

The Three Enemies of the Soul

The Flesh

Fairview Missionary Church | Angola, IN

Scripture: Assorted

Speaker: Sam Schertz

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Good morning. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" Last Sunday, we began a three-week series on three topics that have historically been called "The Three Enemies of the Soul." And last week, we began by talking about the enemy known as the devil. We saw that the devil is a very real being.

He was an angel created by God to operate in worship and honor of God almighty, and then he rebelled against God because of the sin of pride. And God cast the devil out of his heavenly role and down to the earth. And then demons are angels that followed him in this rebellion of pride and were also cast down to the earth. We saw that the devil will one day, with the other demons, receive their punishment in the lake of fire as the judgment of God Almighty, but that judgment has not yet come.

And so the devil and his demons are roaming the earth, seeking to steal, kill, and destroy all that God has created for good and holy purposes. And his master plan in this destruction is to speak lies. Lies about who God is, lies about who you and I are and what God's created us to be. Lies about what should be normal and good in life. And then we concluded by shifting our gaze to the good news that hope is found in Jesus Christ, hope even against the devil.

Because the devil must ultimately come under God's authority as Creator of all things. Jesus came to this earth to live a perfect life and die on the cross for sins and be raised from the dead to prove that he had victory over the devil and the works of the devil. And that was the good news that we concluded with that by putting our faith in Jesus and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, you and I do not have to be afraid of the devil and demons.

Today, we're going to study the next enemy of these three enemies, and this is the flesh. Because just as it is essential for us as Christians to acknowledge that we have an external enemy known as the devil, who is speaking lies to us so that we might be destroyed, we must also acknowledge the fact that we have an internal enemy that is speaking these same lies to seek our destruction. Now, before we begin, I just want to thank my wife for talking me off the ledge from wearing my tan leotard today as an object lesson.

Thank you, baby. Not my brightest idea. All jokes aside, though, would you pray with me as we begin our study? God, we love you. We thank You so much for Your Word. Lord, thank You, Holy Spirit, that You are here with us and You want to speak to us. I pray that You would reveal the lies of this great enemy known as our flesh. And Lord, would you receive all the glory, honor, and praise in Jesus' name. Amen. Throughout human history, the history of our nation, and the history of every one of us in this room, we see that human beings are capable of great evil.

We read about it all throughout scripture. We take classes to study it, known as history. We watch movies and documentaries and we read books about it. You turn on the news for more than 30 seconds. You're going to get a story of the depravity of the human heart. And so true are the words from the prophet Jeremiah that I began

with, "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" It's as if you and I have this inner beast within each and every one of us that's crying out to be satisfied.

And the apostle Paul refers to this inner beast as the flesh. Now, to better understand what he's describing when he talks about the flesh, I'd like to take a moment and just zoom out. Big picture, good versus evil. How have we come to this place? First, we begin with the reality that God is the creator of everything. We talked about that last week. He created everything. He sustains everything. It's all for His glory and purposes. And we saw that as creator and sustainer of everything, that means that God is the source of all truth.

Because truth literally equals reality. And lies equal unreality. If you say something that's true, it means it's in line with the real world. And if you speak a lie, it's something that's not in line with reality. And all the way back in the Garden of Eden then, we're introduced to a four-step process by which this evil then invades creation. And these four steps are lies that lead to disordered desires, which lead to sin, which leads to death.

James 1:14 and 15 speaks of this when we read, "But each person is tempted, there's a lie, when he is lured and enticed then by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin. And sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. And so all the way back in the Garden of Eden, we get a picture of lies, desires, sin, and death. The devil told Eve a lie. And the lies that he spoke in that moment really boiled down to something like this.

God's holding out on you. You shouldn't trust Him. You would be more satisfied if you decided what was right and wrong. And really, in all of those lies, it was boiling down to one big lie, and that is you can be your own God. Pride that was once the downfall of the devil was now at the center of his deception of Eve. And this lie played to Eve's desires. Her desire for visual satisfaction and her desire for her body to feel good and for authority.

Desires that were created to be good when used in God's perfect plan and under his authority. But now they were being disordered to seek fulfillment in a selfish way. And it's those disordered desires within Eve that then, when acted on, became sin. Eve eats the fruit. Adam's like, "Hey, I'll take it too. He's with her." And the unreality that began with an idea and then played to a desire is now willfully brought into the picture.

What was once beautiful and good under God's authority has now been twisted and misused for selfish, rebellious pride. And a false narrative enters human history. And it's then that sin that leads to death because Adam and Eve figured out, you know what? As they detached themselves from God who was the truth, they also detached themselves from God who was the life. And now in a world that was intended to be good and beautiful and full of life, there was sin and death and destruction because separation had been brought.

Lies, desire, sin, death. And this is the false narrative that has then played out for all of human history. Now, you and I as humans, we come by this brokenness naturally. You and I, we could trace our ancestry all the way back to this one man, Adam and Eve. And so every human being that has ever been born then has been born into a situation of selfish, prideful, disordered desires. We see this even with babies and young children.

Boy, naturally from the womb, there's a tendency within each and every one of us to be selfish and to do it our own way. Our bodies and our minds are born under this slavery to sin. This is not to say that you and I only earn and deserve God's wrath because once upon a time, a man named Adam and a woman named Eve sinned, and so we're all just stuck with their choice.

Romans 5:12 puts it this way, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, and in this way, death came to all people because all sinned." Every one of us in this room have willfully joined in that selfish rebellion against God, and we've all stamped our own ticket to eternal punishment. And it's this internal drive to satisfy these disordered desires based on lies that the apostle Paul is referring to as the flesh.

This is the flesh. Now, I want to encourage you as we talk about the flesh and we look through some scriptures today that really unpack the truth of what it is. I want to help us avoid two common misconceptions of this term.

First, we need to understand that the Apostle Paul is not just referring to your physical body. Yes, we just said it. Our physical bodies are bound to sin and death, and that is very real. And one day, we're all going to die.

But this can be overstated and results in a common heresy in the church history, and this was called Gnosticism. And it's an overstatement of this reality to basically say your body and all that is physical, that is bad because of sin. And anything spiritual, that's good. And so really, anything physical, we just want nothing to do with it, and we want to be all about spiritual realities.

But the truth is, your body, my body, the people around you are good, and wonderful, and beautiful, and created in the image of God, and broken and sinful and bound to death and destruction. It's both. So when we read the flesh, I don't want you to think, "Oh, my body is just evil." Spirit good. There's more to it than that. Number two, we need to understand that the flesh, as Paul refers to it, it's capable of creating its own evil. What do I mean by that?

Well, we said lies lead to desire, which leads to sin, which leads to death. So you might conclude then, okay, if the devil is a liar, and he's the father of lies, and that's where all this sin, death, and destruction comes from, does that mean everything I do that is wicked ultimately comes from him? And in a big picture sense, we saw last week, yes, all evil does fall under the kingdom of the devil, but we also must acknowledge the reality that you and I, we can come up with all kinds of evil ourselves.

You don't have to blame every evil desire, every evil thought, every twisted reality in your life on, boy, there must just be some demon speaking to me right now. Yes, spiritual warfare is real, but you are capable of all kinds of evil, all on your own. And this came to be because God created human beings in his own image. And part of that meant that just as God was a creator, he called human beings the top of creation to also be creators.

We see that between a man and a woman and creating another human being, fulfilling God's command to be fruitful and multiply. We have creative power in that way under God's authority. But you and I also were then given the command subdue the earth, which in essence, God was saying, "Yes, I've created all that is wonderful and good, and now I've given you the ability to put something in your heart and mind and see it and will it into reality." And so he gives Adam and Eve this command to go and subdue the earth.

Basically, create culture, create infrastructure, business, art, music, all that can be beautiful. With the things I've given you, go create. And so unlike animals and plants, you and I, we can truly come up with something that we don't see yet, and then we can make it happen. And that's part of being made in the image of God. It's beautiful. It's wonderful when used right. But when twisted, you and I now have the ability to create our own false narratives.

We can come up with things that are not in line with God's reality, and we're capable of creating them ourselves. And so this creative power is distorted and misused in the flesh. And so our flesh is one, the place where we see sin and death because of the lies of the enemy, but it's also the place we see sin and death because of our own lies that we're creating. Scripture then goes on to describe, well, what does the flesh look like? How is it lived out?

In Galatians 5:19 through 21, we read, "The acts of the flesh are obvious. Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like. Paul's saying, "Hey, if your sin's not on this list, don't think you're off the hook. Anything in these categories that you see is this selfish, prideful misuse, that is the flesh.

And he says, "I warn you as I did before that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." And this is the bad news of the flesh. But we discussed last week that there is good news and it's found in Jesus Christ. Because by faith, you and I can receive the gift of God's grace. And we're given forgiveness in the gift of the Holy Spirit. You and I are literally made righteous in God's eyes because we receive Christ in place of our sin.

And we're set free from this slavery to sin, and we become citizens of the kingdom of heaven. And God gives us a new spirit with new desires and new perspectives, a heart that longs to see God glorified, not ourselves lifted up. And the Spirit of Christ literally is within us to empower us to walk in freedom. And Scripture describes what this looks like in life in Galatians 5:22 and 23.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law." That's the great news. And many of you are here today because once upon a time, you said yes to that invitation by faith to receive God's grace. And then we woke up the next day and we began to uncover a very dark reality.

Our flesh was still there, still longing to be satisfied, the beast still within us. And many of us in that moment have asked questions like, "Am I really a Christian?" Maybe it didn't stick. Because if I really was a Christian, why do I still really want to do bad things? Maybe you're here this morning asking those questions. I want to encourage you, you are not alone.

Every Christian has this inner battle between the Spirit, the new life in Christ, and the flesh, the disordered desires of our pride. The apostle Paul describes this in Romans chapter 7, verses 21 through 25. He says, "So I find this law at work. Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being, I delight in God's law, but I also see another law at work within me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me."

What a wretched man I am. You can just hear the grief, the apostle Paul. "Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the flesh, a slave to the law of sin." But notice, even as the apostle Paul is grieving over this, he's like, "Oh, man, this is just awful within me." He also gives us the hope and the source of our victory.

In verse 25, we read, "But thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord." In Christ, you and I can have victory over the flesh. In a past sense, you and I can be forgiven of all the prideful, selfish, disordered desires that we have walked in. God says, "You're new." In the present, we're given the Holy Spirit so we can wake up every day and say, "You know what? I'm no longer a slave to my desires."

My truest identity is in Christ." And in a future sense, one day, these bodies that are bound with the flesh will die. And that is good news to a believer because God will give us glorified bodies that are no longer bound by these selfish, prideful, disordered desires. Romans 8:11 speaks of the hope that is found here. It says, "If the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you." Now, in light of this, maybe you ask yourself this question.

"Okay, I'm forgiven. I'm made righteous in God's eyes. I'm pure before God. And one day this body is going to give out and I'm going to get a glorified body and no longer have to deal with the flesh. So why not just live it up in the in-between?" First, let me just say that is your flesh talking. But Scripture knows that every one of us goes there in our mind at some moment or another. Hey, I'm forgiven. Hey, I have this future hope. I don't really feel like trying today. I want to just walk in whatever I want to do.

And we read in Romans 13:14, "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires. We are commanded by God to daily put on your new identity in Christ and die to the old identity of the flesh." So the easiest answer is why do we as Christians not just kind of live it up in the in-between is because God says so. We don't. There's no weaseling out of it in the Christian faith and saying you can do whatever you want because you're forgiven.

There is no gray area in Scripture about walking in the flesh, but there's a reason that God does not leave a gray area here. And so I'd like to point out four biblical practical life reasons that you and I should learn to walk in the

Spirit and crucify the flesh daily. There are four reasons to walk in the Spirit and crucify the flesh. Number one, walking in the Spirit is beneficial to our lives.

When you and I walk in the Spirit and don't gratify the desires of our flesh, we avoid some of the consequences of sin and death and evil in this life. You can avoid a whole lot of pain and suffering by just doing it God's way. No matter how awkward it feels, it does benefit you. And this is not to say that Christians, hey, if you follow Jesus and you do good things, you're going to be healthy and wealthy and happy because it's just going to work.

I'm not saying that, but I am saying that if you go against the grain of the universe that God has created, you are going to get a whole lot of splinters along the way. Galatians 6:7 through 8 says, "Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, speaking of our prideful, disordered desires, from the flesh will reap destruction. But whoever sows to please the Spirit from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

Our actions have consequences. In a room like this, every one of us know what it is to feel death and destruction in our lives because of a sinful choice, a sinful lifestyle that we walk in in pride. Poor eating habits catching up with us. A lack of exercise, poor financial management, drug addiction, sexual addictions, alcohol addiction. We know what it feels like to feel the pain and suffering and death of walking in rebellion.

And God is saying, "I want more for you. I want more for you." And he speaks of this in Galatians 5:1, when he says, "It is for freedom that Christ has set you free. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." It's as if you and I have been freed from a deep, dark prison of suffering with chains on us. And Christ says, "You know what? You're free, go. I give you all that is good. I give you all that is wonderful." And you and I are like, "But can I stay and just slap these babies back on?" I think it sounds more fun.

And the lie of sin and the lie of our desires imprisons us again. And Jesus is saying, "I've made you for so much more." Next, walking in the Spirit brings us intimacy with Christ. The more we learn to die to our flesh, the more we know our Savior. And there are two specific ways in which this happens, dying to our flesh and knowing Christ. The first is you are never going to defeat your flesh without drawing near to Jesus. John 15:4 through 5 says, "Remain in me as I also remain in you.

No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. But apart from me, you can do nothing. And so pursuing Jesus and intimacy with Him is the avenue through which we find victory over the flesh. You're not going to be able to walk in the Spirit of Christ if you don't first get to know the Spirit of Christ.

And so this war against our flesh really begins with a daily invitation to say, "Jesus, I need you. I can't do this without you. I'm a mess without you today." And so to win this war, we find ourselves seeking our Savior. I need thee, oh, I need thee. Every hour, I need thee. But then, not only is Jesus going to be the source of this victory, but He's the reward of this victory. John 14:21 says, "Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.

The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them." Jesus is saying, "Okay, I see that prayer. I will give you strength for today. And when you get over that battle, when you say no to your flesh, I will also reward you with myself." And the more we die to the flesh, the more we know the heart of Christ. Matthew 5:8 says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." The third reason is that walking in the Spirit points others to Christ.

As you and I die to our selfish, prideful desires, people look on in this world and they see a glimmer of hope. They see, "You know what? I could have hope for my past. And I think I could have hope for today where there is no hope. And I need a hope for tomorrow." And so as we live this out, we become a beacon of light to people who

are hurting. Matthew 5:16 says, "In the same way, let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." And sadly, we've also experienced the opposite to be true.

When you and I claim the name of Jesus and we walk out of this place, or maybe we even do it in this place, and we live for the disordered desires of our sin, people want nothing to do with Christ. Stories of pastors falling into moral failure. Church members or business leaders that then go out and live and act nothing like Jesus in their private life. Church splits. Christian Karens at the grocery store. Whatever it may be, how you live makes a difference to the people around you.

Number four, walking in the Spirit confirms our identity in Christ. Please don't misunderstand me here. It is by grace you are saved through faith, not by works. God is not going to look upon us and say, "Yes, you can get into heaven because you are a good person." People love to say, "You know, if you're a good person, you do more good than evil. You go to heaven. If you're a bad person, you do more bad than good, you're going to go to hell one day." That's not true. It's by the blood of Jesus Christ alone, but how you live is a matter of allegiance then.

Because if we sit here and we say, "Oh, Jesus is Lord," and He decides what is true, and then every day of my life, I live for the reality that I am my own God and I decide what I'm going to do. That makes no sense. 1 John 2:4 through 6 speaks of this. Whoever says, "I know Him," speaking of Jesus, but does not do what He commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys His Word, love for God is truly made complete in them.

This is how we know we are in Him. Whoever claims to live in Him must live as Jesus did. True followers of Jesus must wage war against their flesh. It is not an option. This is not to say we're going to get it right every time. As Christians, we're going to fall down on the job. We're going to have days where we say, you know what? I walked in the flesh. Instead of submitting to Christ today and falling on my knees and saying, "God, your will not mine," there are days you're going to grab it up and say, "My will not yours." And it's in those moments that then as true followers of Jesus, we have to repent and say, "God, I rebuke that." I don't want to go back to that prison.

I've been there, I've done that. Lord, would you help me to get back up? Lord, would you put me in community in a way that I can keep walking? There are going to be seasons of your life where you feel like you're regressing. The Christian walk is not just one steady journey toward holiness. You're like, "Every day I'm getting better." There might be long stretches where you go, "Boy, I feel like I'm going the opposite way." But eventually, and in some way in your heart, the Holy Spirit will poke you and say, "Let's keep going. You don't belong here. Get up." Maybe it's another brother or sister who tells you, "Hey, you don't belong here."

Put the bottle away. Get off the internet. Stop being a jerk to your wife." And we get back up. We say, "God, I want to follow you. I want to die to my flesh." Galatians 5:24 says, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Church, we have a very real enemy known as the flesh. This inner beast that is crying out to be satisfied with its disordered desires and pride, and it leads to death.

So may we heed the instructions of the Holy Spirit in Romans 13:14 when we read, "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires." As we close this morning, I'd like to leave you with three daily steps to practically win this war against the flesh. These are big-picture steps. Three ways to crucify the flesh and walk in the Spirit. Number one, resolve to know Christ.

Make this the number one goal of every day of your life. Wake up and say, "Jesus, I want to know you." Our main goal is not to be moral people. Our main goal is to walk with God. I want to encourage you, if you're here today and you've not put your faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, please don't leave here and think, "You know, I should really be a better person, stop doing some bad things." No, I hope you hear in your heart. I want to know Jesus. I want to know this God that can save me from myself.

We have to start with resolving to know Christ because as we learn then to walk in the truth, we must begin with Jesus who is the truth. So we do this through things like spiritual disciplines, which is just a fancy word for saying

some practices of the life of Jesus that he modeled for having intimacy with God. Some of these are very common. You think of Scripture reading and prayer and we sing songs together, but it's also things like fellowship and taking times to be silent and many others depending on your personality and the way God's wired you.

But resolve to know Christ daily. Number two, I want to encourage you to resolve to let Christ know you. This is coming before the Lord daily and saying, "Lord, here's my heart. I believe that you're the truth, so I'm asking that today you would reveal what is untrue in me. Expose the lies that I've been believing. And this is incredibly painful in the life of a believer because oftentimes what we find out is in that prayer where you and I take our hearts before the Lord and say, "Would you just expose what's not true?" We might find out that maybe the strongest, most natural, honest desire of our life could be based on a complete and total lie.

And we have to come and say, "Lord, you're the truth." And as He reveals those lies in us, then we have to take some action steps to say, "Okay, I didn't realize that lie was within me. Lord, what boundaries would you have me set in my life? What things would you have me avoid to make no provision for my flesh to gratify its desires?" And there's some hard steps, some reality, some real life that you got to walk with then as God reveals the truth of your heart. And that leads us to number three, which is resolve to be known by others. Lord, you're the source. I want to know you.

Lord, reveal what is untrue in me. And God, I now also practice the habit of laying my heart before others. We bear one another's burdens. We grow in wisdom and in godliness together. It's the Spirit of God in you ministering to the Spirit of God in me. This could be the practice. You know For me, it's calling two, three, four men in my life every week and just saying, "This is the real me. No holes barred. I'm going to tell you what's on my heart today.

I'm going to expose some lies within me that feel really, really honest and feel really like, oh, this is me." Men in my life that I could call up and say, I feel crazy today. I feel like everything that I know to be true in God's Word and what He says about me is a lie, and I just want to go after my own reality. And it's in those moments that a loving voice or a loving hug, someone could say, "I'm going to be alright. Take another step. Don't go there. Get up tomorrow." I don't have the strength to get through the rest of my life, but I do have the strength in that moment to get through another day.

And that is the practice of walking in community with one another. We bear one another's burdens. Darkness hates light. When we walk in community, we're saying, "God, would you just shine a light on who I am and I want to live open?" Talk to guys that I mentor, I say, "Would your thought life and your inner desires, could we just put those on the screen on Sunday?" I want to be a man that gets there. I want to be a man that could say, it's the real me. You all know there's nothing to hide. It's messy. It's broken, but I'm getting there.

And I'm hiding that's key to walking in the Spirit and victory over our flesh. I want to encourage you as we close. God loves you, church. He's for you. And He's with us in this journey against our enemy known as the flesh. So would you pray with me? Lord, thank You so much for Your Word. God, I pray that this message would not be twisted by the devil or twisted by the lies of our own heart to be a try-harder sermon.

I'm not trying to beat people down or make people feel like, "Oh, I just got to do better." But God, I pray it would be reality check for each and every one of us to say, "You know what? It's inconsistent to call Jesus Lord and walk in the sin of my pride with no repentance and no turning." And Lord, I pray that that would begin by seeking intimacy with you and laying our hearts before you and then walking in community as we daily live out what it means to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

God, we love you. I ask that you would make us more like Jesus. In His name, we pray. Amen.