

Abstain From Fleshly Lusts

Martin Luther

*Abstain from fleshly lusts,
which war against the soul.—1Pet.2:11*

I will not determine here whether Peter speaks of outward impurity, or like Paul does, of all that is called carnal—that is, whatever man does without faith, while he is in the body and in a carnal life. I hold however that Peter had a different mode of expression, yet I do not think he uses the word *soul*, as Paul does, for spirit; but Peter has held more to the common Greek word than Paul. Yet much stress is not to be laid upon this; let it be understood of all kinds of lust, or all kinds of carnal desire or impurity. But this at least he would teach us, **that no saint on earth can be fully perfect and pure.** The high schools have even trodden this passage under their feet, and they do not understand it; they think it is said only of sinners, as though the saints had no wicked lust remaining in them. But whoever will study carefully the Scriptures must note a distinction. The prophets sometimes speak of the saints in a manner, as though they were indeed perfectly holy in every respect; while on the other hand they speak also of them as having evil lusts and being troubled with sins. In regard to these two distinctions those persons cannot judge. Therefore understand it thus: that Christians are divided into two parts; into an inward nature which is faith, and an outward nature which is the flesh. If we look upon a Christian as respects faith, then he is pure and entirely holy; for the Word of God has nothing impure in it, and wherever it enters the heart that depends upon it, it will make that also pure; because, in respect to faith all things are perfect. According to that, we are kings and priests and the people of God, as was said above in 1 Peter 2:9. But since faith exists in the flesh, and we still live on the earth, we feel at times evil dispositions, such as impatience and fear of death. These are all the fault of the old man, for faith is not yet mature and has not attained full control over the flesh.

This you can understand from the parable in Luke 10:30 of the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves. They beat him and left him lying half dead. But the Samaritan afterward took him up, and bound his wounds, and cared for him, and saw to it that he should be nursed. There you perceive that this man, since he is to be nursed, is not sick unto death, his life is safe. All that is wanting is that he should be restored to health. Life is there, but he is not completely restored, for he lies yet in the hands of the physicians and must yet give himself up to be healed. So we have also the Lord Jesus Christ in his completeness; we are assured of eternal life, yet we have not perfect health; some of the old Adam still remains in the flesh.

Similar also is the parable in Matthew 13:33, where Christ says: "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven which a woman takes and mingles in the meal until it is leavened throughout." When meal is made into dough, the leaven is all in it. But it has not penetrated and worked through it, but the meal lies working until it is leavened throughout, and no more leaven need be added. Thus through faith you have all that you need to apprehend the Word of God, yet it has not penetrated throughout, wherefore it must continue to work till you are entirely renewed. In this way you are to discriminate in regard to the Scriptures, and not martyr them as the papists do.

Therefore I say, when you read in the Scriptures of the saints, that they were perfect, understand that as to faith they were entirely pure and without sin, but the flesh still remained and that could not have been entirely holy. Therefore Christians desire and pray that the body or the flesh be mortified, that they may be entirely pure. Those who teach otherwise have neither experienced nor relished this, which leads them to speak just as they imagine and conceive with their reason; wherefore they must err. In regard to this, those great saints who have written and taught much, have greatly stumbled. Origen has not a word of it in his books. Jerome never understood it. Augustine, had he not been driven to contend with the Pelagians, would have understood it no better. When they speak of the saints, they extol them so highly as if they were something different from, and better than, other Christians; just as though they had not felt the power of the flesh and complained of it as well as we do.

Therefore Peter says here, as ye would be pure and have complete sanctification, continue to contend with your evil lusts. So also Christ says in the gospel of John 13:10: "Whoever is washed, must also wash his feet." It is not

enough that his head and hands be clean; therefore, he would yet have them wash their feet.

But what does Peter mean in that he says, abstain from the lusts that war against the soul? This is what he would say: You are not to imagine that you can succeed by sports and sleep. Sin is indeed taken away by faith, but you have still the flesh which is impulsive and inconsiderate; therefore take good care, that ye overcome it. By strong effort it must be done; you are to restrain and subdue lust, and the greater your faith is, the greater will the conflict be. Therefore you should be prepared and armed, and you should contend with it incessantly. For they will assault you in multitudes and would take you captive.

Hence Paul also says: "I delight in the law of God after the inward man; but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity" (Rom 7:22, 23), so that I do what I would not. As though he had said, I fight indeed against it, but it will not finally yield. Therefore I would gladly be free, but in spite of my good will it cannot come to pass. What then am I to do? "Wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" (Rom 7:24). In this same manner all the saints cry out. But people without faith the devil leads in such a way that he permits them only to enter on a sinful course, and he follows them, but does not destroy them entirely by sin. But as to the others, he thinks, I have already taken them captive by unbelief. I will permit them to go so far only, as to do no great sin and have no great assault, and be kept from swearing and knavery. But believers have always opposition enough; they must ever stand in the attitude of struggle. Those who are without faith and have not the Spirit, do not feel this nor do they have such an experience. They break away and follow their wicked lusts. But as soon as the Spirit and faith enter our hearts, we become so weak that we think we cannot beat down the least imaginations and sparks of temptation, and we see nothing but sin in ourselves from the crown of the head even to the foot. For before we believed, we walked according to our own lusts, but now the Spirit has come and would purify us, and a conflict arises when the devil, the flesh, and the world oppose faith. Of this all the prophets complain here and there in the Scriptures.

Therefore Peter now means that the strife does not take place in sinners, but in believers, and he gives us the consolation that we may check evil lusts thus, namely, by barking against them. If thou then hast wicked thoughts, thou shouldst not on this account despair; only be on thy guard, that thou be not taken prisoner by them. Our teachers have proposed to relieve the matter by directing men to torture themselves until they had no more evil thoughts, that they at last became frantic and insane. But learn, if you are a Christian, that you must experience all kinds of opposition and wicked dispositions in the flesh. For wherever faith exists, there come a hundred evil thoughts, a hundred struggles more than before. Only see to it that you act the man and not suffer yourself to be taken captive. Continue to resist and say, I will not, I will not. (Lord Christ thou hast said: "Ask and ye shall receive." Help, dear Lord, against all temptations. Ed. 1539.) For we must here confess that the case is much like an ill-matched couple who are continually complaining of one another, and what one will do the other will not.

That may still be called a truly Christian life which is never at perfect rest, and has not advanced so far that we feel not sin, but that we indeed feel sin, only we do not allow it admittance. Thus we are to fast, pray, and labor to weaken and suppress lust. So you are not to imagine you are to become a saint like these fools speak of. Since flesh and blood continue as long as sin remains; therefore we are to constantly war against it. Whoever has not learned this by his own experience must not boast that he is a Christian.

Before, we have been taught that when we made confession or joined some spiritual institution, we were at once pure and needed no longer to contend with sin. They have said, moreover, that baptism purifies and makes holy, so that nothing evil remains in the person. Hence they thought, now I will have a pleasing rest; then the devil came and assaulted them worse than before. Therefore, understand this well: Though you confess and receive absolution, you must do even as the soldier who in battle runs upon the points of the javelins, when the critical moment approaches and the conflict rages, compelling him to strike for the right, as if to repel outrage. Then he must draw out his sword and strike right and left. But now while the strife threatens only, there must be untiring vigilance. So, if you have been saved, be on your guard, inasmuch as you are not safe for an hour from the devil and from sin, even though you think you will have no more attacks. Therefore a Christian life is nothing else than a conflict and encampment, as the Scriptures say (Job 7:1ff); and therefore the Lord our God is called the Lord of Sabaoth, "*Dominus Sabaoth*" (Psa 24:10), that is Lord over hosts. So also, "*Dominus potens in praelio*," the Lord is mighty in battle (Psa 24:8). By these words, God shows that he is almighty for he triumphs in a wonderful way through us against the prince and God of this world, the Devil and the gates of hell. Yet we are very weak, hardly to be counted a feeble fly compared to Satan. Hence Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:7, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves."

And thus he shows how powerful he is, that he permits his people to be exposed in the conflict and rush upon the

points of the javelins; yet while the trumpets are ever-sounding, he is ever-observant, saying, beware here, beware there; thrust here strike there. Besides, it is a lasting conflict, in which you are to do all you can to strike down the devil by the Word of God. We must therefore ever offer resistance, and call on God for help, and despond of all human powers.