

THE BATTLE AGAINST THE SELF: HOW PHILOSOPHY, SCRIPTURE, AND
PHYSIOLOGY AFFECT SELF-DISCIPLINE

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ABSTRACT

As mankind's culture has shifted throughout history, the conflict of worldly culture and Christianity has always remained. However, in today's culture we have seen a slight shift in how culture forms identity. No longer does community put restrictions on what is acceptable and what is not. Instead, the individual now places those restrictions on themselves. This has led to more self-indulgence than we have ever seen before. This paper aims to explain that shift in how one finds their identity, what Scripture has to say about the battle against the flesh, and how living a life according to the Spirit benefits the physical flesh far more than the philosophy of our modern culture.

INTRODUCTION

It's no secret that 21st century America is living in an age of indulgence. For the most part, we have everything we could ever need. Roofs over our heads, endless amounts of food on our plates, endless options of clothing, entertainment of any kind at our fingertips – if you want it, you can have it. Instant gratification is something we have come to expect. If pleasure was as simple as pressing a button – which it basically is – today's culture encourages pressing that button as many times as you possibly can. Looking at all that we have in America, you would think that there would not be any problems, but the opposite has turned out to be true. Instead of certainty and security, people seem to be lacking direction, and insecurity seems to be higher than it has ever been. Even in a world that is prepared and able to meet our every need, to satisfy our every desire, we live in a world filled with pain, anger, and emptiness.

As Christians, we have the perfect antidote to these overabundances. We have Christ, who filled a void that our world never could. We have Christ, who gave us purpose, direction, and satisfaction for our sins. We have everything we need, but that does not mean that we live outside of this world where indulgence and self-gratification are at the forefront. In fact, one of our greatest enemies in the battle against temptation is constantly with us. The battle that we all face every day is the battle against the self.

While as Christians we recognize that the battle against the self is one that needs to be fought daily, there are several philosophers that experienced and portrayed the self in a far different light. The picture that the sinful world gives of this battle against the self is not a battle

at all. Instead, the self is portrayed as a *friend*, not as an enemy. This is evident in the teachings of several prominent philosophers but is also evident to us as Christians who struggle against the sinful flesh and its selfish desires daily. This paper will explore a few secular philosophers who have tracked the way different cultures have behaved and, through their observations, produced works on what it means to be a human being. Regardless of the philosopher or philosophy, it is clear that the same flaw comes out in each of their ideas: the ultimate fulfillment of what it means to be human is *self*-fulfillment.¹

It can be a daunting task to look at what has become of our world and wonder how a Christian can continue to deny himself when the message that he is constantly hearing from the world is to indulge himself. The key lies in Christianity's message and the resulting Christian identity.

This paper seeks to communicate two key points: First, it aims to communicate that the spiritual response to the gospel is to obey God's command out of gratitude for his love. Second, it aims to offer practical ways to say no to the flesh by having an understanding of our physiology. The aim is to communicate this by exposing the philosophies and lies of the sinful world, by showing how the gospel truth counters a selfish message, and by equipping the reader with a better understanding of how our physiology works as they are eager to master the self and make the body a slave to righteousness. With the freedom that comes from Christ's redemption, the number of ways a Christian might battle the flesh is endless. Hopefully, by reading this paper, more paths are opened for how we might battle the self and serve Christ with our bodies.

1. It would be hard to make the argument that everyone who is not a Christian only seeks self-promotion and self-advancement. However, as we look at secular philosophies, it is fairly clear that the goal of humanity is to find *self*-fulfillment, rather than to find the fulfillment *given* to us in Christ. While not everyone's philosophy includes self-promotion and self-advancement, as we look at the philosophy of the cultural West, I think it would be hard to deny that most philosophies which are taught and lived out are self-centered.

PART 1: THE PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE OF THE MODERN MAN

If someone took a quick look at the world that we live in today, it would not take them very long to conclude that we live in a world where the goal for most individuals is to satisfy their every desire, to think first and foremost about themselves, and to establish that our “god” should dwell within us. Satisfy the self, and you have satisfied the very essence of what it means to have a fulfilled life. A key source in evaluating this Western line of thinking was *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* by Carl Trueman. While Trueman’s focus is on the sexual revolution, he displays an in-depth understanding and knowledge of philosophy, culture, and events that help paint a clearer picture for his readers of how we got to the point that we are at today.² In his chapter on “reimagining the self,” he highlights the thoughts of one of the greatest 20th century philosophers, Charles Taylor, who narrates the movement of the Western worldview from one that is mimetic to one that is poietic. Put simply, a mimetic worldview looks at the world as having a given order and meaning. Therefore, mimesis implies that human beings are expected to discover the meaning within their culture and conform themselves to it. On the other hand, a poietic worldview sees the world as an open canvas with almost an unlimited amount of material, out of which meaning and purpose can be created by the individual.³

2. Entire forests have been cut down exploring the topics of philosophy and culture. While I could walk through Trueman’s book and track how Western worldview has morphed throughout the years, my goal is to show that the worldview we have today is indeed one of self-gratification and indulgence.

3. Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020), 39.

Signs of this poietic perspective's dominance in modern culture are evident all around us. One of the more obvious examples that Trueman gives is the advancement of medical technology and the ability to shape the world, including even our biology, to our imagination. The average American citizen no longer has to conform to their immediate local context. Instead, if they so desire, they can go online and portray, or even create, their life however they wish. What technology has done to isolate the individual from their local community is profound, because it allows individuals to curate their reality to themselves and the world to however *they* see fit.

The struggle against the self is evident in both a mimetic and poietic culture, but it makes sense why Taylor is seeing more of a shift towards the poietic in today's society. In looking at how this poietic culture makes the sinful self more of a friend than a foe, it is important that an attempt is made to explain an elusive term: culture.

Culture

Culture may have a variety of meanings depending on whom you talk to or what you read. This is what makes it such an elusive term, but for the most part, the common understanding of culture is "the accumulation of behaviors and beliefs that characterize a group of people. It is comprised of the attitudes, symbols, language, rewards, expectations, customs, and values that define the experience and context of those people."⁴

4. George Barna, *Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary* (Wheaton: Tyndale Momentum, 2012), 108.

However, as one looks at how culture has become a crutch in helping the sinful flesh, the 20th century philosopher Philip Rieff gives us a more pointed definition of culture. While his understanding of culture involves all the ideas of the basic definition just mentioned, he includes a perspective that might help us understand why our poetic culture makes self-denial hard and self-indulgence obvious. Rieff understood culture to be found not through what a society does or how it acts, but rather through what it forbids.⁵ He therefore sees culture as something that gives direction to the individual by showing them what is unacceptable. In a traditional culture, the community would define what is unacceptable, and so the individual would be directed by *communal* activities. It is through these communal activities that individuals find their true selves.⁶ As Rieff explains what a traditional culture does, he writes, “Culture is another name for a design of motives directing the self outward, toward those communal purposes in which alone the self can be realized and satisfied.”⁷ So, by looking outward, an individual’s values are formed. To put it simply, an individual expresses himself by trying to find acceptance within their community, a community that has rules and guidelines more so about what is forbidden rather than what is accepted.⁸

In the battle against the self and giving in to selfish desires, this additional perspective on culture is helpful, especially when we look at how Rieff categorizes culture and tracks its evolution. As will be noted, these communal restrictions that shape the individual give way to

5. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 43.

6. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 43.

7. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, 40th anniversary ed. (Wilmington, Del: ISI Books, 2006), 3.

8. This also the view that Freud held regarding culture. “Sigmund Freud believed that culture/civilization was the result of prohibitions. The essential culture of a society is determined by the things that it forbids and how it forbids them.” Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 43.

the individual shaping those restrictions himself. Before exploring the impact of this shift, it is important to point out that the battle against the self was still prevalent in a mimetic, or traditional, culture. Even as one's identity was shaped by communal restrictions, the promotion and advancement of the self was still a sinful struggle. If it was not, then there would not be the countless exploitations, betrayals, murders, wars, and polemics that we see as we look back on history. But as we have shifted from a traditional (mimetic) culture to a modern (poietic) culture, we will notice how the power to make and abide by restrictions shifts from the hands of the community to the individual.⁹

Holding to this understanding of culture, Rieff dives into the different ways that he categorizes culture – as first, second, and third-world cultures. To put it simply, first and second-world cultures rely on something outside of self to set boundaries. First-world cultures rely on fate (e.g. the Oracle at Delphi or other mythological belief systems) and second-world cultures rely on faith (e.g. Christianity). Third-world cultures do not rely on anything transcendent but *only* refer to self. Trueman states it simply, “Third worlds, by way of stark contrast to the first and second worlds, do not root their cultures, their social orders, their moral imperatives in anything sacred. They do have to justify themselves, but they cannot do so on the basis of something sacred or transcendent. Instead, they have to do so on the basis of themselves.”¹⁰

The implications of a third-world culture, which Rieff details and argues for, are enormous. If we live in a third-world culture, then our boundaries have no basis except for what gives us a subjective sense of well-being. In trying to trace the evolution of culture, Rieff comes

⁹ As we battle against the self, this shift in culture has only given the sinful flesh more freedom. It is interesting how the pastoral focus has shifted over the years from working on communal activities to a focus on building and nurturing relationships with individuals.

10. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 76.

up with a way to track how mankind's worldview has evolved through labeling the cultures in which mankind lived. These are not new kinds of culture. Rieff is simply attempting to demonstrate the various ways in which mankind's identity has been shaped throughout history. Notice how it shifts from something communal to something that is found within the individual.

First, Rieff says that there was the political man – the man who finds his identity in the activities in which he engages in the public life of the *polis* (e.g. Aristotle in the Areopagus).¹¹ Second, he says that the political man gave way to the religious man – someone who found his primary sense of self in his involvement in religious activities: attending mass, celebrating feast days, taking part in religious processions, etc. (e.g. Catholicism in the Middle Ages).¹² Then, the religious man gave way to the economic man who found his sense of self in his economic activity: trade, production, and the making of money (e.g. Karl Marx).¹³ And finally, there is the player that Rieff argues we have up to today – the psychological man. Trueman states that the psychological man is “a type characterized not so much by finding identity in outward-directed activities as was true for the previous types but rather in the inward quest for personal psychological happiness.”¹⁴

On Rieff's historical development of this psychological type of self, Trueman makes the point that Rieff's scheme is far too simplistic. The idea that one can chart human history through

11. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 44.

12. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 44.

13. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 45

14. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 45

the rise and fall of these four distinct types of human beings is far-fetched at best.¹⁵ Still,

Trueman shows that Rieff has a convincing argument, culturally speaking, when he writes,

Nevertheless, if the historical scheme is greatly oversimplified, the significance of the rise of psychological categories as the dominant factor in how Westerners think of themselves and who they consider themselves to be is surely a persuasive insight. One does not need to agree with Rieff on how society came to be dominated by the therapeutic¹⁶ to agree with him that such domination did emerge in the latter part of the twentieth century and currently shows no sign of abating.¹⁷

What this shift to a third-world culture and psychological self means is significant. Rieff saw two historic reversals underlying this new world of the psychological man. First was the understanding of therapy. Instead of the therapist helping their patient grasp their role within the nature of the community in order to socialize an individual, the role of a therapist is to protect the patient from “the kind of harmful neuroses that society itself creates through its smothering of the individual’s ability simply to be herself.”¹⁸ The second reversal lies within the commitment of the individual. In a first or second-world culture, the commitment was outwardly directed toward the community to which one belonged (e.g. the church, the assembly, a union, etc.). In a third-world culture, in the world of the psychological man, the commitment is first and foremost to the self and is inwardly directed.¹⁹ Looking at these two reversals, Trueman explains how Rieff concludes that outward institutions become in effect the servants of the individual and her sense of inner well-being.²⁰

15. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 45.

16. Therapeutic – beliefs, practices, and institutions that center on and cater to mental rather than physical.

17. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 45–46.

18. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 47-48.

19. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 48-49.

20. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 49.

The premise of Trueman's book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, is to explain why a statement such as "I am a man trapped inside a woman's body" makes sense today. In doing so he explores the philosophies of philosophers such as Rieff, along with Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, Taylor, Rousseau, and other prominent philosophers of the past couple of centuries to create a roadmap of how the modern self has transformed from looking outward to looking inward and how we went from a mimetic worldview to a poietic one. But you do not have to be fluent in the language and knowledge of these philosophers to see that our culture has shifted from a second-world culture to a third-world culture, where restrictions to the self come from the self. One of the easiest ways to show this is to simply look at how self-indulgence has affected our society in the last forty years. Dr. Anna Lembke, who is a professor of psychology at the University of Stanford, makes the following observation.

We are all at risk of titillating ourselves to death. Seventy percent of world global deaths are attributable to modifiable behavioral risk factors like smoking, physical inactivity, and diet. The leading global risks for mortality are high blood pressure (13 percent), tobacco use (9 percent), high blood sugar (6 percent), physical inactivity (6 percent), and obesity (5 percent). In 2013, an estimated 2.1 billion adults were overweight, compared with 857 million in 1980. There are now more people worldwide, except in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, who are obese than who are underweight. Rates of addiction are rising the world over... Global deaths from addiction have risen in all age groups between 1990 and 2017, with more than half the deaths occurring in people younger than fifty years of age.²¹

Yet the psychological self has not kept itself within the realm of the unbelieving world. It has also worked its way into the religious landscape. In his book *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, Ross Douthat makes the following observation when exploring "God Within" literature. He writes, "There are frequent calls to 'compassion' and 'kindness,' but little

21. Anna Lembke, *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence* (New York: Dutton, 2021), 49.

guidance for people facing actual dilemmas. And what guidance there is often amounts to ‘if it feels good, do it.’”²²

When looking at the battle against the self, the sinful flesh has always pushed for the self to be obliged, whether that was within a traditional society or a modern one. However, when we look at how culture has morphed from mimetic to poietic, we see how the self has gained even more freedom to do what it pleases within today’s society. It is important that as Christians we recognize this in our battle against the sinful flesh and the sinful world. Thankfully, we know that the battle against the self is not hopeless; in fact, it has already been won.

22. Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, 1. Free Press hardcover ed. (New York: Free Press, 2012), 228.

PART 2: A SCRIPTURAL SOLUTION TO THE SPIRITUAL PROBLEM

From the very beginning, it has been clear that man's greatest concern has been "me, myself, and I." Shortly after creation, mankind had a desire to be like God, to do what they thought was best for them, and so they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result, the flesh became sinful, a trait that was passed down from generation to generation. As was explored in the last section, it is clear – maybe today more than ever – that mankind's attitude has only steepened, and that desire for "self above all else" remains at the forefront of modern thinking. To us as Christians, this is no surprise. David's words ring true: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5). Before we were called to faith through the gospel, we were dead in our sins as the rest of the world. Even more, we were slaves to sin. By looking specifically at Ephesians 2:1–10, along with other parts of Scripture, we see what God's Word says about the state of the unbelieving self, how we were delivered from slavery to sin, and the life we now live according to the Spirit. This is vital in understanding the battle against the self and how the gospel changes our gaze from inward to outward.

The State of the Unbelieving Self

"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now

at work in those who are disobedient” (Eph 2:1–2 NIV 2011)²³. The result of the fall into sin did not just mean physical death, but spiritual and eternal death. The trait that has been passed down from Adam onward is a trait that permeates our entire being, making us captive to sin and the desires of the flesh. Paul emphasizes this when he continues, “All of us also lived among them at one time, *gratifying the cravings of our flesh* and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were *by nature* deserving of wrath”²⁴ (Eph 2:3). As we look at a world that is strictly concerned about the self, we see a world that is enslaved to sin, deserving of God’s wrath. This slavery to sin means “freedom” from God’s restrictions or commandments. We can use Paul’s letter to the Romans as a commentary on this verse. In Romans 1, Paul writes,

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done... Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them (vv. 28, 32).

These verses from Ephesians and Romans show that the sinful nature desires what a third-world culture calls for: the complete freedom for the flesh to set its own boundaries and restrictions.

These verses also point to the psychological captivity that was explored in the last part of this paper. They show that the cultural shift is of no surprise. Mankind, from the moment they are born, has a hostile mind towards God.²⁵ John P. Koehler connects Paul’s words to the world’s psychological process in his commentary on Ephesians. He writes,

The way the apostle handles these terms²⁶ shows his observations of the psychological processes of ethical death as well as of spiritual life. The lusts, ἐπιθυμία, of the flesh

23. Unless noted otherwise, the NIV 2011 will be the translation that is used throughout the rest of the paper.

24. Emphasis is my own.

25. Romans 8:7.

26. Koehler is referring to “spirit” and “flesh.”

represent the deepest stirrings of sin in the heart, which show the source of conscious aberrations in thought, word, and deed and also the abyss of corruption. These sinful impulses crystallize into acts of the will, and the plural, *θελήματα*, indicates at the same time the thriving activity of this lower life in the direction of evil... The body shares in the lusts, and from that source and from the life of thought therein, the impulses crystallize into acts of volition. That is how the apostle portrays the utter perplexity and helplessness of corrupted human nature in coping with the monsters of sin and death.²⁷

Paul makes it clear that while the world is concerned with the desires of the flesh, this way of thinking leads only to death. Not only is it the opposite of what God wants, but it is deserving of God's wrath.

Looking back at Romans 1, Paul also notes how this line of thinking is not only prevalent but also encouraged in the unbelieving world. Again, verse 32 reads, "Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." Not only does sin permeate the whole of our flesh, but the desires of the flesh are also advertised all around us. It is no wonder that the world thinks the way that it does. It is no wonder that slavery to sin is impossible to escape on our own.

Furthermore, the world is less than helpless before God. It is not as if it has the desire to please God but is unable to. The sinful flesh hates God. Paul writes, "The mind governed by the flesh is *hostile* to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh *cannot* please God" (Rom 8:7–8). More than that, "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit" (1 Cor 2:14). Even if someone knows the entirety of Scripture, what God desires, and how to live a godly life,

27. John Philipp Koehler, *A Commentary on Galatians: And, Paul's Rhapsody in Christ: A Commentary on Ephesians* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2000), 277.

the one who is a slave to sin refuses and hates to do what God wills as good. This is the attitude of the flesh. If something does not work to the advantage of our desires or puts restraints on them, the self sees it as foolish and wants nothing to do with it.

Scripture shows that the sinful flesh is permeated with sin, seeking self, and deserving of God's wrath. This has been true ever since the fall, regardless of the culture or time that mankind has lived. However, as we have shifted toward a culture where it is up to the individual to set their own boundaries, it does seem as if the enemy of the self is more prominent today than it ever has been. Still, whether one is in a first, second, or third world culture, it does not change what Scripture clearly states: the battle against the sinful flesh and the glorification of the self is one that mankind is powerless to win on their own. Thankfully, God stepped in and destroyed sin for us.

Deliverance from Self

After Paul opens up Ephesians 2 by talking about how mankind was dead to sin before conversion and how the sinful flesh desires to gratify itself by seeking the things of the sinful world, he continues by summarizing why and how God rescued us from eternal death. Professor Daniel Deutschlander uses Ephesians 2:4,5,8, and 9 to show that the faith of mankind, which promises us deliverance from death, was given to us strictly because of God's grace. He writes, "Faith is not a human rational choice; it is the gift of God from beginning to end, as is everything

else that has to do with our salvation.”²⁸ He then highlights this by quoting the verses from

Ephesians:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this [*everything that has to do with salvation, including faith*]²⁹ not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph 2:4,5,8,9).

Paul makes the solution to our dilemma abundantly clear. He takes the focus off of what the sinful world sees as wise and puts the focus on the message of foolishness that is Christ crucified.³⁰ Through his powerful Word, God brings us to faith in him. Through baptism, he makes us his own. Through the Lord’s Supper, he personally comes to us, strengthening our faith and forgiving our sins. In these means of grace, we see how it is God who does all the work. And it is through the means of grace that we learn about God’s mercy for us. And how rich God’s mercy is. What we were helpless to do, Christ did for us. Koehler puts it well when he says,

The splendor of these three phases of mercy appears all the more lustrous since no cause for it could be found in us, having been quickened while we were yet sinners, that is, dead in sin. The exceeding greatness of his grace becomes apparent when the love of God is contrasted with the wrath that was our due, which love is then emphasized by this that God loved us while we were yet sinners when he gave up Christ to die (Ro 5:8). Such love is grace, and grace is the highest order of love bestowed.³¹

“No cause for salvation could be found in us.” Out of love, God sent his Son to live a perfect life for us and suffer the punishment of our sins. The doctrine of original sin and salvation through faith alone, which are both found here in Ephesians 2, are crucial for understanding the battle

28. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015), 202.

29. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 202.

30. 1 Corinthians 1:18.

31. Koehler, *Ephesians*, 282.

against the self. Since we were sinful from birth, empty of anything that was pleasing to God, there was nothing in us that could fight against the self or turn the sinful flesh from the sinner's best friend into the saint's worst enemy. Yet, as these verses from Ephesians show, it is God who, in his rich mercy, made us alive with Christ. It is only because of God's love that there is a battle being fought within us at all. And it is because of Christ and what his Word tells us that we can be confident in the outcome: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

The Battle Within

What lies at the heart of our salvation is also what lies at the heart of our sanctification and the battle against the flesh: the cross. At the cross of Christ, we see both the law and the gospel in full. We see the sins of the world punished as they deserve, and we see Jesus take that punishment in our place. What we see at the cross is also what is at the heart of our battle with the flesh. When we fail to treat the sinful flesh as an enemy and instead indulge it as a friend, we are driven to see our need for a Savior again and again. And as we are driven back to the foot of the cross, we look up and see our Savior who tells us our sins are forgiven. It is the power of the gospel message that leads us to say with Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the *power* of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16).

The longer we battle the flesh, the more the cross comes into focus for us. As we mature in our faith, the gospel lens that we wear gains clarity as does our awareness of how sinful we are. As we make use of the means of grace in Word and sacrament, the more our appreciation grows for what our God has done. As the power of the gospel grants us salvation, it also affects

our lives of sanctification, causing us to *want* to obey what God has commanded of us. Professor Deutschlander states it well:

The better we know our need for the Savior and the better we know the beauty of his grace and blessing in the gospel, so much the more will we be motivated to love the law of the Lord and so much the more will we strive to live according to it. For it is God's will that we follow and obey the moral law. He plainly declares it so often in his Word.³²

He continues by referring to one of the places where the Lord declares it in his Word, the same place this thesis has focused on: Ephesians 2:8–10. Deutschlander continues,

One of the most beautiful passages teaching salvation by grace alone through faith has a call to live a life of good works attached immediately to it. St. Paul says, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph 2:8–10).”

In Ephesians 2, Paul shows us that the faith God grants us *through the gospel* not only affects our salvation but our lives of sanctification too. Faith results in both passive righteousness and, naturally, active righteousness.

The new man with his heart of faith can see that the life of a Christian is far different from that of the old man. By remaining in the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacrament, God continues to work through the power of the gospel by driving us back to the cross. It is at the cross that we take our eyes off of ourselves and instead look to Christ. And it is because of the cross that we live a life with the flesh as an enemy instead of a friend. It is because of the cross that we continue to battle the self day in and day out.

The battle against the flesh is something the Christian must recognize as a reality in their lives of sanctification. It is a battle that the Christian readily equips himself for by willingly living as a slave to Christ who freed him from his slavery to sin. Part of this freedom from sin

32. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 240.

means that we can in turn enslave the flesh. While the battle against the flesh is spiritual, there are physical aspects to it. After all, it is the sin we commit in the physical flesh that reveals to us our need for a Savior. The Christian understands that the battle they fight includes a battle against the body and making the self a slave to Christ as well. We must understand that the body is something that needs to be put under control.

Scripture and Self-Control

The desires of the flesh are the weapons that Satan uses against us. Almost every sinful behavior that Paul warns us about concerns the gratifying of the flesh or giving into selfish desires. He gives several examples: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like (Gal 5:19–21). As we look at the unbelieving world, we see a world that is defenseless against Satan’s attacks and regularly falls into such behaviors, but we do not have to look very far to see that Satan is always close and looking to devour us as well. As Peter writes, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8). In contrast with a selfish philosophy that says, “Do what you want, when you want,” Paul makes it clear that the philosophy of Scripture is much different. In Galatians 5 he writes, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you

want. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and *self-control*” (vv. 17, 22, and 23).³³

Scripture makes it clear that the life we are to lead as Christians in light of Christ’s love for us involves self-control. In 1 Timothy Paul says, “For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and *self-discipline*” (v. 7). In his first letter Peter writes, “Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to *abstain* from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul” (v. 11). In his letter to Titus, Paul states, “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live *self-controlled*, upright and godly lives in this present age” (vv. 11–12). Scripture clearly states that the war against the flesh involves having self-discipline.

Up to this point, I have communicated a harsh view of the unbelieving world. But I would be remiss to look over how there are plenty of people in the unbelieving world who have good self-discipline. It is nigh on impossible to have a successful life in the eyes of the world without having at least some discipline. While their aim of self-fulfillment is much different than that of Christians, it is evident enough to all people, believers, and unbelievers alike, that a life without discipline would have disastrous consequences. God has given every human being a conscience that accuses even the unbeliever when they do not live according to the law that is written on our hearts. He has shown that there are temporal consequences to sin as well. Were someone to break the fifth commandment by indulging in everything that gratifies the flesh, whether it be overeating, overdrinking, taking drugs, sexual carelessness, or any number of other

33. These verses are from the NIV 1984 translation. The rest of the verses cited will be from the NIV 2011 unless otherwise noted.

indulgences, there would be a physical consequence to those practices (diabetes, liver failure, chemical dependency, STDs, etc.).

Common sense tells us that discipline is necessary, but there is plenty of science that backs this up too. These sciences, especially sciences having to do with physiology and psychology, evaluate a variety of behaviors and whether they are beneficial or not. In evaluating these behaviors, there have been several practices that have been followed to help avoid falling into the trap of indulgence, a trap that both believers and unbelievers struggle against. Take addiction for example. Both the psychiatrist and the pastor would not suggest that the addict should simply wean themselves off of their drug or behavior.³⁴ In most cases, a psychiatrist is going to push for complete abstinence from the drug or behavior of choice. In all cases, the pastor is going to call for repentance, the turning away from sin, and trust in their Savior. Again, all sin is a spiritual matter, but we see that there are plenty of sins that affect us physically and psychologically as well.

As we continue to look at the battle against the flesh and gaining control of the body, 1 Peter 5 is a good place to turn back to. Before warning us of the enemy that looks to devour us, Peter tells us to be alert and of sober mind.³⁵ To be alert and of sober mind means that we are to be in full control of ourselves so that we do not act foolishly, and so that we are anticipating the devil's every move.³⁶ This specifically calls for us to be alert for the enemy that we face as we strive to reach the goal by holding onto Christ. In speaking of reaching the goal, Paul uses this

34. This is true for the most part. There are addictions in which it is deadly to quit "cold turkey" such as *severe* alcoholism (drinking to the point of dependance for functionality), a heroin addiction, or something else that would lead to death or permanent bodily damage.

35. 1 Peter 5:8.

36. David P. Kuske, *A Commentary on 1 & 2 Peter, Jude* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015), 248.

exact language to highlight the need for self-discipline. As unbelievers are disciplined in striving towards their goal, so too must believers be disciplined in order to hold fast to the victory that has been won for us by Jesus. Paul talks about this self-discipline by using the metaphor of a runner training for and running a race. In 1 Corinthians 9, he writes,

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (vv. 24–27).

Paul makes it clear that self-discipline involves denying the sinful flesh or even experiencing pain to stay on the path and not lose the crown of heaven. He is willing to experience this pain and denial of the flesh because of the motivation he has in light of the gospel. Paul recognized the art and the *power* of the means of grace in law and gospel. He knew that indulging the flesh and treating his sinful flesh as a friend would lead to being cut off from God's grace, and that thought is rightfully terrifying. As we strive to enslave the flesh, we also recognize the seriousness of sin and are eager to cling to Christ, no matter the cost.

As we battle the flesh and cling to Christ, we also recognize the art and the power of the means of grace in law and gospel. We also recognize that the battle is against the sinful *flesh*, which oftentimes quite literally involves our physical flesh. This leads us to a key question: Can understanding how our bodies work help in thinking through practical ways to say no to the flesh and maintain self-control?

Before we explore this question, it would be good to summarize what has been discussed thus far in this part. Scripture clearly shows that the new man has a different motivation in holding the sinful flesh as an enemy instead of a friend. This battle against the flesh was impossible for us to have in the first place, as man is naturally dead in sin from birth. To save us

from our slavery to sin, death, and the devil God sent his one and only Son to make the payment for our sin and suffer the punishment that we deserved. We were saved by grace alone through faith. We did not participate in our salvation in any way. As redeemed children of God, we now live our lives in accordance with the Spirit. Even the good works that we do are not from ourselves but are a gift from God. While we have been freed from sin and our salvation has been won for us through faith in Christ, that does not mean that we live without the sinful flesh while we are here on this earth. An important part of battling the flesh is self-discipline. This is something that even the unbelieving world has recognized as there are physical consequences to self-indulgence. In mastering the flesh, the question that will be explored is whether or not understanding how our bodies work can help in thinking through practical ways to say no to the flesh.

PART 3: PHYSIOLOGY, DOPAMINE, AND TEMPTATION

In light of the gospel, we joyously look for opportunities to give glory to God in all that we do even if that means abstaining from pleasures to maintain control over our sinful desires. As we looked at in the previous section, Paul gladly deals blows to the body so that he might finish the race that is marked out for him. He also draws a comparison between the rigorous training required for a race aimed at winning a temporary reward and the work we put into securing our hold on the eternal crown that Jesus has already won for us. We gladly take up this work so that we might experience the eternal joys of heaven.

Before looking at whether or not a better understanding of our physiology can help us in thinking through practical ways to say no to the flesh, it is important to emphasize again that our ultimate tool and power lies with the Word. It was God's all-powerful Word that worked faith in our hearts, and it is his Word that assures us that our sins are forgiven and that our salvation has already been won. As Peter writes in his second letter,

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that *through them* you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Pet 1:3–4)

The goal of this section is not to replace the means of grace or suggest that aspects of our physiology are a means of grace. However, I will make the case that by having a better understanding of our physiology, we can have a better understanding of temptation and use that understanding as we seek to resist temptation and maintain self-control. As you read, I think you

will find that many of the points that will be made resonate as common sense and that even though the practices and concepts are not necessarily spiritual, much of what is suggested lines up with walking in accordance with the Spirit. As Christians, this makes sense. We are creatures that were made in the image of God at creation and so living in accordance with God's will, while not always giving us immediate pleasure, also means that our bodies function at their best when leading a God-pleasing life.

There is almost an endless list of physiological points and practices that could be explored concerning this topic. Whether it be diet, exercise, sleep, psychology, bodily functions, sexuality, or something else, we do all things to the glory of God. Anyone could look into best practices in each area if they wanted to, but one aspect of our physiology that is involved in nearly everything we do is a molecule known as dopamine. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that is responsible for movement, motivation, and drive, and it is the key aspect of our physiology that will be explored.³⁷

What Dopamine Is, What It Does, and How It Functions

What is dopamine? Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that is involved in reward processing.³⁸ How does a neurotransmitter work? To help understand the function of a neurotransmitter, Dr. Anna Lembke³⁹ compares a neurotransmitter to a baseball. She writes,

37. Andrew Huberman, "Controlling Your Dopamine For Motivation, Focus & Satisfaction," Huberman Lab, September 27, 2021.

38. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 48.

39. Anna Lembke is a psychiatrist and the chief of the Addiction Medicine Dual Diagnosis Clinic at Stanford University School of Medicine. She specifically treats patients struggling with addiction.

The main functional cells of the brain are called neurons. They communicate with each other at synapses via electrical signals and neurotransmitters. Neurotransmitters are like baseballs. The pitcher is the presynaptic neuron. The catcher is the postsynaptic neuron. The space between pitcher and catcher is the synaptic cleft. Just as the ball is thrown between pitcher and catcher, neurotransmitters bridge the distance between neurons: chemical messengers regulating electrical signals in the brain.⁴⁰

Since dopamine is among the most important neurotransmitters in reward processing, it follows that dopamine is what is released whenever we feel pleasure or pain. While it plays an important role in experiencing pleasure, it has another more prominent function as well. That function is motivation. As Dr. Lembke puts it, “*Wanting* more than *liking*.”⁴¹

Aside from motivation and pleasure, dopamine is also used to measure the addictive potential of any drug.⁴² To help illustrate this, Dr. Andrew Huberman⁴³ describes what happens to our dopamine levels when someone ingests certain things or does certain activities, and you can see a correlation between dopamine levels and the addictive potential of each behavior. The more dopamine that is released and the faster it is released depending on the behavior that releases it, the more addictive the drug or behavior.⁴⁴ The study shows that chocolate increases dopamine levels by 50 percent, sex by 100 percent, nicotine by 150 percent, cocaine by 250 percent, and amphetamine by 1,000 percent.⁴⁵ Dr. Lembke makes an important point in laying

40. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 47.

41. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 49. To illustrate her point, Lembke uses the example of genetically engineered mice in a laboratory. When they bred the mice with a mutation that made them unable to make dopamine, the mice did not seek out food and starved to death even when food was placed just inches from their mouth. When the food was placed directly in their mouth, they would eat it and still seem to enjoy it. Wanting more than liking.

42. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 49.

43. Dr. Huberman is a professor of neurobiology and ophthalmology at Stanford University School of Medicine.

44. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 49.

45. Huberman, “Controlling Your Dopamine.”

this out when she writes, “This is not to say that *high-dopamine* substances literally contain dopamine. Rather, they trigger the release of dopamine in our brain’s reward pathway.”⁴⁶

When talking about dopamine, it is important to note that there is a baseline. To understand the baseline, it is important to understand that dopamine is a “noninfinite, yet renewable resource.”⁴⁷ And so, when talking about our dopamine baseline we want to think of the baseline as being a reservoir of dopamine – it is how full or empty our dopamine “pool” is.⁴⁸ An increase in the release of dopamine results in pleasure and an absence of dopamine results in pain. The brain wants there to be a balance of the two; it wants the dopamine levels to return to baseline. Dr. Lembke describes this concept with the imagery of a seesaw or balance scale. In a conversation that she has with Dr. Huberman, she says,

To me, one of the most significant findings in neuroscience in the last 75 years is that pleasure and pain are co-located. The same parts of the brain that process pleasure also process pain and they work like a balance. So, when we feel pleasure, our balance tips one way. When we feel pain, it tips in the opposite direction. And one of the overriding rules governing this balance is that it wants to stay level. So, it doesn’t want to remain tipped very long to pleasure or to pain. And with any deviation from neutrality, the brain will work very hard to restore a level balance, or what scientist call homeostasis. The way the brain does that is with any stimulus to one side there will be a tip in the equal and opposite amount to the other side.⁴⁹

In her book, *Dopamine Nation*, Dr. Lembke talks some more about this balance. When talking about the homeostasis that the brain wants to maintain, she speaks of what happens when we experience pleasure, saying that when our balance tips toward pleasure, powerful self-regulating

46. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 50.

47. Jocko Willink, “Andrew Huberman. Influence/Ownership Over Your Physiological Psychological Being,” Jocko Podcast, May 4, 2022. Quote is from Dr. Andrew Huberman.

48. Andrew Huberman, “Leverage Dopamine to Overcome Procrastination & Optimize Effort,” Huberman Lab, March 27, 2023.

49. Andrew Huberman, “Dr. Anna Lembke: Understanding & Treating Addiction,” Huberman Lab, August 16, 2021.

mechanisms kick into action to undo the sensation of pleasure and bring it level again. These mechanisms do not require conscious thought or an act of will. They just happen.⁵⁰

In sum, dopamine is a neurotransmitter that is released in the pursuit of pleasure. There is a level of dopamine that our brain wishes to maintain to have homeostasis. When we pursue and experience pleasure, dopamine is released in our brain which gives us a peak in dopamine. The more our balance tips, and the faster it tips, the more pleasure we feel.⁵¹ Once we have achieved that experience, our brain responds by self-regulating to bring us back down to our baseline levels. Dopamine and the balance of our dopamine levels show us how our pleasure and pain relate to the physiology of our bodies. By looking at the molecule of dopamine, we can see why we pursue experiences that please us. Dopamine also helps us gain a better understanding of how our physical flesh tempts us by craving the behaviors that bring us pleasure. It is important that we understand what dopamine is and why it matters so that we might gain a better understanding of the sinful flesh and think of practical ways to use dopamine to our advantage.

Why Dopamine Matters

All of this is significant when talking about addiction and goes a long way in explaining why someone would keep returning to a drug or behavior of choice. We all experience cravings after engaging in a behavior that pleases us. As Lays advertises about their potato chip, “No one can

50. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 51.

51. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 51.

eat just one.” The simple solution to this “pain” or withdrawal is to simply engage in the behavior again to keep experiencing that pleasure.⁵²

However, Dr. Lembke describes the problem with going back for more, saying,

With repeated exposure to the same or similar pleasure stimulus, the initial deviation to the side of pleasure gets weaker and shorter and the after response to the side of pain gets stronger and longer, a process scientists call *neuroadaptation*. That is, with repetition, our gremlins⁵³ get bigger, faster, and more numerous, and we need more of our drug of choice to get the same effect.⁵⁴

With repeated engagement in these pleasures, our baseline changes so that we need more and more in order to experience the same pleasure that we did the first time. However, the more that we engage in those behaviors, the more our brain reacts to bring us back to homeostasis. This reaction to bring us back to homeostasis can overcorrect and lead to dropping below baseline and getting stuck. It is like adding another child to one end of the seesaw: when we do come back down from pleasure, we dip below the baseline and become stuck on the side of pain, needing more of the drug or behavior just to reach a level balance again. This is the danger.

Lembke explains, “With prolonged, heavy drug use, the pleasure-pain balance eventually gets weighted to the side of pain. Our hedonic (pleasure) set point changes as our capacity to experience pleasure goes down and our vulnerability to pain goes up.”⁵⁵ Eventually it gets to the point where no matter how many “potato chips” we eat, we lose the ability to derive pleasure

52. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 53.

53. Lembke looks at the self-regulating mechanism as a bunch of gremlins that hop onto the pain side of the balance to bring it level again.

54. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 53.

55. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 54.

from them. Thus, we see the paradox of hedonism. “The pursuit of pleasure for its own sake, leads to *anhedonia*, which is the inability to enjoy pleasure of any kind.”⁵⁶

Dr. Lembke’s book is all about dopamine and addiction. In it, she shows why dopamine matters. If dopamine is what drives us to pursue the things that give us pleasure and we release too much of it too fast when we obtain what we desire, we fall into the risk of becoming trapped in our behavior just to feel normal. This is what happens with addicts. But you do not have to be an addict to see that dopamine also plays a role in falling into temptation’s trap. Dr. Lembke also points out how our world has made us all too likely to fall into this trap and why we have more addicts today than we ever have. She writes,

By raising our neural set point with repeated pleasures, we become endless strivers, never satisfied with what we have, always looking for more. But herein lies the problem. Human beings, the ultimate seekers, have responded too well to the challenge of pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. As a result, we’ve transformed the world from a place of scarcity to a place of overwhelming abundance... The net effect is that we now need more reward to feel pleasure, and less injury to feel pain.⁵⁷

This world has become one of plenty. All our bodily needs are met without seeming effort. With the click of a button, we can have food at our tables, clothes on our backs, and a roof over our heads. This has cultivated a community and culture where the goal is no longer survival, but simply to be happy. The result is that people, in their search for pleasure, have found nothing but temporal pleasure and lasting pain. The conclusion that Dr. Lembke comes to is, “The reason we’re all so miserable may be because we’re working so hard to avoid being miserable.”⁵⁸ Not surprisingly, she is not too far off. We as Christians know that this has been the case since the

56 . Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 57.

57. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 67.

58. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 46.

fall into sin. Our sinful flesh is inclined to pursue happiness in a self-serving fashion. This brings us back to the heart of the battle against the sinful self, and the need for both the law and the gospel in a Christian's life. When we treat the sinful flesh as our friend and indulge it, it will only result in us feeling lasting pain. Dr. Lembke's conclusion illuminates how failing to live a life in accordance with the Spirit leads to suffering, both spiritually and physically. This includes a physiological pain stemming from overindulgence in worldly behaviors.

The studies on dopamine lead us to see a physiological effect of our self-focused philosophy. This physical effect corresponds perfectly to the evil desires of the flesh to indulge. When the sinful flesh is mankind's best friend, the sinful flesh physically pushes us to indulge it with whatever it desires. Yet, as Dr. Lembke shows, this pursuit of pleasure does not last but rather leads people to feel miserable and trapped. Part of the reason Dr. Lembke writes this book is to help people understand what goes on behind addiction and, in doing so, help them find a better, healthier balance between pleasure and pain.⁵⁹ Throughout the book, she tells the stories of her patients and how she tries to go about helping them. Part of this process involves helping them understand what is happening in their brain so that they might be better equipped to fight their addiction. The other way she helps is by giving them specific practices to do. While most of us may not be addicts, understanding addiction and what is done to help those struggling with it may also help us practice self-control and flee when tempted ourselves.

59 . Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 2.

PART 4: RESETTING THE BALANCE

Just as dopamine can serve as a tool for temptation, understanding it can be helpful as we are eager to fight temptation. We know that dopamine plays a major role in motivation and drive, so much so that we would not be able to move at all if our dopamine was completely blocked.⁶⁰ We know that certain substances or behaviors result in the release of dopamine such as chocolate, sex, and nicotine. We know that our brain wants to maintain a baseline or level balance of dopamine. So, while we see that dopamine does play a role in our desire to feel pleasure, by understanding it we can be prepared for why we are tempted to fall into sin, and we can explore how this understanding of dopamine can play to our advantage as we strive to battle against the self.

Abstinence

“Here’s the good news. If we wait long enough, our brains (usually) readapt to the absence of the drug and we reestablish our baseline homeostasis: a level balance. Once our balance is level, we are again able to take pleasure in everyday, simple rewards.”⁶¹ It seems simple. It is simple.

60. See footnote 41. Parkinson’s disease is essentially losing the ability to create dopamine until one becomes paralyzed. “Parkinson’s Disease – Symptoms, Diagnosis and Treatment,” *American Association of Neurological Surgeons*, n.d.

61. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 57–58.

When dealing with addiction, the number one way to get back to “normal” is to refrain from the drug or behavior of choice for an extended time. For obviously harmful things, such as certain drugs, the goal would be to never use them again. However, there are a surprising number of addictions out there that are dangerous, but not obviously so. One such addiction that Dr. Lembke mentions is an addiction to drinking water.⁶² While talking about addiction and returning our dopamine levels to homeostasis, we can evaluate the areas that we are tempted in and see if complete abstinence is a necessary step forward.

Dr. Lembke uses an acronym for the steps that we can take once we make these evaluations. The acronym is unsurprisingly “dopamine.” The first step is to gather *data*. See how much you are engaging in a behavior. Once you have an honest understanding of how much you are participating in whatever behavior it is, you can look at what your *objectives* are in engaging in that behavior. In other words, it is important to look at the why behind the temptation or sin. From there, it is only natural to look at the *problems* that result from the choice behavior. What are the consequences? The next step is *abstinence*.⁶³

This brings us to the first practical suggestion. Dr. Lembke makes it clear that abstinence is almost always⁶⁴ a necessary step for an addict to recover. While the context is specifically addressing addiction, it again makes sense to look at how this would help the Christian in

62. Huberman, “Dr. Anna Lembke: Understanding & Treating Addiction.” While it seems strange, too much water can prove fatal or lead to delirium. This patient was administered to the hospital multiple times. Tragically, Lembke later mentions in the episode that this patient would engage in this behavior to get out of her own head and eventually committed suicide. Other addictions that would seem harmless in and of themselves would be video games, exercise, reading, and music. Yet, our pursuit for the pleasures they give us can drive us to constantly be searching for more to continually experience that pleasure and an addiction can form that takes over other aspects of our lives.

63. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 71–76.

64. The only exception would be if abstaining would cause actual physiological harm. Such instances would be a severe alcoholic or opioid addict quitting cold turkey, but for the most part there are few exceptions.

battling against the sinful flesh. She writes, “Abstinence is necessary to restore homeostasis, and with it our ability to get pleasure from less potent rewards, as well as see the true cause and effect between our substance use and the way we’re feeling.”⁶⁵ The amount of time that it takes for the brain to get back to homeostasis depends on the frequency of use and the potency of the substance or behavior in the release of dopamine. Unsurprisingly, a majority of her patients (80 percent) reported feeling much better after doing a “dopamine fast.” An important aspect of abstaining that she always lets her patients know before they start is that they will feel worse before they feel better.⁶⁶ After looking at dopamine and how it works, this makes sense as the cessation of use will result in dropping below dopamine baseline levels.⁶⁷

This leads into the next letter of the acronym which stands for *mindfulness*. Dr. Lembke defines the term simply as, “The ability to observe what our brain is doing while it’s doing it, without judgment.”⁶⁸ It is important to understand what is happening while it is happening. Understanding that our brain overcorrects and drives us below our baseline when we abstain may not take the pain away, but at least we can understand why we are feeling the way that we are. After abstaining for a long enough period, the goal is to come away with a level of *insight* that eluded us before. More often than not “the simple exercise of abstaining from our [behavior] of choice for at least four weeks gives clarifying insight into our behaviors.”⁶⁹ By seeing what life is like without falling into the same sin over and over again and what it is like to maintain self-

65. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 77.

66. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 77–80.

67. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 81.

68. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 82.

69. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 85.

control, we can have a more positive outlook on life going forward and be better prepared to deal with temptation in the future.

This leads to the next two letters of the acronym: *next steps* and *experiment*.⁷⁰ After gaining insight and regaining a restored homeostasis, one can come up with a plan for what the next steps should be. Maybe it is continued abstinence, which would be our goal as Christians if the behavior involves sin. Maybe it is moderation. This could be an option if the behavior or substance is less severe or was not sinful to begin with but rather became sinful with how it took over someone's life.

While the goal of abstinence is simple and clear, that does not make it any easier to achieve. Even with a good understanding of what happens when we resist temptation, that does not make the temptation magically go away. There is still going to be a battle taking place, and that will always be the case, but there are simple ways in which one can make the journey towards abstinence more doable.

Experiment

The last step of Dr. Lembke's acronym was *experiment*. Thankfully, there have been plenty of people who have experimented already, and the Christian does not have to experiment without any idea of what their next steps should be. There are several ways in which a Christian can train in their lives of sanctification.

70. Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 86–88.

One of the ways to help with abstinence and self-control is to employ “self-binding.”⁷¹ Self-binding can be physical, chronological, or categorical. Physical self-binding is the practice of physically locking something away so that you do not use it. An example would be having your spouse put all the alcohol in a safe if you struggle with alcoholism, or deleting all of your social media accounts if you find your life taken over by endless scrolling.⁷² Chronological self-binding is the use of time limits and finish lines.⁷³ An example of this would be intermittent fasting. If you struggle with overindulging with food, a solution could be to limit your consumption of it to the hours of 8 AM to 4 PM, not allowing yourself any calories outside the set hours. The third and final kind of self-binding is categorical self-binding. Dr. Lembke describes it as “[limiting] consumption by sorting dopamine into different categories: those subtypes we allow ourselves to consume, and those we do not. This method helps us to avoid not only our drug of choice but also the triggers that lead to craving for our drug.”⁷⁴ For example, if someone struggles with sports betting and finds that seeing anything sports-related triggers that behavior, they would do their best to avoid all things sports whether that be on the TV, in the newspaper, scrolling social media, or something else.⁷⁵ No matter what type of self-binding one does, it can provide a structured setting to consciously make the body one’s slave, rather than the

71 Huberman, “Dr. Anna Lembke: Understanding & Treating Addiction,” 91.

72 Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 93–100.

73 Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 101.

74 Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 111.

75 Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 111.

other way around. It becomes a way to exercise self-discipline. It becomes a way to say no to temptation. As Dr. Lembke puts it, “Binding ourselves is a way to be free.”⁷⁶

Another way in which an understanding of dopamine can help us in our fight against temptation is by realizing that the “seesaw” saws both ways. If when we seek out pleasure our brain brings us back to homeostasis, the same thing happens when we purposefully put ourselves through pain. In other words, when we experience pain, our brain wants to maintain homeostasis and so self-regulates, causing us to feel pleasure when we achieve what we set out to do. I do not say this to suggest that we should go about flogging ourselves or having our friends purposely beat us up so that we can experience the pleasure that follows, but there are ways to put your body through trials that are not harmful in order to maintain a level balance of dopamine. An obvious example of this would be exercise. Exercise is by its nature a straining of the muscles and is meant to put stress on the body, but maybe you have noticed that after exercising you actually feel better than you did before! Another example that is common practice, although far less common than exercise, is ice baths or cold-water treatment. Ice baths or cold showers, while only lasting a handful of minutes, are proven to have an extended period (2–4 hours) of increased dopamine release.⁷⁷ The final example that I will use is that of intermittent fasting. There are several benefits of intermittent fasting in resetting multiple processes that take place within our bodies, but one of those processes includes the release of dopamine.

As a Christian is eager to exercise self-control over his body, understanding how dopamine works can help such a Christian act in wisdom. All these tools can be helpful, but they are far from the only ones out there. Hopefully, in using the gospel as the power and motivation

⁷⁶ Lembke, *Dopamine Nation*, 118.

⁷⁷ Huberman, “Leverage Dopamine to Overcome Procrastination & Optimize Effort.”

that it is, the reader can use this understanding of dopamine to find practical ways to help master the body. In Christian freedom, the Lord has given us a number of ways to enslave ourselves, including our bodies, to righteousness. While none of these practices are commanded in Scripture, it is clear that God wants us to live a life in service to him. I pray that some of these tools are useful as you decide how that life looks for you.

CONCLUSION

In a culture where the sinful flesh is mankind's greatest friend, the Christian's battle against the sinful flesh becomes more evident. Where the world works to remove all restrictions from what the flesh desires since they are enslaved to sin, the Christian lives in freedom to fight the flesh using the power of the gospel. In light of what Christ has done for us, we strive to live our lives in the Spirit. We cherish God's demands and live our lives in service to our heavenly King. With the freedom that Christ gives us to serve him, we are free to make use of whichever practices help us live in accordance with his commands. One of the commands which God has given us is to maintain control over our sinful flesh and its desires. When by God's grace we do live according to his will, we recognize the physical benefits that come through this newfound freedom. As we make use of that freedom, it would be wise for the Christian to have an understanding of how our physiology works so that we might better master our bodies. A key aspect of our physiology is dopamine. As we work to enslave our bodies, this understanding of dopamine can be useful in how we might choose to go about mastering our flesh and, as we do, understand the physical benefits that come with leading a God pleasing life. It is my prayer that this paper helped further that understanding and proved useful as the reader continues to struggle against the flesh until we are all united together with Christ in heaven someday.

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