

THE FLESH

by Jack Cole

What keeps us from fully experiencing the abundant life that Jesus promised? According to the Bible, the hindrance is flesh. Flesh is a condition in which man operates out of his own resources, doing things his own way. Flesh is the self-centered source upon which we depend to get our needs met. Some describe it as a tool box with which each person attempts to deal with life or fix his problems. Others describe flesh as habit patterns, the way in which man attempts to cope with life in his own strength. It is the programming or pathways in our members left over from being in Adam. It seems very natural and often feels very comfortable to us because we are so familiar with it.

Flesh, or self-life, is universally present in all men. Flesh is all that the non-Christian has with which to cope with life. Our flesh remains with us (in our members, body and soul) even though at conversion our human spirit is united with the Holy Spirit and we have a new identity in Christ. Flesh can even develop further within the believer. From the outside, flesh can appear to be either good or bad and can produce either good or evil. Therefore, you can't judge it by results. It can emanate from either positive or negative influences, which produce positively or negatively programmed flesh.

Flesh in the Believer

Flesh operates continuously in a non-Christian, whereas in the Christian, it operates when the believer is not abiding in Christ and, therefore, not walking by the Spirit but operating under the power of "indwelling sin" (Romans 7:14-25). Flesh in a Christian attempts to develop a self-centered image and not one centered in the believer's identity in Christ. Therefore, the flesh hurts us as well as hindering God's highest purpose, to manifest Himself through us.

As the flesh strengthens in a believer, he is habituated to its false self-identity, and is "living according to the flesh" (Romans 8:1-7, esp. vv. 4-5). This believer, though saved and going to heaven, is leading a defeated life on earth and is not living the victorious Christian life available to him. Christians today are increasingly leading defeated lives as polls often indicate little difference between believers and non-believers in many areas of life.

Therefore, one objective of our ministry is to help the believer identify his own unique version of the flesh and to recognize its deceptive workings in his life. This revelation is a principle for both the humbling of self for salvation and the breaking of self for spiritual growth.

The Garden of Eden

The biblical origin of flesh goes back to the two trees in the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, man came under the power of sin and was a sinner by identity. One result was spiritual death or separation from God's life, forcing man to function in self-sufficiency, or flesh. Therefore, flesh has the ability to do both good and evil. Man reasoned that if he could do good, he would be good, but if he did evil, he would be evil. So the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is representative of flesh with its self-sufficiency, self-reliance and exhaustible resources, which leads to bondage and ultimate death.

But man's choices are not between just good and evil because both of these can come from the same source, flesh. The real choice is between flesh and life, the other tree, which produces fruit of the Spirit and another kind of good. The Tree of Life represents the Spirit with Christ's sufficiency, God-reliance, inexhaustible resources, and dependence (on Christ) which lead to freedom, grace and life.

Flesh vs. Christ

Many things are good, but they are not life nor produced by life. We are told to "put no confidence in the flesh" whether it be "good" or "bad" (Phil. 3:3). Good produced by non-Christians is a work of the

flesh and some of the good produced by Christians may be also a work of the flesh. This is why many "good" church programs fail. It is vitally important to distinguish between that which is flesh and that which is Christ.

The self-life can vary from poorly adjusted flesh to well-adjusted flesh. It can look exceedingly corrupt or exceedingly good. Flesh means much more than overt sinful activity. It may not look self-centered; it can look philanthropic, or self-depreciating. Many humanists of our day can look godly.

It is important for you to spot your own flesh and to see it for what it is. Will you pray that the Holy Spirit would convict you of its destructive work in your life?

Common Characteristics of Flesh

Flesh is a controller.

It controls to keep God at a distance, to keep the world or circumstances from overwhelming us, to control others, to protect us from control, to control our emotions and not to show weakness. Methods of control are many and varied such as a critical attitude ("you never could do anything right"), body language (scowls, frowns), silent treatment, hostility (temper, violence, abuse), seductive behavior, blackmail, intimidation, parental favoritism, passivity, manipulation (false guilt, self-pity, flattery), overt laws and punishment, religion, and overprotection. Control can be exercised out of strength or weakness.

Flesh is self-protective, physically, emotionally and mentally.

Self-protection can take the form of excuse making, justifying behavior, shifting blame, withdrawing, inability to make decisions or take responsibility, and lying.

Flesh is multi-faceted.

It is one problem with many tentacles, or symptoms. Paul describes this very well in Galatians 5:19-21: "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissension, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. . . "such as bitterness, passivity, pride, impatience. If you choose to deal with symptoms only, prepare yourself for a never-ending task. Flesh can generate symptoms faster than they can be dealt with. And if one or more symptoms are dealt with successfully, pride can rear its ugly head. Do you see the pervasiveness of the flesh?

Flesh is a captive and a victim.

If man lives by his natural resources (flesh), the Bible says he will self-destruct. "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 14:12). The reason for this is that man in his own strength is no match for Satan and his powers; thus, the enemy of our souls will arrange for man to be overcome by somebody or something. Sooner or later, man succumbs and/or is overcome by some bondage, and hopefully, will recognize the need for deliverance. Can you see why Christ said he would set the captives free?

Flesh is deceptive.

Flesh is like a chameleon which disguises itself by assuming the color of its environment. Jacob demonstrated this by wearing animal skins. Our flesh can disguise itself even as spirit. Take a new believer and surround him with a Christian environment (church, school, home) and he will learn how to act so as to disguise his flesh. Likewise, just as non-Christians can produce imitations of the fruit of the Spirit – something that looks like love, joy, etc. – so too the Christian living in self-sufficiency can produce imitation fruit.

Well-adjusted home environments are likely to produce good, sophisticated flesh patterns. Poorly adjusted homes will likely produce corrupt flesh patterns. Don't be fooled by quiet, passive, smiling, good flesh.

Flesh builds an identity around itself.

Our identity, who we think we are, is very important in determining our actions – what we do. If our flesh develops an identity around some manifestation of itself and convinces us to believe it is our own identity, then our flesh has built a fertile background in which its own characteristics (control, protect itself, etc.) can flourish.

Flesh is proud.

Man operating according to the flesh has a tremendous drive to exalt himself to meet his needs for acceptance, value and recognition. Characteristics emulating from pride and self-exaltation are the "need" to be right, to blame others, and to be superior. The flesh brags and rebels.

Pride is one of the chief obstacles to the cross and grace because it is so subtle. 1Peter 5:5-6, however, says that "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time."

Can you imagine the relief we can experience by admitting that in ourselves, with or without God's help, we are total failures so that in Christ we can be all He intended us to be? This is brokenness, the way of the cross, coming to the end our self-life. Only when we are willing to be a failure in our own strength is He willing to reveal that we are a complete success in Christ.

Flesh is an idolater.

We can usually determine what our false god is by what causes us to fall apart when it is removed. Is it our health, our possessions, job, spouse, family? The question is: Who or what is meeting your deepest needs? This could be your god and is a manifestation of your flesh.

Finally, Flesh is a rejecter.

It will try to protect itself even at others' expense. This results in all kinds of damaging rejection. When we are already struggling to get our needs met in our own effort and then are rejected by another, we will inevitably retaliate or manipulate. This helps explain why abused children often grow up to imitate their abusive parents.

As one person struggles in an unending quest to get his needs met (even legitimate needs for love, acceptance, significance, security, and meaning), others will be attempting to get their needs met also. Turning to other self-centered people to meet our needs ultimately results in someone being used and/or rejected and their needs going unmet. This results in anger, jealousy, frustration, anxiety, suppression of feelings, denial, etc. These, in turn, create more rejection for the person and for those with whom they interact in a widening circle. Over time, we develop a fear of losing control of our world and a new flesh cycle begins.

God's Solution—Death.

What is God's method of dealing with the flesh? Death! "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). The flesh can only be dealt with through our union with Christ in the full work of the cross. The flesh cannot be improved upon, trained or modified in any significant long-term way. Through struggle and failure, the Christian is carefully and lovingly taken through the experience of self-revelation and finally into an appropriation of his death with Christ to his

old life in Adam. This is the only basis upon which we can "know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:10, 11).

Is it possible to walk totally free of the flesh? Not this side of heaven, but we don't have to be under its control. We now have a choice. Walking after the flesh can become the exception, not the rule. Well-adjusted people can appear to have the flesh under control, but it is simply more subtle. If a person's life has not been exchanged, the true fruit of the Spirit will not be manifested. Once the source of the flesh has been cut off, the works or symptoms of the flesh can be dealt with by the putting off and putting on of Colossians 3:1-17. By faith, the power of the flesh is replaced with the life of the Spirit – Christ Himself!

Summary

Flesh, or self-life, is universally present in all people and is a major hindrance to the expression of Christ's life in believers. Simply put, whatever we depend upon to get our needs met, short of Christ's life, is our flesh. Each believer has his own unique version of the flesh and it should be seriously considered. God has only one provision for dealing with the flesh: death through union with Christ in His death on the cross. God's only provision for life is our union with Christ in His resurrection. Christians, even though recognizing the impossibility of self-salvation, often seek to live for the Lord in self-effort.

Flesh is manifested differently in each individual, but it has some common characteristics that may be useful in identifying your unique version. Flesh controls, self-protects, has many symptoms, is a captive and a victim, deceives, builds an identity around itself, is proud, is an idolater and rejects.

Flesh is developed as we live apart from Christ's life, either as an unbeliever or as a believer, and will always be with us on this earth.

Living according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh is a moment by moment experience until our Lord returns. We have Christ's life within us to be victorious in this battle, not perfectly, but victoriously nonetheless. God's grace is sufficient, even in the fiercest of battles. He loves you and will never leave you nor forsake you. You are precious to Him. You are worth Jesus to Him.

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