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VICTORIOUS CHRISTIAN LIVING CONFERENCE

MY FLESH—GOD’S ENEMY

Lesson Transcript by Mark Ford

I’d like to ask you to turn in your manuals to the section on MY FLESH—GOD’S ENEMY. On many occasions I deal with young men who are struggling in their marriages. Often they say things like: “Mark, I really love my wife. The thought of losing her terrifies me. Can you help me somehow? Can you share something with me that will give strength and stamina to my marriage? I have trouble controlling my thoughts and my words. It isn’t helping my marriage at all.”

As we go through the Scriptures together we always agree as to what is true and should be done, and yet frequently when they return the next week they come back totally defeated. They say things like: “I don’t know what happened. When I got home and my wife started in on me, it was like something came over me and dragged me into my anger. I wound up seeing my anger accelerate and the next thing I knew, I was doing all of the things we agreed I shouldn’t do. I feel totally helpless.”

It brings us to a very important question. “Why do some situations render us helpless, without strength to do what we know is righteous?” We are going to answer that question. Sometimes it seems that situations somehow gain power and seize precedence over all that’s happening. What can we do for people who genuinely desire to walk with the Lord, but find no power to do it?

A major point is the will. I may have an idea of what life should be and find that God has a different idea. God takes His children through hard times to purify them and teach them to become comfortable with having to trust only in

the Lord. Certainly the Lord did that with His people in Israel. In hard times God’s people may say, “This is not what I signed up for God. I am not interested.” They look for ways to arrange some kind of a compromise with God. Sometimes Christians will pursue their own desires, walk away from God and the church for a while, hoping that God doesn’t punish them too severely. Christians argue: “I like that kind of music. I don’t think that God wants me to listen to it, but I want to listen to it.”

Others struggle with the kind of friends they choose. “I don’t think that God wants me to spend time with these people, but they make me laugh. I enjoy being with them.”

The Word says that we are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers; yet, we see it in marriage and business. Many Christians struggle between their will and what they know God wants. It really does bring havoc.

Sometimes Christians play this deadly game: “This is what I want. I know God doesn’t want me to do it, but what will He do to me if I do it? I really don’t want to abandon God, so I will do it and confess it later.” Where does this kind of thinking originate? It comes from unbelief. It comes from the flesh which demands its desires and to be in control to fulfill them. Our flesh knows God isn’t going to deliver what it wants. Flesh knows that God won’t help in its plans, and so, it must rely on self to make them happen.

In this lesson we will study four things:

- We will identify for you what the flesh is.
- We will teach you how the flesh works and what it does to you.

- We will show you how to identify your flesh.
- We will show you how to escape the power of the flesh and walk in peace and righteousness.

Let's look at our title page and answer the question, "What is the flesh?" Look at Romans 8:7 in the box. "Because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so." That answers part of our question. The flesh is hostile to God. If you are subjecting your decision making process to the control of the flesh, you will not be successful. You will not experience life and peace. The flesh does not even have that capacity. That's important.

The text under the box says, "This lesson deals with the condition within each of us whereby we desire to operate in our own strength, reason, and selfish desires. This condition is called the flesh or the self-life. The flesh may be described as 'my claim to my right to myself' (Oswald Chambers). Paul says in Romans 8:6 that 'The mind set on the flesh is death.' This is a crucial lesson to uncover a basic reason Christians are not living in victory. They are choosing to walk after the flesh. There is good news—victory is possible because **I am not my flesh.**"

We have a quote here from the book *Grace Walk*, written by Steve McVey, which I believe is very helpful. Here is what he said: "We have all learned to rely on our own strategies for getting our needs met. The Bible calls this mechanism for servicing our own needs the *flesh*. Every person has developed his flesh-life in order to get what he wants out of life as much of the time as possible. Don't think of flesh as skin, but as personal *techniques* for meeting your own perceived needs, apart from Christ."

Here is another way of looking at it. The flesh is *another will*. Let's consider the origin. Turn

in your Bibles to Isaiah 14:13-15. Notice the five "I wills" of Satan. "But you said in your heart I will ascend to heaven, I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of the assembly in the recesses of the North. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds. I will make myself like the Most High." Notice God's comment. "Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol to the recesses of the pit."

Maybe as you hear the comments of Satan you may be thinking, "Well I don't want to ascend above the throne of God, I don't want anything like that." I don't either, but we don't have to take it to that extreme to buy into independence from God. Have you ever heard yourself telling God, "I don't want to do that"? Or maybe saying, "God, I can't" or how about, "Lord, I know you want me to do this, but not right now." Or "I'm just not into that kind of thing. Can't you find someone else?" If we say things like that to God, it may not sound so blatant as "I will be like the most High," but any time we don't do what God wants, when He wants it done, we are basically saying: "God, I am the god of my own life. I make my own decisions." There is no difference.

Since the fall in the garden of Eden, man has lived with the flesh, perverted by sin—believer and unbeliever alike. For the unbeliever, the flesh is his life. It is everything to him. It is his decision maker, it is in absolute control of every single thing he does. That's the power of the flesh. The believer on the other hand has an option. He does not have to sin. According to Romans 6:6-10 he can yield his life to God. He doesn't have to yield his body as an instrument of unrighteousness unto sin. He can yield himself to God. The believer has flesh, but he also has an option. For the believer the flesh remains God's enemy and ours, but it becomes a very good reason to pursue the Lord. The fruit of following the flesh is always death. There are no exceptions.

MAKING LIFE OR DEATH DECISIONS (Diagram 150-A)

Let's consider how the flesh works. Turn to Diagram 150-A. Let's look at Deuteronomy 30:19-20: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them." Notice what He said. Life comes by loving the Lord, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him. Hosea 10:13 says, "You have plowed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, / You have eaten the fruit of lies. / Because you have trusted in your way, in your numerous warriors." What is the value of numerous warriors? They are resources. If we trust in our own resources, we are not trusting in God. We can take God's resources and abuse them for our own purposes. That is what this lesson is all about.

Let's look at the diagram. You can see in the large arrow off to the left that there are basically seven areas of life: psychological, spiritual, physical, social, financial, marital, and parental. Notice that each of those areas can bring problems, needs, and questions that force us to make decisions. Somebody once said that every sin issue is really a trust issue. Because I have concerns that God will not do what I want, I determine what I want and trust in my own way and resources to make it happen if I can. "My will" is the element in the decision making circle that tips the scale down to the self-life.

The option is to allow the Christ-life, or God's will, to tip the scale and lift us to submission to God. That is based on John 6:38, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." Here is the question. Do I want what God wants or what my flesh wants?

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Now let's look at what happens. Suppose we choose to do what Hosea describes, trusting in our own way. Look in the "my way" box and see how it works. My way is based on "what I want." That's what Satan did, wasn't it? That's also what Eve did in the garden. She knew what God wanted. It was God's tree. God gave his instructions regarding the tree. But she said: "I know what you want God. I have a better idea. It would be better for me to know the difference between good and evil, and then I would be just like You." She chose to pursue her own agenda. Notice the basis, "what I want."

The second one is "thinking my life is my own." 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 tells us clearly that we are not our own. We are bought with a price. Our responsibility is to glorify God who is in heaven. But if I take the body God gave me to pursue my own desires, I am telling God that I belong to myself and I can do what I want.

Pride and vanity often drive us in "our way." Have you ever heard someone say, "I can't possibly go out in public looking like this." I used to have a 1979 Toyota Celica and I've actually had people decline to ride in it. It defiled their image.

I may choose my way based on defending my rights. This is a problem for many people. "I have rights and I'm going to defend them. Your right stops where my right begins."

What about fear? Many function out of fear. I may know what I'm going to do is not God's way, but I'm afraid this is my only chance to achieve my goal or stay in control.

What we need to see from this diagram is that if we pursue the self-life, it inevitably culminates in living death. Galatians 6:7-9 tells us that God is not mocked. If we sow to the flesh, we are from the flesh going to reap corruption. We will reap death.

Let's consider the other option we have as

FLESH

Christians. In the decision making process we may choose the Christ-life. Notice what the Christ-life is based on. It is based on the Father's will. Notice what John 6:38 says. "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." That was life for Jesus and if you are living the Christ-life, that is your life as well. Let's consider the life of a golfer. He worked all week long and he is looking for his reward. He wakes up at 6:00 Saturday morning, grabs his clubs and is on his way out when his wife hears that noise and says, "Where are you going?" He says, "I'm going golfing." She says to him: "You can't do that. My mother is coming in a few days. You've got to paint the living room and the bedroom." The agenda begins to roll. The first words that come out of his mouth are: "Your mother is coming? You didn't say anything to me about that." The fire begins to build and the words begin to fly. The next thing you know, the two are yelling at one another. What happened? The wants of two people came into conflict. This describes many lives.

How can we identify the cause? We find a concise list of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21. Here they are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, and carousing. You know for certain that if you are experiencing an outburst of anger, the Bible says you are walking after the flesh. When you have walked after the flesh what do you need to do? You need to recognize that you have made the self-life choice. It's going to be based on one of these things—what you want—perhaps pride or defending your rights. You may be certain that it is going to culminate in death.

Let's use our diagram to track through the conflict with our golfer and his wife. It begins with the social world in our seven areas of life.

He wants to go golfing with his buddies. His problem was that his wife said, "You need to stay home and paint." He must make a decision. What decision might he make if he decides in favor of the Christ-life? He begins with John 6:38. Jesus didn't come to do His own will. He exists to do the will of God who sent Him. So, too, it is with our golfer. Perhaps he needs to prefer his wife and stay home and paint. There's nothing wrong with golf. In 1 Corinthians 9:27, Paul talks about something our flesh doesn't like to hear about. Buffeting our body keeps us from becoming enslaved to our flesh.

There are other verses to consider. Ephesians 5:25 says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her." In the Greek that word "gave himself up" could also be translated "he abandoned himself" for her. What would be wrong with him abandoning himself and his desire to go golfing for his wife? What would he be doing if he stands and argues with his wife? He is basically saying, "The only thing that is important here right now is what I want. Paint it yourself."

We could consider other of the seven areas from our diagram. Finances come up often. People who are struggling financially will sometimes go into business with unbelievers because they have money. They might think: "I have the business, I need the money. I know that God's Word says that I am not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers, but God doesn't understand. My business is going to fail if I don't get some money. He's got the money. I'll just do this quickly, turn my profit and pay him off. Then I will get back on track with God again." It ends in death.

Consider parenting. I was standing in the check-out line at the grocery store where I saw a battle between a mother and her child. The child grabbed a candy bar from the rack. Mother did

not want her baby to have the candy. When the two realized they had come to an impasse, the child played the trump card. He let out a screech that felt like a steel bar going right through my ears. You know what happened? Mom grabbed the candy bar and gave it to Junior and paid for it. Was that God's will? It was MY will. The pain was excruciating. I would have bought the kid the candy bar if she didn't. It wasn't my child. I didn't have to worry about the child. Mother gave the child the candy because the mother didn't want to deal with the scream. She didn't want the embarrassment. The Bible tells us that we are to train our children. What kind of training was she giving? For the moment it was more convenient for the sake of her vanity or pride to give him the candy. For 35 cents she saved her pride. That is self-life. In ten or fifteen years payday is coming. Mom and Dad are going to have to deal with the legacy of teaching their child that if he makes people uncomfortable enough, he can have anything he wants, anytime he wants it. It's easy for a while, but living death is coming.

There is another element not quite so obvious. In Jeremiah 17:9 the Bible says, "The heart is more deceitful than all else / And is desperately sick; /Who can understand it?" The truth is, you cannot trust your heart or your emotions. That is why we need God to tell us what to do. If we take our lives into our own hands and do things our own way, we're going to run into lots of trouble.

I served as a missionary in Papua New Guinea for three and a half years and was totally convinced that what I was doing was absolutely righteous. If you would have looked at my life you would have thought I was doing what God wanted. I want you to understand how what I was doing was not at all what God wanted, and I'm going to show you how you can tell in your own life.

I wanted to become a dedicated missionary.

When I went to the mission field in Papua New Guinea, I already had a plan. I suppose I was more concerned about what I was willing to do than I was about how God wanted me to do it. That was the way I went to the mission field. I got involved in learning language, doing all of the good things that a missionary should do.

SELF-LIFE (Diagram 150-B)

Let's look at Diagram 150-B. Notice the life that ends in death begins with the self-life. I want to illustrate this diagram with my life. Let's read James 3:16. "For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing." Where jealousy (which is what I want) and selfish ambition (which is the essence of the drive of what I want) exist there is disorder and every evil thing.

My life began with the self-life. I wanted to gain personal value through becoming a good, accomplished missionary. Did you notice what I said there? "I will have personal value." Does that sound anything like what we looked at in the words of Satan, "I will be like the Most High"? It doesn't matter if I say: "God, I don't want your throne. I don't want my throne to be above the stars of heaven. I just want to do what I want to do." There is no difference. That's why the Lord deals with that same issue in Luke 12:18. That's where the man says: "Here is what I will do. I will tear down my barns and build new. And then I will sit back and say to myself, 'Soul, you have laid up much for yourself.'" What did God say? "Bad choice. Your soul is going to be required of you tonight and then who is going to get all of your stuff?" Don't you think it makes a lot more sense to let the God who knows everything be the One who directs your life?

Notice how my life failure progressed. I arrived on the mission field and jumped right into the middle of language study. The first thing that I began to hear from my tribal friends was just what I was searching for, "Mark, you sound

Kuman.” That was the tribe I lived with. Notice as we move from self-life down to self-commendation. “Mark, you are a great missionary. You sound Kuman. Mark, you are Enduga.” Wow! I’m Enduga. That was the clan in my tribe that adopted me. I belonged to them. I fit in. I began to get very excited about how that felt.

You will notice the next slip down the cycle is self-occupation. The more I gave myself to that whole process, the more occupied I became with it. When you become enamored with what you are doing, that is self-occupation. That is exactly what I was, self-occupied. As I became more involved with the tribal people there were things like weddings, funerals, all kinds of events that began to clamor for my attention. The more involved I became, the more acceptance I gained. That is what I was pursuing.

Notice the next step down, self-pleasing. I wanted to please myself. I loved my work so much. For the first time in my life I was having more fun than I thought I would ever have and I pursued it. You could say I sold my soul to pleasing myself, and I actually believed I was giving myself to the Lord. The reality was I had no clue that I was literally being eaten alive by my own lust for self-approval.

As my wife began to see me going down this spiral, my wife began to say: “I’m not going to march in your parade any more. Mark, you are a runaway locomotive and I’m going to get out of your way.” My wife started talking about going home. It shocked me. It frightened me.

“You are NOT going home.”

My wife should have been able to receive some support from me. What she got was: “Come with me, Sue. If you will come with me, I’ll get you value just like I am getting. Come on, Sue. Learn the Kuman language. Come to the funeral with me. Come to the wedding party with me.”

I got so involved in taking care of Mark, my wife decided that she needed to get involved in taking care of Sue. She began to decline attending funerals. I told her she couldn’t stay home. If she stayed home the message she would be communicating to them would be that she didn’t want anything to do with them. They weren’t important. I couldn’t let her do that. She had to go.

From there it became nasty. She defied me and wouldn’t go. She told me that I was the missionary, she wasn’t. If I wanted, I could go, but she would not. I told her: “No, you ARE going. Let’s get this clear.” She began to tell me what a lousy husband I was: “You care more about the tribal people than you do about me.” I told her, “Well, you are a lousy missionary.” She reminded me that she really never wanted to be a missionary and that I was abandoning my family. I told her to leave if she wanted. I was committed to the work of God and I would stay and do it. I walked away with my fingers in my suspenders. I won the argument. I still had my spiritual integrity and she had just admitted to being a spiritual dwarf. So now that we had established that, she was God’s problem and that’s where I left it.

“God, if you want me to stay out here and do this awesome work, you are going to have to do something about my wife.”

I became self-defensive, and it wasn’t long before I moved into self-pity: “God, why in the world did you saddle me with this woman? Her sole mission is to destroy my work.” I was so self-righteous about it. You will notice on the bottom that the end is self-destruction. That is exactly what happened. My wife and I had such an impasse with the whole thing that it really did bring destruction.

OVERCOMING THE FLESH (Diagram 150-C)

Let’s consider how to identify the flesh. We use this diagram to give relief and direction. This

diagram will help you identify your motives. How can you discern your flesh?

Look at box number one. Is my decision for the flesh? Am I doing this for my self-interest? Is it against God's word? Is it contrary to those in authority? Am I feeling frustrated, angry, or fearful? Or is there a lack of contentment?

Let's apply the principles. You know we can nail the golfer's flesh right off the bat. Is he doing it for his self-interest? Of course. Things like that are easy. Is it against God's word? Well, if you are talking about something like adultery, lying, or stealing, of course it is.

What about things that are more subtle. There are many people in ministry, and I would have included myself, who are totally convinced that what they are doing is righteous, yet they are destroying their families. Wouldn't it be nice if God gave us a way to look at what we are doing and know, "THAT'S FLESH"? He has.

Look at box number 2. Is my decision for the Spirit? Am I doing it in recognition that my life is not my own? Am I acknowledging God's sovereign control in everything and trusting Him to work things out? Notice that it says, "If so, the result is life and peace."

Let's use the diagram and track my life through it and see how it works. What about my going to the mission field? Was I doing it for my own self-interest? The honest answer is "yes," but I couldn't see it. Was it against the Word of God? Absolutely NOT. "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel." I thought that if I didn't go I would have been disobedient. Is it contrary to those in authority? No. Boy, I'm flying through this list. Look at the next one. Am I feeling frustrated, angry, or fearful? That one had me cold. By checking on our emotions and motivations, we can find the reality of what is going on inside our hearts.

We could move on. I could check it out: "Is my decision for the Spirit? Am I doing it in recogni-

tion that my life is not my own?" No, I was doing it my own way. That was pretty obvious. "Am I acknowledging God's sovereign control in everything and trusting Him to work things out?" Absolutely not. I was trusting in my own resources. The way to determine fleshly motives is actually very simple. The Lord gives peace doesn't He? The Bible says to let the peace of God rule in our hearts.

Let's say in the scenario of my life that our struggle was all my wife's spiritual problem. That was not the case, but let's suppose it was. If I am trusting in God's sovereignty even if my wife is trying to destroy the ministry, it is God's problem. I don't have to worry about it do I? I can just sit down and say, "Okay God, you take care of this." I can continue to patiently love and accept her and show her the love of Christ. I didn't do that. I was very hard on my wife. I was very hard on my kids because I was protecting my agenda. God had to allow tragedy to come into my life to bring me to my knees. For the first time in my life I had not one solution. I came to VCL a broken man.

CHRIST'S LIFE (Diagram 150-D)

Look at Diagram 150-D. Luke 9:23 says this, "And he was saying to them all, 'If any one wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.'" I had to come to this. My first step was: "Mark, you have done a poor job of evaluating your needs, what your goals ought to be, and how you ought to accomplish them. Look at your family. Look at your wife. Look at your ministry. Everything has absolutely gone to seed. I quit. Lord, I take whatever is left of my life and I put it at the cross. I have been running my own life my own way, doing my own thing. I have literally experienced living death. So Lord, if you can do anything with this life that is left, You can have it. It is Yours."

As I began to deny myself and daily bear the cross the Lord had given me, I began to live. I

was in pain from my choices, but I realized I was reaping what I had sown. I chose to obediently reap them in order to honor what God says in Galatians 6:7. The pain was the natural consequence of my bad choices. As I quit fighting them and began to walk with the Lord through them, God began to fill me with praise and worship.

One more thing about this diagram. These “spiral out” steps are not *goals* for us to try to meet. This is the natural result of what happens when we are living the Christ life. That’s important to remember. As I continued and all of this became a flow of peace and joy in my life, I had expectations from God. I began to watch the Lord heal my relationship with my wife. I began to see the Lord heal my children. I am a man who brought serious destruction to his family actually believing I was serving the Lord. When I came to the Lord and said: “I give up. You are the King, You are the Head. I am your servant and I belong to You. You tell me what to do and I’ll do it. I have ruined my life.” God moved me so rapidly through this cycle, it was so wonderful to see. I had expectations from God, that He was in charge and He would heal.

As we grow in expectations from God, we move into mature love and spiritual freedom. As God weans us away from the selfishness that drives us, we begin to lead lives that are poured out for the sake of others, just like the Lord Jesus. That is my testimony and here is the deeper blessing. Two of my kids are training for ministry now, learning how to disciple others. Because they saw transformation and reconciliation active in their father, they began to put their lives in the Lord’s hands as well.

REVIEW

Let’s consider the review. “The flesh or self-life is a condition that exists within every person, believers and non-believers alike.” Point two: “A believer has been born of the Spirit and does not have to carry out the deeds of the flesh.” When we choose to obey the Lord, we walk in liberty. Point three: “However, when a believer chooses his or her own way over God’s way, that person is walking after the flesh and it will produce death.” Point four: “By checking my motives, I can determine if I am walking after the flesh or walking after the Spirit.” Consider this: Your life is not your own. You belong to the Lord. Maybe you have made a real mess out of your life as I did. May I just encourage you? There is One who has the answer. There is One who has the solution. There is One that has more power than you can ever imagine, and all you have to do is give it up.

Let’s pray: “Father, thank You that You love us enough to chase us anywhere in the world, even to the fields of New Guinea to make Your point, to show us that only you are God. Only you can direct life. And this thing of the flesh and trusting in it is absolute death. Lord, I thank you for what you did in my life. I praise you for it. Lord, I pray for those who are struggling right now who are hearing this message. I pray in Jesus name that You would lay Your hand on their shoulder, that You would fill their hearts with hope as they walk in faith, knowing that as they direct their lives to You, they can live the victorious life in Christ. Thank You, Lord, for what You are going to do, in Jesus name. Amen.”