to what the “flesh” desires to do.
 - These are the two combatants which are in you right now.
 - This war is continual; there are no ceasefires in the battle between our “flesh” and the Spirit in us.
 - We cannot rely on our emotional experiences, nor can we think that we are going to somehow have a break from the battle through worldly means.
 - Since it is a continual war our guard must always be up and we must be watchful over every area the enemy may want to attack us.
 - The war is irreconcilable because there can be no compromise if victory is the goal.
 - Our unredeemed flesh cannot be educated into submission, it cannot be reformed to be a better sinful flesh, nor can our sinful flesh be trained to become more like God.

¹ Must of this content and many ideas come from Sinclair Ferguson, *The Christian Life*, ch. 14.

- In other words, there is no balance between our sinful desires and our godly desires. They are, at all times, opposed to each other in all things.
- It can be said that the Spirit never wants what the flesh wants, and the flesh will never desire the things of the Spirit.
 - In fact, the things of the flesh will make the spirit “grieve.”
- Thankfully we are not left in despair with no hope.
 - Yes, at times, our flesh will prevail and we will fall into sin. We will say or do things that are not honoring to God or edifying to His people.
 - Victory today comes from the “continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ.”
 - But we also know that while the believer may sin, he is still forgiven and can look forward to the Spirit’s complete victory.
- It is the work of God in us so that we are empowered to say no to sin and yes to righteousness. Our total aim in our whole life is to now be made more and more like Christ in every aspect.
- Remember that Christ conquered sin and we, being in Christ, have then died to sin, we now live from a position of victory.
- Yet, even from this victory, sin has not been completely destroyed and still seeks to have its way over the believer. This is our warfare; this is our fight...day to day...

Primary Areas of Conflict in the Christian Life

- The Bible is not vague, nor does it veil the fact that believers not immune to pressures of sin as they live in a fallen world and are constantly surrounded by its fallen inhabitants.
- Since the beginning there has been three major conflicts facing all mankind, but they are especially targeted towards Christians.
- These three areas are commonly referred to as *the world, the flesh, and the devil*.
 - **1 John 2:15-16** “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. {16} For all that is in the world, ***the lust of the flesh*** and ***the lust of the eyes*** and ***the boastful pride of life***, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”
- There are two “outside or without” sources or conflicts of temptation, the world and the devil, and one “inside or within” source or conflict is the flesh.
- These are the areas where we are constantly waging war and we need to be aware of how they operate in our life so that our sanctification can continue.
 - These areas of conflict are common areas to all believers, but the attacks they wage are different for each person.

- **Some background to these:**
- **Genesis 3:6** “When the woman saw that the *tree was good for food*, and that *it was a delight to the eyes*, and that *the tree was desirable to make one wise*, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate.”
- Going back to the Garden of Eden, this was the fundamental way Satan attacked Eve.
- *Lust of the Flesh:*
 - “the tree was good for food” This was her physical appetite and a desire to have her senses gratified.
 - “Sin happens when you satisfy a God-given desire in a God-forbidden way.” (MacArthur)
- *Lust of the Eyes:*
 - “it was a delight to the eyes” She had a desire to possess what she was looking at.
 - “This is the sin of coveting – believing that ‘stuff’ can satisfy the soul.” (MacArthur)
- *Pride of Life:*
 - “the tree was desirable to make one wise” She was not satisfied with what God had done.
 - “This is the most ‘demonic’ sin because it mirrors Satan’s own fall.” (MacArthur)
- This was Satan’s first recorded attack against God’s creation, and it worked.
- Since that worked, he used the same pattern of attack when he came against Jesus.
 - Unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus did not fail the “test” but resisted Satan and his temptations.
- **Matthew 4:3, 5-6, 8-9** “And the tempter came and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.’ {5} Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, {6} and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, ‘HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU’; and ‘ON their HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.’” {8} Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; {9} and he said to Him, ‘All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me.’”
- *Lust of the Flesh:*
 - “command that these stones become bread” Jesus had been fasting for 40 days and 40 nights and **Matthew 4:2** tells us that Jesus became hungry.
 - Satan came at the opportune time; Jesus was physically hungry and weak.
 - “Sin happens when you satisfy a God-given desire in a God-forbidden way.” (MacArthur)
- *Lust of the Eyes:*
 - “showed Him all the kingdoms of the world...I will give You” Satan showed Jesus what He could have if He only would submit to Satan’s rule and bow down before him.
 - “This is the sin of coveting – believing that ‘stuff’ can satisfy the soul.” (MacArthur)

- *Pride of Life:*
 - “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down” To “prove” to Satan that Jesus was who He said He was and seek self-glory.
 - “This is the most ‘demonic’ sin because it mirrors Satan’s own fall.” (MacArthur)
- Satan attacks each of us in the same way.
 - Remember though, Satan is not everywhere, he can only be in one place at a time. He does have his demons doing work for him but because not all our temptations are directly from him, we can’t blame everything on his work. We have two other battles, the flesh and the world.
- How do these three enemies (the world, the flesh, and the devil) work together to bring you to the place of making the decision to sin?

The World

- This is the environment that we all live in. This is where all things are offered to all people. All the beauty, power, food, etc. is put on display so that you know what you could have or what you are missing out on.
- “This is the main means of the Wicked One’s whispering in our ears.”²
- “It is as hard to live in the world and not be defiled, as to go much in the sun and not be tanned. The opinions of the world are defiling ... The examples of the world are defiling. Examples have great force to draw us to evil.”³
 - The world has nothing good for us in a spiritual sense. It only seeks to enrapture us with its various forms of beauty which change like the wind.
- “We love and serve Jesus and keep close to him, but we ride to work each day past the enticing adverts...[they] beckon the many temporal pleasures of the flesh deliberately packaged to capture us precisely at our weakest points and to overcome us when resistance is low. You and I are ‘in Christ’, but we are also ‘in the world.’” (135)
- All of our desires can be immediately gratified. Anything that you think you need or that you feel you deserve, it can be found in the world.
- As we look around, we notice that others have more than us; others have it better than us.
- We notice the material success of people and are told that if we are not living to a certain standard that the world has made up, then we are missing out.
- It is not just the “stuff” that we are missing out on, but the joy of being like everyone else as well.

² <https://puritanchurch.com/thomas-watson-on-the-sixth-petition-of-the-lords-prayer/#:~:text=Besides%20what%20was%20shared%20about,141:9>.

³ Thomas Watser, *The Lord’s Prayer*

- The world promises fame, reputation, and not only supports self-promotion, but encourages and celebrates it with you
- Jesus tells us about this in the parable of the soils.
 - **Matthew 13:22** “And the one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this is the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.”
 - Jesus paints the picture of the of the world and all it has to offer as choking the grace of God which is found in His Word.
- As disciples of Jesus, we too can choke out the grace of God as our eyes are enticed by the empty promises of the world.
- If our devotion to the world grows, it is clear that the love of God diminishes in us.
 - It is not as if God’s withdrawing His love from us, we are making the choice to seek something other than Him and our heart goes in that direction.
- “Eventually (for the process is slow, often unnoticed, but inexorable) the breath is sucked out of the voice of God’s Word in our hearts – and any spiritual vitality we formerly knew dies.” (136)
- This is why the constant battle rages for our desires. If our desire is for the world, then we cannot continue to have the power of God’s grace in our life for sanctification.
 - We are still born again, but trying to do things on our own and in our own way. The Lord will not allow us to stay there if we are His children. He will bring us back into right thinking through whatever means necessary.
- “The world moulds [sic] us, as well as chokes us...we have to make every effort to avoid the danger of its grip pressuring us into conformity with its way of thinking.” (138)
- The world will always draw us from Christ to something else. The same desires that are for Christ will be shifted so something else...something less than Christ.
- Probably one of the saddest statements in the Bible regarding Paul’s companions is that of Demas.
- Demas was a fellow worker with Paul,
 - **Philemon 1:24** “...as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.”
- Demas was ministered with Paul,
 - **Colossians 4:14** “Luke, the beloved physician, sends you his greetings, and also Demas.”
- But he did not finish his race well...from what we know. In Paul’s final letter, he writes,
 - **2 Timothy 4:10** “...for Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia.”
- It was Demas’ love of the world that caused him to desert Paul and go away to Thessalonica.

- “Something in this present age, in this world order, drew him away from his first love for Christ and for his suffering people. Demas must, at least momentarily, have seen what was happening to him. But perhaps by that time it was too late! He had lost so much spiritual power that apparently he found no assurance in the truth..” (138-139)
- If Demas was a worker with Paul, saw and heard all that Paul did and still walked away, how much more do we need to be watchful over how we take in the world around us.
- **What is our comfort in this?**
- **1 John 5:4-5** “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith. {5} Who is the one who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”
- While those who are born again may, from time to time, slip into a Demas “attitude.” Those who are *born of God* will overcome the world.
- Why is that? Not because they are so good but because they belong to God and they are the ones who believe Jesus is the son of God. It is not by our own might or strength, but through faith in Jesus.

The Devil

- “When we think about the conflict with Satan there are twin dangers to be avoided. The first is that of paying too little attention to him. The second error of making too much of him so that we lose sight of Christ and his victory, or are paralyzed with irrational fears about the power of evil...the full force of Satan’s power is to be recognised [sic], but it is looked upon in the light of Christ’s victory.” (139)
- The devil is real and he hates God, God’s children, and anything that God or His children love.
- While certainly present in the Old Testament, Satan’s true self is revealed in living color when Jesus comes to earth and puts on humanity.
- The devil goes by many names (140-141):
 - Devil means that he is a slanderer...he makes false statements and twists the truth; especially the truth about Jesus.
 - Satan perhaps portrays someone laying in wait to make an ambush. “For often we are not aware how or why times of temptation, stress, conflict and evil pressure have appeared. There can be no doubt that irrational fears, doubts and thoughts which Christians experience should be traced back to the ambush in which Satan hides.”
 - Deceiver is a name give to him as he can be just like the one he hates, Jesus. His desire is to lead people to wander away from Christ and uses any means necessary to accomplish his goal.
 - He is also the accuser of the brethren. “Here is the picture of the Devil as the counsel of prosecution against the child of God...”

- “The Devil is one who makes believers’ guilt and failures his stock in trade.”
- John Newton wrote,
 - “Bowed down beneath a load of sin...By Satan sorely pressed
 - By war without and fears within...I come to thee for rest
 - Be Thou my Shield and Hiding-Place...That, sheltered near Thy side
 - I may my fierce accuser face...and tell him Thou has died.”
- The devil’s greatest tool against those who are born again is to keep reminding them of their fears, their faults, and their failures.
- Since there is nothing that can keep a child of God from going to their final resting place with the Lord of glory, it is Satan’s hope it to make the trek there as miserable and unfruitful as possible.
- In our struggle against sin, often times Christians struggle to distinguish between the hand of Satan and the hand of Christ in their life.
 - Paul references this in **2 Corinthians 2:11** “...so that no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes.”
 - Here is our two-fold desire, we do not want to be taken advantage of by Satan, and we do not want to be ignorant of his schemes.
 - We already know that Satan’s schemes distort reality and our view of Christ.
- Ferguson suggests 4 ways we can know the difference between the true leading of Christ and the deceptive workings of the devil. (142)
 - *Christ’s voice is always in accord with the true meaning and application of Scripture.*
 - Just like in the Garden of Eden or coming against Jesus in the wilderness, Satan will use and manipulate Scriptures to his own advantage.
 - The manipulation is always imbedded with some truth, which can make it hard to understand.
 - This is why we must know the Scriptures or know how to search them and how to find out what they mean.
 - **Example:** Someone *feels* they need to date an unbeliever so that they can lead them to Christ. God’s Word says not to be unequally yoked (2 Cor 6:14). Perhaps Satan says, *but God is love and isn’t it loving to want to see someone saved? If this brings you joy, then the joy of the Lord is your strength.*
 - The Word of God is the objective standard to live by and anything that takes you away from what truth it teaches, regardless of how we may feel, is not from the Lord.
 - *Christ’s wisdom has the characteristics of Christ himself. It is pure and peaceable (James 3:17)*

- **James 3:17** “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.”
- Satan desires to breed restless in the believer’s heart and discontentment in where they are.
- Satan’s wisdom will only bring disharmony between fellow believers and God.
- **Example:** There are ministry needs in the church. There is the choice to either pray and patiently wait for the Lord’s timing or believe that if something doesn’t happen now, the church will fail. Satan creates the urgency to whip people instead of shepherding them.
- Satan’s desire is to drive the church into total chaos and Jesus is our Shepherd who leads us where He wants us to go.
- When there is an unholy or undue pressure or when the wisdom does not align with what James writes, we know it’s not from Jesus.
- *Christ’s entreaties are gentle, just as he himself is gentle.*
 - When Satan puts his desires upon us they are there to drive us, not lead us.
 - He may start by telling you that you are worthless if you don’t do more. That your life and ministry depend upon you and if you don’t do better, there is no hope.
 - **Example:** When we fail at something, we are tempted to think that it’s the end. We can equate our failure with God’s disapproval of us and start to think that He’s done with us.
 - But in reality, our failure is expected, but never desired. Satan wants to keep us from Christ because of our failure but in reality we need Christ because of our failure.
 - Jesus entreats us to come to Him, “Matthew 11:29 “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for you souls.”
- *Christ calls us into the fellowship of his suffering (Phil. 3:10)*
 - Satan can often times use our normal suffering as a tool against us to tell us that we are not in God’s love.
 - His desire is to take our affections as far away as possible from our loving and caring Master who suffered for us.
 - **Example:** When anything “bad” comes upon us, Satan can use this as “proof” that we are no longer loved by God. Things are thought like, *if God loved you, this would never have happened* or *His patience or grace finally ran out and this is the consequence* or *He loves others, but He just can’t love you anymore.*
 - The list can go on and on, but when we realize that Satan wants us to stay away from suffering, he wants us to stay away from Christ, when these thoughts come we should run to Him for all we need.

- Ferguson gives some helpful thoughts on how the believer can not only distinguish between Jesus’ truth and Satan’s lies, *but also between Satan and our own hearts*. (142-144)
 - While certainly related, this is not the believer’s battle against the flesh, but another avenue that Satan tries to manipulate God’s children by his attacks.
- Ferguson says, “In some ways this is a yet more difficult task, for the fundamental reason that there is a kingship between the remnants of indwelling sin in our hearts and the designs of the Evil One. We look in vain, by and large, for spiritual guidance at this kind of level in today’s church.”
- Ferguson is both pointing out the *enemy within our hearts* and lamenting the fact that the modern church seems to ignore this level of spiritual truth.
- Think of it this way, the remaining sin in each of us still has a kinship to the Devil...he is not creating some sort of new evil in us.
- Even though we are born again and have a new nature, the *draw* and *enticement* of sin still resonate in our hearts and minds.
- Satan’s suggestions can still “sound good” for a moment, not because our new nature agrees with him, but because we still have our fallen humanness living inside of us.
- His lament over the church is that many messages and sermons have moved into the *self-help* or *surface-level fixes*.
 - In other words, real spiritual warfare where believers are killing their flesh, leaving behind objects of temptations and filling their minds with truth have been replaced with coping techniques, 6–8-week programs for a better you, and far too many feel good then do good messages.
 - The church has become a place where some of their sins have become *respectable*.⁴
- Puritan Thomas Watson, in the 17th century asked the question, “How shall we perceived when a motion comes from our own hearts and when from Satan?”
- “It is hard to distinguish between the bite of the serpent and the disease of the mind.”⁵
- In other words, how can we tell that which is a suggestion from Satan between what we have conjured up in our own hearts.
- **As Watson goes on to say, “But I conceive there is this threefold difference⁶:**
- Such motions to evil as come from our own hearts spring up more leisurely, and by degrees. Sin is long concocted in the thoughts, ere [before] consent be given; but usually we may know a motion comes from Satan by its suddenness. Temptation is compared to a dart, because it is shot suddenly.

⁴ The late Jerry Bridges wrote the book *Respectable Sins: Confronting the Sins We Tolerate*

⁵ For reference, this is not what today is commonly called mental illness. It is talking about how sin effects our thoughts.

⁶ Quote and list from Thomas Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 261. Found in Ferguson’s book.

- **Ephesians 6:16** “...in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.”
- David’s numbering the people was a motion which the devil injected suddenly.
- **2 Samuel 24:1, 10** “Now again the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah.’ ... 10 Now David's heart troubled him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the LORD, ‘I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O LORD, please take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have acted very foolishly.’”
- **1 Chronicles 21:1, 7-8** “Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel. ... 7 God was displeased with this thing, so He struck Israel. 8 David said to God, ‘I have sinned greatly, in that I have done this thing. But now, please take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly.’”
- The motions to evil which come from our own hearts are not so terrible. Few are frightened at the sight of their own children; but motions coming from Satan are more ghastly and frightful, as motions to blasphemy and self-murder. Hence it is that temptations are compared to fiery darts, because as flashes of fire, they startle and affright the soul.
- When evil thoughts are thrown into the mind, when we loathe and have reluctance to them; when we strive against them, and flee from them, as Moses did from the serpent, it shows they are not the natural birth of our own heart, but the hand of Joab is in this. Satan has injected these impure emotions.
 - **2 Samuel 14:19** “So the king said, ‘Is the hand of Joab with you in all this?’ And the woman replied, ‘As your soul lives, my lord the king, no one can turn to the right or to the left from anything that my lord the king has spoken. Indeed, it was your servant Joab who commanded me, and it was he who put all these words in the mouth of your maidservant...’”
 - Joab secretly coached a woman to speak to the King to achieve his own ends. The words came out of her mouth, but the “mind” behind them was Joab's.
 - To Watson, realizing "the hand of Joab is in this" helps a person resist the "ancient tempter" by recognizing the source of the evil and not taking personal ownership of thoughts they find repulsive.⁷
- “Clearly there is no easy way. At no point of our experience do we come to the place where we can rely on a fool-proof system which will lead us unharmed through our pilgrimage. We follow a Shepherd, and we must always have our gaze fixed upon him.” (143)

⁷ <https://puritanchurch.com/thomas-watson-on-the-sixth-petition-of-the-lords-prayer/#:~:text=Besides%20what%20was%20shared%20about,141:9.>