

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

78 What Hinders Me from Being a Better Christian?

Scripture: I Corinthians 2:14-3:3

But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ. And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly.

I invite you to follow me in a venture deep into human experience. In a word, it is an exploration into the phenomenon of growth and development. Certainly there is no more fascinating study than an investigation of the process of progress. This is no less true in the spiritual realm as one comes to consider the perpetuation of the Christian life in terms of measured and determined growth.

The above question concerns certain people who live in this world. If it is a concern of yours, it seems to me that you have assumed at least three things about yourself. First, you have assumed that you are a Christian. Secondly, you have assumed that your Christian experience is fluid rather than fixed and that it is possible for you to progress. Lastly, you have doubtless discovered certain hindrances which check your efforts to become a better Christian. We are going to study the nature of these hindrances, but I first want to comment on this matter of being a Christian and the possibility or challenge of growth. The term "Christian" was a kind of nickname given to believers by people living in Antioch in the days of the early church. (Acts 11:26) Nicknames are often interesting because they arise from a particular characteristic of an individual or place. Doubtless the believers in Antioch were forever speaking of Jesus, it only seemed reasonable they should bear His name. That the name is used in a general way today is common knowledge. The question has to be asked, "Who is a true Christian?" Perhaps you have wondered about this matter and wished for an answer which would satisfy you completely. Such an answer is available, but it does not come from the lips or pen of men. To accept what man has to say is to

be caught in a maze of opinions which will leave one hopelessly confused. God gives His definition of a Christian in His word. It is clear, concise, and convincing. The Bible defines a Christian in Philippians 3:3, and I have satisfied my own mind that this is the way God would have us identify those who belong to the Lord. Christians are those who *“worship in the Spirit of God, glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”* At the center of this definition is a personal trust in Christ, and the other activities constitute what is the nature of true Christianity.

On the one hand, God is to be worshipped in the Holy Spirit because no one is able to call Jesus Lord apart from the Spirit's ministry. (Titus 3:5; John 6:63; II Corinthians 3:6; John 15:26-27; 16:8; I Corinthians 12:3) On the other side in the words, *“no confidence in the flesh,”* there is the instruction to avoid the universal pitfall of trusting in our own good works for salvation. (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:5) There is little meaning in talking about being a better Christian if one is not a Christian to begin with, and this is what it means to be a Christian. The Bible never encourages anyone to act like a Christian who has not renounced self righteousness and come to trust in Christ's work alone. In fact, the Lord's most stinging rebukes were against those vigorous religionists who lacked repentance and faith.

But the Christian life is also a process and that involves change. We actually live in an environment of change. Everything is in a state of flux and alteration, nothing remains the same. There is nothing changeless about life except change itself. It really doesn't even make any difference whether or not we like the idea, as individuals we are living in a changing body located in a changing world. Some of this change we call growth, and this is what we mean by becoming a better Christian. What we do is mature spiritually so that our faith is strong, and we reflect the beauty of Christ and are pleasing to Him. There is an interesting verse in Ephesians which speaks of Christians as being *“His inheritance in the saints.”* (Ephesians 1:18) He may be everything to us, but the question is, what are we to Him? Am I everything to Him? This also is part of what we mean when we talk about being a better Christian, being a pleasure to Him.

What hinders us in this desire? Growth is not easy and we ought not to be afraid to admit that there are real obstacles to overcome. Sometimes we may find it hard to be completely honest at this point because of all the success stories there are about other Christians who seem to have it all together. We need to realize

that the Bible nowhere indicates that the things which hinder us will go away. Nor is there ever a suggestion that we should quit in our quest. The hindrances we are about to study and confront seem to me to be a Scriptural and realistic appraisal of what the difficulties are.

I. WE ARE HINDERED IN BECOMING BETTER CHRISTIANS BECAUSE OF WHAT WE ARE:

What we are is flesh. This is a word that is used in the Bible again and again, and in different ways. It is used to describe the material body of a person as in I Corinthians 15:39, *“all flesh is not the same flesh.”* It can also mean people in the universal sense as in Romans 3:20, *“because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight.”* The meaning we are concerned with has to do with a certain ability which men have to live lives without God. This usage, for example, is found in Romans 7:18-24. The passage begins with the words, *“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh, for the wishing is present with me, but the doing of the good is not.”* The flesh here is understood as an ability which we have to exclude God and live for our own interests. Theologians have long spoken of this as a “nature” which is evil. When I do what comes naturally, as the old song goes, I do not seriously include God in my affairs. For our study we will use the words ability or capacity for being egocentric or self centered. Now when a person becomes a genuine Christian he becomes a new kind of person. (II Corinthians 5:17) The Greek word here is “kainos” which means newly made in terms of quality. What God does is to implant a new ability which has the desire and the capacity to glorify God and serve Him. The true Christian emerges then as a composite person, possessing the aptitude to either please God or himself. He has a new as well as an old nature.

In verse 1 of I Corinthians 3, Paul uses the interesting word *“sarkinoi.”* Words ending in “inos” suggest “that which is made of something.” He is speaking to those who are made of flesh, to those who are living on the level of the physical. They have not gone beyond the human dimension of thinking and acting. That in itself was a rebuke, but we are all this kind of flesh. In verse 2 he tells them they are yet carnal or still fleshly. Here he uses the word *“sarkikoi”* which means to be dominated and driven by the flesh. The passage is teaching us that what Christians are capable of is the desire on the one hand to please God, and the desire on the other to live for themselves. Every Christian is a kind of walking

civil war. He possesses desires, impulses, instincts, urges, and interests which are in juxtaposition, next to but contrary with one another.

There are certain things about this flesh capacity which we must know if we are going to overcome its pull on our lives. **First**, the flesh is the same in the most Godly person as it is in the most ungodly. In Galatians Paul enumerates what are the works of the flesh. We seem to have the impression that spiritual people are incapable of doing certain things, but I make bold to suggest that unless divinely controlled, the flesh can rise to ascendancy at any time. **Secondly**, the flesh nature is not removed at the time of conversion. In Romans 13:14 Paul urges believers to make no provision for the flesh. The Christian has the same ability to leave God out of his life as the non-Christian. **Thirdly**, the old nature is incurably bad. In Romans 7:18-24, Paul describes the wretchedness of this violent opposition he feels within himself. The "*wretched man*" (verse 24) concept is drawn from Paul's boyhood days. Near Tarsus there lived a certain tribe which employed a horrible form of penalty upon a person guilty of murder. In those back hills of Asia Minor the dead body of the victim was lashed to the back of his assassin, shoulder to shoulder, back to back, thigh to thigh, with cords drawn so tight they were impossible to be dislodged. He was then driven out. After a few days death in the one body would begin to assimilate to the other. The murderer would run to and fro for help as he faced only the grisly possibility of a gangrenous death himself. Well he might cry, "*O wretched man I am!*" The Christian is possessed of a holy nature but lives in close contact with the nature of death. It is incurably bad, it is not gradually changed. It is the same the day God calls him home to Glory as it was when he became a Christian years before. **Fourthly**, there is constant conflict between the old and the new capacities. One is from God and energized by the Holy Spirit. (II Peter 1:4; Ephesians 4:22-25; Galatians 5:17; Romans 7:15-25). Yes, we are hindered from becoming better Christians because of what we are. We are flesh. We retain a nature opposed to the things of God.

II. WE ARE HINDERED FROM BECOMING BETTER CHRISTIANS BECAUSE OF WHERE WE ARE:

We are in the world. This is another word which occurs in the Bible and has different meanings. Sometimes it is going to mean the material earth upon which we all live. This is what is meant in Acts 17:24, "*God that made the world and all things therein.*" Other times it means the whole inhabited earth as in John 3:16. We can even bring the two thoughts together as in John 1:10, "*He (Jesus) was in*

the world, and the world (earth) was made by Him, and the world (mankind) knew Him not.” What concerns us is what the Bible means when it says, *“Love not the world nor the things in the world.”* (I John 2:15-17) The world which is spoken of here is not the material earth or the human beings which inhabit it. Rather, it is an invisible system which is in control of Satan. An interesting name given to Satan in Ephesians 2:2 is *“the prince of the power of the air.”* So broad is this prince's power it comes to us as close as the very air we breath. How can this be? I believe the answer lies in the clause which precedes, *“the course of this world.”* It is in the thought forms which are at all times pressing in upon us wherever we are. Another expression is at the end of verse 2, *“of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.”* These expressions describe the dynamics which give birth to the way people naturally think who live in this world. We live in an atmosphere which has been created by the prince of this world, Satan. Before becoming a Christian a person is moved as a puppet or pawn by the original expert in brainwashing. Shrewdly Satan clouds the minds of men as He effects lifestyles, educational systems, governments and total cultures. His influence is not unchristian, “anti-Christian. He is against all that Christ is for. To the extent the Christian loves the world as so ruled by Satan, the love of the Father will be minimized. (I John 2:15) It will also effect doing the will of God. (2:17) Anything which causes a Christian to lose enjoyment of God's love or desire to do the Father's will, will be a hindrance to becoming a better Christian and this can happen because of where Christians are, they live out their days in the world. Paul said that Christians have the mind of Christ, not the mind of the natural man, the mind of the World. (I Corinthians 2:14-16)

III. WE ARE HINDERED IN BECOMING BETTER CHRISTIANS BECAUSE OF WHO WE ARE:

I believe that Satan must hate the spiritually minded Christian with a passion. Here we have a former slave who has escaped the galley, a former worldling who now sights a better land, and who poses a constant threat to all that he stands for, a person who now speaks of God's wisdom, which God predestined before the ages. (I Corinthians 2:7-8) The downfall of the Christian must therefore be the avowed purpose of Satan. There is an old story about a man walking down the street and seeing the devil on the curb stone crying bitterly, he asked, “What's the matter?” The devil responded, “I'm getting blamed for things I had little to do with.” There is a great deal of truth to that. We have often used Satan as a

scapegoat and thought with Flip Wilson, "the devil made me do it." We do know that he can be the source of temptation. (I Corinthians 7:5; Matthew 4:1,9; I Chronicles 21:1). There is no question that Satan lures Christians to evil. He also provides snares as indicated in I Timothy 3:7, *"Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."* (See also II Timothy 2:26) He is capable of buffeting those who serve the Lord. Paul wrote, *"And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations given unto me, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure."* (II Corinthians 12:7) He further resists and opposes God's servants in the ministry they have. (Zechariah 3:1; Daniel 10:13) No work for God is easily done. There will surely be opposition from Satan. No souls are easily won. Satan also hinders God's people from realizing their desires. In I Thessalonians 2:18 we read, *"Wherefore we would have come to you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us."* Paul repeatedly planned to visit the Thessalonians, but Satan was able to restrain him. Of course this is only part of the story. We may be confident that such a hindrance will work for good to those who love the Lord. Satan also accuses the brethren before God according to Revelation 12:10. He sows tears in God's field as shown in Matthew 13:39. He is a formidable foe whose wiles we will have to stand against until God takes us home. (Ephesians 6:11-13)

These are the obstacles we face in becoming better Christians. God is interested in our growth, He wants us to grow. His desire surpasses our own. It is well that we be keenly aware of those influences which work against us. This has been the purpose of our study.

Alan B. Christensen, Pastor, Hope Evangelical Free Church, Wilton, CT,
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