

“The Flesh”
The World, The Flesh, and The Devil
Downtown
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If you have a Bible turn to **Galatians 5:13**.

As you're turning there, I don't know if you've been to the Edventure Children's Museum, but there's this giant quote posted on the wall there, right across from the aeronautics exhibit that reads this:

Steve Jobs

Have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become.

Which for most of us, sounds pretty warm and fuzzy. And this sort of thinking of “following your heart” has become so ingrained in our senses that most of us wouldn't think twice about the fact that someone thought this factual enough to put beside the scientific explanation of flight.

Now there's a lot of different things we mean when we talk about the heart. But most often, the way it's used is when we talk about our deepest desires, our passions, our cravings, and our longings.

However, when we look at the Scriptures there's another name for it, called **the flesh**.

And that's what we're talking about this morning, the second enemy of our soul, the flesh.

If you were hear last week we talked about the devil - if you missed it, you can check it out on our podcast, but we said that the devil is an evil supernatural being hell bent on destroying the things of God, and his primary strategy he uses to accomplish this is through lies. Or as we said in week one:

Deceptive ideas (the devil) that play to disordered desires (the flesh) in a society that normalizes them (the world).

And what I want us to see is that these all work together and the lies that the devil feeds us **ARE NOT RANDOM**. Ok? Like, the devil is not whispering in anyone's ear “Columbia wasn't discovered in 1786, it was 1785.” Because who cares? Like that's going to destroy your soul. In a lot of ways, the devil operates more like a Russian bot or a deepfake on the internet or a Facebook algorithm, tailor-making lies and deceptions to play to you...to what the New Testament would call the flesh.

Listen to the words of

Galatians 5:13, 16-24,

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another... But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Now before we get too far into it, what do the Scriptures mean when they talk about the flesh?

The word flesh comes from the Greek word, sarx. And based on the context, can take on different shades of meaning. So sometimes sarx refers to your physical body. Sometimes it refers to humanity, and a few times it refers to ethnicity.

But most commonly, and in this passage in particular sarx refers to our passions.

New Testament scholar, **Timothy George** defines it this way. “Flesh refers to fallen human nature. The center of human pride and self-willing.” It’s the part of your will that is bent on rebellion against God’s rule and reign over your life or the kingdom. “flesh is the arena of indulgence and self assertion” I want what I want, and I want it now.

A more straightforward definition put forward by another pastor I follow put it, “**the base, animalistic drives for self-gratification - especially in regards to things like sex, food, pleasure, survival, power over others, and fear.**”

In other words, the flesh is the basic instinct of “I want” or “I must have” “Give me this or that.” And honestly, as a dad with 3 young kids I see this attitude a lot and I would say it’s primarily because they haven’t learned to fake it yet. Speaking for myself, it feels like the older I get the better I get just masking those flesh desires.

Like, the other day, one of my kids - I won’t say who - had the loudest tempter tantrum we’ve had to date. She was telling Lucy, “I don’t like you, no one likes you” at one point she said, “you’ve got a tiny lemon brain” It’s like huh? And it was all because we said she couldn’t have juice.

This is the flesh at work. That impulse that dwells somewhere within us that demands self-gratification.

- And it’s easy to spot when those impulses are more overt whether that be cravings for power, or comfort, or sex but our flesh is sneaky and subtle
- This desire to do what I want, when I want it, as I want it...as opposed to what God says is good for me, and the world, and for my neighbor

Or as Paul says in verse 17:

Galatians 5:17

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

And Paul says in verse 19 that these works of the flesh are **evident**. They’re self-revealing if you think about it for a moment.

So to help paint the picture for us a bit.

Let’s say you’re a parent and all your kids are yelling at you, demanding your attention, and you desire more than anything to have some peace and quiet. So you just lash out in anger and yell at them with such a growl that you think to yourself, “oh man, where did that come from?”

But these desires can manifest themselves in smaller ways too:

For you working parents in the room. You know that feeling you have when you pull up into the driveway after work? You're sitting in the car, engine running, and think "I love my family...but I don't want to go in there right now, I'm tired. I'd much rather just lay in bed or watch netflix or drink a beer by myself or all of the above." That desire to run away from your God-given role for the sake of your comfort...that's what we're talking about when we talk about the flesh - this war within us between what we want to do and the good we ought to do.

Or let's say there's a peer at your workplace who's successful. Perhaps even someone you like and consider a friend - but there's another part of you that sees their success and you get jealous and angry and part of you even hopes they fail. So you work hard and do more, not because you necessarily enjoy the work or see it as a way to honor God, but so you can prove to everyone else in your workplace that you're better than them. It's that part of you that gets angry when your idea is disregarded, your opinion is not listened to, that stewes bitterly over a conversation you had with your boss. That's the flesh.

It's that part of you that desires to comfort yourself with food or alcohol. Or that part that obsesses over what you eat and seeks to exert unhealthy control over it. That part of you that wants to watch porn or sleep around. That part of you that doesn't care to meet your neighbors, that part of you that just wants to sit your kids in front of a screen so you don't have to parent.

All of that is what the Bible would call "flesh" One pastor, I listen to, said his wife started using this as an adjective. On days where he was especially self-indulgent or ill-tempered, she'd say, "You sure are acting flesh-y today."

And the trouble is - we have a very complicated relationship with these desires. Here's what I mean:

The question that civilizations for thousands of years have tried to answer is this: what is the good life? What does it mean to be human? How can I flourish as a human being?

And in comes African theologian Augustine around the year 400 AD who says that we're a mixed bag of desires. Some of those desires are good and virtuous. And some of those desires are evil.

So our desires might look something like:

- I want to stay faithful to my spouse, but I also want a divorce.
- I want to honor women, but I also want to objectify them so I can fulfill my sexual appetite
- I want to be like Jesus but I also want to do whatever the heck I want
- I want to have a great prayer life and I also want to stay up late watching TV

And the key to the good life, to be fully human, was about saying yes to the right desires and saying no to the wrong desires. Virtue was all about pursuing the good and starving out the bad.

This is how the majority of human beings thought about desires. But cut to some 1500 years later, in comes Sigmund Freud. And that's where things started to change.

Freud was a follower of Darwin's theory that human beings are not image bearers, they're animals. We're not created by God to pursue good, we're created by time and chance, absent from any design. And the most important desire you have is your libido - which is your driving impulse for pleasure. And the reason why we're so messed up is because our libido - or desires - have been repressed for too long.

Meaning if someone has authority over you and says no to what you want, or says no to whatever is your truth or your authentic self, then that's the reason why you're so unhappy, it's because they're oppressive.

Now take this concept and it's become pretty clear that this is how we think as a culture tend to think about our desires.

In the words of one ethicist:

Robert C. Roberts -

“We have been led to believe that the self is sacrosanct. Just as in an earlier time it was thought never fitting to deny God. Now it feels never right to deny oneself.”

- For example, what our ancestors called **chastity** - as in sexual purity - was once considered a virtue - you really ever hear it now is to mock something. Our culture would call that oppression.
- What they called **self-mastery** - to say no to yourself, to deny your wants - has become a cultural sin. In our culture it is a sin to not follow your feelings.
- It's why that quote from Steve Jobs will be put out right next to an explanation of physics, because “following our heart” and “being true to our self” seem as intuitively true as gravity.

And so we often come to the table with a radically different idea of flourishing and freedom than the Bible does. We tend to believe that **true flourishing is found in freedom from any and all restraint** - to ability to do, and live, and be, and love and ____ however we want. To follow our desires, so to speak.

But, biblically speaking, **that is not real freedom**. Real freedom isn't absence of restraints, but the presents of the right ones.

A classic story I love to tell about this is about a youth pastor I knew back in college who was trying to teach his students about this concept. He brought out a fish in a small fish bowl and presented it to his students and asked, “Is this fish free?” Of course, all the students were like, “NO! He's trapped in that little bowl!” So, he was like, “Okay, how about now?” and he brings out a larger fish bowl and puts the fish in it. Again the students shout, “No way! He's still trapped in. So he brings out an even larger fishbowl and dumps the fish in it. “How about now?” “No! He's not free!”

And so then he scoops the fish out of the bowl and throws it down on the table and with a stone cold look in his eye says, “how about now?” And the kids just sat there horrified. As the fish flopped to death on the stage in front of them all. He looked them right in their eyes and said, “**true freedom is not the absence of restraint, true freedom is the presence of the right ones... that one's that fit what we are made for.**

And that's a lesson those kids, even after years of counseling, haven't forgotten. You can get away with a lot of stuff when you're a youth pastor.

Real freedom isn't absence of restraints, but the presents of the right ones.

We tend to have **some framework** for understanding restraints:

- like working out. We'll look at self-discipline and self-control as positives there because I can see it and perhaps it gives me what my flesh-y desires actually want.
- Or we'll see the effects of things like substance abuse and think, “well, of course, some restraint is a good thing.”

But, we tend to **not bring that mental architecture into other categories** of our lives - like what we do when we get home from a long day at work, or when I'm grasping for control with my family or job,

when I think about my spending, my online activity, my... fill in the blank - and it gets very muddy very quickly.

And what we can often fail to believe is that the flesh - no matter how it looks - leads us to destruction. It does not take us where we want to go. Look back at verse 21:

Galatians 5:21

... I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is the place where God rules and reigns. Where all that sin has made wrong is made right. Where humans dwell and flourish as they were made for with whom they were made for. It is the place where life is as it should be.

Living a life of gratification and want doesn't lead us to eternal fulfillment or salvation. But rather, to emptiness, to ever dissatisfied pursuit pleasure, power and control. A life of conflict and pain. Ironically, Freud got one thing right. With the flesh in control, we do wind up being more animal than human in the end. Or to say it even more directly, in the language of the New Testament, more slaves than free.

Because here's the thing, whatever controls us, whatever determines what we do, enslaves us. When we do things that deep down we don't want to do but we seem to be unable to stop it...that's slavery. The person who has to watch porn every night before bed, the person who can't finish the day without a drink to take the edge off, or even the person whose temper can't be contained over an inconvenience is enslaved. Differently than we may normally think, but it's still slavery

And practically speaking, for some of us, our flesh will absolutely destroy our lives - we'll get fired, we'll destroy relationships, we'll develop addictions.

For others of us, our flesh **won't practically** destroy us. In some cases, it might even make us very successful in terms of the world, but in the long-run it will **leave us emptier than ever** - leading us to things like burn out, anxiety, insecurity and the like.

And eventually it lands us outside of the Kingdom of God... because **when the desires of the flesh are our king, Jesus can't be.**

And you may be thinking, "That sounds extreme, man. It doesn't feel like that big of a deal to me."

Here's how I'd try to help you see it. Take **adultery**, for example. No one just wakes up in the morning in a happy marriage and cheats on their spouse that night. In every story of infidelity I have ever come across, the affair did not start with the act itself but with a thousand acts earlier. Not with the decision to cheat, but with the decision to watch this movie, or skip date night, or make a flirtatious comment to a neighbor or whatever it was. There were a thousand tiny, even mundane compromises to the flesh made years, maybe even decades before, set the stage for the affair to become a reality.

And the same is true for something we would consider less extreme. Like **jealousy**. Every decision I make to compare, and complain, and whatever more and more forms me into a person for whom jealousy eventually owns. A person who becomes incapable of "rejoicing with those who rejoice" and winds up hating their own life.

The truth is the more you follow the flesh, the more you sin, the less you feel bad about it. The more callous you become to it. Until eventually it hardens you completely.

In the words of one of my favorite thinkers, **C.S. Lewis**:

“Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or a hellish creation.”

But the question obviously, where do we go from there? If this is the battle we're up against, how is the flesh fought? And how can we actually move from a life defined by the fruit of the flesh to a life defined by the fruit of the Spirit?

Galatians 5:13 says:

[13] For you were called to freedom, brothers.

The good news for us that we need to hear is that Jesus has come to set us free. Not as a freedom to do whatever we want to follow our own desires, because that only leads to death, but a freedom from my basest desires and fleshly impulses to actually choose the good life. To say no to my flesh and to say yes to the things of God. To follow freedom according to how Jesus maps it out. Jesus who was the freest, happiest, most joy-filled human being that ever walked the earth calls us to model Him.

In another letter in the Scriptures he puts it like this:

2 Corinthians 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

I love that - v.17 says we're a new creation. For those who have put their trust in Jesus - who believe in His life, death, and resurrection - by faith in Him and what He's done for us - we are now by His Spirit called a new creation. We're born again. Which means we have new desires. A new mind. A new way of looking at the world. Meaning, it's not just that Jesus shows us how to live a life like His but by His Spirit we have the power made available to us to actually walk in Him.

We still have the desires of our flesh and because of our new Jesus-centered desires, there's this war now within us. Flesh v Spirit. I want to do good and follow Jesus, AND there's this inward flesh that feels like it has its power over me. And at each moment we choose: do we choose self, to walk in the flesh or do we choose the things of God, to walk in the Spirit?.

And so the key to experience life in the Spirit, victory in the spirit, saying yes to the things of God is not to willpower your way through it. It's not a matter of try harder, do better, be better. It seems a bit **paradoxical**, but the power to the fight the flesh first begins by admitting we are powerless on our own. We need an outside source beyond us.

And it's here where Galatians 5 commands us we are to:

Crucify the flesh and walk in the Spirit

This comes from verse 16 and verse 24. And I know these sound like very churchy words, but it's this idea that by grace through the Spirit, we turn away from the flesh desires **and** cultivate space where the things of the Spirit can grow.

So taking that first part: crucify the flesh. As the puritan John Owen famously said, “you must be killing sin, lest it be killing you.” Paul elsewhere calls it putting off the old self. Removing certain behaviors or habits from our lives that feed the flesh, and in the process we starve those desires.

Some of us are stuck right now in sin, in the passions of our flesh, not because they actually have a hold on you but because you make provision for them.

- You don’t consider it deadly. It’s just a look here, a compromise there, a little indulgence, “oh, we love each other... it’s okay... as though sin were an extra scoop of ice cream.

What you’ve got to come to see the desires of the flesh aren’t something to take lightly. They are dangerous and won’t ultimately take us where we really want to go.

And so part of what this means is putting in place the right type of restraints. The restraints that enable freedom.

- you might need to not have a TV.
- you might need to delete Instagram.
- you might need to just get rid of the scale in your house.
- you might need not go to bars or keep alcohol in the fridge.
- you might need to change the location of your office.
- you might need to find a new job.
- You might need to take up the practice of fasting - denying specifically food so that you can cultivate discipline and self-denial in your life and prayer so that you are more empowered to say no to whatever else

I hesitate to get too specific with you because I don’t know your particular situation, but the point being, we must starve the flesh and kill sin. If that means actions that seem extreme to the rest of the world, then so be it.

Bare minimum, I know some of us have struggles with anger, jealousy, pornography, alcohol, addictions, and a whole host of other things that our LifeGroups no nothing about. And many of us need to sit down with them and deputize them to help us fight the flesh in our lives. Some of us, this week, need to sit across the table from them and say, “Hey y’all, this is what is going on with me. I know it’s killing me and not producing the life God has for me in Christ... and I need your help.”

And we walk in the Spirit.

By this I mean the practices that spiritually form us: abiding with the Spirit through His Word and prayer and fasting. But also, obeying the things He says, connecting our lives to His people - the church, worship, Sabbath, serving, giving, all of these things that we teach all the time.

These are the things that grow and shape our affections for Jesus. These are the things that open our eyes and enliven the realities of his love and truth and grace and presence in our lives.

The flesh reigns for many of us simply because we do not see the spiritual realities of what’s going on around us.

For instance, many of us think worship on Sundays is a morally good thing to do that occasionally makes us feel good... but what I hope you hear throughout this entire series is that: **Worship is warfare.** Community is warfare. Prayer is warfare. Reading Scripture is warfare. All of it... is warfare.

- The way it works is the more we engage with truth and grace of Jesus alongside the people of Jesus and the ways of Jesus, the more the Spirit of Jesus produces His fruit in our lives - the more He loosens the grip of the desires of the flesh on our lives and brings life to our souls.

The more we see Jesus for who He is, the more experience the goodness of His presence through His Spirit and grace, the more our deepest desires will become our strongest

- The more I abide in **God's Word and prayer**, the more I crucify my old ways of thinking - and place myself under the right restrictions so that I can experience true freedom knowing who God is and who I am in light of that
- The more I **Sabbath** each week, the more I crucify my desire find identity in my productivity, and place myself under the right restrictions so I can experience the peace of God and the identity He has for me
- The more I lean into **community**, the more I crucify my desire to be my own authority, and place myself under the right restrictions and see that biblical freedom is not about making my life better but giving my life away to others in love.

And when we do this for the long haul - for weeks, and for years, and decades with the people of God - the fruit of the Spirit becomes more and more a way of life. And we want this for y'all more than anything. For us to be a people whose lives overflow with joy not bitterness, for love not apathy, for kindness not cynicism.

So... Where are you in the battle against the flesh?

- Is it even a battle for you? Or are you living under the delusion that the desire for self-gratification leads to the good life? Are you currently feeling owned, or enslaved by it?
 - Come to the One with the power and promise to change. There is no sin, no addiction, no failure, no habit, no fear too big for Him to heal. No one is too far gone.
- But also, where are you making provision for something that needs to be put to death? When it comes to the Spirit and the flesh, which are you actually feeding and starving in your life?
- And also, do you have hope in your battle against the flesh? Do you live like Jesus rose from the dead, conquered the flesh, and has now sent his very Spirit to live inside of you to give you life and freedom?

The flesh is a powerful enemy, but it's also a defeated enemy. If you are in Christ God's eternal Spirit dwells in you and you are not and never will be alone with your battle against the flesh.