

Introduction

On a website called *Answers*, a user named Jack posted this question, **"What is the problem in the world?"** Responders of course gave different answers. One said it's immigration. Another said it's the United States thinking it can police the world. Still another said it's politics being all about money. None of those is the right answer. What is the problem in the world? Paul tells us in Romans 8:12-13. He also tells us what the only solution to that problem is.

Live According to the Flesh

Let's begin with the word **"flesh."** The Greek word translated that, here, refers to the body formed in evil. The body isn't inherently evil. But it's formed in evil and that's to what the word **"flesh"** in our text refers. If you and I want to be like Jesus, we need to understand how that happens and what the result of it happening is.

Each of us is born with a fallen nature. We have an inner disposition that's self-absorbed. We will three things: security (getting our needs met), satisfaction (getting our wants met), and status (being respected and praised by others). We will those things more than anything else, including the security, satisfaction, and status of people and even the will of God. We're fallen or self-absorbed in other words.

Because we are, we direct our bodies to do whatever they have to, including evil things, to pursue our security, satisfaction, and status. As time passes, they do those evil things over and over again until finally, the action becomes habit. At that point, our bodies do them on their own, without us consciously directing them to. That's why Paul calls those evil things what he does in verse 13, **"the deeds of the body."**

Five or six years ago, the wife of a high profile televangelist got mad at a flight attendant and acted so inappropriately toward her that she was thrown off the plane. Several years before that, a celebrated televangelist did the same. Her dispute was over the storage of ski

equipment and his over the storage of his pastoral robe.

Let me ask you a question. Did she and he do what they did in cold blood, after deliberation? Did they stop and think to themselves, **“I’m going to get angry and mistreat this stewardess in order to get what I want.”** The obvious answer is **“No.”** They did what they did automatically not thoughtfully. Their body parts went off on them so to speak and acted without them consciously directing them to.

Why did they? It goes back to the process I explained. Over the course of their lives, their fallen natures inclined them to get security, satisfaction, or status through anger and attack. They repeatedly yielded to that inclination until eventually anger and attack settled in their body parts and became habits. Their bodies were then poised to get angry and attack only awaiting the occasion, which here was the flight attendants opposing their wills.

They illustrate what the primary form of evil is. It isn’t deliberation. People don’t do most of the evil things they do after contemplating whether or not they should. The primary form of evil is habit, what Paul calls **“the deeds of the body.”** People do most of the evil things they do automatically without thinking about or even willing them. Their bodies are formed in evil in other words. They’re poised to sin only awaiting the occasion.

The result is what Paul calls, in verse 13, **“living according to the flesh.”** People live at the mercy of the destructive habits that reside in their body parts. Those habits, not their wills, routinely direct or run their lives. That is the biggest problem in the world.

Put to Death the Deeds of the Body

But according to verse 12, you and I, as disciples and friends of Jesus, don’t have to live that way and shouldn’t. Paul writes that we are **“under obligation.”** The Greek word translated **“obligation”** means **“duty.”** We have a duty precisely because we are disciples and friends of Jesus. It’s to **“put to death the deeds of the body.”** It’s to replace

the habits of evil in our bodies with habits of good.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, the "**patient**" of the underling demon, Wormwood, converted to Jesus. But his leader demon, Screwtape, encouraged him with these words: "**There is no need to despair; hundreds of these adult converts have been reclaimed after a brief sojourn in the enemy's (God's) camp and are now with us. All the habits of the patient, both mental and bodily, are still in our favor.**" That's exactly right. Apprenticing ourselves to Jesus and being filled with the Holy Spirit don't automatically remove all the habits of evil that reside in our bodies. Many if not most remain.

I conducted the funeral service of a long-established Christian. At the dinner afterwards, I overheard one person sarcastically tell another, "**No one mentioned how good a gossip she was.**" Sad to say, it was true and everyone knew it. Even decades after her conversion, a habit of evil, gossip, still resided in her tongue.

My point is this. Apprenticing ourselves to Jesus and being filled with the Holy Spirit don't automatically remove all the habits of evil that reside in our bodies. Many if not most remain.

But according verse 12, we're duty bound to remove those habits of evil and replace them with habits of good. That implies that we can and verse 13 teaches us how. Paul couples a prepositional phrase here, "**by the Spirit**" with a clause "**putting to death the deeds of the body.**" He reveals in doing so that the transformation of our bodily habits is a cooperative effort between the Holy Spirit and us. It's first and foremost His work. Without Him, we can do nothing. But it's secondarily our work. If we do nothing, it will be without Him. He has His part to play, in other words, and so do we.

Our Part

Let's start with our part. We "**put to death the deeds of the body.**" Paul says it differently in 1 Corinthians 9:27, but the meaning is the same, "**But I discipline my body and make it my slave.**" Each of

our bodies is a field of our freedom. We have the ability to manage and direct them in specific ways. Our duty is manage and direct them in ways that replace habits of evil with habits of good. Doing that requires two things of us.

The first is recognition. We recognize the habits of evil in our bodies and the habits of good that need to replace them. We do that by learning from the Bible the particulars of what God wills. We then stack up our routine behaviors against those particulars.

I read 1 Peter 3:10 one night, which reveals several things a person must do to have life. One is **“keep his lips from speaking deceit.”** I stopped reading and asked, **“Do my lips speak deceit?”** Having sincerely pondered that, I determined that, **“Yes, they do.”** Just several days before, I knocked our bread maker off the counter, causing my wife to groan. I instantly claimed I knocked it off because she had placed it too close to the edge of the counter. But that really wasn't true. I knocked it off because I was in a hurry as usual. Relating that incident to 1 Peter 3:10, I recognized that a habit of evil resided in my tongue – the habit of hiding, managing, or putting a positive spin on my mistakes. I also recognized that I needed to replace it with the habit of admission.

You get the idea. We learn the particulars of God's will. We then stack up our routine behaviors against that. We'll recognize the habits of evil in our bodies and the habits of good that need to replace them.

Putting to death the deeds of our bodies requires a second thing – purposeful obedience. **“Purposeful”** conveys intention. We intend to replace the habits of evil we recognize with their opposing habits of good. We complete that intention with decision. We decide to do whatever is necessary to carry out our intention. **“Obedience”** conveys action. We actually do whatever is necessary to carry out our intention. Whatever is necessary is one of two things, trying or training.

Most of the habits of evil that reside in our bodies are weak ones. They're so weak in fact that we can replace them with habits of good just by trying. When the occasion arises, we consciously direct our bodies not

to do the evil thing but the good instead. We do that repeatedly until eventually the good thing, not the evil, is our habit. Our bodies are then poised to do the good thing, only awaiting the occasion.

I mentioned my habit of hiding, managing, or putting a positive spin on my mistakes. Once I recognized it, I decided to replace it with the habit of admission. So, when I made a mistake and felt inclined to hide it, manage it, or put a spin on it, I directed my tongue not to and it didn't. It admitted it instead. I did that repeatedly until now admission not deceit is my habit. The habit of evil was weak enough that I was able to replace it by trying.

But some habits of evil are so strong that we can't replace them directly by trying. Each of us has such habits that are peculiar to us. It might be gossiping, grumbling, or filthy language for instance. But some habits of evil are deeply engrained in almost all of us. Curse, not bless, those who mistreat us. Criticize right back, not thank, those who criticize us. Envy, not rejoice, when others outshine us. Root against, not for, our competitors. Seek people's praise, not God's. Complain, not relax, when we're forced to wait. For most of us, those deeds of the body are so deeply engrained that we can't replace them by trying. When the occasions arise, our bodies not our wills direct what we do.

Thus, we train by practicing spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are bodily activities that we can do now. And doing them over time transforms us until finally we can do what we can't do now, like thank, not criticize right back, those who criticize us or relax, not complain, when we're forced to wait. We practice spiritual disciplines that address the habits of evil and good that concern us.

A Christian I know routinely sought people's praise by saying and doing things to adjust how he appeared to them. So, he practiced the disciplines of solitude, silence, worship, and study in order to replace that bodily habit, and did. He now seeks God's praise, not people's.

That then is our part in the putting to death the deeds of our bodies, the habits of evil in them: recognition and purposeful obedience.

The Holy Spirit's Part

Now let's identify the Holy Spirit's part. Jesus' axiom in Matthew 26:41 reveals what it is, "**The spirit is willing but the body is weak.**" The Holy Spirit's part is to transform those two dimensions of us.

First, He makes the spirit willing. The word "spirit" refers to our volition or will. What He does here is create desires we never had. One of those is the desire to replace bodily habits of evil with habits of good. We're passionate about that. We want it! We will it!

The Holy Spirit does a second thing. He makes the body strong. Let's go back to trying and training. They're more than just psychological and sociological tools of change. If we're disciples or friends of Jesus, they're transcendent tools of change as well. That's because they open us up to the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit. They place us before Him in such a way that He's able to touch and transform our bodily habits, and does. Suppose a disciple of Jesus and a non-disciple try and train in identical ways to bless those who spit in their faces. The change in the disciple will be far more pervasive and deep. Why? It's because the Holy Spirit works in him and not in the non-disciple. The change in him is supernatural and in the non-disciple natural.

That explains then what the Holy Spirit's part is in putting to death the deeds of the body. He makes the spirit willing and the body strong.

Conclusion

I read a magazine article titled "The Top Solutions to the World's Biggest Problems." It identified the most pressing problems in the world and the best solutions to them. Not surprisingly, it omitted what is without doubt the single biggest problem in the world and its only solution. That problem is the habits of evil that reside in people's bodies. That solution is "**by the Spirit**" to "**put to death the deeds of the body.**" Do that and the biggest problem in the world won't be yours.