

Discerning between the Flesh and Spirit

Healing Streams, Savannah, GA. All scriptures are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

Your flesh cannot be cast out, nor does it need to be.

It is always there with its tendency and disposition to sin. One day, when we enter into His glory, God will separate us from our fallen nature (1 Corinthians 15:53-54), but until then it is dangerous for us to try to eradicate the flesh ourselves. In fact to try to eliminate our flesh is an act of unwitting disobedience to God's Word. And this is because Jesus has already defeated it for us (Romans 6:5-14). Whenever we can truly trust in and rely upon the Lord our flesh (the old man) is laid to rest by His Spirit and the new nature carries us forward in peace and freedom (Romans 8:1-2). Any failing of trust or obedience on our part and the flesh is only too ready to spring quickly back to life. The New Testament scriptures are clear that if what we are struggling with is an issue of the flesh, then we are to put off the flesh like soiled clothing—to just say no and turn from it.

To put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Ephesians 4:22-24

The flesh is essentially a dead thing, crucified by Christ and, like a shadow now seen by the light of Christ within us, the flesh has no power of its own to overthrow us who walk by the Spirit. But if we get our eyes locked onto our shadow we may easily trip and fall! The way to keep this from happening is to keep our eyes on Christ and by so doing abide in continual trust and obedience. In this way the knowledge of the reality of our flesh and of its total depravity (no redeeming thing about it) helps to humble us and remind us to keep our focus on our Savior.

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Colossians 3:9-11

Strongholds are a different matter

To the degree that “putting off the flesh” is difficult, to that degree a stronghold has likely been built into our flesh by the prior activity of the enemy in our lives. Such areas of the flesh, when they are touched by present situations (words, events, desires) are very difficult to simply set aside and a struggle ensues within us if the sinful desire of the flesh is to be overcome. **We are to carry the thoughts of these strongholds captive to Christ**—a much more intense image. Finally, the strongholds may be occupied and defended by alien intruders—the kingdom of darkness whose temptations and deceptions built the strongholds in the first place. Here we are told to resist the devil and he will flee from us and even to cast out the evil spirits in the name of the Lord who conquered them at the cross. **Such “occupied” strongholds cannot be defeated by simply shifting our focus back to Christ.** They require the harder work of the 8 R's.

Don't shadow box with the flesh!

We are not to expend much energy in seeking to carry the thoughts of the flesh captive to Christ, for this would be paying far too much attention to the flesh which is forever throwing up negative thoughts and desires. You could just as easily bail out the ocean! Instead, whenever we recognize the thoughts of the flesh rising within us, we are to turn from them (to put off the old man) and put on Christ by returning our inward focus to God through Christ (to go back to trusting and obeying). This can readily be accomplished by simply shifting our attention back to the Lord or by breathing a simple prayer in doing so. **The word about**



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strongholds comes into play when we realize that the thoughts of the flesh are beginning to carry our attention captive (see 7 Steps to Sin). At this point effort and inward attention is required to find the thought that is troubling us and carry it—drag it as a conquered thing—to Christ, expose it to the Light of His Word and see it slain in His presence. In so doing our attention upon Him and our rest in Him is restored: both the flesh and the stronghold have been dealt with.



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