

# MORTIFYING THE FLESH

## WEEK 1: WHAT IS THE FLESH?

### INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

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- In this 6-week series we are going to discuss *how to put to death the flesh*.
- Colossians 3:5 “Therefore *consider the members of your earthly body as dead* to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.”
- Romans 8:13 “...for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are *putting to death the deeds of the body*, you will live.”
- **Killing our sin or flesh is not a once off action nor is it done with your own strength alone.**
- To live the Christian life as God intended, the believer must be actively killing sin in their life.
- **“Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.” John Owen**
- As Owen further states, to clear the woods of sin in our heart is a critical part of the whole process of sanctification. The process of killing sin in our hearts not only allows us to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel but also brings more assurance that we are children of God.
- When our hearts are set on pleasing the father, we are going to want to walk in a way that pleases him, not the world, not ourselves but Christ alone. To do this, we must be able to identify and put to death sin.
- **This is the heartbeat of progressive sanctification, a life lived for God by mortifying our flesh.**
- **Week 1: What is the “flesh?”**
- Week 2: How important is my new identity? (Col. 3:1-4)
- Week 3: How does sin work in every aspect of my new life? (Col. 3:5-11)
- Week 4: Practical steps for mortifying sin. Part I
  - Learn to admit sin for what it really is.
  - See sin for what your sin really is in God’s presence.
- Week 5: Practical steps for mortifying sin. Part II
  - Recognize the inconsistency of your sin.
  - Put sin to death.
- Week 6: What is personal watchfulness? (1 Cor. 16:13; Gal. 6:1; Col. 4:2; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Jhn 8)
  - The necessity and cultivation of watchfulness.

## INTRODUCTION

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- In order to fully understand how we are to mortify or kill our sin / flesh, we must understand what the Bible means when it talks about our flesh.
- There are a couple of meanings for this in the Bible and it helps to be able to understand what the Bible is talking about when it says “flesh.”
- Ultimately, we are talking about holy living.
- “People who aren’t interested in holy living will avoid being exposed to sound doctrine.” MacArthur.
- We must understand our enemy so that we are able to not just get by but defeat him and walk in the promised new life to the glory of God.
- “One of the most serious threats against the church today, one of the most serious threats against Christians is this new kind of sanctification effort without the Holy Spirit. The church has bought into human pragmatism, ideas, techniques. The church has bought into psychology. These things are offering false and weak and worthless solutions to the troubles and burdens of believers. We have become the victim of humanistic ideas, therapies, human efforts, all kinds of human principles, human devices to try to accomplish spiritual goals. That is not unlike the Galatians who had begun in the power of the Spirit and were trying to perfect themselves by their own effort.”<sup>1</sup>

## BIBLE VERSES ABOUT OUR FLESH

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- Before diving into one specific meaning, it would be helpful to look at all the different uses of the word flesh in the NT.
- “This really is a crucial question. It is utterly crucial for understanding the apostle Paul, who uses this concept so often.” John Piper

### What does the Bible say about the “flesh?”

- The Greek word is σάρξ (sarx) and it is used some 150 times throughout the NT.
- A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature describes the word this way: “the physical body as functioning entity; in Paul’s thought esp., all parts of the body constitute a totality known as flesh, which is dominated by sin to such a degree that wherever flesh is, all forms of sin are likewise present, and no good thing can live.”
- **John 1:13 “...who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.”**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/90-34/walking-by-the-spirit>

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- John 1:14 “And **the Word became flesh**, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”
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- Matthew 16:17 “And Jesus said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because **flesh** and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.’”
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- Matthew 26:41 “Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the **flesh is weak**.”
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- Romans 7:5, 14 “For while we **were in the flesh**, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death...For we know that the Law is spiritual, **but I am of flesh**, sold into bondage to sin.”
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- Romans 8:3 “For what the Law could not do, weak as it was **through the flesh**, God did: sending His own Son in the **likeness of sinful flesh** and as an offering for sin, **He condemned sin in the flesh**...”
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- We see many different contexts that *flesh* is used. It is very helpful to know exactly what the author is talking about and not just assume that the word flesh always equals bad.

## **FLESH AS OUR INNER DISPOSITION PRIOR TO SALVATION.**

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- The flesh can also be called our nature or our sinful nature.
- Ephesians 2:3 “Among them we too all formerly **lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind**, and were **by nature** children of wrath, even as the rest.”
  - The word for *nature* is *birth or physical origin*. So, each person is born with the sinful nature that puts them as a child of wrath. This is also called your flesh.
- This flesh or sinful nature is the control center for every person when they are born.
- Romans 5:12 “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, **because all sinned**...”
- We get our sinful nature or our flesh because it has been passed down from Adam to everyone who has ever lived...except Jesus.
- Speaking of the flesh “It manages everything about you – how you think, what you want, what you love, how you feel, and, ultimately, everything that you do. The flesh operating system in Adam suffers under

universal depravity, as all have sinned. We are born sinners and become sinners. Because the outlook of the flesh is hostile to God, the flesh refuses to submit to the law of God, nor is it able to do so. The flesh is the operating system through which sin occurs. This sinful disposition can also be referred to as your old man.”<sup>2</sup>

- If this is true (which it is), then we can never blame someone for our own sin.
- We must come to the place where we realize and comprehend that the sin which comes out of us, whether in word, deed, thought, etc. comes from a place that is sinful in us.
- If we are do mortify the flesh, kill our sin, then we have to admit that our sin is our responsibility.
- “The flesh is a built-in law of failure, making it impossible for natural man to please or serve God. It is a compulsive inner force inherited from man’s fall, which expresses itself in general and specific rebellion against God and His righteousness. **The flesh can never be reformed or improved.** The only hope for escape from the law of the flesh is its total execution and replacement by a new life in the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup>
- This is why, while they are good, laws can never stop the flesh from desiring and committing sin.
  - Laws are good to restrain evil, but they cannot stop it from happening all together.
  - This is a very hard concept for all people to understand because we naturally want to think of people as generally good. But that’s not what the Bible says.
- When you talk to unbelievers about moral issues and a Biblical worldview, they will be lost. Their morals are subjective to something other than the truth of Scripture.
- This is one of man’s biggest failures today. They are attempting to “mortify the flesh” by putting rules and restrictions on people in the hopes they will do what is good and right.
- They don’t realize that man’s natural disposition is to sin, not to follow laws.
- We sin because of our sinful nature or our natural disposition against God. Sinning comes natural to people who are without God because they do not know the alternative.
- When unsaved people choose not to sin, they are not doing it because they rather desire to glorify God. Their choice is based on their own personal selfishness to meet their own desired end.
- **Hebrews 11:6 “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”**
- **Romans 14:23b “...whatever is not from faith is sin.”**
- We can easily see from these two passages (and there are more) which specifically say that nothing that comes out of a heart of unbelief pleases the Lord.
  - Of course, this doesn’t mean that unbelievers can’t perform acts which outwardly conform to God’s law. They don’t kill. They don’t steal. They don’t lie. In other words, they conform outwardly to

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<sup>2</sup> <https://kevincarson.com/2022/03/24/how-do-you-put-to-death-the-flesh-what-is-the-flesh/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/the-flesh.html>

some of God's revealed will. What this shows is that it's not simply external conformity to prescribed deeds that pleases the Lord.<sup>4</sup>

- This begins to show us there is a marked difference between those who are in the flesh and those who are not. Those who are in the flesh or walking in sin are those who cannot please God.
- “So we can say that the flesh is any human action or achievement without dependence upon the Holy Spirit and without glorying in Christ Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>
- Prior to being saved, all mankind is *in the flesh* or as the Bible says *dead in our trespass and sin (Eph 2:1)*.
- A question that should arise in our mind as all believers still sin is *do believers still have the sin nature or are believers still in the flesh?*

### **What does it mean to live or walk in the flesh?**

- “We do not segment our lives, giving some time to God, some to our business or schooling, while keeping parts to ourselves. The idea is to live all of our lives in the presence of God, under the authority of God, and for the honor and glory of God. That is what the Christian life is all about.” — R.C. Sproul
- **Romans 8:5** “For those **who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh**, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.”
- **Galatians 5:16-17** “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the **desire of the flesh**. For **the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit**, and *the Spirit against the flesh*; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”
- **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, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that *those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*”
- To live according to the flesh or our sinful desires means that our minds are set on deeds that are contrary to what living in the Spirit looks like.
- As Paul says in **Galatians 5**, our flesh *has desires*. This is why we are talking about mortifying or killing our flesh because it desires to have control over you.
- How do you know when someone is walking in the flesh? They are living a life which is consistent with what Paul describes in **Galatians 5**.
- In all three sets of these verses Paul is not talking about the once off sin but the consistent pattern of sinful acts in the life of a person. In other words, our works are going to show our standing before God.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/do-non-christians-ever-please-god>

<sup>5</sup> [desiringgod.org/interviews/what-does-it-mean-to-live-in-the-flesh](https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-does-it-mean-to-live-in-the-flesh)

- If our works are constantly aligning with the deeds of the flesh, then we are *in the flesh*. To be in the flesh is the opposite of being *in the Spirit*. **That means that to be in the flesh is not to be saved.**
- Notice the ending of **Galatians 5:21** “...those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”
- We must take careful note that Paul does not say *those who have done nor do* these things, but he is careful to point out that it is a present continual action.
- This works in tandem with **Romans 8:5** about where our minds are set.
- This is precisely why we this topic of killing our sin or mortifying our flesh is so very important. It is not just something a Christian *should* be doing, but it must be the practice of every believer.
- It is not a work to get into heaven but one that comes to anyone who is on the way to heaven.
- It is a constant struggle that every believer is engaged in and will only stop when our sanctification is complete in our glorification.
- This leads us to our next question...

## IS THE BELIEVER’S FLESH STILL ALIVE?

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- This one of the most important questions for the Christian...is their flesh still living and active?
- Since we all still sin, since we seem to wrestle with our sinful desires on a moment by moment basis, what happened when we were born again?

### All Christians are new creations.

- **2 Corinthians 5:17** “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, **he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.**”
  - When one is born again or in Christ, their whole being has been changed. Their old value system and behaviors are changed, not by their own desire but because they are now in Christ.
  - In other words, they are now dead to sin but alive in Christ (**Rom 6:11**).
- **Galatians 2:20** “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is **no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.**”
  - Remember what we said before, those who are not living by faith find it impossible to please God.
  - Paul says here that his new life is characterized by living by faith *in the Son of God*.
- I think these two verses are so essential to the Christian life to know who we are now as believers.
- These are stative verses, meaning they state the new reality that belongs to the Christian.
- **What we are going to do over the next several weeks is learn how this new stative reality looks in our new created lives.**

## Can a believer be in the flesh?

- The Bible never says that a Christian is *in the flesh*. This language is used when the author is talking about those who have not been born again.
- When the Bible describes those who are sinning, it uses different language.
- 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 “And I, brethren, **could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ**. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; **for you were not yet able to receive it**. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, **for you are still fleshly**. **For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?”**
  - Notice a few things here. Paul never called them unspiritual men, nor did he call them natural men.
  - He said that he was unable to talk to them like spiritual men. This phrase means to be mature in spiritual matters. They were not acting (behaving) like those who were mature but like those who were immature in spiritual things or acting as infants in Christ.
  - These Corinthians were acting no different than the world around them who were not born again.
  - Paul never tells them they are walking in the flesh, he really stops just short of that, but he tells them that in this instance of picking their favorite pastor, they are acting like the unsaved.
- Regarding the Corinthian church, they struggled with many instances of looking like the unsaved world. Paul never condemns them to walking the flesh but he constantly reminds them of who they are in the Spirit and what they must do to have victory over the flesh.
  - 1 Corinthians 6:11 “Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”
  - There are times where every believer needs to be reminded of their new position in Christ so that they are able to get out of the sin they are steeped in.
  - We do others a disservice by either renaming their sin or giving up hope for them.
- Colossians 2:11 “...and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, **in the removal of the body of the flesh** by the circumcision of Christ...”
  - Paul here compares the physical act of circumcision with the spiritual removal of man’s unredeemed flesh by the death and resurrection of Christ.
  - Those who are circumcised in the flesh have no advantage over those who are not.
  - What Paul is talking about is their spiritual state. Similar to what Stephen said to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7:51 “You men who are **stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit**; you are doing just as your fathers did.”
  - Circumcision in the OT was a physical rite to show who was of God’s and who was of the world.
- The exact same thing is said for the Christian, though in spiritual terms.

- This is what Paul was getting at when dealing with the Corinthians.
- *He never called them unbelievers or unsaved, just that they were acting like them.* He reminded them of their place in the Spirit and how they should now be acting as new creations.
- We should be very careful to call anyone *in the flesh* who has called on the Lord for salvation. As Paul expressly says, they could just be infants, not ready for the meat of the Word.
- But, on the flip side, if someone is constantly living a life which is characterized by being in the flesh without any sense of their sin against God, we should warn them they as if they are not in the faith.
- This is the importance of the warning passages in the Bible.

## WHAT IS OUR HOPE?

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- The last thing we want to leave with is thinking that if we sin we are somehow excluded from the Kingdom of God. That's simply not true.
- *2 Corinthians 13:5 "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you--unless indeed you fail the test?"*
- Instead of making excuses for our sin or lack of desire for holiness, we should be examining ourselves.
- In God's kindness and mercy, He has not left us to hope we are saved.
- We can take the Bible and scrutinize ourselves, our hearts, our thoughts and our actions to make sure that we are living according to the Spirit.
- We are always going to find areas that we need to kill, that's the point. We are never going to get to a place where the Word of God no longer convicts us.
- Christian behavior is the touchstone for determining whether those who claim to be Christians really are.<sup>6</sup>
- More than our religious experiences or rituals, the Bible constantly asks how we are living for Christ.
- God is faithful that through the Holy Spirit and the Word He will continue to bring these areas to mind that we need to kill in order for us to be conformed more into the image of Christ.
- This is the normal sanctification process in the life of the believer.
- As our heart (inner man) has changed and is being changed, so will our thoughts, actions and words.
- How we do all of that is the topic for our upcoming classes.

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<sup>6</sup> Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, TNAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 547.