

John R. W. Stott on the “deadly feud” ...

Having examined ‘the works of the flesh’ and ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ separately, it should be even clearer to us than before that ‘the flesh’ and ‘the Spirit’ are in active conflict with one another. They are pulling in opposite directions. There exists between the two ‘an interminable, deadly feud’.

[Stott, J. R. W. (1986). The message of Galatians: Only one way (p. 149). Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.]

First, a Christian’s rejection of his old nature is to be pitiless. Crucifixion in the Graeco-Roman world was not a pleasant form of execution, nor was it administered to nice or refined people; it was reserved for the worst criminals, which is why it was such a shameful thing for Jesus Christ to be crucified. If, therefore, we are to ‘crucify’ our flesh, it is plain that the flesh is not something respectable to be treated with courtesy and deference, but something so evil that it deserves no better fate than to be crucified.

Secondly, our rejection of the old nature will be painful. Crucifixion was a form of execution ‘attended with intense pain’ (Grimm-Thayer). And which of us does not know the acute pain of inner conflict when ‘the fleeting pleasures of sin’ (Hebrews 11:25) are renounced?

Thirdly, the rejection of our old nature is to be decisive. Although death by crucifixion was a lingering death, it was a certain death. Criminals who were nailed to a cross did not survive. John Brown draws out the significance of this fact for us: ‘Crucifixion ... produced death not suddenly but gradually ... True Christians ... do not succeed in completely destroying it (that is, the flesh) while here below; but they have fixed it to the cross, and they are determined to keep it there till it expire.’¹

Once a criminal had been nailed to the cross, he was left there to die. Soldiers were placed at the scene of execution to guard the victim. Their duty was to prevent anyone from taking him down from the cross, at least until he was dead. ... So, Paul says, if we crucified the flesh, we must leave it there to die. We must renew every day this attitude towards sin of ruthless and uncompromising rejection. In the language of Jesus, as Luke records it, every Christian must ‘take up his cross daily’ (Luke 9:23). [Ibid. (pp. 150–151).]

- (Luke 9:23 ESV) And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

HAVE CRUCIFIED THE FLESH ...

- (Galatians 5:24 ESV) And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
- (Galatians 5:16 ESV) But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

In 5:24 ... Crucifixion of the flesh is described here not as something done to us but rather something done by us. Believers themselves are the agents of this crucifixion. Paul was here describing the process of mortification, the daily putting to death of the flesh through the disciplines of prayer, fasting, repentance, and self-control. [George, T. (1994). Galatians (Vol. 30, p. 405). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]

The aorist verb ἐσταύρωσαν, since it identifies the crucifixion of the flesh in the Christian’s experience as being a past event but assigns that event to no specific time in the past, is best translated

as a perfect, “they have crucified”—i.e., a past event with present results or implications. [Longenecker, R. N. (1998). Galatians (Vol. 41, p. 264). Dallas: Word, Incorporated.]

When Paul said earlier Χριστῷ συνεσταύρωμαι (2:19), he meant that the cross of Christ severed his relation to the law; here he says that the cross of Christ severs believers’ relation to the ‘flesh’. For Paul, as we have seen already, the law and the flesh belong to the same pre-Christian order. But the cross of Christ severed Paul’s relation to the law only as he himself was ‘crucified with Christ’, thus becoming ‘dead to the law’ that he might live to God; so also the cross severs the relation of believers in general to the flesh only as they reckon themselves to have been crucified in the historical crucifixion of Christ. The crucifixion of the former self-centered ego, that it may be replaced by the new Christ-centered mind—“it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (2:20)—is not materially different from the crucifixion of the flesh, that it may be replaced by a Spirit-imparted life and a Spirit-directed conduct. [Bruce, F. F. (1982). The Epistle to the Galatians: a commentary on the Greek text (p. 256). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.]

Those who belong to Christ, then, those who acknowledge his lordship in no merely formal way, have made a clean break with what they formerly were; they have been delivered from the ‘present evil age’ (1:4) and have become members of the new creation (6:15). It is the cross of Christ that makes this clean break. [Ibid. (p. 256).]

Have crucified the flesh is a strategic statement to grasp, because crucifixion was a means of execution. All but four uses of the term in the New Testament refer to the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Three of the exceptions help in understanding the fourth, which is in the present text.

The first of the three is in the book of Romans, where Paul affirms that at the time of

our justification, “our old self was crucified with [Christ]” (6:6). The other two are in Galatians, one before and one after the present text. The apostle says, “I have been crucified with Christ” (2:20), and, near the end of the epistle, asserts that “the world has been crucified to me” (6:14).

In each of those three passages, “crucified” is simply a vivid and dramatic way to say “killed,” or “executed.” In the first two passages Paul is teaching that at salvation his old, sinful, unregenerate self was executed and he was born a new man in Christ Jesus. In the third passage he is saying that the world has been executed and is now dead to him, so that it is no longer his master, holding him in bondage. He is therefore now free to serve the Lord.

Obviously, in none of those passages does Paul mean to imply that the crucifixion analogy carries the idea of total death, in which all influence ceases. Sin was still a reality in his life, and so was the temptation of the world. But there was a sense in which the power of the old self and of the world was broken. Those influences no longer dominated him. [MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1983). Galatians (p. 170). Chicago: Moody Press.]

The verb “keep in step with” (στοιχέω) is found only four other times in the NT, three of them in Paul (Acts 21:24; Rom 4:12; Gal 6:16; Phil 3:16). It is in the same semantic range as the verb “walk” (περιπατέω), and it emphasizes that believers should continue to stay in line with the Spirit. ... here Paul contrasts the new creation life of the Spirit with the old creation of the elements. Believers enjoy life in the Spirit now, but they must continue to march in tune with the Spirit. Life in the Spirit is not on automatic pilot, for the battle against the flesh continues (5:17), so that believers must continue to walk by the Spirit (5:16) and be led by the Spirit (5:18). [Schreiner, T. R. (2010). Galatians (pp. 356–357). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.]