

A Sinner's Guide to Holiness

**Learning to Live
with a
Gracious God**

Joshua Nickel

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Introduction

Holiness, according to the New Testament, is a Person. More specifically, *your* holiness is a Person, who also happens to be your wisdom and righteousness. According to the apostle Paul, this Person became for you “wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, 'He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.'” Sanctification is a term that refers to being made holy, and sanctification (*your* sanctification) is a Person.

The passage quoted above is 1 Corinthians 1:30-31, which also refers back to the prophet Jeremiah, who said, “Let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and know Me, that I am the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight,' says the LORD.” (Jeremiah 9:24)

To *glory* means to boast and celebrate victoriously, and the more you understand and know the Lord, the more you have to celebrate.

This book, therefore, is a celebration of your holiness. If you are justified by faith in Jesus, with no confidence in your own power to save yourself, then you, dear sinner, are a saint, and I am writing this book to boast about you and to celebrate your sainthood.

If you don't have this kind of faith in Jesus, this book may still be for you. Have you ever done anything wrong that you wish you hadn't done? If so, then this book is definitely for you. This book is for all sinners, believers and unbelievers alike.

There are many approaches to personal holiness. There are different views among Christians on the subject of sanctification, but it seems to me that it's mostly a matter of emphasis. My emphasis in this book is on grace.

This particular guide to holiness is a three-step program:

Step One: Accept the fact that you will never get better.

Step Two: Accept the fact that you don't have to get better.

Step Three: Let me explain.

Step number three is critical. We're going to start with step number three, devoting the first three chapters of the book to it. Then we'll spend a chapter on step two and a chapter on step one, so we will be covering the steps in reverse order.

I hope this book will be an encouragement to you and exalt the Lord Jesus on your behalf.

Books written by people can prove to be helpful, but the true guide to holiness is the Holy Spirit Himself. May He ever guide you to a deeper appreciation for the beauty of holiness and the glory of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The Woman Who Wanted a Different Husband

She Was Married to the Wrong Guy

In the middle of his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul tells a story about a desperate woman. It's a brief story, it only takes up three verses at the beginning of Romans 7, and it's easy to overlook, especially in light of all the great things Paul goes on to say in Romans 8.

Let's consider this woman for a moment. Here is the story in Romans 7:1-3:

“Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man.”

The woman in this story might not seem desperate at first, and she certainly doesn't look like any kind of role model for us, but Paul makes clear, in the next verse, that this woman represents the believers he's writing to:

“Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God.”

Paul's fellow believers in Rome are represented by the woman in this illustration. The other man, whom the woman would rather be married to, is Christ. If you want to apply this lesson to yourself (and you should), then you need to see yourself as this wife. The person that you want to marry is Christ.

So who is the husband you no longer want to be married to? It is often thought that the law is the husband, especially because Paul will go on to say that these

believers, who are represented by the wife, have been delivered from the law:

“For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.” (Romans 7:5-6)

We will take another look at those verses in a moment. For now, let me just say that the husband is indeed identified in that passage, but by these words: “when we were in the flesh.”

Paul is not saying that you were married to the law and got out of that marriage by dying. The law is not the husband in this story. The law is the law. The law is what calls the woman an adulteress. That's why the woman is stuck in the marriage. Perhaps she wouldn't care what other people called her, but if the law calls her an adulteress, it must be true. It's not that she wants to escape the law, it's that she doesn't want to break it. So she is stuck, by law, to her husband. She is stuck, that is, “in the flesh.”

Back in Romans 6:6, Paul has told us who it was that died: “...our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.” Here in Romans 7:1-3 he has changed his metaphor from slavery to marriage, but he is still talking about that same “old man.”

So there is something very unusual about the marriage Paul talks about in Romans 7:1-3. What is strange about it is you and your place in the story. For you are both the wife *and* the husband. Therefore, if you want to apply the story to yourself and take to heart the lesson that Paul is teaching, you need to see how it can be that you are both, and to understand the way in which you are the husband who dies, and the way in which you are the wife who marries Christ. (Hint: it has to a lot to do with the flesh/Spirit dichotomy that Paul develops in Romans 8, as we will soon see.)

She Was Tired of Living for Herself

Let's begin by looking back to Romans 5 and considering the comparison that Paul has set up between Adam and Christ. He took a relatively long time to set up that comparison because he planned for it to serve as a backdrop to much of what he would say in the following chapters. (Paul, of course, didn't really write Romans in chapters, the chapter divisions were added later.)

Paul pointed out that, just as sin entered the world through the disobedience of Adam, so also grace came by the obedience of Christ. As children of Adam, we are sinners like him, but, as Paul went on to say, "our old man" was crucified with Christ. It was then that the old husband died, when we died with Christ.

So the husband is Adam? Not the historical Adam, of course, but you as a child of Adam, who you are in this world, your Self. You are married to your Self. You live for your Self, serve your Self, seek the best for your Self. In other words, you are a great wife, utterly faithful and devoted. Your husband, on the other hand, has issues. No matter how hard you try and no matter how good a wife you are, your husband is what he is, his name doesn't change and neither does yours.

This is the aspect marriage that Paul is highlighting with his illustration: the fact that the wife takes the name of the husband so that her fate (and reputation) is linked with his. The children that the wife bears continue the husband's family tree.

So the husband is your identity, your name, yourself. In that sense, you are the husband in this picture. The wife is your service, your work, your effort. No matter how good you are as a wife to yourself, no matter how hard you work as a wife, you can't change who you are as a husband. No matter how much you do that you think is righteous and good, you will remain a sinner.

The husband's last name is Sinner. The husband (representing you) is Self the Sinner, and the wife (also representing you) is Mrs. Sinner. No matter what good things you do, you do them as Mrs. Sinner. You're tired of being Mrs. Sinner, you want to be Mrs. Righteous. You want to get married to Christ the Righteous, change your name, change your identity, and change the one you live for.

Here is where you run up against the law. The law won't let you change. Paul began his story by saying, "I speak to those who know the law." They knew, for example, that the law didn't allow the wife to divorce her husband.

The law has identified you as a sinner, and you can't change that identity. Even the good you do, you do as a sinner. The law won't allow you to get a divorce and get rid of the name Sinner. The law must punish you. Since you are a sinner, you must die. Since you are both the husband and the wife, if the one dies the other dies also. No wonder Mrs. Sinner wants a divorce, her husband is under a death sentence and it applies to her as well!

Now do you see why Paul had to tell an unusual story in which you are both the husband and the wife? Because it reflects reality—a reality that is perhaps even more unusual, but reality none the less. There are two 'you's in the marriage metaphor because there are two 'you's in Paul's gospel: the 'you' who died with Christ on the cross and the 'you' who lives with Him now.

The Law Never Forgets

When we get to Romans 8, we see that Paul has moved on from his marriage metaphor, but it still serves as a backdrop to what he is saying. He uses language that echoes the language he used in telling that story. For example, he says in Romans 8:2: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.”

Look back at the language Paul used in his marriage story: “For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from *the law of her husband*. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from *that law*...” (Romans 7: emphasis added)

What is Paul saying about this metaphorical wife in her new marriage to her new husband. Is she now free from the law, so that she can murder and steal with fear of punishment? Of course not, but she is free, Paul says, from *that law*, meaning *the law of her (former) husband*.

What does Paul mean by *the law of her husband*? Did the husband make and enforce his own laws according to his own will? No. *The law of her husband* means the law as it deals with this woman in relation to her husband. When she was single she was already obligated to obey the law, but when she got married, the law dealt with her in a new way, binding her to her husband.

Once the law has convicted you as a sinner (as Mr. Sinner) then it judges everything you do as the work of a sinner. It has become the law of your husband. In other words, it condemns you and all that you do and will continue to condemn you until your sin is punished with death.

Now look again at Romans 8:2: “For *the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus* has made me free from *the law of sin and death*” (emphasis added). Are there two different laws? Not exactly. There are two different 'you's. There is Mrs. Sinner, the wife of Self, and there is Mrs. Righteous, the wife of Christ. Both of these wives are under the law of their husband.

Just as *the law of her husband* meant the law as it relates to the wife in the context of her marriage, *the law of sin and death* is the law as it relates to you as

someone who has sinned and is deserving of death. Now I bet you can guess what *the law of the Spirit of life in Christ* is. It's the law as it relates to you as one who is married to Christ. When you were married to your Self, the law of sin and death was the law of your husband. Now, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ is the law of your husband.

The Law Never Forgets, but It Can be Satisfied

There was no sin in Jesus that deserved to be punished. So the law, to Him, was not the law of sin and death. The law didn't apply to Him in that way.

When the law looks at Jesus it sees only righteousness. If Jesus is your husband, the law sees His righteousness when it looks at you as well. It doesn't turn a blind eye to your sin, it sees your sin as already punished in the death of your former husband (Self), which it sees as taking place in the death of Christ.

As we have seen above, Romans 7:4 says, "You also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ." This doesn't mean that the law is dead, or that it's not around anymore. The law is still very much around, pointing out sin and condemning it as deserving of death. When it looks at you, however, it sees that you have already been punished unto death for your sins. To be dead to the law means that the law itself sees you as dead, that the law has already dealt with you and punished you.

Let's take a look at Romans 8:3-4. For now, we will look only at the first part of this verse 4. In chapter three we will look at the rest of that verse. Romans 8:3-4a says:

"For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us..."

God condemned your sin already in the death of Jesus. So you are dead to the law. That means that, as far as the law is concerned, you have been punished. You are now Mrs. Righteous. The law, when it looks at you, sees the righteousness of your husband, Christ.

Now that we have identified this woman's husband and the role that the law places in the story, let's look again at Romans 7:5-6, where Paul applies his marriage metaphor to the Roman believers. Here it is with explanatory notes added in brackets:

“For when we were in the flesh [*living for ourselves; married, as it were, to our identity in this world*], the sinful passions which were aroused by the law [*the law of our husband, that is, the law of sin and death*] were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law [*of sin and death*], having died to what we were held by [*our old man was crucified with Christ, that we should no longer be slaves of sin*], so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.” (Romans 7:5-6)

The King Who Couldn't Revoke His Own Decree

The Man Who Almost Got Away with Genocide

The Old Testament book of Esther describes a time when the people of Israel were exiled from their land, living in a foreign kingdom. During that time, a man named Haman had a grudge against a certain Jew, so he decided he wanted to kill all the Jews in the entire kingdom. Haman had influence with the king, and he figured out a way to accomplish his goal.

Esther 3:8-11 describe how Haman poisoned the king's mind against the Jews:

“Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, 'There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from all other people's, and they do not keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not fitting for the king to let them remain. If it pleases the king, let a decree be written that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who do the work, to bring it into the king's treasuries.'

“So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. And the king said to Haman, 'The money and the people are given to you, to do with them as seems good to you.’”

Haman had chosen a certain day and convinced the king to issue a decree making it was permissible for anyone in the kingdom to kill Jews on that particular day. Nobody would be charged with murder or theft on that one day as long as the people they killed and stole from were Jews.

Esther 3:13 tell us how great scope of the plan was:

“And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, to destroy,

to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions.”

The book of Esther tells the story of how Esther became queen, how she convinced the king that Haman was evil, and how Haman ended up being punished. Haman's treachery was exposed and he was executed, but one issue remained unresolved: the decree of the king had gone out into all the land, and that law was still on the books.

In that land, in those days, not even the king had the authority to revoke his own decree. Haman was dead, but the enemies of the Jews were many, and they had the legal right, on that one day, to kill as many of them as they could. Not even the king could take that right away from them.

That doesn't mean, however, that the king was powerless. He issued another irrevocable decree, giving the Jews the legal authority, on that same day, to fight back. Esther 8:11-13 explains that the Jews were given the same legal authority to do the same thing to their enemies as they had planned to do to them:

“By these letters the king permitted the Jews who were in every city to gather together and protect their lives—to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the forces of any people or province that would assault them, both little children and women, and to plunder their possessions, on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province and published for all people, so that the Jews would be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.”

On paper these two decrees looked exactly the same. On paper it looked like neither side had any great advantage. But when the day came to act upon these decrees, it wasn't close at all. Esther 9:1-2 explains:

“Now in the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day, the time came for the king's command and his decree to be executed. On the day that the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, the opposite occurred, in that the Jews themselves overpowered those who hated them. The Jews gathered together in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could

withstand them, because fear of them fell upon all people.”

A New Law for a New Age, the Same Old Law for the Same Old Age

Now, with that story in mind, let's take another look at Romans 8:2: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.”

We have already considered this verse in light of Paul's story about the woman who wanted a different husband. We saw that whom you're married to determines how the law relates to you. The law will deal with you as “the law of your husband,” so it's very important who your husband is. Now let's consider this verse again in light of the story about the king who issued two irrevocable decrees.

The law of sin at death is still in effect. It has been fulfilled in Christ, punishing sin in Him, but it remains unfulfilled in the world, wherever faith in Christ is absent. It still operates in the world, just as it did before Jesus died and rose again, and it will continue in full effect as long as sin, death, and unbelief remain. Everything that was a sin before Jesus came is still a sin today, and every sin is still intolerable to God and rightly deserves punishment. Jesus didn't make it “OK to sin,” He made it “still not OK but already punished.” Understand this difference—understand it with everything you've got—and you will be well on your way to living a different kind of life.

God hasn't revoked the law of sin and death, but He has issued a new law: the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. Now there are two laws dealing with two different situations. (The two different situations are, as we will see, you walking in the flesh/unbelief and you walking in the Spirit/faith.)

Your new husband, Jesus, doesn't want to share you with your former (now dead) husband, your Self. Neither of the two husbands in Paul's story wants to let the wife go. Likewise, these two laws, both still in effect, seek to rule you completely.

Actually, the law of sin and death only seeks to rule you if you are in the flesh. It's the flesh, not the law itself, that struggles against the Spirit. As Paul says elsewhere, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of

the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other..." (Galatians 5:17 ESV)

Perhaps on the books these two laws might look like a close match. That is, when you read Romans 8:2 and similar verses, it may seem like it could go either way: you could walk in the flesh one day and in the Spirit the next; you could live for Christ now and for yourself later.

Remember, however, what happened in the book of Esther. The two decrees of the king looked the same, but when the day came for the decrees to go into effect, it was a blowout on the side of God's people.

Likewise, when you read Romans 8 it might look like a close match between the flesh and the Spirit, but when put into practice, it isn't even close. One law (the law of the Spirit), when followed, so totally overpowers the other law that, for all practical purposes, it might as well have been revoked.

The Preacher Who Saw a Preview of the Apocalypse

It Changed His Perspective on Life

The New Testament tells of a man who saw the end of the world before it happened. Not surprisingly, what he saw changed him for the rest of his life, affecting everything he did and said. I'm not referring to John, who wrote the book of Revelation, although I could be. Instead I'm talking about the apostle Paul, who, as Saul of Tarsus, met the risen Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus.

In that encounter, Paul saw the end of the world, not as an event that will happen in the future, but as something that had already happened to a Person. When he met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, he saw what had happened to Him. He saw a Man who had experienced the end of the world, not as a vision but as a reality, and who had lived again to tell about it—and to start a new world.

In chapter one we looked at Romans 8:4. We looked at the first half of that verse, anyway. Now let's finish that sentence. In Jesus Christ, God condemned sin in the flesh, it says, so “that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who...”

Now, if you had never read Romans before, and I asked to start at the beginning of the letter and read up to Romans 8:3, and then to read 8:4 and finish the sentence yourself, how would you finish it? Would you be able to put the words in Paul's mouth? Would you see where his train of thought was headed?

We'll never know the answer to that, but I wouldn't be too hard on you got it wrong, and finished the sentence like this: “He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who...*believe in Jesus.*” After all, that's what Romans is all about isn't it? That has been Paul's emphasis in Romans up to this point, that we are saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ and not by our works.

Actually, Romans 8:4 says this: “...that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who *do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*” You may not have guessed that this was where Paul was headed, but don't worry. If you would have guessed, “*believe in Jesus,*” you would not have been that far off. Faith in Jesus is still what Paul is talking about, it's just that he wants to begin to talk about it in terms of the Spirit, and to show how the Spirit fits into what he has been saying. Nevertheless, when he talks about the Spirit, he is still talking about faith in Jesus.

In fact, if you go all the way back to Romans 1:16-17, where Paul introduced the theme of his letter, you will see that he has stayed remarkably on topic, despite all the ground he has covered. In those verses, he quotes his opening text from the Old Testament (Habakkuk 2:4), saying, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'” (ESV)

There (Romans 1:17) he says that the *righteous will live by faith*; here (Romans 8:4) he says that the righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled in us who *walk according to the Spirit*, and everything between these two verses teaches us that these two phrases mean pretty much the same thing. To live by faith is to walk according to the Spirit, and vice versa. Paul is still developing his opening text, still expounding on what it means to say that the righteous will live by faith.

Paul's consistency in Romans is often unappreciated, because we don't see the world like he did. We tend to assume that believing and walking are two different things.

In the early chapters of Romans we see Paul's explanation of justification by faith, that it is a once-and-for-all divine act of grace. It's all or nothing. You are either justified by faith or you aren't. But then Paul starts talking about how to live and behave in this world, and we don't see it as an all-or-nothing matter.

We don't live our lives in an instant. Our lives in this world change and develop, so we want to know how the gospel deals with us as we change and grow.

In accordance with this perceived difference between believing and walking,

we compartmentalize the gospel into parts that deal with different aspects of the Christian life. For example, the finished work of the gospel is sometimes distinguished as *justification*, as opposed to *sanctification*, which is viewed as the progressive aspect of the gospel—the gospel changing us over time.

There are some problems with this distinction, however. For one thing, the gospel changes us by not changing, and not waiting for us to change. It helps us to live in this world by not conforming itself to this world—by giving us a message from outside of this world and insisting that this ever-changing world in which we live and grow has ended, and that our lives in it have ended as well.

As for the fact that we are clearly not dead. The gospel gives us a new world to live in, a world governed by—in fact, created by—God's once-and-for-all decree that we are righteous in Christ. To live under that decree is to live in the Spirit, and to live in the Spirit is to live the life of the new creation.

Seeing Black and White in a World of Gray

Below is Romans 8:5-11. Read it and try to answer this question: is Paul speaking in absolute terms or is he speaking in degrees? Are there in fact only two different kinds of people in the world, those who walk, and always walk, according to the flesh, and those who walk, and always walk, according to the Spirit? Or are there some who walk in the Spirit sometimes, or even most of the time, but sometimes also walk according to the flesh?

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

“But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.”

If you were to base your answer to my question on Romans 8:5-11 only, you would probably answer that it's all or nothing as far as Paul is concerned. He's speaking here in absolute terms. However, if you've read some of Paul's other letters to other churches, you will know that he understood as well as anyone that believers sometimes walk according to the flesh, and sometimes woefully so. We find Paul, in some of his other letters, addressing and correcting believers who think and act carnally. We find him dealing with Christians who have sinned.

We only need to read a few chapters of 1 Corinthians to see that Paul knew that the saints of God could sometimes think and act according to the flesh yet still be saints. Paul deals with such cases with understanding. Unless such Christians are unrepentant, we don't find him saying that they are no longer Christian and have no share in the Spirit of Christ.

Yet look again at what he says in Romans 8:5-11. Here he doesn't leave any

room for those kind of immature believers:

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit...those who are in the flesh cannot please God. *But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.* Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.” (emphasis added)

Why does he talk in such absolute terms? Does he see no shades of gray, only black and white? Why doesn't he add a disclaimer, saying that sometimes even the saints might walk in the flesh a little bit?

In fact, that is something that Paul never did, not in Romans or in any of his other letters. When he addressed sinning Christians, it was always to deal with past sins, not to suggest that they might continue to sin in the future. He warned them, no doubt, to take every precaution against falling to temptation or drifting from faith. He warned them severely, but it was always with the expectation that they would heed his warnings. When describing the standard that they should live up to, however, he was hopelessly optimistic (or, as some might say, demanding).

Paul didn't see sin and righteousness in shades of gray, as matter of gradual change, but in stark black and white. In fact, seeing in shades of gray is part of the very immaturity that he was fighting against in the Corinthian church. The problem with some people, he said, was that they were measuring themselves by themselves, comparing themselves to other Christians, evaluating themselves by imperfect standards (2 Corinthians 10:12). The Corinthians were being influenced by these people. No wonder they were confused. Everything is gray when we just look at each other and not at the Lord.

For another example of Paul's apocalyptic mindset, consider what he said in Romans 13:12-14:

“The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.”

Paul sets up a picture of night turning into day. This is something that happens

gradually. Every morning the sky becomes lighter by degrees until it is daytime. But the called-for response to this gradual change is sudden change: Get up and get dressed. Do it now and do it all-at-once. You don't get dressed as slowly as the sun rises in the morning. You immediately put on the clothes that you are going to wear that day. And since you're getting dressed, the day has effectively arrived and nighttime is over. So also, Paul would say, live as if this world has already ended.

Seeing Perfect Holiness in a World of Sin

Why did Paul talk in such absolute language? Was he a perfectionist who demanded that all others live up to his unrealistic standards?

Actually, it was because he was realistic. He understood the way things really are. He had seen the pattern of all true spiritual growth, and it wasn't anything gradual. It was sudden and dramatic. It was the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus died he brought the world of sin down with Him. For Him death wasn't just the end of a life, it was the end of the world. His resurrection was the beginning of a new world.

Paul focused on the cause, not the effect. The effect is that people gradually become more mature over time. But that's not because the cause (the gospel) is gradual. It's because we are dull of heart and slow to believe. We slow down the work of the gospel in our lives by our unbelief. We will never be able to accuse the gospel of not being powerful enough. The problem is our lack of faith.

Paul didn't limit the gospel's power in order to accommodate the church's lack of faith. Even after he had dealt with so much immaturity in the church, he still did not envision the Christian life as being one of flesh-directed behavior alternating with Spirit-directed behavior. He was stubborn on that point, but that's what happens to a preacher who sees the end of the world ahead of time. He wanted everyone else to see the same thing. He wanted everyone else to adopt his mindset.

What is the answer for the Christian who is living in that shadowy world between midnight and dawn? What is the answer to the Christian who walks and thinks according to the flesh? Is it to walk and think a little more in the Spirit today and then a little more than that tomorrow? No! The thinking that leads to victory is thinking in absolutes, the all-or-nothing mindset on display in Romans 8:5-11.

We have just seen, when we looked at Romans 13:12-14, that Paul warned the believers to “make no provision for the flesh.” Paul followed this advice even when he talked about the way Christians live. The language he used to describe

the Christian life made no provision for the flesh, it didn't even leave the door open a crack. Paul himself often had to deal with Christians who were indeed acting carnally, but that was in reaction to what had already happened, not in anticipation of future sin. He *reacted* to the flesh but still made no *provision* for it.

Paul's purpose was that Christians would see the absurdity of sin—the absurdity of the idea that, as a Christian, you should expect to be in the flesh sometimes and in the Spirit sometimes. That's why he asked, in Romans 6:1, if we should continue in sin so that God's grace could abound? He wanted his readers to ponder the foolishness of that option: How can we who have died to sin continue to live in it?

Consider that all-important date in the book of Esther. The Enemies of the Jews had legal authority to destroy them on that day. They had a decree from the king. The Jews had a similar decree authorizing them to fight back. Now imagine that you were a Jew fighting on that day, but you also had friends on the other side. Imagine that sometimes, for a few minutes, you switched sides and fought alongside the enemies of the Jews, then you suddenly switched back and fought for the Jews. How does that behavior sound? Foolish? Crazy? Reprehensible?

So it is for a Christian to walk in the flesh. He fights against himself. Does it happen? Paul knew as well as anyone that it happens, but he also knew that the fact that it happens doesn't make it any less absurd or foolish, and that, if people could see how foolish it was, it wouldn't happen.

Consider again Paul's illustration from Romans 7:1-3, about the woman who wanted to change husbands. Imagine that she got her wish. Her first husband dies, but instead of burying him, she leaves him in bed, marries a new husband and moves in with him, and every once in a while she sneaks back to the old house to check up on the corpse of her former husband.

Something is wrong with this picture, isn't it? What would you say to such a woman? Would you say, “Your goal should be never to visit the corpse of your former husband anymore, but of course you might actually slip up and visit it from time to time, but you should do so less often.”? I don't think you'd say that. I think you'd simply say, “Don't do that anymore!”

That's how Paul talked about sin because that's how he viewed it. He didn't accommodate his words to the views of others. He described what he saw so that those who heard him would see things his way.

The Judge Who Couldn't Get Anybody to Believe His Verdict

The Old You Lives in an Old World

Let's review some of the things we have learned so far. Here's one important lesson: It's better to walk according to the Spirit than according to the flesh. We have seen this from Romans 8:5-11. We have also seen that we should make no provision for the flesh, which means, among other things, expecting that we can always be in the Spirit.

This should be our mindset, no matter how many failures we have experienced in the past. Don't ignore your failures, understand them and learn from them. Paul said make no *provision* for the flesh, he didn't say make no reaction or response to it. He didn't say pretend it doesn't exist (more on that in the next chapter).

If you remember from the introduction, this book is divided into three steps, which we will cover in reverse order. We started with step three, which set up the context necessary to understand the first two steps.

It's time to consider step two, which is to understand that you don't need to get better. It should be clear by now that it is *in the Spirit* that you have no need to improve, in fact you have no lack of any kind, for in the Spirit is all the richness of the kingdom of God.

It is very important, therefore, that we understand what Paul meant by flesh and Spirit, and specifically what he meant in Romans 8, for he used the word *flesh* to mean different things in different places.

Sometimes *flesh* simply means the physical body. In that sense, flesh is not a bad thing; indeed “the Lord is for the body,” and, “everything created by God is good.” (see 1 Corinthians 6:13 and 1 Timothy 4:4)

But that's not how Paul uses the word *flesh* in Romans 8:5-11. There, when he

talks about flesh and Spirit, he is not referring to two different parts of you. The flesh, here, does not mean your physical body as opposed to some unseen part of you. You do indeed have unseen parts, but God wants all of you to be holy, seen and unseen parts alike. God wants you to be “holy in both body and spirit.” (see 1 Corinthians 7:34)

In Romans 8, as in other places, Paul uses the word *flesh* to refer to the *world*. To live and walk and think according to the flesh means to live and walk and think according to the ways of the world. It means to try to relive the life of your former husband (Self).

Paul is referring to two worlds: the old world corrupted by sin and the new world created by the resurrection of Jesus Christ and given to us by the Holy Spirit. Paul often uses the word *flesh* this way, referring to the old world as opposed to the new world of the Spirit.

Fortunately it's not hard to know when Paul is using the the word this way. The context will make it clear. When you find the word *flesh* used in the New Testament (not just in Paul's letters), replace it with the word *world* and see if it still means the same thing. Sometimes it will (for example, in 1 Corinthians 1-4 *flesh* and *world* are used interchangeably). Sometimes *flesh* means *world*, or more specifically, you living according to the ways of this world.

Living in a Crucified World, Walking in a New Creation

To walk according to the flesh is to live the life of your old self in this old world. But isn't your former husband, Self the Sinner, who lived according to the ways of this world, dead? Yes, indeed he is, and so is the world in which he once lived. Paul says in Galatians 5:24 that "those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires," and he says a few verses later (Galatians 6:14) that, "by [Christ] the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." So the flesh and world have both been crucified.

Yet, despite this crucifixion, Paul still admits to living in the flesh/world. For example, he says in 2 Corinthians 10:3, "though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh." (He could just as well have said, "Although we still live in the world, we don't fight like the world.")

Also, in Galatians 2:20, he says, "the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God..." Is Paul saying that he is carnal and still does what he would call the works of the flesh? No. He is simply saying that he lives in the same world as everyone else. He is living in a dead, condemned, crucified, world. However, it's not the *only* world that he lives in and it's not the world that he walks according to. Paul is living in the old world with faith in the Son of God—faith that He has created another world for him to live in, with a different set of rules to walk by.

You may remember from chapter three, when we looked at Romans, that Paul began his argument in Romans 1 by saying that the righteous will live by faith, and by the time he got to Romans 8 he was talking about walking in the Spirit, and he was really still talking about the same thing. He does something similar in Galatians.

Galatians 2:20 ("the life I live in the flesh *I live by faith...*") comes at the beginning of his argument. (He had some issues to deal with in the beginning of Galatians, so he took longer to get to his main argument.) By the time he says "*let's walk in the Spirit*" (Galatians 5:25), if we have followed his argument carefully, we will know that he is saying, "*let's live by faith.*"

I said in chapter one that there are two 'you's in Paul's gospel. It may be more accurate to say it this way: that, although you are one person, there are two ways of looking at yourself and thinking about yourself, two ways of walking. There are two worlds, two ages, two kingdoms that both make claims upon you as an entire person—spirit, soul, and body. You actually live in both worlds, just as Paul did. But it's possible to walk, think, and act exclusively according to the new world, the world of the Spirit.

You can live as a new creation in the midst of this crucified world. You can taste the powers of the age to come during this present evil age. You can walk in the Spirit and not fulfill the lusts of the flesh.

As you do this, as you consistently walk in the Spirit, the life you live in the flesh will become more and more conformed to the image of Christ. The life you live in this world does indeed show signs of progress. In that sense you *do* get better, and you could even say that you *need* to get better, more mature, more loving, *etc.* But you live out your life in this world by faith in the Son of God; you live out this life by walking in the Spirit, walking in a world in which you are completely accepted and favored and forgiven already, a world in which you do not need to get better.

Is This Just “Legal Fiction”?

If there are two worlds, which is the real one? They're both real. The world of the Spirit is just as real as the world of the flesh. It's also eternal, as opposed to the temporary world of the flesh, so, if anything, it's more real.

It's true that if you walk according to the flesh, the world of the flesh will seem more real to you. But it's also true that as you walk in the Spirit, that world will seem more real.

Without faith you will not walk in the Spirit and this world will seem to you like only real one and you will feel utterly at home and comfortable in this world, that is, in the flesh. Many people live this way while giving lip-service to the world of the Spirit. Because of the example they set, observers are wary of any kind of suggestion that Christians don't need to get better, seeing it as an excuse to keep sinning.

The righteousness of faith is sometimes considered to be just such an excuse, a kind of “legal fiction,” an imaginary status that people presume to have before God that has no practical effect on their lives. This charged needs to be addressed.

First of all, the announcement that you are blameless and forgiven and righteous in Christ has been pronounced by God, who is the Judge of all people. Therefore, since it's the pronouncement of a judge, you could call it *legal*, although it's also much more than that.

But is it *fiction*? It certainly is to those who don't believe it. But then, so is God. The Holy Spirit is a fictitious character to those who don't believe in Him. Some people are convinced that the resurrection of Jesus is fiction. Likewise, justification by faith is fiction in the sense that a lot of people don't believe it.

You, on the other hand, probably do believe in justification by faith, the new creation, and the world of the Spirit. I imagine that's why you are reading this book, because you know that the sanctifying grace of Jesus Christ is real and you want it to work for you.

Am I right, or are you reading this book in search of loopholes that will allow

you to keep sinning without consequences? I doubt that you would have gotten this far if you were.

Are you, on the other hand, looking for true holiness? You will find it, but you have to believe the Judge's verdict. Then, no matter what it is for others, for you it will be legal reality.

Justification by faith leads to holy living. This may sound like legal fiction to some people, but in reality it's an historical fact. It's not a verdict announced by a Judge in some unseen cosmic courtroom in some other world. God, the all-knowing Judge, made His decision known in this world, and He did so by raising Jesus from the dead.

The resurrection of Jesus is the announcement of the Judge's verdict that you don't need to get better, that you have been found righteous and blameless before God. It was announced and made known in this world that we all share, not in the illusory realm of some theologian's imagination. Christ's resurrection is also the beginning of the new creation, the world of the Spirit in which we walk by faith. His resurrection, therefore, is where the two worlds meet.

So it's legal, but it's definitely not fiction. Your righteousness and blamelessness before God are as real as Jesus Christ is alive, and this legal status will work wonders for you if you walk in it. And that means believing it—for walking is believing and believing is walking.

Imagine a judge who pronounced his verdict, but people thought that what he said was merely fiction. Their unbelief wouldn't change the legal force of his verdict, but it would affect their behavior.

What good is it to have a judge to speak authoritatively if nobody believes he meant what he said? Our society would fall apart if people treated judges that way, yet even Christians sometimes doubt, or forget, God's verdict over their lives. He's not joking; you can take Him at His word.

In Colossians 2:12 Paul said our faith is in the working of God, who raised Jesus from the dead. The word *working* could also be translated *effectiveness*. If you believe in God, believe in His power; believe that what He did was effective; it worked; it created a new world for you to live in—a world of unconditional favor, a world in which you don't need to get better.

The Christian Who Stopped Trying to Get Better

Life as a Crucified Sinner

Now it's time to consider step one of our three-step program: understand and accept that you will never get better. This step is not nearly as depressing as it sounds. It's actually liberating, especially since it goes hand in hand with the realization that you don't *need* to get better.

In the last chapter we saw that it is *in the Spirit* that you don't need to get better. In this chapter we will see that, *in the flesh*, you can't get better anyway. If you walk according to the flesh, indeed you desperately need to get better, it's just that you never will. That's why God crucified your flesh. There was no other way.

That doesn't mean that there is no such thing as discernible progress and growth in maturity. Certainly there is. Bad habits will end, good habits will develop. That's normal Christianity.

There is a reason this chapter is last. I don't want to be understood as saying there is no such thing as progress in the Christian life. A believer in Jesus Christ is always growing in maturity, or else something is seriously wrong.

The point I want to make is that progress doesn't happen by measuring progress, but by measuring the finished work that God has accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—*trying* to measure it, I should say, for it's immeasurable, but must be comprehended with the help of the Holy Spirit. And part of comprehending that immeasurably glorious work is understanding that you remain a sinner. That's why you were crucified with Christ. If you could have been rehabilitated instead, the cross would not have been necessary.

But the cross *was* necessary and you *have* been crucified. As Paul said in Galatians 5:24-25, “And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.”

In the Spirit, the flesh has been crucified with Christ, so to walk in the Spirit means to remain crucified as far as the flesh is concerned. To remain crucified is to remain dead. To remain dead is to remain a sinner. As far as your life in this world is concerned, you are still a sinner, but with one very important qualification: you are a *crucified* sinner.

It is good to know in what sense you are a sinner, and in what sense you aren't, so that you can think of yourself properly. You're not a sinner in the sense that you are bound to sin, that you are not forgiven, that you're on thin ice with God, or that your justification by faith in Jesus is ineffective. You're not even a sinner in the sense that you want to sin and wish you still could.

You're a sinner in this sense: you know how to sin. You have learned to sin, and I'd venture to say that you're good at it. It's like riding a bike in that way. You may go years without riding a bike, but if you have learned to do it many years ago, you could get on a bike today and ride it. So you're a bike-rider, even if you haven't owned a bicycle in years.

We've all grown up in this world trying to figure out how much we can get away with. As Paul said in Romans 3:10, "There is none righteous, no, not one." Paul would go on, in Romans 3, to quote passages from the Old Testament describing the corrupt nature of humanity, saying, for example, in verse 13, "With their tongues they have practiced deceit." Some have had more practice than others, but we've all had more than enough.

You've learned early and well how to lie. You've learned how to deceive, mislead, misdirect, and generally avoid having to tell the truth. You've acquired all kinds of other sin-related skills over the years as well. You don't unlearn these. You get rusty without practice, but you could always go back to lying and cheating and all manner of sin, and in a little while you would be back to form.

You're also a sinner in another sense: you're not better than anybody else. God doesn't give you His sanctifying grace so that you can look down on others. He gives you grace because you need it just as much as anyone.

Grace is for Sinners

You are a saint, but there is a certain sense (which I have tried to clarify above) in which you are still a sinner. Understand and accept this about yourself, and you will soon understand that you need never go back to walking according to the ways of this world and fulfilling the lusts of the flesh.

Also, you will never trust yourself and you will never think that you have the resources in yourself to live the kind of life that is pleasing to God. This is a good lesson to remember.

You will never think that your flesh doesn't stink. It does stink, because it's under the decree of death, it's subject to the law of sin and death. But at least you know it stinks and you will not walk according to the flesh because if you do, your words and deeds will stink like flesh.

You are still a sinner in the sense that you are still utterly dependent upon the grace of God and are less than nothing without it. This is a good lesson to remember.

Holiness is a gift of God's grace given to sinners for Jesus' sake. When you no longer think of yourself as a sinner in the sense defined above, holiness will seem less like a gift and more like a possession. If it was your possession, however, you could control it, put it on display, and maybe even dispense it out to others, but you can't. In fact, you can't even hold on to it by yourself. God not only gives it to you, He keeps it for you. Otherwise, you would lose it in a matter of days, if not hours.

Understanding that you're a sinner means simply recognizing that it's not your holiness. It's His. It's His holiness that makes you a saint. He will not take it away from you, but it will always be His.

He is more than generous with His holiness and righteousness, anyway. Why would you want your own?

Being a crucified sinner is glorious. So is being a *forgiven* sinner. The quickest way to stray from the source of divine, life-changing, New Testament power is to take forgiveness for granted. Acknowledging that you are a sinner means

appreciating His forgiveness. Even if you can't think of anything you've done wrong recently, you're not defined by your actions, you're defined by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The cross of Christ has identified you as a sinner; His resurrection has identified you as a saint. Live with that identity until He comes back for you. It may be mystifying and hard to explain, but it's what He did. It's who you are for now, until He is revealed to the world and you are revealed with Him.

What About Trying?

One more thing. The New Testament has a lot to say about striving for and pursuing holiness, a lot to say about working hard and fighting the fight of faith. What does all of this mean in light of the fact that holiness is a free gift from God? Do we still have to work for it?

I know I do. As much as God's righteousness and holiness are free gifts, they simply do not fit into this world of flesh. Furthermore, they're not welcome here, for they spell the end of this world. The flesh is going to fight to reject that gift, so the struggle comes as no surprise. (But neither, for that matter, does the victory.)

I still strive, but not to get better, and not to change who I am. I don't need to change who I am anymore, and I can't do anything about that anyway. It's amazing how different striving becomes when I take that out of the equation.

I strive to experience as much of the character of Jesus Christ as I can. I don't strive to be a kind person, for example, I strive to experience the kindness of Jesus in my life, to get a good strong taste of it. It's the same with every other virtue and fruit of the Spirit. If you want to get to know Him, do everything you can to be like Him.

We have been chosen to be conformed to the image of Christ. We get to be like Jesus. How is that not worth fighting for?

If somebody told you that you had to be perfect in order to be like Jesus you wouldn't even try. But what if I told you that He will clothe your feeble attempts at patience with His patience, that He will be your self-control when you exercise self-control? Would you get upset and say, "You mean I still have to try?!"

Proverbs 28:4 says, "Those who forsake the law praise the wicked, but those who keep the law strive against them" (ESV). To live in this world means to either strive against wickedness or yield to it. Everything you do is part of a greater struggle, a cosmic battle of good versus evil. *Everything* you do is part of that. Proverbs doesn't say that only those who keep the big rules strive against evil, but those who keep the law, including the small stuff. Doing the right thing

is always a struggle against evil, even when it means following the little rules that nobody else takes seriously.

Since you're free from the need to get better, you're free to strive to know Jesus better, to experience His presence more, and to resist the influence of evil. And you are not on your own in anything you do. Not only is God with you, but you are a part of a family of saints. Your struggle is our struggle.

Fight the fight of faith because you *get* to. You have been privileged to share in an epic, world-wide, millenia-spanning, all-out war of good versus evil, and every little effort you make towards doing good instead of evil is part of that story. It's part of a bigger picture and a more glorious victory.

May God's grace be with you in Jesus Christ.

With love,

Joshua Nickel (joshuanickel.com)