

## Chapter Eight

# The Enemy Within

If the devil is Public Enemy Number 1, the flesh certainly qualifies as Public Enemy Number 2. One of the most useful areas of counseling is helping people learn to deal with what the Bible calls "the flesh." This is a realm in which only God, not psychology, has any information. It is only the Bible that instructs us on this major problem in mankind. So, as God's people, we need to find out all we can about the subject.

First, let's seek to define the flesh. How do you understand the term? One group I asked came up with these ideas: Self, acting apart from God; doing what comes naturally; a drive to be separate from God; a valiant attempt to make a go of it without God; self-sufficiency; doing as you please without reference to God. Note that most of these definitions share the common factor of leaving God out, and that is the essential idea.

Here are some of my own attempts to define the flesh:

- 1) That evil tendency in man to try to leave God out and try to go it alone.
- 2) The spirit of independence that cuts God out of thoughts and actions.
- 3) Our basic fallen humanness proceeding from Adam, characterized by a fancied independence from God.
- 4) The inherent tendency to trust in one's self rather than in God.
- 5) The seat of the rebel spirit that resists the control of God in the life. (It includes the *best*, as well as the *worst* that man can do without God. It also includes all those neat, respectable sins, those refined types of sin that we protect. Incidentally, the flesh can be very religious, often putting up a front of relating to God while actually resisting God.)

### Identifying the Flesh

We can use several approaches in learning to identify the flesh at work, in ourselves or someone else:

- 1) Examine the source of your thought processes. Are you exhibiting earthly or heavenly wisdom?
- 2) Compare Galatians 5:19 and 5:22, 23, contrasting the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. See which one fits.
- 3) Examine some of the biblical illustrations like Abraham, Esau, Jacob, and Amalek.
- 4) Check through some of the common forms of rationalizing--ways of excusing fleshly activities or thought patterns.

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

### Two Kinds of Wisdom

One way to identify the flesh is to examine the *source* of our thought processes. James has a good word on the

subject:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. And the harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (James 3:13-18).

This penetrating passage highlights two kinds of wisdom, deriving from two different sources. So we ask ourselves, "Where am I getting my information? Where are my thought processes coming from?" One way to recognize the flesh, then, is to identify the source of our attitudes and behavior, using James' helpful checklist outlined below:

WISDOM FROM ABOVE	THE OTHER KIND
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PURE</li> <li>· GENTLE</li> <li>· OPEN TO REASON</li> <li>· FULL OF MERCY</li> <li>· FULL OF GOOD FRUITS</li> <li>· WITHOUT UNCERTAINTY</li> <li>· WITHOUT INSINCERITY</li> <li>· PRODUCING A HARVEST OF RIGHTEOUSNESS--A GOOD LIFE.</li> </ul>	<p>is marked by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· BITTER JEALOUSY</li> <li>· SELFISH AMBITION</li> <li>· BOASTING</li> <li>· BEING FALSE TO THE TRUTH</li> </ul> <p>is being:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· EARTHLY</li> <li>· UNSPIRITUAL</li> <li>· DEVILISH</li> <li>· PRODUCING DISORDER AND EVERY VILE PRACTICE.</li> </ul>

**Observe the Results**

Another way is to carefully observe the *results* of our actions and attitudes. Galatians 5:19-21 tells us the results of operating in the flesh:

Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like.

We all like to hurry through this list. We don't like to look too closely at these words. But if we're willing to face the music, we will ask: Are my actions producing *strife* or *dissension*, or *anger*? If so, what is the source? It is the flesh. If we go on, continuing through the whole rotten list, we can identify the problem and its source.

On the other hand, Galatians 5:22 tells us: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." The vivid contrast between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit helps us to identify clearly the basis of our actions, whether it is the flesh or the Spirit.

## Biblical Examples

Another way to pinpoint the flesh in action is to look at some of the illustrations in the characters of the Bible. The first one who comes to my mind is Abraham. That may sound strange, since we generally think of Abraham as the *man of faith*. But Abraham had his lapses, even as we do. One in particular, far-reaching in its effects, is recorded in Genesis 16.

Abraham, on the advice of Sarah, decided that he should have a son by Hagar, Sarah's maid. The problem was that God hadn't come through on his promise to send Abraham and Sarah a son, so they said, "Lord, you need our help. If you can't make it, we'll help you out." The significance of their action comes dramatically to light when you think about the implications of circumcision, instituted by God, following Abraham's decision to help God out (Genesis 17). Circumcision is a cutting off of the flesh of the sex organ, and the sex organ was the instrument that Abraham decided to use to do God's work for him. Connect this with Colossians 2:11 and you can see what God was teaching in circumcision: "In him [that is, in Christ] also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ."

Now the result of this fleshly union was Ishmael, and "Ishmael" has been a problem to "Isaac" throughout history, and still is today. In the Middle East we see two opposing forces right across the border from each other *still fighting*-- and this is the result of Abraham's fleshly lapse. To me that is a very potent illustration of how crucial our decisions are and how clear it is that we should let God fulfill his own promises instead of trying to help him out by our fleshly maneuvers.

It is easy for us to see the flesh at work in Abraham and Sarah, but it is amazing how hard it is to see it in ourselves. For we do the same thing. We're no different. Did you ever get impatient about God's apparent slowness in keeping his promises? That's the same idea. We rationalize our impatience, saying, "We just want to hurry up the process." But I every time we get impatient, we are saying the same thing Abraham and Sarah did: "Lord, you are not making it. But that's all right--we will help you out. Just watch us, we'll get results!" And of course the results we get are exactly like theirs.

## Twin Pictures

Another illustration of the flesh at work--actually a double picture--is the story of Jacob and Esau, who were twin brothers. Esau pictures the flesh in the *non-*believer (and he was the more appealing of the two, from a human viewpoint), while Jacob, the little sniveling wretch, was a picture of the flesh in the *believer*--a rather pointed shot at us who are believers.

Esau disdained his spiritual inheritance and sold it for a plate of bean soup! That's a pretty cheap price, even when you are hungry. Thus Esau ruled God out entirely, judging him to be of no importance in his life. Jacob, on the other hand, valued the spiritual inheritance, and really did his best to gain it, but he went about it the wrong way. God had already made up his mind that Jacob was to have the inheritance, but Jacob was a schemer, and he decided to get it *his* way, not God's. (The story of Jacob's deception is in Gen. 27.)

Nevertheless, this devious Jacob, whose name means "supplanter," became Israel, which means "prince with God." When Jacob finally accepted God as sovereign in his life, God changed his name to reflect the nature and purpose he had planned all along for Jacob to have and fulfill.

## War with Amalek

Later on, in Exodus 17, we find the story of Amalek, who further illustrates the work of the flesh, clearly portraying God's attitude toward it:

Then came Amalek and fought with Israel at Rephidim. And Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out, fight with Amalek; tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, .Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands

grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat upon it, and Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. And the Lord said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my banner, saying, "A hand upon the banner of the Lord! The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Ex. 17:15-16).

Here is a beautifully pictorial representation of the battle against the flesh. Amalek was Esau's grandson, descended from the same fleshly line. God was taking the Israelites into the land of promise. (Israel, the nation, is a picture of the believer, and the land of promise represents the spiritual victory we are meant to enjoy.) Amalek is a picture of the flesh, the force designed to thwart God's desire to give us spiritual victory. The flesh constantly fights against what God wants--our living in triumph in Christ.

As we follow through this remarkable picture of our spiritual life, we must remember that the children of Israel had come from Egypt, and they had crossed the Red Sea (which is a picture of our commitment to Christ--cutting off the way back). Moses was to take them all the way into the land of promise (the place of spiritual victory). But Amalek (picturing the flesh) tried to keep them out, opposing the entrance of Israel into the land of promise. In the same way, in our lives, the flesh always opposes God's program for spiritual victory.

In this story, the rod is the symbol of power, the authority of faith--and when it was held up, the Israelites won. The battle didn't depend on fighting, it depended on *faith* --even though there was indeed fighting going on. But who was doing the fighting? It was Joshua, and the name Joshua is the Hebrew equivalent of "Jesus." So in our lives, who does the fighting? It is always Jesus; our part in the battle against the flesh is simply to believe.

After the battle was won we read in verse 14, "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.'" What Moses was to write down constituted what would later be included in the law of the Jews. And since Joshua is a representation of Jesus, what the Lord is saying here, in effect, is that the law (what Moses was given to write down) is to communicate a directive to Jesus ("recite it in the ears of Joshua"). The content of that directive is that God will, through Jesus, "utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." Jesus, in other words, was sent into the world to deal effectively and authoritatively with the flesh not only once, but for all time: "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." This Old Testament story is therefore a graphic portrayal of the commitment of the Lord Jesus to faithfully and continuously deal with the flesh in our lives.

## **Getting Values Straight**

One last biblical example is the Apostle Paul's attitude, in which we can learn an essential fact concerning the nature of the flesh but one which is particularly hard for us to recognize in ourselves:

For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church as to righteousness under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Phil. 3:3-9).

Do you see what he is saying? Paul counted his ancestry, his education, his religious heritage, and his personal righteousness all as worthless garbage in view of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. Therein lay his victory over the flesh. He chose to reject all the things that the world values highly as being of no worth in terms of where he placed his confidence. Paul had plenty of reasons to take pride in himself, however. He was a brilliant man, an able student, a well-instructed scholar of the truth of God. He was a Pharisee, a "fundamentalist of the fundamentalists" of his day. Yet he was able to say, "We put no confidence in the flesh."

For us, it's comparatively easy to recognize the obviously negative things in our lives as fleshly--things like jealousy, strife, and the like. But to pride ourselves in educational prowess or mental brilliance--that's fleshly, too. If you were to somehow suddenly be stripped of all your educational background, or to discover that your great-grandparents didn't come over on the Mayflower after all, or to learn that your career was henceforth rendered meaningless by some technological advance, would you crumble? Take a look and see where your confidence really lies. It may startle you, but it will free you to begin to depend more totally on the One who is totally dependable.

Paul had his values straight. He got his insight the hard way, however, by being blinded for a few days so he could finally see the truth. These words of his are well worth remembering: "We are the circumcision." Circumcision is always a picture of the cutting off of the flesh--spiritual circumcision (of the heart, not of the body). Thus it pictures putting aside any confidence in ourselves. "The circumcision" are further described as those "who worship God in spirit." Worship is "worthship," and Christians are those who have discovered that *real* worth is in God, not in us. Furthermore, those who have circumcised hearts "glory in Christ Jesus." But how? By placing our confidence in him as our indwelling Lord.

### **Truth in Labeling**

There is one more way we can identify the flesh, and that is to recognize some of the ways in which we rationalize our carnal attitudes. Here are a few typical rationalizations:

Others have *prejudices*, but we have *convictions*.

Others are *conceited*, but in me it's *self-respect*.

Others are *social-climbing snobs*, but with me it's *just trying to get ahead*.

If you are unyielding about your views of Scripture, that's just plain *stubbornness*; but in me, it's *contending for the faith*.

When you spend time on your personal appearance, it's *vanity*; in me, it's *just making the most of my God-given assets*.

In you, it's *impatience*; while in me, it's *"have you noticed how annoying everyone is?"*

In you, it's *touchiness*; but in me, it's *sensitivity*.

In you, it's *self-righteousness*; while in me it's amply justified, because I *really* am right.

In you, it's *worry*; in me, *concern*.

In you, it's *self-justification*; but in me it's just *explaining my position*.

In you, it's a *bad temper*; while I "blew my stack" because *they had it coming and I couldn't let them get away with it*.

Do you see how this works? It's a pretty familiar process isn't it? But in order to deal with the flesh in us, as we will work through in a moment, we must first label it for what it is. Perhaps the following summary list

will be helpful.

#### VARIOUS FORMS AND EXPRESSIONS OF SELF:

- Self-approbation
- Self-justification
- Self-indulgence
- Self-pleasing
- Self-reliance
- Self-effort
- Self-centeredness
- Self-righteousness
- Self-pity
- Self-protectiveness
- Self-assertiveness
- Self-confidence

*Then there's:* selfish ambition, stubbornness, bigotry, false modesty, anxiety, withdrawal, hypersensitivity, impatience, egotism, inferiority feelings, vanity, hostility, nervousness, depression, a critical spirit, dominance, indifference, fear guilt, avarice, lovelessness, dissension, envy, pride--and YOU

If you consider each one carefully you will see how all of these traits simply rule God out of our scene and leave us shut up to our own human resources. And as has been said, "A man wrapped up in himself makes a mighty small package."

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