

JUST THE WAY IT IS

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How we see ourselves (how we answer the question “Who are you?”) usually revolves around what we do (our job or our relationships). But the relationship that has the most profound, and lasting effect on our lives is our relationship with Jesus Christ.

Today, I am going to teach you one of the hardest lessons in the Christian life. It is hard because it requires complex thinking (that is, embracing ideas which, while *not* contrary to logic, may boggle the mind). It requires a new perspective of life, based on the Word of God alone, instead of sensory experience.

One of the greatest paradoxes presented in the Scriptures is the co-existence of a fallen human nature *with* the new life in Christ.

New Birth is Required

Do you realize that Jesus taught that all people, whether religious or secular in their life orientation, require a “new birth”? To Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, Jesus said:

³ *“I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.”*

⁴ *“What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?”*

⁵ *Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. ⁷ So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’*

Okay, so we know that we need a new birth in order to follow Jesus. But what does it mean to be “born again.” How does it happen? And what is the result?

“Born again” could also be translated “born from above.” This gives us a clue as to the origin of this new birth. It is the result of the meeting of heaven and earth. The Holy Spirit awakens your faith in Jesus Christ, and when your faith becomes conscious, it embraces Christ, and a new life is born.

It’s not the body that is born again... same warts and scars. And it’s not the mind (memory or thought processes) that is reborn... same old you.

Nevertheless, something is new, deep inside of you; your spirit has been raised from the dead. Where you were dead toward God, but very much alive toward sin, you have become dead toward sin and very much alive toward God!

We were (all of us) dead (spiritually) because of sin (not just our apart-from-God sinful actions, but our fallen, disconnected-from-God hearts).

Romans 3:23 For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.

Our sinfulness of heart has put us (indeed, the whole world) in a condition of “spiritual darkness”—unfamiliar with the light of God and of Christ, unacquainted with God’s truth, unaware of His presence and grace.

Here’s how the Bible describes it:

1 Corinthians 2:14 (NET)

2:14 The unbeliever does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

The New Living Translation renders the same verse this way:

14 But people who aren't spiritual can't receive these truths from God's Spirit. It all sounds foolish to them and they can't understand it, for only those who are spiritual can understand what the Spirit means.

Notice, the word “unbeliever” in the first translation becomes “people who aren’t spiritual” in the second. That is not the same as being unreligious, for many religious people would find themselves in this very same fog (Nicodemus, for instance).

The Amplified Bible offers this:

14 But the natural, nonspiritual man does not accept or welcome or admit into his heart the gifts and teachings and revelations of the Spirit of God, for they are folly (meaningless nonsense) to him; and he is incapable of knowing them [of progressively recognizing, understanding, and becoming better acquainted with them] because they are spiritually discerned and estimated and appreciated.

So, “unbeliever” = “person who isn’t spiritual” = “natural, nonspiritual” person.

The original Greek simply says, “person without the Spirit.” The opposite of this is the person *with* the Spirit (the person who has been born again).

But as all of you who have been born of the Spirit know, it is not as simple as throwing a light switch, and walking into a life full of light.

Paul, very patiently and painstakingly, using himself as the illustration, portrays the inner conflict of the born-again believer in his struggle to live out his faith in a way that pleases the Lord. There *is* a struggle, and there *is* a conflict... for ALL of us!

There is a Real Battle

You may read it in Romans 7, where Paul laments (and you may, also):

Romans 7:15-20 (NET)

¹⁵ For I don't understand what I am doing. For I do not do what I want—instead, I do what I hate. ^{7:16} But if I do what I don't want, I agree that the law is good. ^{7:17} But now it is no longer me doing it, but sin that lives in me. ^{7:18} For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For I want to do the good, but I cannot do it. ^{7:19} For I do not do the good I want, but I do the very evil I do not want! ^{7:20} Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer me doing it but sin that lives in me.

The first part of that passage is easy to recognize: “I don’t understand what I am doing!” Confusion, inner conflict, guilt, shame—these are common feelings that result from this inner tension (the tension between what we earnestly *want* to do versus what we actually do). Many times, the conflict rages after we act, but sometimes before we act, in the fiery face of temptation.

The second part (the Biblical conclusion) is less easy to reach: “It is no longer me doing it.” This is not imaginative blame-shifting. This Holy Spirit-inspired passage reveals a mysterious truth.

The very fact that Paul has this desire to do what is right and avoid what is wrong, indicates that part of him (what he calls here his “mind”) agrees that the law (or, God’s way) is good. The very aversion and hatred that he has in his heart towards sin, is testimony to the goodness of God’s law.

And Paul is not denying personal responsibility for his sin. What he is saying is that the real I, the new I, the person that I am in Jesus Christ, the born-again me, is not doing that. It is the old self, who was put to death with Christ, that is gaining the upper hand here.

My old, fallen nature, is still housed (somehow) in the members of my earthly body, even though my heart has been born again, and still tends to think and act apart-from-God—according to self-interests, and seeking self-gratification. The wonderful influence of the Holy Spirit has not yet gained full control.

A person who has moved from Texas to San Rafael is the same person as before, even though living in a new environment, and will still be affected by influences from his past life.

So it is for the person who has been moved from the kingdom of Satan to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. A new and with-God environment is now your home, but your apart-from-God past still haunts your affections and behaviors. So much so, that Paul deduced, and now expresses, a spiritual principle.

Strengthen Your Core

Romans 7:21-23 (NET)

^{7:21} So, I find the [principle] that when I want to do good, evil is present with me. ^{7:22} For I delight in the law of God in my inner being. ^{7:23} But I see a different law in my members waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that is in my members.

It seems that whenever we desire to do good, we experience the closest proximity to evil, the greatest chance of failure.

This tragedy of the human condition is referenced by God in a conversation with Adam's and Eve's first son, Cain:

⁶ "Why are you so angry?" the Lord asked Cain. "Why do you look so dejected?" ⁷ You will be accepted if you do what is right. But if you refuse to do what is right, then watch out! Sin is crouching at the door, eager to control you. But you must subdue it and be its master."

Sometimes, it is even in our most dedicated moments, in our most precious times of devotion to Christ, that the most wicked thoughts will creep into our minds.

Now, no unregenerate person (person without the Spirit) "delights in the law of God in the innermost self." This statement can only be made about a person who has been born again.

Take note of this: in this passage, Paul makes a distinction between the core of who we are (our "inner being", where we delight in and approve what God demands), and the periphery of our lives (our outer "members", which are still so enchanted by the influence of sin).

Cain was no more successful at beating this monster than Paul was. However, the Law of Moses had taught Paul clearly what was right and what was wrong for a faithful Jew. Still, he was haunted by sin and temptation, and in his race toward religious righteousness, he became a hunter and murderer of the followers of Jesus Christ.

Hear the agony of his heart, caught as he was, in the grip of sin:

Romans 7:25 (NET)

^{7:24} Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ^{7:25} Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

This is a passionate declaration, expressing Paul's personal grief at his own sinfulness! Only a Christian knows the anguish of godly remorse for sin. (Consider Isaiah 6:5, when the prophet saw the glory of God upon His throne, and wailed, "It's all over! I am

doomed, for I am a sinful man. I have filthy lips, and I live among a people with filthy lips. Yet I have seen the King, the Lord of Heaven's Armies." Or Luke 5:8, after Jesus gave Peter a miraculous catch of fish: "Oh, Lord, please leave me—I'm such a sinful man." (Luke 5:8)

Others may express regret and self-loathing, but not a genuine remorse for having offended God.

Paul would agree with the psalmist's lament to God:

Psalm 51:4 Against You, and You alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in Your sight. You (God) will be proved right in what You say, and Your judgment against me is just.

So, what can be done about this grievous battle? Much! And then, not much at all.

Remember this: God is not sanctifying your flesh; He is sanctifying your spirit.

One Nature or Two?

Because it is contrasted with the word "spirit," here "flesh" describes the inner, fallen nature that is connected to life in this world.

Some modern translations choose to use "sinful nature" instead of "flesh," lest people think that our physical bodies are evil.

Unfortunately, that translation creates another problem, for it suggests that people have two natures, which is... well... contrary to nature. That implies that *both* are "you."

But the New Testament urges us to recognize the new birth (due to our faith in Jesus Christ) as real, and shift our identity to the new and growing nature of Christ within us, considering the old godless nature dead. This is an act of faith, with which our experience (feelings and thoughts) may frequently disagree.

However, works of the flesh are not put to death by self-effort (that just adds flesh to flesh). Works of the flesh are put to death by *faith in Jesus* alone.

MORE FAITH, not more works, is the answer to our dilemma.

How can a sinner commune with Christ, the Anointed Servant of God?

If our own righteousness is required, we have all surely failed, and we are fooling ourselves.

If, on the other hand, the righteousness of Jesus overwhelms our sinfulness and grants us free access to God, then we have discovered the greatest gift of God to humankind!

Courage for the Battle

Still, there will be inner conflict. So, in closing, let me offer this comfort and courage to you who face the struggle.

Integrity has two sons: *ideal* integrity and *real* integrity.

Ideal = everything in order, complete honesty, thorough righteousness in word and deed.

Real = honest with God about sins, accurate (humble) self-image, genuine faith in the Savior.

A person with *ideal* integrity imagines that they can live without ever sinning in thought, word, or deed. But they can only pull it off in their imagination! If they persist in thinking this way, they will deceive themselves.

The truth is, a person with *real* integrity is not a sinless person, but a person who has genuine faith in Jesus Christ as Savior—every day. While he or she will plan and try to avoid sinning, they know that they live with sin (in the flesh), and they are ready to repent and try again.

They live according to 1 John 1:8-9, which says:

⁸ *If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth.*

⁹ *But if we confess our sins to [God], He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.*

Let's not pretend. Let's be *real* Christians.