

Introduction

Last wee, I was on the Internet and discovered a site on Yahoo titled *Answers*. Apparently, a user posts a question and people respond with answers. Well, a user named Jack posted what I think is a crucial question, "**What is the problem in the world?**" Responders of course gave different answers. One said the problem is immigrants. Another said it's the United States thinking it can police the world. And still another said it's politics being all about money.

None of those of course is the right answer. What is? Paul tells us in Romans 8:12-13. He also tells us what the answer is to another question that's just as important as Jack's. What is the solution to the problem in the world? Let's discover and discuss both of his answers.

Live According to the Flesh

In verses 12 and 13, Paul teaches us how the vast majority of people on planet earth live. It's "**according to the flesh.**"

I explained last week what the "flesh" is. It's the overriding inclination to take ourselves in practice as if we're God. It's the systematic readiness to do whatever we have to in order to achieve three things: security (getting our needs met), satisfaction (getting our wants met), and status (being respected or praised by others).

That's the flesh and Paul says this about it in verses 12 and 13. Most people "**live according to**" it. He goes on to define the opposite of that in verse 13. It's "**putting to death the deeds of the body.**" Defining the opposite of it that way reveals what is just a vital insight. Our inner reality, the flesh, is linked with our outer reality, the body.

It is so in this way. As we grow, the flesh, which we're born with, settles into our bodies. It's slowly but surely farmed out to our body parts and resides there. That happens through repetition. The flesh compels us to act in some evil way to achieve security, satisfaction, or status. We yield to the compulsion and act in that evil way, over and

over again, until finally the action becomes a habit. Our body parts then do the evil without us even thinking about it. At that point, we have two problems. One is the flesh. The other is the destructive bodily habit to which it has led us. Many such habits of course develop over the years.

Several years ago, the wife of a high profile televangelist got mad at a stewardess 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 off his pastoral robe. Here's what I want you to see. They didn't do what they did deliberately. They didn't stop and think to themselves, "**I'm going to mistreat the stewardess.**" They did it automatically instead and here's why. Before they decided to follow Jesus, the "flesh" in them compelled them to do whatever they had to, including mistreat others, to achieve satisfaction, to get what they wanted. They yielded to the compulsion and did so, over and over again, until finally, the readiness to mistreat others to get what they wanted settled in their body parts. It became a destructive habit of theirs, something they did automatically without even thinking about it.

That illustrates what the primary form of evil is. It isn't deliberation. People don't do most of the evil things they do after reflecting on whether or not they should. They don't do them thoughtfully. The primary form of evil is the automatic responses of the body, what Paul calls "**the deeds of the body.**" People do most of the evil things they do without reflecting on whether or not they should. They do them habitually. Gossiping, swearing, lusting, lying, retaliating, manipulating, and so on, are nothing more than habits of their bodies.

That then is what Paul means by "**living according to the flesh.**" He means living at the mercy of the destructive habits that reside in our bodies - allowing them to direct or run our lives.

Putting to Death the Deeds of the Body

But according to verse 12, you and I, as followers of Jesus, must not

live that way. Paul writes that we **“are under obligation.”** The Greek word translated “obligation” means duty. We have a duty and Paul tells us what it is. It’s to **“put to death the deeds of the body.”** It’s to replace habits of evil in our bodies with habits of good. I said last week that deciding to follow Jesus and being filled with the Holy Spirit don’t automatically remove the habits of evil in our bodies. Most remain. But we’re duty bound to remove them and replace them with habits of good.

Many followers of Jesus don’t grasp that. I once talked with a Christian young man about lust. I explained to him that the first step in sexual purity is to do what Job did in Job 31:1. It’s to make a covenant with our eyes that they will not ogle women. He was taken back though that I even considered the possibility of not lusting. **“There’s no way,”** he replied, **“that I or any other normal male can do that.”** What he said reveals what he believes. Lust is an irresistible cosmic force that no one can conquer. But he’s wrong on both counts. First, it isn’t an irresistible cosmic force. It’s just a bodily habit of the eyes. And second, followers of Jesus can conquer it. They can put it to death and, according to verse 12, must. It’s their duty to do so.

That’s the way it is with all the habits of evil in our bodies. Jesus expects us to put them to death - to remove them and replace them with habits of good - which implies of course that we can. We can and verse 13 tells us how, **“by the Spirit.”**

Notice that **“by the Spirit”** is coupled with **“putting to death the deeds of the body.”** They go hand in hand, which teaches us this. 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 if we do nothing, it will be without Him. He has His part to play and we have ours, both of which I want to explain.

Our Part

Let’s start with our part. It’s to **“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 it in specific ways. These verses call us to manage and direct it in ways that remove the habits of evil and replace them with habits of good. Doing that requires three things of us.

The first is recognizing. We must recognize the habits of evil in our bodies and the habits of good that need to replace them. One of the ways we do that is by examining our sinful or harmful behaviors “after the fact.” After we’ve done something sinful or harmful, we ask and answer two questions. First, did I do that deliberately or thoughtlessly? And second, what should I have done? Asking and answering those questions can help us recognize the habits of evil in our bodies - and the habits of good that need to replace them.

Not long ago, for instance, I spilled grease from a pan onto the floor of our back porch and stained it. I immediately declared to my wife, **“The dog was right at my feet and made me spill it.”** It’s “the dog made me do it” defense. I realized the moment I said it though that it wasn’t true. The real reason I spilled it was because I was in too big a hurry as usual. So I asked and answered two questions. First, did I do what I did deliberately or thoughtlessly? It was thoughtlessly. I just reacted and automatically blamed the dog. And second, what should I have done? I should have “fessed up” and admitted it was my fault. Asking and answering those questions about that incident, and several others, showed me two things. I have the bad habit of hiding, managing, or putting a positive spin on the things I do wrong. And I should have the good habit of admitting the things I do wrong instead.

The second thing that putting to death the deeds of the body requires is trying. Most habits of evil are weak enough that we can get rid of them directly, by trying. So we make the decision not to do a sinful or harmful thing but to do the good thing. We then carry out that decision over and over again – until finally, it becomes our habit not to do the sinful or harmful thing and to do the good thing.

For instance, I've made and am carrying out the decision not to hide, manage, or put a positive spin on the things I do wrong. I'm "fessing up" instead, which is becoming my habit.

There's a third thing that putting to death the deeds of the body requires – training. A few habits of evil are so strong and deeply engrained that we can't get rid of them directly, by trying. We can only get rid of them indirectly, by training. Training involves spiritual disciplines. We practice disciplines of abstinence and engagement that address the habit of evil and the habit of good that concern us. Doing so eventually gets us to the point that we can eliminate the evil habit and develop the good habit by trying. *The Power to Live* part of our discipleship curriculum explains the spiritual disciplines and how to practice them.

What do you normally do, for instance, when someone mistreats you? It's probably what almost everyone does - mistreat him or her right back. That is one of the strongest and most deeply engrained habits of evil in human life. Consequently, almost none of us can do what Jesus calls us to do, bless those who mistreat us, by trying. The only way we can do it is by training – by practicing spiritual disciplines that address that issue.

The Holy Spirit's Part

Now that we know what our part is in the transformation of our bodily habits, let's figure out the Holy Spirit's part. Jesus' axiom in Matthew 26:41 helps us do that, "**The spirit is willing but the body is weak.**" The Holy Spirit addresses both of those dimensions of us.

First, He makes the spirit willing. The word "spirit" refers to our volition or will. When we decide to follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit inhabits and works in our volitional processes. What He does there is create desires we never had before. In this case, those desires are to get rid of the habits of evil in our bodies and to replace them with habits of good. Paul describes it in Romans 7:19 as "**the good that I want**" and "**the very evil I do not want.**"

I once witnessed a license bureau clerk be rude to a customer. The customer got mad in turn and told the clerk in no uncertain terms where she could go. Out in the parking lot later, I overheard the customer tell the person he was with how gratifying it was to tell the clerk off and how glad he was he did it. But if many of you and I had done that, we'd be grieved not gratified that we did and deeply regret it. The difference is profound. He desires to mistreat those who mistreat him. But we desire to bless those who mistreat us. His spirit isn't willing. But ours is and it's the Holy Spirit who makes it that way.

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. When we're filled with the Holy Spirit, they're transcendent tools of change as well. That's because they open us up to His ministry and work. They place us before Him in such a way that He's able to touch and transform the habits of our bodies – and does. Suppose a person who follows Jesus and one who doesn't try or train in identical ways to bless those who mistreat them. The transformation in the person who follows Jesus will be far more pervasive and deep. Why? It's because the Holy Spirit helps him and not the other. The change in him is supernatural and in the other natural.

You can see then what the Holy Spirit does. He makes the spirit willing and the body strong.

Conclusion

What I've preached about today accurately answer Jack's crucial question. What is the problem in the world? We now know. It's the habits of evil that reside in the bodies of human beings. But it answers the other crucial question as well. What is the solution to the problem? It's the Holy Spirit making the spirit willing and the body strong. Years ago, a high school teacher challenged us, "**Be part of the solution not the problem.**" Decide to follow Jesus. The Holy Spirit will fill you and make you just that if you do, part of the solution.