

Romans 8:8–13, Galatians 5:16–24, James 4:1–6 and Resisting the Flesh

Prayer

Introductory Questions

- Christians must resist the world, *the flesh*, and the devil. What is *the flesh*?
- What are strategies for resisting the influences of *the flesh*?

Introduction

This lesson explains the nature of *the flesh* and how to resist its influences. One way to approach this topic is to study the Greek word *sarx*.¹ The word can refer to the material that cover our bones (Luke 24:39), the human body (2 Cor. 7:1), or a human being generally (Rom. 3:20). But this lesson focuses on two other meanings of the word:

1. **The word can refer to the realm of the non-Christian.** The flesh is the sinful state in which non-Christians live—their very sphere of existence apart from God—and they are under its power. Paul taught: “5 For when we were *in the flesh*, the sinful passions aroused through the law were working in us to bear fruit for death” (Rom. 7:5). By way of contrast, all Christians are “in the Spirit”—in union with him and in his realm (Rom. 8:9).

This meaning of the word *sarx* is related to similar concepts. Prior to becoming Christians, we were “in Adam” as opposed to being “in Christ” (1 Cor. 15:22), and we were in “the domain of darkness” as opposed to being in the kingdom of God’s Son (Col. 1:13–14; cf. John 12:46). We now live in the realm of our triune God (Matt. 28:19; 1 Thess. 1:1)!

2. **The word can refer to our sinful disposition.** While Christians no longer live in the realm of the flesh, our sinful tendencies remain. Our hearts (including our deepest values, desires, and thoughts) crave sin. Peter exhorts us: “...I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from the passions of *the flesh* that wage war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11).

The concept of the flesh is broader than one meaning of a word. For example, Paul teaches Timothy to “flee from youthful *passions*, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart” (2 Tim. 2:22; cf. 1 Pet. 1:14).

We explore both meanings by focusing on these passages from Scripture: Romans 8:8–13, Galatians 5:16–24, and James 4:1–6. We conclude this lesson by summarizing how we can resist the influences of the flesh.

¹ Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 45; Naselli, “Flesh and Spirit.” *Tabletalk* 38, no. 10 (October 2014): 22–24.

1. The Realm of the Flesh and the Realm of the Spirit

“8 Those who are *in the flesh* cannot please God. 9 You, however, are not *in the flesh*, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him. 10 Now if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. 11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, then he who raised Christ from the dead will also bring your mortal bodies to life through his Spirit who lives in you. 12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are not obligated to *the flesh* to live according to *the flesh*, 13 because if you live according to *the flesh*, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” (Rom. 8:8–13)

Non-Christians are *in the flesh*—a realm of existence that opposes God and his kingdom (v. 8). Christians have been set free from the power of sin and death, and they are *in the Spirit* (v. 9). Christ and the Spirit dwell within us and produce life in us, and God will raise us in the life to come (vv. 10–11). Given we are no longer in the flesh, we are not obligated to live according to our flesh (our sinful disposition) (v. 12). All who live according to the flesh will die eternally, but all who by the Spirit put to death their sinful deeds will live with God forever (v. 13).

- What does it mean to be “in the flesh” vs. “in the Spirit”?
- What truths do we see in this passage that help us resist our sinful cravings?

2. The Works of the Flesh and the Fruit of the Spirit

- “16 I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of *the flesh*. 17 For *the flesh* desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against *the flesh*; these are opposed to each other, so that you don’t do what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” (Gal. 5:16–18)
- “19 Now the works of *the flesh* are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, 20 idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Gal. 5:19–21)
- “22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things. 24 Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified *the flesh* with its passions and desires.” (Gal. 5:22–24)

Christians are guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit to overcome their flesh—their sinful disposition that craves sin (v. 16). The desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit are against one another (v. 17). All who are led by the Spirit are not under the Mosaic law

(v. 18). The works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit are both apparent (vv. 19–23). By the power of the cross and the Holy Spirit, we have already crucified (put to death) the dominating power of the flesh in our lives (v. 24) (Schreiner, *Galatians*, 339–351). Our craving for sin will remain until we are with Jesus, and that is why we must put to death (or put away) ungodly character qualities and actions, both of which our flesh desires (Col. 3:5–11; 1 John 3:2–3).

- Does the flesh affect every part of who we are? Explain.
- Considering vv. 19–21, how are you trying to put away “the works of the flesh”?

3. Sinful Passions and The Grace of God

1 What is the source of wars and fights among you? Don't they come from your passions that wage war within you? 2 You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and wage war. You do not have because you do not ask. 3 You ask and don't receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. 4 You adulterous people! Don't you know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? So whoever wants to be the friend of the world becomes the enemy of God. 5 Or do you think it's without reason that the Scripture says: The spirit he made to dwell in us envies intensely? 6 But he gives greater grace. Therefore he says: God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. (James 4:1–6)

In these verses James argues that Christians should turn away from fighting against others, which comes from our sinful passions and friendship with the world. What is the source of *fights with others* (v. 1)? It comes from a *fight within us*: our sinful passions fight for what they want. We crave what is not ours to take, and we murder, covet, and fight (v. 2). God grants our requests for what we need, but we often do not ask him. Or, when we do ask, we often ask with wrong motives, for we intend to satisfy our sinful pleasures (v. 3). God is our spouse, and therefore any sin we commit is an act of spiritual adultery (v. 4; cf. Jer. 3:9). Our friendship with the world (the evil parts of culture) expresses hostility toward God and makes us his enemy. Verse 5 could refer to human envy (as reflected in the translation, the CSB, above) or, more likely, it refers to God's jealousy for our spirit (or Spirit), given our spiritual adultery and friendship with the world (v. 5; Moo, *The Letter of James*, 235–240). But God gives greater grace—to overcome sin and/or to be wholly devoted to him (v. 6). In this spiritual battle, God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble, for all who cry out to him for help.

- In what ways do we crave sin? How does that lead to fights with others?
- What is “friendship with the world”? How can we fight against that tendency?

Sound Doctrine: Resisting the Influences of the Flesh

Below are four ways that we can resist the influences of the flesh.

1. **If you have not already done so, become a Christian while there is still time.** Turn from sin and trust in Jesus. Doing so transfers you from the realm of the flesh to the realm of the Spirit. No one who is *in the flesh* can ultimately resist *the cravings of the flesh*.
2. **Do not love the world or the things in the world, and resist the devil.** Resisting the influences of the world and the devil are the topics of two other lessons in this series. Each lesson lists strategies for Christians to resist their influences. Given that the world, the flesh (our sinful disposition), and the devil work together in opposition to God's will for our lives, we must strive to consciously resist each of them—not simply resist them collectively. When we resist the influences of one, the other two correspondingly lose power over us.
3. **Recognize that we crave sin because we are trying to increase our pleasure and decrease our pain.** We sin because we enjoy it. However, like Moses, we can resist the fleeting pleasures of sin (Heb. 11:25). For example, sexual immorality (such as lust) is a sinful, short-sighted, temporary approach to increasing our pleasure, yet God designed sex to be enjoyed in the context of marriage. Sexual immorality is also a powerful, short-term strategy to decrease our pain (such as anger, depression, or anxiety), yet God designed us to take our pain to him and to others in the body of Christ. There is always a better way to satisfy our pleasures and to decrease our pain than committing sin.
4. **Quickly turn from your sinful desires and strive for holiness according to God's will in Scripture.** Peter taught us, "14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires of your former ignorance. 15 But as the one who called you is holy, you also are to be holy in all your conduct; 16 for it is written, 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Pet. 1:14–16). So instead of giving in to sinful desires when they surge within us, we should choose holiness in our thoughts, words, and deeds, because God the Father is holy. For example:
 - turn away from the desire to love people and things more than God, and instead direct your ultimate love and devotion to God himself (Matt. 22:37)
 - turn away from the desire to be independent and instead participate actively in a Christian community (Acts 2:42–47; Heb. 10:24–25)
 - turn away from the desire to hate others and instead love others (1 John 4:20)
 - turn away from greedy desires and instead be generous (Luke 12:15; 1 Tim. 6:18)
 - turn away from the desire to exalt yourself and instead be humble (James 4:6)
 - turn away from the desire for revenge and instead forgive (Eph. 4:31–32)

Holiness requires that we resist sinful desires AND do what God requires.

- What comments and questions do you have about this lesson?
- What is one thing you can do in response to this lesson?

Prayer