

“THE GAME CHANGER”

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

Introductory Remarks — This past year I had the opportunity to share with a number of you some of the significant things God has been teaching me with regard to my spiritual journey. Though the truths were not new in the sense that I never embraced them, they were new in the sense that I was now experiencing them in a far deeper and more profound way. Due to the nature of these revelations, I felt it necessary to be more definitive with my thoughts and put them down in writing (now my favorite pastime). One such truth is the fact that “*God really loves us*” — as human beings, that is the most profound truth we can ever know, yet we are all only growing in our understanding and appreciation of that truth. *If we fully believed that God really loved us*, the resultant effect would be so transformational we would never doubt or worry or complain again, and we would find ourselves living on a spiritual plane no human being has experienced since Adam. The truth of the matter is all of us as believers are *growing* in our understanding of the magnitude of God’s love — the fullness of which will not be realized until we get to heaven. Though this particular truth (that God really loves us) continues to significantly impact my life, there is another related truth that has totally revolutionized my thinking and faith, and it is this: “*The admission that I am desperately sinful, completely lacking of any good thing.*” I find it strange that “this particular truth” does not seem to resonate as much in the minds of believers — it is not that they disagree with it (after all, Scripture clearly teaches it and every human being obviously experiences it), but they really don’t know what to do with it, or how to practically process it theologically — you can almost hear them questioning whether or not this is just some *forensic truth* that they need to affirm, and then continue living the faith life as best they can?... or whether this is an *immensely practical truth* that they can expect to completely revolutionize their faith?” The fact is, this is an **EXTREMELY PRACTICAL TRUTH**, when once affirmed, will totally revolutionize one’s faith!

With that said, I would like to encourage you to carefully work your way through this study.

Due to the fact this subject raises so many questions, and presents so many challenges, I found it necessary to approach it from a number of different perspectives. The truth of the matter is, the implications of this truth are so life-changing, it is very important that the reader carefully and prayerfully consider the many ramifications of it for his/her life. Throughout the study I share a number of random thoughts on the subject — my prayer is that you will not find my rambling to be too big a distraction, but that you will find the various arguments helpful with regard to your own spiritual journey. The reason I have titled this study “**The Game Changer**,” is because that indeed is what it is — this truth will radically change your life without damaging your psyche or making you wish that you had never even heard this stuff. The fact is, this is “*the most liberating truth*” (outside of knowing that God really loves me) that has been a part of my Christian experience. Though I knew this truth, as no doubt many of you do, and have preached it many times, I obviously did not fully embrace it to the degree that I do today. Let me make one more introductory statement before starting the study — *I believe this truth will totally set you free from the prison of your flesh, and bring a degree of liberation to your life that [in all probability] has not yet been your experience.* I realize that may not seem possible to you at this point, but that indeed is the reality. This truth indeed is a **Game Changer!**

The “Game Changer” in the Christian life is found when we discover and admit the truth that there is “absolutely nothing good in our flesh” — and that “God loves us anyway!”

And it has absolutely nothing to do with trying to believe something that we really have a difficult time believing. This truth is not just some *forensic truth* that requires a leap of faith, but the *strongest voice of reality in the soul*. When we really accept this truth, it delivers us from ever looking for “any good” in us, and from being “disappointed” when we don’t find any good there. This is the “*Game Changing Lesson*” we learn from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans. In it he expands upon the truth that though he was a dedicated Christian, he continually fell short of God’s absolute moral standards (Romans 7). The fact that he was “*fleshly*” (carnal) produced a conflict in his soul that mystified him, as it does all believers. He discovered that he could not do the things that he really wanted to do (*doing right*); rather, he found himself doing the things he actually did not want to do (*doing wrong*). The lesson he learned is this — “*there was nothing good in his flesh*” (Rom 7:18); by the way, the word “good” is emphatic in that statement. It is this proclamation by Paul that is the essence of this study. When Paul was confronted with the thoroughness of his sinful condition, he felt miserable... he mourned his wretchedness... and he cried out for deliverance (7:24).

The context of Romans 7 indicates that Paul learned this truth by “painful experience.”

Ultimately Paul concluded that *in spite of the fact that he was a regenerate man, he was still only a man made of flesh* — and as *flesh*, man is terribly weak (Mt 26:41; Rom 6:9) — *and that apart from divine empowerment he was completely powerless to do the will of God*. Paul discovered that there was a sense in which he was still in bondage to his sin disposition (his flesh), and that it would continue to accompany him throughout his entire earthly life. It should be noted, if the believer’s *sin disposition* were not in him, then the struggle between the Holy Spirit and the flesh would not take place (Gal 5:17). Furthermore, Paul makes it very clear in this passage that “*his sin disposition was an extremely active and powerful force in his life*” — even though he hated the fact that it was still in him, and that it continually tried to usurp control of him against his will, *that was the reality that he had to finally accept*. Every honest Christian is aware that his life falls far short of God’s perfect standard of righteousness, and that he falls back into sin with disturbing frequency. Though believers are no longer *absolute slaves of sin* (Rom 6:16-22), they are still subject to its deceit and are still attracted by its many allurements. The fact is that lingering part of our unredeemed humanness (our flesh) is still totally sinful and, as such, is at war against that part of us that is new and redeemed (Rom 7:23; Gal 5:17). Sin is so powerful, even in the redeemed, that it hangs on and contaminates our life and frustrates our inner desire to obey the will of God. This condition produces in every believer’s life a *spirit of humble contrition*, that cries out for help (just as it did in Paul’s life), “Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (Rom 7:24).

Thus the Apostle Paul exclaimed to the church at Rome, “In me dwelleth no good thing.”

Obviously, that is a profound statement, and it completely agrees with the words of Jesus to the rich young ruler, “*No one is good except God alone*” (Lk 18:19). If that indeed is a description of our humanity as believers, then it is a profound truth that needs to be strongly affirmed, and not ignored. Down through the centuries, theologians have naturally asked these questions — “How bad is man?” and “How bad is sin?” Some believe man is only “*slightly flawed*,” that he is just “sick;” thus causing observers to differ over how sick he is: acutely, gravely, critically, mortally. The Bible says, however, that man is “spiritually dead” (Eph 2:1) — that he is “*totally flawed*.” Scripture tells us that the fall of man in the garden affected every part of him — *his spirit died*; that is, his communion and fellowship with God was broken... *his soul died*; he began to lie and

cheat and kill... *and his body eventually died*; God told him, “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). In Rom 3:10-12, Paul quotes Psalm 14 when describing man’s spiritual condition:

1. “No one is righteous, not one,” that is the essence of the moral side of every human being. Luther said, “We are *wholly* given over to sin;” we are *fully* enslaved to sin (Rom 6:6, 17, 20).
2. “No one understands,” sin has polluted our intellect and our spiritual understanding.
3. “No one seeks for God,” this is the area of our will – we have no desire to come to God; instead we make gods of our own making, and look to them to satisfy our longings (things such as careers, possessions, success, position, education, admiration, people, travel, etc.).

What does “sin” really look like in the heart of man? According to Scripture, man is totally corrupt, and has placed his own interests above all other interests; hence, through and through, man is a “*self-centered creature*.” His entire life is oriented toward himself – *he loves himself*; as such, God commands him to “*love others*” (Mt 22:39). The sum of all the commandments is “love;” thus sin in its nature is egotistical and selfish; self replaces God as the thing most prized (Rom 15:3; 1 Cor 13:5; 2 Tim 3:1-2; 2 Th 2:3-4); by the way, “*overt self love*” is one of the signs of the last days (2 Tim 3:2). Ultimately, men have their own *self-interests* at stake in everything they do — in some way, their intent is always to satisfy and gratify themselves. As a result of man’s natural self-orientation, Paul writes, “Don’t merely look out after your own personal interests, but also look after the *interests of others*” (Phil 2:4). Since our number one concern is “*us*,” everything we do in life is to make us feel good about ourselves and gain the approval of others; it is natural to want others to “*like us*” (that’s the essence of “flesh”), so we behave in ways that elicit favorable responses from them. When people don’t like us, or respond negatively toward us, it offends us and injures us, and causes us to become defensive, and jealous or angry. Why? because our own “self interests” have been impinged. By the way, even the so-called “good people” in this world respond this way – they’re just more socially disciplined in how they express their displeasure; the fact is *by “nature” we are all totally sinful and self-centered*. Scripture calls it “*the flesh*.”

Jeremiah said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9; Mk 7:21; Rom 1:21; 7:11; Eph 4:22; Ecc 9:3). Man’s heart is not only deceitful, it is desperately wicked and corrupt to the core. There is no part of man that is left untouched by sin: our minds, our wills, our affections, our emotions, our conduct, our speech, our character, and our bodies have all been effected by evil — all of our parts and passions have been touched and affected by sin... as such, we speak sinful words, desire sinful things, do sinful deeds, and think sinful thoughts. *The problem with sin is that it is rooted in the core of our being* — we have been stained by sin and are flawed by its effect upon us; *it fully permeates our heart*. Jesus said, “From within, out of the heart, proceed evil thoughts and every form of sin and deceit; all evil things proceed from within the heart of man” (Mark 7:21-23). *Sin penetrates every aspect of our being so that everything we do is tainted by sin; even our best works are motivated and guided in some measure by the principles of a sinful heart, and are marred by sin; even our holy things have the smell of evil*. We evaluate **good deeds** from a human perspective, and measure them against a human standard; therefore, when people are “*relatively good*” (in comparison with others) they believe they possess a degree of inherent goodness. God, however, looks at the heart and the motives that lie behind their actions; as such, He sees all of them tainted with sin. Isaiah said, “*Our works are as filthy rags before God*” (Is 64:6). The apostle Paul himself said, “I do not have the capacity to judge and examine myself; ultimately, the Lord is the one who

examines me” (1 Cor 4:3-4). Man is not capable of making such judgments, because he is not able to fully evaluate the thoughts and intentions of his heart (Heb 4:12-13). Reflect upon the words of **Matthew Henry** in his commentary on *Jeremiah* —

There is that wickedness in our hearts which we ourselves are not aware of and do not suspect to be there; nay it is a common mistake among the children of men to think that their own hearts... are a great deal better than they really are. The heart, the conscience of man, in his corrupt and fallen state, is deceitful above all things. It is subtle and false.... It calls evil good and good evil.... When men say in their hearts that there is no God, or He does not see, or He will not require, or they shall have peace though they go on [in their sin]; in these the heart is deceitful. It cheats men into their own ruin... they are self-deceivers, self-destroyers. Herein the heart is desperately wicked; it is deadly; it is desperate.... [It’s conscience] is the mother of falsehood and a ringleader in the delusion. What will become of a man if that [which is in him] gives a false light, if God’s deputy in the soul, that is entrusted to support his interests, betrays him? Such is the deceitfulness of the heart that we may truly say — “Who can know it?” (Jer 17:9). Who can describe how bad the heart is? (Henry, Vol. IV, pp. 519-520).

The response by some is to argue that this is the condition of the “unbeliever’s heart,” not the “believer’s heart.” That argument, however, is quickly refuted by looking at what Scripture has to say on the subject. Here are just a few passages in chronological order that address the problem of the human heart; many of the following specifically address the believer’s flesh —

Gen 2:17 – The result of the fall in the Garden was death — total corruption.

Gen 6:5 – The thoughts of man’s heart are continually evil.

Job 15:14 – What is man that he should be pure?

Ps 51:5 – We were brought forth in iniquity, and conceived in sin.

Ps 58:3 – We are estranged from the womb.

Ecc 1:14 – All our works are vanity.

Is 64:6 – All our deeds are like filthy rags.

Luke 18:19 – No one is good except God alone.

John 3:19 – The hearts of men love darkness because they are evil.

Rom 3:10-12 – There is none who does good, not one.

Rom 3:23 – All of us are sinners.

Rom 6:6 – Our flesh is enslaved to sin.

Rom 7:14 – Our flesh is in bondage to sin.

Rom 7:17 – Sin dwells in us.

Rom 7:18 – Nothing good dwells in our flesh.

Rom 7:20 – Sin dwells in us.

Rom 7:21 – Evil is present in us.

Rom 7:23 – Our flesh is captive to the law of sin.

Rom 7:24 – We are wretched to the core.

Rom 7:25 – Our flesh serves the law of sin.

Rom 8:7 – Our flesh is hostile toward God.

Eph 4:17 – Our flesh is darkened in its understanding, excluded from the life of God.

Gal 5:17 – Our flesh sets its desires against the Spirit.

Jam 3:2 – We all stumble in many ways

1 Jn 1:8 – Our nature is sinful.

1 Jn 1:10 – We all commit acts of sin.

Because the issue of “our sinfulness” is so multi-faceted, it is necessary to approach the subject from several directions, so bear with me as we uncover its many aspects. One of the critical issues for the believer is that *“he needs to admit”* that he is fully corrupt and sinful to the core... and that he agrees with the words of Paul, *“In me dwelleth no good thing.”* For me that was a monumental shift in my thinking. Though I was not blindly ignorant of my shortcomings and foibles — *they were painfully evident* — nevertheless, as I look back I can now see that I was hanging on (in some measure) to the rope of my own goodness (be it my devotional life, my continued commitment to the work of ministry, my faithfulness in giving, or my relatively kind deeds), and desperately wanting to think that there was at least an ounce of goodness in me that was pleasing to God (God forbid that my entire life was displeasing to Him!)... and that, hopefully, others were seeing some measure of good in me as well — after all, as a man of the cloth, I’m supposed to be a shining light for Christ! Here’s the paradox — I was always aware that “sin” was firmly planted in my soul (only an idiot would have denied that), yet no matter how hard I tried to expunge it and slay it, it never ceased to lose its power or go away. So in that respect I accepted the fact that I was still sinful (perplexing as it was) — **“but it really bothered me that that indeed was the case”** (that was the issue that really plagued me). I felt an incessant need to *“be reasonably good”* in some measure (though not fully understanding it), that God might be pleased with me to some degree; after all, I did not want to grieve Him, quench Him, or incur His scourging hand (Eph 4:30; 1 Th 5:19; Heb 12:6; Ps 119:75).

By the way, the day we accepted Christ none of us believed there was “nothing good in us” (note the double-negative in that sentence) — that was something that we needed to *“learn.”* Though many of us came to Christ because we had really made a mess of our lives, none of us knew the depth of our problem — that’s one of the reasons many believers find it so difficult to give their testimony; they just have a difficult time admitting that they were (are) totally sinful people; their proud hearts are still crying out for a reasonable degree of respect. By the way, it took years for the apostle Paul to learn how truly sinful he was after he was saved (Rom 7; 2 Cor 12: 7-10; Gal 1:15-19; 2:1-2; Phil 4:11), and he was the greatest theologian who ever lived (he penned the majority of the NT epistles). Paul teaches us in his letter to the Ephesians that “our old self” (our flesh) *is in a state of continual degeneration... that it is progressively getting worse and worse* (not better and better as many believers think). Our flesh, at this very moment, is actually “in a state of being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit” (Eph 4:22) — in the NT language of Greek, that verb is in the “present tense,” meaning this is a *process* that is continually ongoing; furthermore, that verb is in the “passive voice,” meaning that outward forces (not we ourselves) are causing this to occur and that there is nothing we can do stop this degeneration — so here is the message: **our flesh is increasingly manifesting itself for what it is — totally sinful.** By the way, each of us should be able to attest to that — none of us are as “good” today (relatively speaking) as we were when we were little children; when we were young there was actually a degree of innocence in us (compared to our condition today), but the older we have become the more *“visibly corrupt”* our sinful nature has become. Though we were *conceived in sin*, the manifestations of that condition become more and more apparent the older we get.

When we were young in the faith, we were inclined to think that “we were really not that bad” — “Oh,” we reasoned, “we may have screwed up a lot, but we could have been a lot worse than we really were.” Only by walking with God for a significant period of time (i.e., maturing in the faith) do we come to that point where we see how deceitful our hearts are and how depraved the core of our being really is. When we are younger in the faith we are still being ruled in large

part by a “proud heart” that wants to think that it is better than it really is — it argues something like this: “I may be sinful, but I’m not completely sinful; there are a lot of terribly sinful people in the world that are a whole lot worse than I am” (notice the “relativity” of that argument?). The vast majority of Christians in the world today would probably echo that sentiment. So what are the reasons we resist believing and admitting that we are totally sinful?

1. Our experiences — We haven’t as yet “seen” how wretched and sinful we really are; in short, we haven’t yet been tested enough in the furnace of affliction (which reveals our condition).
2. Our pride — We aren’t about to go around and publicly admit that we are grossly sinful; after all, what would people think if we admitted to being “really sinful”? People would probably think we had gone off the deep end with this “faith thing,” or that we are perverted in some way (which of course we are not!). The issue here is this — our proud hearts are simply begging for a reasonable degree of respect; we just can’t accept the fact that we are radical, despicable sinners. By the way, one of the problems here is our “definition of sin” — if we think of sin as only that which is “overtly evil” (murder, theft, lying, adultery, etc.), then we may have a case; but Scripture defines sin as “that which is not of faith” (Rom 14:23), and all of us stumble badly in this regard because God is not the primary consideration in all of our thoughts and actions — “we” are.
3. Our hearts are deceived — We don’t see things as they really are because our “hard drive” (our heart) is flawed; the software that was downloaded into us in our mother’s womb is completely messed up... as such, it misinforms, misdirects, misconstrues, and misleads us at every juncture of life; in short, it always distorts the truth and is never accurate.
4. Our standard for judging — Rather than comparing ourselves with “other people” (which is a very low standard), we are to compare ourselves with a “Holy God” (which is a standard of absolute perfection); only then do we recognize how sinful we really are.

Let me comment further on our “proud hearts” — The truth of the matter is we desperately want to feel good about ourselves, and there is not much we won’t do in order to accomplish that. Though many of us have lived a lifetime of feeling like we don’t measure up in some way, which can produce deep psychological and emotional pain (especially if we think we are supposed to measure up and we don’t), we do everything we can to make ourselves better people internally, socially, physically, and outwardly, and desperately seek the approval of others and God (so that we will feel better about ourselves)... we have won a few battles along the way (or so we think) and have worked way too hard to surrender the fight at this point. Our thinking is that we just need to keep up the good fight, and eventually we’ll get there. Sound familiar? That is the essence of modern psychology (“you must feel good about yourself to become psychologically healthy”). The worldly orientation is totally toward “self.” By the way, it was into just such a world that Jesus came telling us to “deny self and follow Him.” And what did Jesus model? He lived for the Father and for fallen man — not for Himself. He wasn’t into wanting to feel better about Himself; His whole orientation was outward, not inward. He was totally committed to doing His Father’s will, and completely confident in His Father’s love for Him; He never even entertained the idea that His Father didn’t love Him. Jesus had a completely SELFLESS orientation in life... and if anyone had a right to be SELFISH, it was Him... but that did not define Him.

As human beings we differ from Christ in that we “inhabit sinful flesh;” as a result nothing good dwells in us... whereas only good dwells in Christ. So here we are, sinful humanity concentrating exclusively on “*ourselves*,” and the God of heaven concentrating on “*others*.” What a contrast! When we become children of God, He instructs us to turn from a “self-orientation” to a “God/others-orientation,” *but we are so firmly entrenched in the “self-life” and preoccupied with our own selfish desires that we hardly even hear what He is telling us*. Interestingly enough, we employ the same debased “self-centered strategy” to our spiritual lives: we keep on trying to *make ourselves more acceptable to God, that He would be pleased with us* — life is all about *us*. Though we admit to often blowing it, for some reason we want to believe that we’re still slowly making progress and inching our way up the ladder (which is delusional). We so desperately want God’s approval and His affection that we keep our hand to the plow and our eyes on the goal, in hopes that we will one day get there, and then hear those wonderful words from God, “I’m really proud of you! Well done, good and faithful servant!” If this describes you, you are going down the wrong road and you are focusing on the wrong thing — take your eyes off *yourself* and put them on *Christ* — you are simply spinning your wheels spiritually. By the way, do you really think down deep that this is the “*abundant life*” to which God has called you?

Jesus said, “My yoke is easy, and My load is light” (Mt 11:30); hence, we are not to be trudging wearily through life, burdened with the responsibility of “making ourselves good enough”... and constantly feeling defeated and discouraged with our performance. God clearly states in His Word that He wants us to experience “His joy” in life — not feelings of guilt because we’re not good enough, or that our efforts are paltry and unacceptable; that only leads to disillusionment, discouragement and despair. So, what is the secret of getting off this treadmill and actually making spiritual progress and enjoying our relationship with Christ? Paul’s “*weary struggle*” should provide us with the answer — He made a valiant effort at trying to “conform himself” to the law of God that he might be a better person and be more pleasing to God (remember, he was a Spirit-filled believer); but try though as he may, he failed miserably (Rom 7:15, 19, 24). Alas, he finally came to the realization that God had not condemned him to a “*hopeless life of penal servitude*” (Rom 8:1), that he had been *set free* from the law of sin and death (Rom 8:2) through the cross of Christ... so trying to “measure up” by one’s own inherent [apparent] goodness is ludicrous; because, first and foremost, we do not possess the inherent goodness to do so! We are *totally sinful*! It is like trying to “long jump” the Grand Canyon! Our silly efforts are absurd! We are not even close to being able to accomplish such a feat. Furthermore, God never asked us to attempt it.

Thus, Paul was made aware of the truth that “in him dwelled no good thing” (Rom 7:18), and the resultant effect was not that this was “*discouraging news*,” but that it was “*liberating news!*” Up until this point Paul had lived with the understanding that as a believer he needed to “*be better!*” Which is basically the same conclusion that all believers come to! So we all set out to make ourselves better! But guess what? We never get better! It is only after a sincere effort to “*improve our stock*” that we realize that our stock is not going up! The truth of the matter is it is actually getting worse! Paul finally came to the conclusion that he was going down the wrong road — he no longer needed to try to “improve his stock with God!” or “make himself better so that God would love him!” The truth of the matter is (listen very carefully!) God had saved him as a SINNER — not as a GOOD MAN — and though he had become a *new creation in Christ*, he still inhabited “*sinful flesh*” (that had not changed; God had not extricated him from his flesh); furthermore, that part of him that he now found very distasteful would accompany him all the

way through life... nevertheless, as a believer in Christ, he was now a “brand new creation” (2 Cor 5:17) — though his old habits and evil thoughts were still resident within him, he was now a different person... he was “born again”... he now possessed “new life”... he had now been restored by Christ to ultimately become that person God originally created him to be (Gen 1:26; 1 Cor 15:45-49)... his life had now been changed; he was no longer living for himself, but for Christ (Gal 2:20; Phil 1:21)... old things had passed away, all things had become new — he was now in the process of “being transformed into the image of Christ” (2 Cor 3:18; 5:17). Had he “arrived” yet? No, not even close (Phil 3:10-14), but that certain future reality was the wonderful hope that lay before Him. So Paul was now able to look at and evaluate this world through the eyes of faith (2 Cor 5:16). Because of the propitiatory work of Christ on the cross, God had reconciled him to Himself — it had nothing whatsoever to do with anything he did; he had been saved only by the GRACE of GOD (1 Cor 15: 9-10; Gal 1:15; Eph 1:7; 2:8-9; 3:8; 4:7), and it was absolutely foolish to think that he could now somehow offer some subsequent work to make himself better or enhance his position with God. It should be noted — all our efforts at this point only “detract from the work of Christ!” Think about that! We have absolutely nothing to bring to the table!!!

Let’s continue to reflect upon the concept that we are sinful to the core. When we were first introduced to the person of Christ we acknowledged our sinfulness, and our need of a Savior. So when we accepted Christ as our Savior, what changed? According to the Word, we were “born again!” we became a “new creation!” we were “forgiven!” and we became “children of God!” But nowhere are we told that we became “sinless” or “less sinful than we were” — Christ had paid the penalty for our sins, and by the power of the Holy Spirit “we spiritually participated” in His death and resurrection when “He baptized us (placed us) into Christ;” thus, when Christ died, we died with Him, and when Christ was raised, we were raised with Him — the resultant effect was the work of Christ was appropriated to us, thus enabling us to walk in newness of life (Rom 6: 3-11). As such, writes Paul, “We should no longer let sin reign in our mortal bodies that we should obey its lusts” (Rom 6:12); obviously, letting sin reign is a very distinct possibility, and that is the war in our soul that we must fight every day. Paul said “his sinful flesh” still remained in him (even though he was a believer) and that “it was still totally sinful” (Rom 7:18). It was only when he “fully and humbly acknowledged the pervasiveness of his sinful flesh” that he was “set free” from the bondage of his flesh (Rom 7:24-25) — at that point he finally realized that “he was no longer condemned to a life of penal servitude” (Rom 8:1) — such thinking was all of Satan and his flesh. Remember, when we “humble ourselves” before God and admit the severity of our condition (that we are totally sinful), we become recipients of “more grace” (Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5), and it is only by His grace that we are able to walk in newness of life. The Apostle Peter tells us that we are to “grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). More on that later...

The nature of “our flesh” is such that it cannot be relied upon to accurately define reality. It consistently misinforms, misdirects, misconstrues, misleads and always distorts the truth. The wisest man whoever lived (King Solomon) said, “There is a way which seems right to man but its end is the way of death” (Prv 14:12). Conversely, Jeremiah said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick” (Jer 17:9). If that indeed is the case, how can we trust it to guide us in the truth? We can’t. The truth of the matter is the fall was so evasive that it polluted our entire being... so much so that our “fallen minds” are totally unreliable. We are so screwed up in our thinking that when we hear that God loves us, we [naturally] conclude that He loves us because we are somehow lovely or worthy of it! Which is ludicrous, but that is how screwed up our flesh is... it continually lies to us... and because it is so cunning and deceitful, and is resident

within us, we are continually being presented with “claims” that simply aren’t true. The truth of the matter is this: if we listen to the voice of the flesh, it will convince us of its ways — and its primary message is that God is not pleased with us... that we are not good enough for Him... that He is actually very disappointed in us... and after all He did for us at the cross, we better elevate our game and get our act together! But that message is the antithesis of what Scripture teaches! God is not angry with us! He loves us so much that He went to the cross for us (even though we were totally sinful and estranged from Him). And He is now at work in us, mercifully, tenderly and lovingly transforming us into the image of His Son (Rom 8:29-30; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 2:13). By the way, if that indeed is not the case, then we’ve got major problems... but God is at work in us!

Yet in spite of all that, we still continue to try and make ourselves “worthy of God’s love,” fearful that we are a big disappointment to Him. After all, we know we’re not worthy, and that really bothers us... therefore we try to do everything we can to improve our stock, because we just can’t believe that a Holy God is really happy with us, when we can’t even accept ourselves! Notice the shift? It is not just a matter of being accepted by God, it is also a matter of being accepted by us! Out own pride is offended! We can’t accept the reality that we are diabolical, no good, sinful wrecks! **We must feel good about ourselves, and that becomes our highest priority!** Satan has convinced us that when we don’t measure up we are losers, and that is very demoralizing and discouraging to us. By the way, Satan is the author of “discouragement” — whereas God is the author of “encouragement.” The Holy Spirit is called “The Encourager.” **And God’s acceptance of us ought to be the most encouraging news one could ever imagine!** Satan will do everything he can, however, to get us to keep our eyes on ourselves (i.e., on our performance!) and when he succeeds we become defeated and discouraged! Why? Because our performance is so poor! The author of Hebrews tells us to place our focus on Christ! (Heb 12:2). The old Scottish preacher **Robert Murray McCheyne** said, “For every look we take at ourselves, we should take ten looks at Christ.” Why? Because our focus determines our peace and joy, and such qualities are only found when we look at Christ. All a “self-focus” does is discourage us and make us miserable! Why? Because there is nothing good in us! That is the reality... even as “born again” Christians!

The Christian life itself naturally teaches us that “we are sinful through and through.” All day long (in the classroom of reality) we are reminded that we are SINFUL and naturally inclined toward evil... as such, none of us grow in our appreciation of ourselves, and somehow think, “Wow! I’m really getting good!” That’s absurd! We *want* to be good, but life teaches us that we are not good! But we are so proud we just cannot accept the fact that “there is nothing good in us” — we refuse to accept reality. Since we insist that there must be “some good in us,” we keep on trying to prove our case. And in spite of our attempts to do so, God keeps on reminding us all day long (by our miserable performance) that “there really isn’t anything good in us!” Nevertheless, we stubbornly refuse to accept that fact... our flesh simply insists on thinking better of itself, and constantly demands a level of acceptance. The important question to ask is this: “Is God disappointed or surprised by our total sinfulness?” Does that question really need to be asked? No, of course He is not disappointed! That’s the reality! By the way, God could eliminate our sinfulness at the snap of a finger if He wanted to... but that is not the economy under which He chose for us to live. Remember, He went to the cross for us because we are sinful... and one day He will totally transform us back into the image of His Son — that is the future reality! That is guaranteed! (Rom 8:29-30; Eph 1:5, 11; Phil 1:6; 1 Th 5:24; Ps 138:16). **And He has chosen to do it through the mysterious transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts while**

we still inhabit sinful flesh! (2 Cor 3:18; Phil 1:6; 2:13; Col 1:27). So none of the transforming work involves our flesh! It is all the work of Christ! And [praise be to His Name!] one day our flesh will forever be jettisoned and abandoned! **Meanwhile, it is our habitat** — sinful though it is... and we must learn to accept that fact and live in the light of that fact — humbling though it is!

Is our total sinfulness “humbling?” Absolutely!!! Thank God it is!!! God gives grace to the humble!!! And we need all the grace we can get!!! To deny the truth of our sinfulness is to cut off the channel of grace!!! (think about that!). Why would one be so proud so as to deny the truth? God simply wants us as His children to live in the light of truth (though you may not believe it yet, it is extremely liberating!). **We are sinful human beings whom God loves and whom He redeemed at the cross... He wants us to live in the light of that truth... to accept that truth... to glory in that truth** (2 Cor 12:9)... **and to glory in His goodness, mercy and love!** One of the questions that is raised in the mind of the believer is this: “Can we do anything at all that has redeeming value?” That is, “Can we do anything that has any goodness in it at all?” The answer to that is an unequivocal, “Yes!” (that answer may have surprised some of you!) — however, those things that have redeeming value (i.e., things that bear fruit unto all eternity) can only be done **in and through the person of Christ**. Jesus made it very clear the night before He went to the cross that **we can do nothing in and of ourselves** (Jn 15:5); we simply do not have the wherewithal within ourselves to bear fruit; that is something only the Spirit can do in and through us. **And that is something that He does only when we live in the light of truth — accepting our total sinfulness and fully depending upon Him in all things.** By the way, as believers, we are not to be concerned about the “fruit of our labors” (the outcome of our works) or the fruit of anybody else’s — we are to leave all of that up to God’s divine providence to do with as He will (Prv 16:1, 3, 9; Is 55:8-11; Rom 8:28; Eph 1:11) — as God’s children we are to simply abide in Him, trust Him, obey Him, and let Him take care of everything else (Jn 15:5; 21:21-22; 1 Cor 4:2; Phil 2:13). Remember, God is plenty capable of doing that which He has planned, and doesn’t need our input; so just listen to Him, believe Him, obey Him, and experience His joy and His peace... His yoke is easy and His load is light — don’t place a greater burden on your shoulders than God intended.

I am reminded of the story of a Pharisee named “Simon,” who invited Jesus to his home for dinner... and along with his many guests, a woman slipped in among them who had been a prostitute (Lk 7:36-50)... apparently she had just recently responded to Jesus’ call of repentance and had embraced Him as Messiah; He had forgiven her and set her free from her sin. Obviously she wanted to see the Lord Jesus again, and express her profound gratitude to Him for transforming her life... as she stood behind Him while He was reclining at the table, she began to weep and her tears wet His feet... so she wiped them with her hair, and proceeded to anoint them with a costly perfume she brought with her. **Spontaneous, unself-conscious worship and adoration flowed out of this broken, contrite, forgiven woman.** In contrast, the host of the dinner had not even shown Jesus the common courtesies that were due Him as “his guest” — instead, Simon was incensed by the response of the woman; in his self-righteous state of mind he felt the woman’s behavior was utterly inappropriate. Jesus proceeded to tell a story about two men who owed a debt to a moneylender: one owed a great amount, and the other a considerably smaller amount. Jesus asked, “Which one of them will love the moneylender more?” Simon responded rightly by saying, “The one who was forgiven the bigger debt.” Jesus then applied that story to what had just happened that evening at dinner — **the woman’s actions had revealed her immense gratitude for His forgiveness; whereas Simon’s actions had not.** It wasn’t that Simon’s need for forgiveness was any less than the woman’s (pride is actually a far worse sin); the truth of the matter is, in

blind arrogance, he simply did not realize how great a sinner he was, or how much he needed forgiveness. Jesus said, “He who is forgiven much, loves much; and he who is forgiven little loves little” (Lk 7:47). The facts are, we are all “totally sinful,” and unless we come to the realization of that fact, our appreciation for God and His forgiveness will be minimal (because our eyes will still be on us). Simon was not able to express the kind of worship and love that the woman had lavished upon Jesus, because he still saw himself as essentially a good man; remember he was a “Pharisee” (one of the most humanly good people in the entire world!). The worst kind of sinner in God’s eyes is one who “thinks and pretends that he is truly good;” apparently the lack of any humbling earthy foibles in the end is what ultimately dooms such a person (their focus is simply on certain outward behaviors; thus they actually buy into their own goodness). Therefore, it is better to have a sensual weakness that is humbling, than to march your proud soul into hell! Why is a “proud heart” so blind to its sinfulness? Well, what keeps people from following God is that, in their hearts, they have placed the “highest of values” on something or someone that is not God (for Simon it was himself and his own achievements) — that is the essence of “idolatry.”

Isn’t it amazing how our own responses to the Lord often resemble Simon’s more than the woman’s? Why does the cold, unbroken indifference of our own hearts toward the Savior not grieve us more? The truth is extravagant love and devotion to God only pours forth from broken and contrite hearts; i.e., from hearts that recognize the depths of their sinfulness and the surpassing greatness of God’s grace. The woman “loved much because she had been forgiven much” (Lk 7:47) — to not identify with the woman in this story is to have a “proud heart” and not affirm the depths of one’s depravity; it is to listen to the diabolical voice of one’s flesh, rather than to the voice of God’s Spirit. Notice the effect this woman’s acknowledgement of her total sinfulness had on her worship and admiration for the Savior — it was profoundly heightened. When we insist on hanging on to some degree of our own goodness it effects the way we view God and the way we respond to Him. If God’s gracious love for us is not the most preeminent thought in our mind, then our own goodness will be, and our heart will be lacking in gratitude to God.

Another aspect that needs to be addressed is the “deep sense of guilt” that some believers live with, because of their inherent sinfulness. They think they should possess an “inherent goodness” now that they are believers, but that is not the case; as such, the sinfulness of their flesh leaves them deeply depressed and troubled in their spirit, and Satan beats them up over it. Much of the believer’s guilt is rooted in ignorance over what Scripture really teaches, which is the “grid” through which we are to process our thoughts and convictions. The nature of one’s guilt can be a confusing issue to believers; as such, they need to carefully differentiate between true guilt and false guilt. True guilt is the uncomfortable, inner awareness that we have violated God’s moral law — such guilt is produced partly by the conviction of the Holy Spirit and partly by our own conscience (more on that in the next paragraph). False guilt is feeling guilty for something that God and His Word do not condemn. Christians from legalistic churches often express feelings of guilt for things that the Bible does not condemn; for instance, they may feel guilty for being tempted, which is obviously not a sin; even Christ was tempted, yet did not sin (Heb 4:15). Whereas true guilt results from divine judgment, false guilt is the result of the judgments of men. Once again, what is important here is that believers process everything through the grid of Scripture, and affirm what it teaches over and over again until its truths peacefully settle in their hearts. A part of each believer’s responsibility is that of growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Pet 3:18)... but one obviously cannot grow if he neglects the study of the Word; be it from the pulpit, small group study, or one’s own personal study (Acts 17:11; 1 Pet 2:2).

Regarding the issue of the believer's "conscience" — Doctors Frank Minirth and Paul Meier, in their textbook *"Introduction to Psychology and Counseling"* (Baker Book House, 1982, pp. 155-157) tell us that the conscience is molded by numerous influences in our environment — what we learn as young children from our parents, our church, the Bible, our friends, our teachers and society all have a part in developing our conscience. For example, parents who *excessively* blame, condemn, judge and accuse their children when they fail to meet their expectations, cause them to grow up with a warped idea of what appropriate biblical standards are. Unforgiving parents who punish *excessively* increase guilt... whereas, adequate and proper punishment given in love and with explanation removes guilt. When children grow up convinced that anything short of perfection is failure, they grow up feeling guilty and inferior, and as adults they suffer from neurotic or false guilt, low self-esteem, insecurity, and a self-depreciatory outlook on everything they do — they then blame themselves and this leads to anger turned inward and deep feelings of unworthiness. *Every Christian needs to know that he has no right to condemn himself; only God has that right, therefore he should make every effort to leave judging and condemnation to God.* For individuals who really struggle with deep feelings of guilt and inferiority, they should study Psalms 51, 130, 139 & 145 and affirm the many realities they teach over and over again. If the love & forgiveness of God does not triumph over a troubled heart, guilt & depression will.

Other issues that many believers suffer from is that of "low self-esteem & depression."

As human beings we are naturally inclined to "focus on our own performance," because we desperately want to feel good about ourselves. The problem we encounter when we focus on "our performance," is that our eyes are no longer on Christ, the One who sets us free to live to the praise of His glory (Heb 12:2)... rather our eyes are focused on ourselves, and when that is our focus, we greatly increase the likelihood of developing dysfunctional personalities and psychological disorders (depression, anxiety disorders, psychotic illnesses, etc.). **Dr. Karl Menninger**, the world's preeminent psychiatrist during the 20th century, and founder of the largest psychiatric training center in the world (the *Veterans Administration Hospital* in Topeka, Kansas)... he believed it was critical that people suffering from psychological problems get their focus off of themselves and onto something or someone else, because as he discovered that being self-absorbed and obsessed with oneself was the cause of nearly every psychological problem. Dr. Menninger discovered that when people turned their attention toward others to help meet their needs, their own psychological problems essentially vanished overnight! Paul's admonition to the Philippians is strikingly similar — *"Do nothing from selfishness... do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but look out for the interests of others. Have this same attitude in yourselves which was in Christ Jesus"* (Phil 2:3-5). Jesus had an "others-orientation" in life, and He knew great joy, peace and fulfillment; whereas those Christians who refuse to abandon their "self-orientation," they struggle with hardness of heart, guilt and discouragement. A "self focus" destroys one's peace and joy, but an "others focus" magnifies one's peace and joy.

The root problem for all of us in life is "our flesh." Though it does not necessarily manifest itself in the same way in everyone's life, it does result in crippling people spiritually, and subjecting them to a state of bondage. The big step for me personally was that of "fully accepting my sinfulness and corruptness," and not having it destroy me or humiliate me and leave me discouraged and in a state of despair. What I discovered was that *my fears were unwarranted, and it was extremely liberating!* I found I was no longer on any kind of performance treadmill. Though my sin disposition (my flesh) would obviously continue to tempt me with its array of "fleshly thoughts," that was no longer the painful ordeal that it formerly was — what can one

possibly expect from the flesh? Good thoughts? Of course not. The flesh is the flesh... it is rotten to the core... Jesus died to deliver us from it, and one day, it will no longer accompany us in life... but until we are ushered into eternity, it is a part of the package that we must accept and learn to live with. Obviously if I had my druthers, I would choose not to have it (who would?); but none of us were given a choice in that matter. By the way, God knows best...

Is our flesh humbling? Absolutely... but “humility” results in our receiving more grace!

From a human perspective, it is astoundingly incredible that God chose to let “*our flesh*” remain with us throughout our entire earthly journey... but God obviously has far more wisdom than we do, so we can assume that a lot of *good* comes from our having to deal with it. When we accept the fullness of our sinfulness, we quickly come to the realization that “we” don’t bring anything to the table with regard to our salvation (our flesh is all the evidence we should need on this subject) — from beginning to end, salvation is all the work of God! We bring absolutely NOTHING to the table, and “our flesh” is a good reminder of that fact. By the way, the depravity of our flesh should also help us realize that “perfectionism” is beyond the realm of possibility — so for those who insist on going down that particular track, they simply must be “blind” to the depths of their sinfulness. The biblical message is this: “*meritorious works*” have absolutely no place whatsoever in the Christian experience (the presence of our flesh ought to be a pretty powerful reminder of that as well); be it the justification experience or the sanctification experience. NOTHING is merited with regard to our position in Christ or our standing before God. Though *works* do have a place in God’s economy, they have nothing to do with who we are in Christ or our acceptability in the eyes of God. Furthermore, there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and nothing we can do to make Him love us less.

Our “works of faith,” in contrast to our “works of flesh,” bear fruit unto all eternity... and all fruit-bearing works can only be done when *we humbly obey the Word of God* (and the leading of the Spirit), and when *we have a heart attitude that is totally dependent upon God* (the recognition that *we* cannot produce fruit!) — that alone renders the work we do eternally efficacious (Mt 25:10-46; Jn 15:5, 8; 1 Cor 3:12-15; 4:2; 15:58; Jam 1:22; 2:12-20). Fruit-bearing works are not done with a “self focus” — we never presume for a single moment that the fruit “was ours” — it would be ridiculous to say, “*Look at my fruit!*” We plant and we water (that is all we do; we simply obey, period), but we do not make anything grow — we do not have the ability to cause growth (1 Cor 3:6). **GOD IS THE ONE WHO MAKES ALL OUR EFFORTS EFFICACIOUS & CAUSES GROWTH!** When you come to the realization that you are “totally sinful and simply an instrument in God’s hands,” this will start to make sense to you. Stop for a moment and consider what the angels and the apostles told people who “bowed down and worshiped them” — they immediately told them to “Get up! and do not bow down and worship us!” saying, “We too are just servants!” (Acts 10:26; Rev 19:10; 22:9). The truth is, every creature of God is just a *humble servant of the Most High!* None of us has anything to bring to the table! The apostle Paul put it this way, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor 4:7). It is critically important that we each see ourselves as not possessing anything that merits praise — only God is worthy of praise!

The Apostle Paul also went on to express himself this way: “I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal 2:20); and “I sin, yet not I, but sin that indwells me” (Rom 7:17, 20). Did you catch the truths of those two statements? The facts are, in a sense, as believers we are now “*two persons*” — we each have an “*old self*” and a “*new self*” — the old self is the sinful flesh (it is predisposed to sin and living for oneself); the new self is indwelled by the Holy Spirit (it is predisposed to

righteousness and the life of God) — no matter who you are, your old self (your flesh) is totally sinful... it was not jettisoned or reformed when you became a believer — regardless of how many hours it has been sitting in the pew it is still despicably sinful! Please hear this message! By the way, your old self and your new self are opposed to each other because of their predispositions, and are constantly at war with each other (Gal 5:16-17; Rom 7:23). It is the “old self” (the flesh) that Paul says, “has no good in it” (Rom 7:18). Therefore, the two truths that each of us as Christians “must continually affirm” are these —

1. **WHO I AM** — In and of myself “I am totally sinful;” there is nothing good in me. When I became a brand new creation in Christ *my flesh was unaffected* — it was not made new!
2. **WHO GOD IS** — God loves me and has forgiven me of all my sins (past/present/future), and He is at work in me in the person of the Holy Spirit, to will and to do His good pleasure, transforming me into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18; Phil 2:13). God does not love me because of anything that is in me, because everything that is in me is totally sinful — that’s the amazing thing about God’s love: He loves me in spite of my sinfulness! So why does God love me? Because He is love! (1 Jn 4:8); as such, *all praise goes to Him! and absolutely none to me!*

To repeat: the two truths we need to “affirm every day” are these — we are totally sinful... and God really loves us (in spite of our sinful condition!). **What is critically important is that every time we affirm the truth that we are totally sinful, we must affirm the incredible truth that God loves us!** To not do so is to become dangerously unbalanced in our thinking. These truths are two sides of the same coin! **BOTH OF THESE TRUTHS ARE ESSENTIAL** — if we just focus on one of these truths we will distort the truth of Scripture, and as such we will either be **despairing** (questioning the fact that God loves us), or we will be **delusional** (thinking that we are better than we really are). Remember, we pretty much have spent our entire Christian lives affirming the lies that “we are pretty good,” and that “God is not too thrilled with us;” and those two patterns of thought have placed us in a “can’t win situation” if they are not rejected! This is all the work of Satan (he is out to destroy us!) and the deceitfulness of our own flesh.

The two concepts that we are to affirm every day, admittedly appear to be “antithetical” to our minds; after all, how can we be so sinful (deserving of eternal damnation), and God still loving us? It just doesn’t add up, but that’s why “**grace**” is so unfathomable and beyond figuring out (Rom 11:33; Eph 3:8). As the hymn writer **Charles Wesley** put it, “**Amazing Love, How Can It Be That Thou My God Shouldst Die For Me!**” The facts are, unless we appreciate how utterly sinful we really are, we will never appreciate the magnitude of God’s love. Therefore, if we hold on to the slightest degree of “inherent goodness,” we will diminish the significance of God’s love and the wonder of His grace in our lives. Our problem as saved humanity is that “**sin**” is still resident within us, and all of our problems are related to that fact... and that is what we must fully come to terms with in our minds. If we do not fully deal with it, we will continue to live discouraged, uninspired, defeated lives. For years I simply focused on the fact that God loved me, redeemed me, forgave me and saved me... but I never fully resolved the problem of my total sinfulness. Though I was confident that God had dealt with my sin at the cross, yet I struggled with the fact that it was still resident in my life, and was not exactly sure just how to deal with it. Perhaps some of you are thinking, “Ekstrand’s losing his mind!” Let me assure you, that indeed is not the case! I am now just swimming in a lot deeper water! Today I am far more aware of my “inherent sinfulness,” and as such I now have a far greater appreciation for **Paul’s** self-assessment, when he

saw himself as “wretched” (Rom 7:18, 24)... and **Isaiah’s**, when he said he was “a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:5)... and **Peter’s**, when he said, “depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man” (Lk 5:8)... and the self-assessments of so many great saints down through the centuries who were distraught over their indwelling sin. The truth is, we are not made aware of the fullness of our sinfulness at the moment of conversion; that is something that we become more and more aware of as God leads us in life... and the more we are made aware of it (through trials and affliction), the more we grow in grace. Thus, the maturing believer is increasingly astounded at the wonder of God’s incredible love for him — so his cry becomes, “How can it be?” Is the believer then actually more sinful? No, not at all. He has just become far more aware of the depths of his sinfulness.

So what happens when we affirm these two truths? They destroy our pride! They make us humble! And they make us incredibly grateful! All we as believers should desire in life is to be grateful, humble servants of God! When we are, we cease to have a proud estimation of ourselves (that is, “of our sinful flesh”)... and humbly admit that there really is “no good thing” dwelling in us (that is simply the truth)... and we are “filled with joy unspeakable” knowing that God really does love us — by the way, that far transcends the displeasure of knowing that we are totally sinful (Rom 15:13; 2 Cor 9:15; Eph 3:19; 1 Pet 1:8) — and that our sinfulness does not disappoint God! To think that our sinfulness is actually disappointing to God, is akin to a mother being disgustingly disappointed with her child because it has a deformity! It takes a really sick mind to reach that kind of conclusion! Yet, that is precisely how “sick” our flesh is! **When we affirm the truth that we are “totally sinful” — such an attitude “favorably predisposes us to God!” and we become “recipients of more grace!”** (Mt 23:12; Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5; Ps 138:6) — God loves humility! (Phil 2:5-9, 12-13), but Satan and our flesh love pride! By the way, when we have a humble attitude about who we really are, it helps us better understand and accept “other people” as well (warts and all), because then we understand that we are all made of the same diabolical stuff — and pride exits! We are all despicable selfish sinners; therefore we really aren’t better than other people; as such, we are now free to genuinely love them! We may be “saved,” but we are still sinners — the only difference is, we are now “saved sinners!” (and that was all by grace!).

All of us are “fallen sinful creatures” totally in need of God’s mercy; so pride has no place in the kingdom of God... humility is the calling card of the believer! We just admit our condition! By the way, this is the “same strategy” used in Alcoholics Anonymous — at every AA meeting, everyone “openly admits” that they are “alcoholics” — by doing so, they are simply admitting reality; and only when they admit the truth do they have any chance at all in overcoming their addiction. Conversely, it is only when we humbly admit who we really are (totally sinful) that God showers more grace upon us. You don’t want grace? then continue to be proud, because God isn’t going to give you any. All God asks of us is that we acknowledge reality — we are fallen sinful creatures, who are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought (Rom 12:3, 16; 1 Cor 15:10; Eph 3:7). I find it strange that those of us who responded to God’s gracious invitation of salvation (which included acknowledging our sinfulness), and then joined a spiritual hospital (commonly called a church) in which to live out the rest of our lives... are now running around in that hospital actually trying to convince other patients in the hospital that we are now doing great! Why the pretense? Such a message only discourages others in the hospital who are admittedly struggling! This is just another “proof” that the proud beast of sin is still alive in our souls!

Every believer should understand that “his flesh” is the SOURCE of all his problems!

Simply admit it. The good news is that we have been “set free” from its power at the cross; thus we are no longer “its slave!” and it is no longer “our master!” Therefore, as believers, let us humbly acknowledge our sinful nature, and “walk in grace!” (Rom 6:3-14; Gal 5:16-17). By the way, if you really are “totally sinful” (and God is well aware of that fact), what do you think God is expecting from you? Wonderful behavior? Did that question need to be asked? No! All God is expecting from you is that “you humbly admit your condition!” **If you will affirm the truth that you are totally sinful, and the truth that God loves you unconditionally — if you will affirm these two truths “ten times” every day for a month, it will become incredibly clear to you that God is doing a miraculous transforming work in your life!** It is pretty much understood by professionals that “habit breaking” takes about a month to really take affect. All God is asking us to do is believe Him! The truth of the matter is we need to “reprogram our thinking” (Rom 12:2), because we are “naturally predisposed” to thinking that there is a level of goodness in us and that God is disappointed with us. **When the perspective of “who we are” & “who God is” is properly defined in our minds, dramatic practical spiritual changes will occur in our lives!!!**

The next statement I am about to make is critically important. As such, I decided to place it in a box by itself. The following words should help bring a little perspective to everything that has been written to this point — *Because we inhabit sinful flesh, we will never reach the point where we fully resolve the problem of our sinfulness in this life, or where we fully come to the point that we truly see ourselves as completely sinful... the truth of the matter is, there is a “proud beast” in all of us, and it will not die until we arrive in glory. Conversely, we will never come to the full realization that God loves us unconditionally until we arrive in glory. The wonderful truth is, we can experience a tremendous amount of growth in both of these areas, in spite of the fact that we inhabit sinful flesh. With that said, we need to make it our life’s ambition of pursuing both of these truths until God calls us home. Lord willing, we will each grow more & more every day in both the understanding and the acceptance of these two truths. Because the enemy of our souls is committed to grabbing as much land as he can within us, we must commit to defending these two critically important highways that God has established within us! Remember, “greater is He who is in you, than he who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4).*

When we stumble (and we will frequently), we are “not” totally defeated and discouraged, because we are now very much aware of the sinfulness of our flesh. So we simply and gratefully “plead the blood of Christ and move on” — life is no more “about us;” it is now about Christ and what it is He wants to do in and through us. Does this mean that we just go ahead and sin that grace may abound? No, of course not. By the way, living in the light of truth makes us far more inclined to “walk in righteousness” than to “walk in unrighteousness.” Is failure humbling? Absolutely, and therein is the pathway to more grace — the humble acknowledgement of who we really are. The Christian life is all about “**grace!**” The truth of the matter is, the more you stumble in life, the less confidence you’re going to place in your flesh — that is the first major lesson that “failure” teaches us — and then before long you will notice “*your pride*” is also being slain (after all, what can you possibly be proud of?). **You will then discover that life is no more about “measuring up” and feeling good about yourself! It’s now about walking with the Lord**

Jesus! experiencing His peace and His joy! rejoicing that He really loves you! and bearing fruit unto all eternity! and it is only when we are experiencing an infusion of His grace, that we experience His peace and joy and bear fruit. Though none of our works are absolutely pure and without blemish, God in His grace honors our imperfect expressions of faith — so all praise and glory goes to Him! Make sense? That is the essence of what it means to be human and be a follower of Christ. Anything else only leads to frustration, discouragement, guilt, anguish, and weariness. The choice is ours.

As a fitting conclusion to this study, let me close with the story of a man in *Greek mythology* who was waiting to enter the gates of eternity. While standing there he noticed there were two doors — one marked “Heaven” and the other marked “Hell.” His curiosity got the best of him, so he thought he would at look inside the door marked “**Hell**” to see what it was like. As he looked inside he saw an incredibly large banquet hall with beautifully decorated tables, and an unbelievable array of delicious food. His attention was quickly drawn to all the creatures that were sitting around the tables: they all had “8 foot” long fingers and were all groaning and doing everything they possibly could to feed themselves... but because their inability to do so, their emaciated bodies had become just skin and bones and open sores. The man quickly turned around and exited the room... he had seen enough; he couldn't believe what he'd just witnessed. He then turned to the door marked “**Heaven**,” and opened that door. As he looked in, he once again saw a gorgeous banquet hall with beautifully decorated tables, and an unbelievable array of delicious food... but this time he noticed all the creatures with their “8 foot” long fingers were joyfully feeding one another and sharing and laughing together... the man thought for a moment and quickly realized the ramifications of living a “selfish life” as opposed to an “selfless life.” God created us to be “God-centered beings” rather than “self-centered beings”... to have an “others-orientation” in life rather than a “self-orientation”... and when that quality defines us, life then works as God intended (Mt 6:33; 22:36-40; Jn 13:34; 1 Cor 12:7; Eph 4:16). By the way, **we will only live a “God-centered” and “others-centered” life when we humbly accept our sinful condition and really believe God loves us — by the way, when we really accept these two truths, we will naturally take our eyes off of ourselves!**

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