

# The Believer's Ultimate Attitude Toward the Flesh

by Watchman Nee

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*Watchman Nee emphasizes the futility of the flesh and the necessity of crucifying it to live a spiritually fruitful life through the Holy Spirit.*

**Scripture:** John 6:63, Romans 8:6

**Topics:** "Dependence on the Holy Spirit", "The Flesh"

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## Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the believer's need to understand God's judgment on the flesh, asserting that both sin and righteousness stemming from the flesh are futile and cannot please God. He explains that the flesh is inherently hostile to God and incapable of submitting to His law, leading to spiritual death unless it is committed to the cross. Nee encourages believers to recognize their flesh's untrustworthiness and to rely on the Holy Spirit for true spiritual life, warning against self-righteousness and the dangers of trusting in one's own strength. He highlights the necessity of continuous self-judgment and the importance of the cross in the believer's life to ensure that the flesh remains in its rightful place of death. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deep understanding of the flesh's nature and a commitment to living by the Spirit, as true spiritual maturity is rooted in acknowledging the flesh's corruption and the need for constant dependence on God.

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## Transcript

### GOD'S VIEW OF THE FLESH

WE CHRISTIANS NEED to be reminded once again of God's judgment upon the flesh. "The flesh," says the Lord Jesus, "is of no avail" (John 6.63). Whether it be the sin of the flesh or the righteousness of the flesh, it is futile. That which is born of the flesh, whatever it may be, is flesh, and can never be "unfleshed." Whether it be the flesh in the pulpit, the flesh in the audience, the flesh in prayers, the flesh in consecration, the flesh in reading the Bible, the flesh in singing hymns, or the flesh in doing good—none of these, asserts God, can avail. However much believers may lust in the flesh, God declares it all to be unprofitable; for neither does the flesh profit the spiritual life nor can it fulfill the righteousness of God. Let us now note a few observations concerning the flesh which the Lord through the Apostle Paul makes in the letter to the Romans.

(1) "To set the mind on the flesh is death" (8.6). According to God's view there is spiritual death in the flesh. The only escape is to commit the flesh to the cross. Regardless how competent it is to do good or to plan and plot so as to draw down the approval of men, God has pronounced upon the flesh simply one judgment: death.

(2) "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God" (8.7). The flesh is opposed to God. Not the slightest chance is there of peaceful co-existence. This holds true in regard not only to the sins which issue from the flesh but also to its noblest thoughts and actions. Obviously defiling sins are

hostile to God, but let us observe that righteous acts can be done independently of God as well.

(3) "It does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot" (8.7). The better the flesh works the farther away it is from God. How many of the "good" people are willing to believe in the Lord Jesus? Their self-righteousness is not righteousness at all; it is actually unrighteousness. None can ever obey all the teaching of the Holy Bible. Whether a person is good or bad, one thing is certain: he does not submit to God's law. In being bad he transgresses the law; in being good he establishes another righteousness outside of Christ and thus misses the purpose of the law ("through the law comes knowledge of sin" 3.20).

(4) "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (8.8). This is the final verdict. Regardless how good a man may be, if the doing is out from himself it cannot please God. God is pleased with His Son alone; aside from Him and His work no man nor work can delight God. What is performed by the flesh may seem to be quite good; nevertheless, because it derives from self and is done in natural strength it cannot satisfy God. Man may devise many ways to do good, to improve, and to advance, but these are carnal and cannot please Him. This is not only true of the unregenerate; it is likewise true of the regenerated person. However commendable and effective should anything be that is done in his own strength the believer fails to draw down upon himself the approval of God. God's pleasure or displeasure is not founded upon the principle of good and evil. Rather, God traces the source of all things. An action may be quite correct, yet God inquires, what is its origin?

From these Scripture references we can begin to appreciate how vain and futile are the efforts of the flesh. A believer who is shown precisely God's estimation of it will not blunder easily. As human beings we distinguish between good works and evil works; God on the other hand goes behind and makes a distinction as to the source of every work. The most excellent deed of the flesh brings down upon it the same displeasure of God as would the most defiled and wicked work, for they all are of the flesh. Just as God hates unrighteousness, so He abhors self-righteousness. The good acts done naturally without the necessity of regeneration or union with Christ or dependence upon the Holy Spirit are no less carnal before God than are immorality, impurity, licentiousness, etc. However beautiful man's activities may be, if they do not spring from a complete trust in the Holy Spirit they are carnal and are therefore rejected by God. God opposes, rejects and hates everything belonging to the flesh regardless of outward appearances and regardless whether done by a sinner or a saint. His verdict is: the flesh must die.

## THE BELIEVER'S EXPERIENCE

But how can a believer see what God has seen? God is so adamant against the flesh and its every activity; yet the believer appears to reject only its bad features while clinging affectionately to the flesh itself. He does not reject categorically the whole thing: he instead continues to do many things in the flesh: he even assumes a selfconfident and proud attitude about it as though he were now rich with God's grace and qualified to perform righteously. The believer literally is making use of his flesh. Because of such self

deceit the Spirit of God must lead him over the most shameful path in order to make him know his flesh and attain God's view. God allows that soul to fall, to weaken, and even to sin, that he may understand whether or not any good resides in the flesh. This usually happens to the one who thinks he is progressing spiritually. The Lord tries him in order that he may know himself. Often the Lord so reveals His holiness to such a one that the believer cannot but judge his flesh as defiled. Sometimes He permits Satan to attack him so that, out of his suffering, he may perceive himself. It is altogether a most difficult lesson, and is not learned within a day or night. Only after many years does one gradually come to realize how untrustworthy is his flesh. There is uncleanness even in his best effort. God consequently lets him experience

Romans 7 deeply until he is ready to acknowledge with Paul: "I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh" (v.18). How hard to learn to say this genuinely! If it were not for countless experiences of painful defeat the believer would continue to trust himself and consider himself able. Those hundreds and thousands of defeats bring him to concede that all selfrighteousness is totally undependable, that no good abides in his flesh. Such dealing, however, does not terminate here. Selfjudgment must continue. For whenever a Christian ceases to judge himself by failing to treat the flesh as useless and utterly detestable but assuming instead even a slightly self-flattering and vainglorious attitude, then God is compelled to run him again through fire in order to consume the dregs. How few are they who humble themselves and acknowledge their uncleanness! Unless such a state is realized God will not withdraw His dealings. Since a believer cannot be freed from the influence of the flesh for a moment, he should never cease exercising the heart to judge himself; otherwise he will step once more into the boasting of the flesh.

Many suppose the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin pertains just to the people of the world, for does He not convict them of their sins into believing the Lord Jesus? But Christians ought to know that such operation of the Holy Spirit is as important in the saints as it is in the sinners. Out of necessity He must convict the saints of their sins, not merely once or twice but daily and incessantly. May we more and more experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit so that our flesh can be put under judgment unceasingly and never be able to reign. May we not lose, even for a moment, the true picture of our flesh and God's estimation of it. Let us never believe in ourselves and never trust our flesh again, as though it could ever please God. Let us always trust the Holy Spirit and at no time yield the slightest place to self.

If ever there was one in the world who could boast of his flesh that person must be Paul, for as to righteousness under the law he was blameless. And if any could boast of his flesh following regeneration, it certainly must be Paul again because he has become an apostle who has seen the risen Lord with his own eyes and who is used greatly by the Lord. But Paul dare not boast, for he knows his flesh. His Romans 7 experience enables him to realize fully who he is. God already has opened his eyes to see via his experience that there dwells in his flesh no good, only sin. The selfrighteousness of which he boasted in the past he now knows to be refuse and sin. He has learned and learned well this lesson; hence he dare not trust the flesh again. But with this lesson he does not in any wise cease. No, Paul continues to learn. And so the Apostle declares that he can "put no confidence in the flesh. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more" (Phil. 3.3-4). Despite the many reasons he can marshal for trusting his flesh (vv. 5-6), Paul realizes how God regards it and well understands how absolutely undependable and untrustworthy it is. If we continue reading Philipians 3 we shall discover how humble Paul is with respect to trusting in himself: "not having a righteousness of my own" (v.9): "that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (v.11): "not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (v.12). Should a believer aspire to attain spiritual maturity be

must preserve forever that attitude which the Apostle Paul maintained throughout his spiritual walk; namely, "not that I have already attained." The Christian dare not entertain the slightest self-confidence, self-satisfaction or self-joy, as though he could trust his flesh.

If the children of God honestly strive for the life more abundant and are ready to accept God's assessment of the flesh, they will not esteem themselves stronger and better than others, notwithstanding their extensive spiritual progress. They will not utter such words as I of course am different from the others." If these believers are disposed to let the Holy Spirit reveal to them God's holiness and their corruption

and do not fear to be shown too clearly, then hopefully they will come to perceive by the Spirit their corruption at an earlier time, with perhaps a consequent lessening of the painful experience of defeat. How lamentable it is, though, that even when one's intention may not be to trust the flesh, there may yet lurk beneath the surface some little impurity, for such a one still thinks he has some strength. In view of this, God must permit him to encounter diverse defeats in order to eliminate even that little confidence in himself.

## THE CROSS AND THE DEEPER WORK

### OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Because the flesh is grossly deceitful, the believer requires the cross and the Holy Spirit. Once having discerned how his flesh stands before God, he must experience each moment the deeper work of the cross through the Holy Spirit. Just as a Christian must be delivered from the sin of the flesh through the cross, so he must now be delivered from the righteousness of the flesh by the same cross. And just as by walking in the Holy Spirit the Christian will not follow the flesh unto sin, so too by walking in the Holy Spirit he will not follow the flesh unto self-righteousness.

As a fact outside the believer the cross has been accomplished perfectly and entirely: to deepen it is not possible. As a process within the believer the cross is experienced in an ever deepening way: the Holy Spirit will teach and apply the principle of the cross in point after point. If one is faithful and obedient he will be led into continually deeper experiences of what the cross has indeed accomplished for him. The cross objectively is a finished absolute fact to which nothing can be added; but subjectively it is an unending progressive experience that can be realized in an ever more penetrating way.

The reader by this time should know something more of the allinclusive character of his having been crucified with the Lord Jesus on the cross; for only on this basis can the Holy Spirit work. The Spirit has no instrument other than that cross. The believer by now should have a fresh understanding of Galatians 5.24. It is not "its passions and desires", alone which have been crucified; the flesh itself, including all its righteousnesses as well as its power to do righteously, has been crucified on the cross. The cross is where both passions and desires and the spring of those passions and desires are crucified, however admirable they may be. Except as one sees this and is ready to deny all his flesh, bad or good, can he in fact walk after the Holy Spirit, be pleasing to God, and live a genuinely spiritual life. Such readiness must not be lacking on his part, for though the cross as an accomplished fact is complete in itself its realization in a person's life is measured by his knowledge and readiness and faith.

Suppose the child of God refuses to deny the good of his flesh. What will be his experience? His flesh may appear to be extremely clever and powerful in undertaking many activities. But however good or strong, the flesh can never answer to God's demands. Hence when God actually summons him to prepare to go

to Calvary and suffer, the Christian soon discovers his only response is to shrink back and to become as weak as water. Why did the disciples fail so miserably in the Garden of Gethsemane? Because "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26.41). Weakness here causes failure there. The flesh can only display its apparently excellent power in matters which suit its taste. That is the reason the flesh draws back at God's call. Its death is therefore essential, else God's will can never be done.

Whatever has the intent and desire to develop ourselves that we may be seen and admired by others belongs to the flesh. There is natural good as well as natural bad in this flesh. John 1.13 informs us of "the will of the flesh." The flesh can will and decide and plan to execute good in order to receive God's favor. But it still belongs to human flesh and hence must go to the cross. Colossians 2.18 speaks of "the mind of his flesh" (Darby). The self-confidence of a Christian is nothing but trusting in his wisdom, thinking he knows every teaching of the Scriptures and how to serve God. And

2 Corinthians 1.12 mentions the "wisdom" of the flesh. It is highly dangerous to receive the truths of the Bible with human wisdom, for this is a hidden and subtle method which invariably causes a believer to perfect with his flesh the work of the Holy Spirit. A very precious truth may be stored securely in the memory; however, it is merely in the mind of the flesh! The Spirit alone can quicken, the flesh profits nothing. Unless all truths are enlivened continually by the Lord, they profit neither ourselves nor others. We are not discussing sin here but the inevitable consequence of the natural life in man. Whatever is natural is not spiritual, We must not only deny our righteousness but also our wisdom. This too must be nailed to the cross.

Colossians 2.23 speaks of a "worship" or "devotion" of the flesh. This is "Worship" according to our opinion. Each method we devise to stir, seek, and acquire a sense of devotion is worship in the flesh. It is neither worship according to the teaching of Scripture nor worship under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Hence the possibility of walking by the flesh always exists; whether in the matter of worship, or in Christian work, or in Biblical knowledge, or in saving souls.

The Bible frequently mentions the "life" of the flesh. Unless this is yielded to the cross it lives within the saint just as much as in the sinner. The only difference is that in the saint there is spiritual opposition to it. But the possibility remains for him to take that life and draw upon it. The life of the flesh may help him to serve God, to meditate upon truth, to consecrate himself to the Lord. It may motivate him to perform many good acts. Yes, the Christian can take his natural life as true life in such a way as to make him feel he is serving the will of God.

We must understand that within man two different life principles exist. Many of us live a mixed life, obeying one and then the other of these two different principles. Sometimes we entirely depend on the Spirit's energy; at other times we mix in our own strength. Nothing seems to be stable and steadfast. "Do I make my plans like a worldly man,

ready to say Yes and No at once?" (2 Cor. 1.17) A characteristic of the flesh is its fickleness: it alternates between Yes and No and vice versa. But the will of God is: "Walk not according to the flesh (not even for a moment) but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8.4). We ought to accept God's will.

"In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2.11). We should be willing to allow the cross, like a knife in circumcision, to cut off completely everything which pertains to the flesh. Such incision must be deep and clean so that nothing of the flesh is left concealed or can remain. The cross and the curse are inextricable

(Gal. 3.13). When we consign our flesh to the cross we hand it over to the curse, acknowledging that in the flesh abides no good thing and that it deserves nothing but the curse of God. Without this heart attitude it is exceedingly difficult for us to accept the circumcision of the flesh. Every affection, desire, thought, knowledge, intent, worship and work of the flesh must go to the cross.

To be crucified with Christ means to accept the curse our Lord accepted. It was not a glorious moment for Christ to be crucified on Calvary (Heb. 12.2). His being banged on the tree meant His being accursed of God (Deut. 21.23). Consequently, for the flesh to be crucified with the Lord simply implies being accursed with the Lord. As we must receive the finished work of Christ on the cross, so must we enter into the fellowship of the cross. The believer needs to acknowledge that his flesh deserves nothing else than the curse of death. His practical fellowship with the cross begins after he sees the flesh as God sees it. Before the Holy Spirit can take full charge over a person there first must be the complete committal of his flesh to the cross. Let us pray that we may know what the flesh exactly is and how it must be crucified.

Brethren, we are not humble enough to accept willingly the cross of Christ! We refuse to concede we are so helpless, useless, and utterly corrupt that we deserve nothing but death. What is lacking today is not a better living but a bet

ter dying! We need to die a good death, a thorough death. We have talked enough about life, power, holiness, righteousness; let us now take a look at death! Oh that the Holy Spirit would penetrate our flesh deeply by the cross of Christ that it might become a valid experience in our life! If we die correctly we shall live correctly. If we are united with Him in a death like His we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His. May we ask the Lord to open our eyes to behold the absolute imperative of death. Are you prepared for this? Are you willing to let the Lord point out your weaknesses? Are you ready to be crucified openly outside the gate? Will you let the Spirit of the cross work within you? Oh, may we know more of His death! May we completely diet

We should be clear that the death of the cross is continuous in its operation. We can never enter upon a resurrection stage which leaves death entirely out, for the experience of resurrection is measured by the experience of death. A peril among those who pursue the ascension life is that they forget the categorical necessity of continuously putting to nought the flesh. They forsake the position of death and proceed to resurrection. This results in either treating lightly as of no serious hazard to their spiritual growth the works of the flesh, or in spiritualizing them, that is, assuming the things of the flesh to be of the spirit. How essential to see that death is the foundation for everything. You may proceed to build but you should never destroy the foundation. The so-called risen and ascended realm will be unreal if the death of the flesh is not maintained continuously. Let us not be deceived into thinking we are so spiritually advanced that the flesh has no more power to entice us. This is merely the enemy's attempt to remove us from the basis of the cross in order to render us outwardly spiritual but inwardly carnal. Many such prayers as: "I thank you Lord, for I am no longer such and such but am now so and so" are simply echoes of the unacceptable prayer recorded in Luke 18.11-12. We are most susceptible to deception by the flesh when we are on the verge of being delivered from it. We must abide constantly in the Lord's death.

Our security is in the Holy Spirit. The safe way lies in our readiness to be taught, fearful lest we yield any ground to the flesh. We must submit ourselves cheerfully to Christ and trust the Holy Spirit to apply the dying of Jesus to us that the life of Jesus may be exhibited. Just as formerly we were filled with the flesh, so now we shall be filled with the Holy Spirit. When He is in complete control He will overthrow the power of the flesh and manifest Christ as our life. We shall be able then to say that the "life I now live in the flesh

is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." Yet the foundation of that life is and always will be that "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2.20)!

If we live by faith and obedience we can expect the Spirit to do a most holy and wonderful work in us. "If we live by the Spirit"-this is our faith, for we believe that the Holy Spirit abides in us; then "let us also walk by the Spirit"-this is our obedience (Gal. 5.25). We ought to believe simply and restfully that our Lord has given us His Spirit, now abiding in us. Believe in His gift and trust that the Holy Spirit indwells you. Take this as the secret of Christ's life in you His Spirit dwells in your innermost spirit. Meditate on it, believe in it, and remember it until this glorious truth produces within you a holy fear and wonderment that the Holy Spirit indeed abides in you! Now learn to follow His leading. Such guidance emerges not from the mind or thoughts; it is something of life. We must yield to God and let His Spirit govern everything. He will manifest the Lord Jesus in our life because this is His task.

### WORDS OF EXHORTATION

If we allow the Spirit of God to do a deeper work by the cross our circumcision will become increasingly real. "We are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3. 3). That confidence in the flesh is relinquished through the circumcision performed without bands. The Apostle makes glorying in Christ Jesus the center of everything. He explains to us that there is danger on the one side yet security on the

other. Putting confidence in the flesh tends to destroy glorying in Christ Jesus, but worship in spirit gives us the blessed joy of life and truth. The Holy Spirit uplifts the Lord Jesus but humbles the flesh. If we genuinely desire to glory in Christ and to let Him secure glory in us, we must receive the circumcision of the cross and learn to worship in the Holy Spirit. Do not be impatient for impatience is of the flesh. Do not try different methods because they are useful solely in helping the flesh. We must distrust the flesh entirely, however good or able it may be. We should trust instead the Holy Spirit and submit to Him alone. With such trust and obedience the flesh will be humbly kept in its proper place of curse and accordingly lose all its power. May God be gracious to us that we may put no confidence in the flesh-yea, that we may look down upon ourselves and acknowledge how unreliable and utterly fruitless is our flesh. This is a very real death. Without it there can be no life.

"Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh" (Gal. 5.13). We have obtained freedom in the Lord; let us not therefore give any opportunity to the flesh, for its rightful place is death. Do not unconsciously construe the activity of the Holy Spirit to be your own, but forever be on guard lest the flesh should be revived. Do not usurp the glory of His triumph and thereby afford the flesh a chance to resume operation. Do not grow overconfident following a few victories; if so, your fall cannot be far away. When you have learned how to overcome and the flesh has long lost its power, never imagine that thereafter you are altogether triumphant over it. Should you not rely upon the Holy Spirit you will soon be thrown once more into a distressing experience. With holy diligence you must cultivate an attitude of dependency, else you will be the target of the flesh's attack. The least pride will supply the flesh an opportunity. Do not be fearful over the possibility you may lose face before others. The Apostle, immediately after his teaching on the crucifixion of the flesh and walking in the Spirit, said: "Let us not become vainglorious" (Gal. 5.26 Darby). If you humbly recognize how worthless you are before God, then you will not attempt to vaunt yourself before men. Suppose you hide the weakness of your flesh before men in order to receive glory. Are you not unwittingly giving occasion to the flesh for its activity? The Holy Spirit can help and strengthen us, but He Himself will not supplant us in performing what is our responsibility. Therefore to fulfill that

responsibility we on the one hand must maintain the attitude of rendering no occasion to the flesh; but on the other hand we must put that attitude into actual practice when called upon to deny the flesh in all the daily realities of our walk.

"Make no provision," exhorts Paul, "for the flesh" (Rom. 13.14). For the flesh to operate it needs a harbinger. That is why no provision ought to be made for it. If the flesh is to be kept confined to the place of curse, we must be watchful always. We must examine our thoughts continually to see whether or not we harbor the least self-conceit, for certainly such an attitude will give great opportunity to the flesh. Our thoughts are most important here because what is provided for in the secrecy of our thought life will come forth openly in words and deeds. The flesh must never be offered any ground. Even when conversing with others we need to be on the alert lest in many words the flesh is equipped to perform its work. We may love to say many things, but if these are not uttered in the Holy Spirit it is better to say nothing. The same applies to our deeds. The flesh can conjure up many plans and methods and be full of expectations. It has its opinions, power and ability. To others and even to ourselves, these may appear to be quite commendable and acceptable. But let us be reckless enough to destroy even the best of them for fear of violating the Lord's commandment. The best the flesh has to offer must be delivered mercilessly to death for the simple reason that it belongs to the flesh. The righteousness of the flesh is as abhorrent as is its sin. Its good acts should be repented of just as much and as humbly as its sinful deeds. We

must always maintain God's view of the flesh.

In case we fail, we must examine ourselves, confess our sin,

and resort to the cleansing of the precious blood. "Let us purify ourselves from every pollution of flesh and spirit" (2 Cor. 7.1 Darby). Not only must there be the work of the Holy Spirit and that of the precious blood; we ourselves must work towards cleansing too. We must search out all the uncleannesses of the flesh and consign them to the cross of our Lord. Even the best that is done though it may not be sinful according to man-is nevertheless condemned by God as unclean. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." This covers both the person and his deeds. God is not so much interested in the form or shape as in the source. Hence we must be purified not only from our sins but also from every deed of the flesh. "Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh" (1 Peter 2.11).

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