

# Feed the Spirit and Starve the Flesh

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at Oak Grove Baptist Church, Paducah, Ky.  
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## Romans 6:12-14

*The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. 13 Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. 14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.*

Many times I have heard the homespun medicinal wisdom, “Feed a cold and starve a fever.” Well, the medical professionals say that is not true. But it is true that you must feed the Spirit and starve the flesh.

It is hard to understand why God does not perfect us when He saves us. It’s also hard to understand why this state of imperfection continues throughout the life of the Christian. Our struggle to be holy doesn’t make sense because we observe we mostly fail, so why does the Lord leave us this way? Why doesn’t He save us and immediately charge us with a triumphant energy and we go right into a form of Christian perfection?

Many Christians suffer the “Good Ol’ Days” Syndrome. They live in the glow of the days and weeks and months after their conversion, longing for that same experience, environment, and emotions. The excitement after conversion is high and the emotions are enlivened to a level they’ve never experienced with any other excitement. They longingly remember being so hungry for God and how involved they were in the activities of the church not wanting to miss a thing. Oh, the “good ol’ days”!

The desire for those days is more intense if the person was saved during a period of great blessing on the church they were involved with. They remember God moved through the whole church, people came to faith, the church grew, and the bonds of fellowship were deep. Ah, yes, the “good ol’ days”.

These memories are not just pleasant, they are also haunting, if not taunting. There’s a deep missing of those days and an longing for them to return. It’s like a jab in the side when you consider that what you now experience is less than what you had. And it hurts. You want it back. If you could only regain what you had. It’s haunting. It’s taunting. This surely cannot be right; this is not what God intended, is it? The simplest solution to recreate the good ol’ days is do the same things we did then. Same songs, same sermons, same programs, same decor—this is the way to relive the glory days. At least that’s what we think.

The same happens in marriage. It's an exciting time for a couple when they get married. They're young, in love, with a small drop or two of fear. It's the perfect recipe for something amazing and unforgettable. The emotions are heightened and sexual stimulation is the strongest. It's all new, which is always intoxicating in itself. Newness is a remarkable thing, but it's also its worse enemy because new can't stay new. New becomes not so new, which becomes the same, which eventually becomes old, which usually winds up boring.

And what do you do when your marriage is in that state? Well, what some couples do to get back that loving feeling is to go on a second honeymoon. They believe if they can reenact some of the drama or environment of the "good ol' days," then the feelings will return. Others leave the old and get them a new husband or a new wife. Then they soon find out that the new isn't so new after all and the new soon becomes the same, which eventually becomes old, which usually winds up boring. This is true even of a Christian seeking the glory of the newness of conversion. The first choice to remedy the dullness and restore the good ol' days is to find a church like the good ol' days, but that seldom works either.

The thrust of this message is twofold: to state that you can't recreate the "good ol' days" whether as a couple or a Christian or as a church. If you want new, then you have to do things you have not done before, go to new levels in your relationship, follow the Master to new places. You can sing the same songs, do some of the same things you did when you were converted but it won't be new anymore. God has more things for you to experience than your past. The past always serves as a foundation for the future but you can't live in the past. We build on it but we must not idolize it. To do so means your present relationship with God has lost its wonder. When you're looking to go back and gain something from your past it is a tell-tell sign that your relationship with Christ at the present is amiss.

The second purpose of this message is to remind us that the struggle to be holy, which is a struggle to take off and put on, is never going to end on this side of heaven. The ease of the early days of the Christian experience will never be experienced ever again. Forget it. You're asking for something that is not in God's plan for your life. And to want to live there is Satan's strategy to keep you from experiencing the excitement of the new things that God wants you to experience. That's Satan's way of keeping you stunted.

This is what our text is saying.

## **I. The Struggle Between Two Principles**

In the text we see two principles struggling for supremacy. We see putting off this and putting on that; these are two principles in the Christian life. The Apostle Paul states the struggle this way, put off the deeds of the person who once were and put on the character of the new person you now are. Note in verse 12 Paul says, "cast off the works" but in verse 14 he says, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." We put off the works and put on a person. One is behavior, the other is character.

This is the struggle of the two principles: The Spirit of Christ and the new person you are, and the struggle of the flesh and the deeds of the old man, which you once were. Paul describes it another way:

### **A. The Law of the Flesh vs. the Law of the Spirit.**

This is a more common way of the New Testament explaining it. For example, in Romans 8 he says anybody that walks by the flesh shall perish but if you walk according to the Spirit you shall live. "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Romans 8:14). In Galatians 5:16 and following, Paul says, "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." What Paul establishes in this text, once again, is his doctrine of the law of opposing principles.

### **B. The Law of Opposing Principles.**

You need to know this principle because it's always operating. Awake or asleep, it's always there. There are those who teach the law of opposites. What they teach is that for everything in life there is an opposing force and nothing can exist without that. I don't subscribe to that. But I do believe there is a law of opposing principles and it goes like this: If you nourish and satisfy one principle the other principle is malnourished. If you feed one the other is starve. This principle works when there are opposites that are connected, that are inextricably linked such as hot and cold, up and down, or opposing points on the compass.

Illustration: Hot and cold is a perfect example of what I'm trying to communicate this morning.

If I feed the fire, the cold is dissipated if not totally eliminated. But if I don't feed the fire, the fire decreases and the cold increases. In this case all I have to do is not feed the fire and automatically the heat dissipates, decreases, and the cold rises. I don't have to bring in large blocks of ice for the cold to increase; all I need to do is not give the fire any fuel. It is said that nature abhors a vacuum. I believe this is true. When the heat dissipates, cold sets in. The same is true in the spiritual. If you are not feeding the new man, then automatically, you are feeding the flesh and it is strengthened. This is the law of opposing principles.

If my love of God increases my love of sin decreases. If your heart grows in its fondness and affection for God, automatically your love for that which is unholy and evil decreases in accordance. To the same degree one rises *the other* decreases. If I do not feed the love of God, then the love of God automatically decreases and with it the love of sin increases. To the degree one gains the other loses. That's why I've told you over and over that the only thing you need to do in order to spiritually decline is nothing. Nothing at all.

Not to feed the new person is to automatically feed the flesh, the opposing principle. It's not necessarily doing evil things and this is where we've been shipwrecked and deceived in our thinking.

We think to live a worldly life is to *do* certain things that are taboo or to do things that we're explicitly told not to do, but that's not all there is to it. It is as simple as not feeding the new man, the new heart, the spirit, the soul of believer. By not feeding it, you are allowing the coldness of sin to increase.

You never arrive at a place in this life where the law of opposing principles is finished. The flesh is weakened but it never dies. The flesh is like a tiger. You never kill the tiger. You can cage it, you can starve it—and you must—but it's always looking for a way out. It's always looking for an opportunity to regain the supremacy and it's always there until we're out of this world.

## **II. The Struggle Never Ceases**

It continues throughout our lives.

### **A. The Mistake of the Young Christian.**

He or she prematurely declares victory. Every victory over temptation or lust weakens that sinful desire. The more this happens the less the moral struggle within the heart and soul of the believer. The struggle never ends but it becomes less acute and you're not aware of it as much. The more you gain victory over temptation and sin, the less struggle because your spirit has increased and the flesh has been weakened.

But herein lies a problem for the young believer. He or she doesn't feel the struggle over certain temptations anymore and wrongly concludes he or she is forever and finally rid of it. As a consequence they no longer feed their spirit in the same way that helped them to starve the flesh in these areas of temptation. They cease to watch and pray. And with time it returns and completely surprises and shocks the believer.

I've heard it over and over again, "Man, I thought I was free from that thing. I thought that was no longer an issue for me. I thought God had delivered me from that." Sin is very patient. It can wait months, it can wait years. If you don't keep the vigil and feed the heart, especially in that area of weakness or the single besetting sin, you may think you've gotten victory over it, but my dear friend, it's just waiting for a moment to pounce and conquer.

Now the struggle progresses to a struggle to believe God's love and acceptance as before, which can lead to a struggle with assurance of salvation. *I no longer have joy like I once had, I'm no longer having the success over my temptations like I once had, maybe this was all a delusion. Maybe I just had a heated moment of emotions and I made a commitment but it wasn't real. Maybe I'm not His after all.* So the cycle begins, this yo-yo, and roller coaster effect of hot and cold, light and darkness in the life of a believer.

When I sense the loss of God's love, my love for God decreases because my love is always dependent on His love for me. This is seen over and over in the Scripture. We didn't love God first; God

loved us first. Our love for God is reflexive. It's a reflex of His love in your heart. "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." If I'm not experiencing the love of God, then my love for God decreases. This is why I have been rehearsing the love of God to you lately, praying that you will believe it and therefore experience it. And if you experience it, you will increase in your love for God and others.

A young believer who has not been educated or disciplined by an older, more mature believer who has gone through this, has no idea. They think this is it. They think they're on the upward climb and they have no obstacles in the way. They believe they are victorious. You remember those days, don't you? Has it been so long for some of you that you can't remember? I know for a few of you, you haven't been saved for more than a year. There's been others of you who have been saved for a short time. Remember the emotions of those first few weeks or months?

The emotions of those first few days is just the beginning. God has something even better. The moment that emotion, that excitement, diminishes, don't think God has deserted you—no, He's wanting to lead you to higher ground! It's not the absence of God, it's the activity of God. He's working within you to lead you to a place where emotions are not the king and guide. His goal is for you to walk by your faith in Him because He dwells in the spiritual realm. The only way you can please God is to relate to Him by the avenue and agency of faith.

But there is a second problem.

The new believer becomes addicted to these emotions. He equates intense emotions with the presence and love of God. The moment God begins to turn down the dial and he no longer can feel such intensity of heart, emotion, and affection, he begins to think something is spiritually wrong. There maybe. But the new believer is at a very dangerous crossroads at this point. This is very much the way of every Christian. You can read every biography of great saints before us and you will invariably find in all of them after their conversion a period where they felt their heart cold, a lot of them even wondered if they had been genuinely converted. I could recite name after name after name. There are very few exceptions to this.

There comes a time in your walk with God where God is going to purposefully shut down your emotions and you cannot feel, He will not make His presence visibly manifested in the emotional part of our being. That's purposeful for your wellbeing, your development, for your good. It's our Lord's way to inspire us to go into deeper intimacy in our relationship with God.

This mistake can plague you for years, not making it a new Christian's problem. There are some of you in this room today who have not learned this. You've not got it yet; you've not seen it. God has not made it your truth yet. You've been saved for multiple years and you're still wrestling over the "good ol' days." *Oh, if I could just have them. If I could just recreate it, if I could just have God do that again in my life, I would be satisfied.* No, you wouldn't. You can't. Your heart was made for something more than what you received back then. If that was all to salvation then, you're right, you need to get back there, but there is a whole lot more to this thing.

## B. Growth in Grace is an Exercise in Vigilance.

This is what Paul is telling us. This is not “Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore.” It’s not an out of body experience, the body must be disciplined. The body must be trained. If you are to know intimacy with Jesus you cannot eliminate or leave behind the body and its important role of walking with God. So what does Paul tell us? Be vigilant in putting off. Then he summarizes putting off in the end of verse 14.

*“make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.”*

We get the first part of the list of things to put off back in verse 12. Things like putting off: *works of darkness, revelry* (code for orgies), *drunkenness, lewdness* (sexual immorality), *lust* (which is the same as preceding word just in case you didn’t get it the first time), *strife, and envy*. We understand putting those off. It’s the last part of the list in verse 14 that proves as elusive as a greased pig. This is hard for us to get: *make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts*.

The word *provision* is unique in that it is one of the few words that give you the definition of the Greek word it translates. It is comprised of the prefix *pro* meaning either *for or forward* and the word *vision*. It simply means to see forward or the word foresight. The only other time it is used in the New Testament is Acts 24:2 when the prosecution against Paul addresses Governor Felix. It is translated *foresight* in this verse, “Seeing that through you we enjoy great peace, and prosperity is being brought to this nation by your **foresight**.”

What does the word *foresight* here mean? For every need that you have, that you have *foreseen*, what do you do? You start making provision. You’re going to get hungry on Tuesday, therefore you know—foresight—you’re going to get up and go to work on Tuesday. The provision is based upon the foresight.

Therefore, what Paul is telling us is do not think ahead about how you are going to satisfy the desires of the flesh that will lead your heart away from Jesus. Don’t think about satisfying the cravings and longings that are natural to us. These aren’t necessarily sinful, they may not be wrong, but if you give them thought and undo importance, you are already under the jaw and claw of the enemy. Another way to say it is as the NIV translates, “and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

Don’t think about it. This is true about every temptation: You’ve got to shut down the mind’s occupation with the thought.

Here we are again. Remember all those sermons on Isaiah 26:3? “You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.” We explained how to do this battle in the mind and the battleground is certainly the mind, it’s the first theater of conflict. You must learn how to shut down the mind’s occupation with that temptation, that alluring thought, that consideration of disobedience and the desire of fulfilling the flesh.

Let me give you an illustration.

Shaunti Feldhahn, a Harvard-trained social researcher, popular speaker, and the best-selling author wrote an article last Thursday in the wake of the Ashley Madison fallout. She stated, “a straight man can’t not be sexually stimulated when he catches sight of the female body in the spandex shorts or the low-cut top. Even if he doesn’t want that pleasurable stimulation, it just happens. If he wants to honor his wife (and God) in his thought life, he instantly has to choose whether to shut down that stimulation by looking away or thinking about something else. A few minutes later he will have to make that choice again. And again.”

I don’t think she means another image but the same one; the same image he will have to deal with over and over again until he finally has conquered it. Ladies, I know you don’t necessarily understand and you certainly don’t like it, but it has nothing to do with love, it has nothing to do with love at all; it has everything to do with how we are made as men. When we see someone of the opposite sex who is physically attractive there is immediately a pleasurable stimulation, immediately. But according to Shaunti Feldhahn it’s at that moment I have to do something with that thought. Immediately. If I don’t, I’ve already lost. I can’t wait. You can’t wait until you lay down that night and pray, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep... and, Lord, forgive me of those thoughts when I saw that woman’.”

A man took to a printer an pornographic image that he wanted printed. But the printer refused saying, “No, thank you. I don’t print this kind of stuff.” The customer said, “Oh, come on now. Don’t try to pull this pious stuff with me. You know that you really enjoy this kind of thing. Just be honest.” And the printer looked at him, and said, “You’re right. I do. I have a nature which likes to feed upon this kind of thing, but I don’t feed it!”

That is what Paul is saying here. Don’t make provision for it. Don’t think about it. Don’t let your mind muse over it. Don’t let the mind admire it. Deal with it immediately! You can’t pretend you don’t have the desire. That never works. You must note it and fight it.

But its more than fighting temptation. It’s more than just putting off the flesh, it’s not feeding it as well. Don’t put any thought into how you feed the flesh because you don’t feed the flesh at all, which means you need to have some provision to do so. You need to have some provisions for how *not* to feed your flesh.

Here’s where some of you will have problems with what I’m going to say. But if I withhold this part of the truth because you won’t like it, then I too have satisfied my flesh.

There are many things you and I enjoy doing that has no sin value whatsoever, there’s nothing wrong with them. But if I indulge them long enough, am I not strengthening the flesh, even if there’s no evil in it?

Do you know that's why fasting is so important? Food is a necessary thing. God created you to run off the fuel of food and therefore He gave you wonderful taste buds that perform and actually enjoy the wonderful requirement of fueling your body. He wanted it to be a pleasurable experience and therefore He created all of these wonderful tastes.

But if I feed this body every time it's hungry, every time it wants something, every time I think I'm hungry even when I'm not, what happens to the flesh? It becomes stronger. It becomes harder and harder to say "no" to yourself. There are other reasons for fasting than this—just to bring your body under submission and you tell the body what it will do and won't do instead of the reverse.

This is why Paul said to married couples in I Corinthians 7 that it is good that they abstain from sexual relationship for a season. It helps to bring the body into submission, but not for too long, lest you become subject to Satan's temptations.

There are many good things that God has given us that stimulate these bodies or stimulate the mind. But being always preoccupied with the stimulation of joy and happiness and pleasure is dangerous. That means then you're going to have to say "no" to even good things so you have mastery over yourself and not let the good things have mastery over you.

You need to be careful about pumping into your soul entertainment, even if it's clean entertainment. Too much of it strengthens the flesh. I didn't say entertainment was wrong, I said too much of it is. Not having any control is dangerous. Eating is entertainment for most Baptists. It's been said we can't dance and can't do other things so that's the only thing we can do. And as you can see, we know how to do it very well, don't we? We're going to eat later and we're going to have an entertaining, pleasurable moment, and it's a good thing. But over-indulge and what happens? You don't have mastery over your body anymore. It's not just how much you weigh, it's about how much your flesh, your appetites, control you.

Paul is saying don't feed the flesh, don't make provision for it, don't let the mind go there. But it's not just putting off.

You have to be vigilant in putting on.

*"put on the Lord Jesus Christ."*

There are other things he tells us to put off but this is the only thing in this text he tells us to put on. "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." When you go to Colossians 3 and he tells you to put on the qualities of the new man, but in essence he summarizes it in these words: put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

To *put on* simply means to clothe. To put on Christ is to clothe the soul with the character traits and habits of Christ. That means you have to learn to do the same things Jesus did in order to



help Him do what the Father commanded. Jesus brought His body under submission, He prayed, He fasted, He got alone in solitude, He did many of these spiritual disciplines in order to prepare Himself so that when He was in the heat of the battle He was equipped and ready. If you wait for the battle to start doing these things and you will lose.

Put on the very person of Christ. Put on His character traits. Put on the habits of Jesus.

I want to go back to Shaunti Feldhahn's illustration of how a man deals with the visual stimulation of the opposite sex. She said, "He has to instantly choose whether to shut down that stimulation by looking away or by thinking about something else." Guys, that was a woman talking. She doesn't know the experience. Looking away is not going to solve the problem. And that's not permission to keep looking either. Looking away doesn't solve the problem. You've got to put on not just take off. That's why so many of you are struggling and being defeated in temptation and growth in grace because all you're doing is trying to throw things overboard. You're trying to stop all of these things, you're trying to bring an end to them, that's good but that's not enough. You've got to replace it with something.

What a man has to do is think about things that deal with the beauty and the excellence of the person of Jesus Christ. He has to put his mind upon Christ. He has to clothe the mind in the habits and characteristics and traits of Jesus. That's the weaponry against that flesh. It's not just looking away but actively, vigilantly fighting to think about Christ—who He is, what He's done, His beauty and glory and excellence.

### **C. Answer to the Objection of Legalism.**

You may object saying, "Legalism!" But I answer not at all. Grace is never opposed to the activities of effort but is only opposed to the attitude of earning. Grace is never opposed to your activities of effort. But if you think all your activities of putting on and putting off will work toward your salvation you're wrong. That is legalism. That's the heart of legalism. What I'm telling you is if you will do those things in obedience and you put your lock, stock, and barrel in Christ, trusting Him wholeheartedly, He will give you the grace to do it and you'll do it. That's not legalism. What did Jesus tell the spiritually declined Ephesians was the remedy for their lackluster love for Him? He said, "repent and do the first works."

But Jesus did not mean try to recreate the same environment as if environment was the reason for the work of God in the first place. This is how we miss it. We so look to means, methods, and measures because we forget about the supernatural and spiritual dimension that we are in. This spiritual dimension has its own laws and principles just as the material universe has its own laws. He didn't mean do the same thing so you can recreate the same experience. Not at all. What does He mean by doing the first works?

He means do the things you did because you were first in love and that love was glowing, hot with passion and ablaze with affections. First love is entirely caught up with loving a person and

makes a person do things sacrificial for the person loved, but they don't feel sacrificial. Not first love. Not strong love. When love begins to feel sacrificial, then it's no longer first love or strong love. The Ephesus church was doing all the right things and they were doing it better than anyone else could do it but they left their first love. They were not doing these things because their hearts were ablaze in affection for Christ it was because it was simply the thing they had to do.

As you feed the spirit, you will starve the flesh. You will also enjoy a more intimate knowledge of Jesus, which will lead to emotions. Please listen. I do not believe in an emotionless Christianity, but emotions must function under the rule and authority of the truth and faith. Your emotions must go to the cross. You're going to have to die to being happy. That pursuit of happiness that we're all taught from childhood on up, as etched by the pen of Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, is the very ruse of the Devil for the Christian. The pursuit of happiness always leads to unhappiness. You have to die to the desire for pleasure and happiness in the moment. Bring that emotion and desire under the rule and authority of the truth and faith in that truth and when you do, my dear friend, you will begin to enjoy pleasures and joys you have never yet tasted.

There are pleasures for the child of God who is willing to let the past remain in the past and press forward to the mark of the prize of the high calling of Christ Jesus. "Oh that I may know Him!" said the Apostle. "Oh that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection in the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable to His death." Why? Was Paul a sadomasochist? Was he into torture? Was he some guy who was crazy and thought the more he suffered the greater he would be with God? Not at all. No, he knew life with Christ. He knew the sacrifices of Jesus for our joy. And if this was the way to joy for Jesus, then it must be for us.

Do you think if Jesus sacrificed everything for your joy that there is nothing too great for you to sacrifice to Him? Do you think your sacrifice will diminish the joy He died for? That's a huge question. Do you think if Jesus sacrificed everything for your joy then your sacrifice will diminish the joy He died for? Absolutely not. That's a rhetorical question. If He sacrificed to the point of death so that I might know joy and pleasures forevermore, joys and pleasures that no human being can experience apart from Christ, do you think that by He commanding me to sacrifice everything for His glory is somehow going to diminish my joy and the experience thereof? No! It will *not* diminish it but will embrace and enhance it. This is what the Apostle is saying.

So today, feed the Spirit, starve the flesh, and enter into the joys of the Lord. These joys are not as great as heaven but far greater than you've experienced here. Amen.