



Hindrances to Discipleship:

The Flesh

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This article originally appeared in the Winter 2012 issue of *Knowing & Doing*.

In recent months we have been exploring hindrances to discipleship. Our previous issue focused on “the world” and before that on “the devil.” In this issue we turn our attention to our treatment of “the flesh,” the third member of what has been called “the unholy trinity.” Although the word *flesh* is fairly common among believers, our understanding of it is often shallow and limited. Frequently it is used as a synonym for sexual lust instead of as the fallen human nature that controls nonbelievers and seeks to control believers. This misunderstanding is a serious problem for those who want to live for Christ; if we don’t understand the flesh rightly, we cannot rightly understand sin and how to deal with it. As J.I. Packer says so clearly, “If you have not learned about sin you cannot understand yourself, your fellow-men, the world you live in or the Christian faith.”¹

By way of introduction, I note the widespread failure of preachers and teachers to address “the flesh” adequately from the pulpit; it is not a popular topic. An even greater problem is our own reluctance to face the reality of our sin or to hear it mentioned in sermons... In *Four Quartets* T.S. Eliot put his finger on our problem, “humankind cannot bear very much reality.” We like to feel good about ourselves and resist anything that might threaten that illusion. But Jesus didn’t come simply to help us feel good; he came to help us be good, for God is more concerned with our holiness than our happiness. If we ever hope to make progress as disciples of Jesus—to think as he thought, to want what he wants, to feel as he felt, to act as he acted—we *must* understand and deal with our flesh and the sins it produces. This means being ruthlessly honest with ourselves about ourselves in the light

of God’s Word and Spirit and then putting to death the sinful works of the flesh through the power of the Holy Spirit. As we do so, we will grow in the grace and knowledge and likeness of Jesus and glorify God more and more. We will discover that a holy life is a happy life.



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Defining the Problem: What Is “the Flesh”?

What then does the Bible mean by the word *flesh*? Answering this question will take some effort on my part and yours, but the benefits are well worth it. What follows has been life changing for many people over the centuries and can be so for you too! In this article we will look at what the Bible means by the term *flesh* and how the flesh operates. Part 2, in the next issue, will address how to gain victory over the flesh in daily life. (And, yes, it is possible.)

The flesh (*sarx* in the Greek) is a complex concept in the Bible, and the word is used with a range of meanings. Its meaning in any given instance can be determined only by the context in which it appears. In all of the Old Testament and most places in the New, flesh is not seen as inherently sinful. It can mean, for example, the material of which humans or animals are made (1 Cor. 15:39), the human body (Gal. 4:13), a person (Rom. 3:20), a family (Rom. 4:1), and similarly rooted concepts. In the New Testament, *flesh* is used 147 times, of which 91 are by Paul. Paul uses the word in the senses just given,

But Paul also employs sarx in a sense not found in the Old Testament, namely, "man's being and attitude as opposed to and in contradiction to God and God's Spirit." The sarx has sworn its allegiance to another: "By means of the flesh I am enslaved to sin (Ro. 7.25). The sarx of every person from Adam onward, Jesus alone excepted (Ro. 8.3), has been Sin's habitation and slave."²

How, you may wonder, do we get from *sarx* as the fleshy material from which we are constructed to *sarx* as sinful fallen human nature? And what does this tell us about ourselves? The story begins in the Garden of Eden. God created Adam not as a spirit like the angels but as a finite being with a body of flesh and blood. Even in his original innocence, Adam was a weak and frail creature in comparison to the eternal God, who is self-sustaining and all-powerful. Adam was a creature composed of flesh in the material sense. But when he rebelled against God, Adam, in his weak and frail flesh, transferred his "allegiance to another." Thus, in addition to being weak and frail by virtue of his creatureliness, he also became twisted and distorted by virtue of his fallenness. The supremacy of God was displaced by the supremacy of self, a self vulnerable to the influences of the devil and the world. In the famous expression of Augustine, before the fall Adam was able not to sin, but afterward he was unable not to sin. A powerful force had captured Adam's thoughts and desires, corrupting his nature and rendering him unwilling and unable to freely and gladly focus on the love of God and the good of others. And he could not escape the gravitational pull of his now-fallen nature or sinful flesh.

Richard Lovelace gives keen insight into the roots of the flesh, and we do well to reflect on his words:

Augustine divided the trunk of the flesh into two main branches, pride (self-aggrandizement) and sensuality (self-indulgence), which in their interaction together might be held to generate most other forms of sin. Luther, however, perceived that the main root of the flesh behind pride and sensuality was unbelief; and his analysis takes in some forms of the flesh which are apparently "selfless" and altruistic. In any case, the characteristic bent of the flesh is toward independence from God, his truth and his will, as if man himself were God.³

This reciprocal interaction of pride, sensuality, and unbelief creates within human beings an attitude and disposition of rebellion against God and enthrones the autonomous self as the center of man's nature. And, like a petri dish, it is a warm, moist breeding ground

hospitable to all manner of sins. This is the essence of the flesh. Lovelace goes on to say that "by means of the flesh sin subjugates the whole person."⁴

J.I. Packer elaborates on the flesh and the sin it nurtures when he says the essence of sin is:

Playing God; and, as a means to this, refusing to allow the Creator to be God as far as you are concerned. Living, not for him, but for yourself; loving and serving and pleasing yourself without reference to the Creator; trying to be as far as possible independent of Him, taking yourself out of His hands, holding Him at arm's length, keeping the reins of life in your own hands; acting as if you and your pleasure, were the end to which all things else, God included, must be made to function as a means—that is the attitude in which sin essentially consists. Sin is exalting oneself against the Creator, withholding the homage due to Him, and putting yourself in His place as the ultimate standard of reference in all life's decisions. Augustine analyzed sin as pride (superbia), the mad passion to be superior even to God, and as a state of being bent away from God into a state of self-absorption (homo incurvatus in se).⁵

Like an incurable disease that passes from generation to generation, sin entered into and entrenched itself in Adam through the gateway of his "flesh" and has reigned in Adam and all his descendants to this very day. Thus we find within our hearts "a complex web of thoughts, desires, values and actions that are in opposition to God's intended pattern for us."⁶ And so, George Eldon Ladd says, the flesh (*sarx*) "ethically conceived is human nature, man viewed in his entirety apart from God and in contrast with the righteousness and holiness of God. As such, man is not only weak and impotent, he is also sinful and rebellious against God."⁷ A simple way to sum up the flesh is "human nature apart from God and at enmity with him."

It now becomes clear how misleading it is to think that the *flesh* is simply another word for sexual lust—a widespread error among believers. This unfortunate reductionism conceals from view the fact that the word encompasses much more, as we have seen. The flesh is the soil, as it were, in which individual sins grow. These sins take a wide variety of forms, physical and mental. Jesus gave us a sample when he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mark 7:20–23

ESV; cf. also Gal. 5:19–21). This is not an exhaustive list by any means. And we dare not overlook the fact that the flesh can take forms that appear very respectable and religious, as with the Pharisees and religious formalism. Lovelace notes that “there is a great deal of active religiosity in the world and in the Christian Church which is energized by the flesh, and sometimes by the devil as well.”⁸

Over the centuries the church has gained deep insight into the flesh and the main sins that characterize it. These insights have been organized and refined into a schema now known as the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, anger, gluttony, lust, greed, and sloth. Like large branches growing from the trunk of a great tree, each is a major sin that produces its own network of branches, twigs, and leaves. The better we understand these major sins and their offshoots, the better able we will be to see the ecosystem of sin in our own lives and where we need to focus our greatest efforts in their eradication.⁹

How the Flesh Operates

Let’s move on to consider how the flesh operates in human life. The flesh works chiefly through desire. Unlike Buddhism, biblical faith strongly affirms that desire is a good, God-given capacity that brings blessing and enrichment to life when focused on good and godly ends. The desire to know, love, serve, and glorify God is the summit of all desire, followed by the desire to love and serve one’s neighbor (Matt. 22:34–40) and the desire to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus himself by the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). And there are many lesser desires that are also good. Ordering our desires and loves aright is crucial for the abundant life God offers us. However, desire becomes sinful when focused on selfish ends, and it is being constantly influenced in that direction by the devil and the world. It disorders our loves and can be highly destructive and produce disastrous results. But though the devil and the world can influence us, they are not the root of our problem. For as James tells us, “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (James 1:14–15). Desire in this sense is represented by the Greek word *epithymia*.

Paul sees epithymia as an expression of the sin which rules man. He sees in it the driving power in man’s flesh (sarx), his sinful being which has turned from God.

Epithymia seeks gratification (Gal. 5:16). It urges man to activity. When all is said and done, it expresses the deeply rooted tendency in man to find the focus of his life in himself, to trust himself, and to love himself more than others. . . [T]he desires determine and enslave a man.¹⁰

Arousing selfish desire first to be like God and then to become wise was how the devil deceived Adam and Eve into eating the forbidden fruit: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be *desired* to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate” (Gen. 3:6, italics added). Stirring up sinful desires in human beings has been a basic tactic of the devil ever since. And he knows just how to tempt each of us. As one old saint observed, “The devil is a master fisherman; he baits his hook according to the appetite of the fish.” Summing up, in its enmity toward God, the flesh distorts our desires, thereby deceiving people and driving them into gratifying the selfish, sinful impulses, which then dominate and enslave them (Eph. 2:3; 4:22; Col. 3:5; Titus 2:12). The Bible calls this enslavement idolatry; it takes many forms today and is described by the secular word *addiction*.

The primary object of desire, the bait it uses to ensnare people, is pleasure. Again, God is the author of pleasure just as he is of desire. A good that he grants to his creatures to enrich life, it finds its focus in the desire for God himself and communion with him. But pleasure can be twisted, corrupted, and focused upon indulging the sinful desires of the flesh. When this is the case, the New Testament uses the Greek word *hedone*, the root of our English word *hedonistic*. This particular word is always used in a negative sense in the New Testament. The desire for pleasure can easily get out of hand, leading to abuse of good gifts such as food, drink, and sex, to name a few. Pride, greed, anger, and many other serious sins can also dominate life, bringing terrible consequences in their wake. Paul tells us that nonbelievers are slaves to various passions and pleasures (*hedone*) (Titus 3:3). And Jesus warns that some who have received the word of God and appear to be growing spiritually are later “choked by the cares and riches and pleasures (*hedone*) of life” (Luke 8:14) and suffer spiritual ruin.

To summarize, the flesh, fallen human nature, is at enmity with God and is driven by sinful desires that are stimulated by the pursuit of what a person thinks will give him or her pleasure. These desires, often incited by the devil or the world system, promise pleasure and satisfaction but produce idolatry and

bondage. This is the heritage of everyone born into the world since Adam and Eve. In the next issue of *Knowing & Doing*, we will look at how to gain freedom from the flesh and victory over sin.

Notes

1. J.I. Packer, *God's Words* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 71.
2. J. Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1993), 50–51.
3. Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), 90.
4. *Ibid.*, 91.
5. Packer, *God's Words*, 73.
6. Lawrence Richards, *Zondervan Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 284.
7. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 472.
8. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, 93.
9. Particularly helpful books on the seven deadly sins include Rebecca DeYoung, *Glittering Vices* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009), and William Backus, *What Your Counselor Never Told You* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2000).
10. H. Schönweiss, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 457.

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