

CHAPTER 3

OVERCOMING THE FLESH

²² Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, ²³ and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:22-24 (RSV)

²¹ Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

James 1:21 (NIV)

And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations:

Revelation 2:26 (KJV)

²⁶ To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne.

Revelation 3:21 (KJV)

The first step in overcoming the flesh is to “deny self”

The key phrase the Bible uses in relation to our dealings with our own flesh nature is to say we must “deny” it. That means to refuse to let it have its own way or even to be listened to at all:

²³ And he said to all, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?

Luke 9:23-25 (RSV)

The believer is told to “deny himself”, meaning to refuse to indulge himself or to let his flesh nature have any say in what that believer does. But this is not a single event, after which the flesh has been “overcome” and is no longer a problem. It is an ongoing process, indeed a lifelong one, and there is no point at which we have a complete or permanent victory over the flesh.

It would be more correct to think of this as a “war of attrition” as the Army speaks of, whereby the goal is to gradually wear down our opponent by a sustained campaign of chipping away at their manpower, resources, fuel, food supplies, etc until the opponent has been weakened sufficiently for you to be able to defeat him. Thinking in those terms is more realistic than if you were to imagine yourself winning decisive battles whereby the whole position is transformed overnight.

Note also the metaphor of picking up and carrying your own cross, just as Jesus, and then Simon of Cyrene, were told to carry Jesus’ cross (or rather the horizontal cross beam) to the place of execution. The image is an apt one because your goal is not merely to weaken your flesh but to gradually put it to

death. That image brings out the intensity of the struggle. It is you or him. Either you defeat the flesh or it will defeat you. So resolve to take the fight seriously and to persist with it all your life.

We actually need to go so far with self-denial as to "die to self"

Our flesh is incurably selfish and sinful and the only effective thing we can do is to put it to death. There is no other way to deal with it. We must take every opportunity to 'die to self' which means being very severe with our flesh, especially our pride and self-centeredness. We have to do the things which undermine our pride and avoid anything which exalts ourselves or boosts our ego.

The trouble is this process is painful, hence the phrase 'die to self'. It isn't easy and it never will be. But it can be done, step by step. Jesus likens it to what happens to a seed when it is put into the ground. The seed, which represents self, is allowed to die so that something good can grow in its place.

²⁴Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honour him.

John 12:24-26 (ESV)

Whatever time you may have left before you die, or before Jesus returns, you have a choice as to how to use each day. You can live for yourself and do what your flesh wants, or you can die to self by planting yourself in the ground and see something good grow from your life.

Whatever we do to deny ourselves and to die to self will produce a harvest in terms of benefit to others and also the rewards that will come to us. The alternative is to exalt oneself, live for pleasure, seek the approval of others and achieve nothing of any eternal benefit.

Dying to self involves putting Jesus ahead of yourself and choosing His will instead of your own

Dying to self involves putting Jesus ahead of yourself and choosing His will instead of your own. You could say that dying to self involves loving Jesus more than you love yourself. That may be easy to say as a slogan, but how many of us can honestly say we do it? I don't think I could, but I'd like to move in that direction. The way to do so is to start obeying what Jesus says, and keep doing so, because He measures our love for Him by *the extent to which we obey Him*:

²¹Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him." ²²Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" ²³Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. ²⁴Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.

John 14:21-24 (ESV)

Jesus was the perfect example of how to choose God's will instead of our own. Look at how Jesus operated in the Garden of Gethsemane. Three times He pleaded with God the Father to find some other way to save us that did not involve Him having to die on the cross.

But, each time, God said no and Jesus submitted. He accepted the Father's wish that He should stick to the original plan and go to the cross. Indeed, it was the only plan there ever was, or ever could be, to save mankind. That is the ultimate and most literal example of how a person can die to self:

³² *And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray."*
³³ *And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled.*
³⁴ *And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." ³⁵ And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶ And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." ³⁷ And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? ³⁸ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ³⁹ And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰ And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. ⁴¹ And he came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."*

Mark 14:32-42 (ESV)

Luke adds a further section that Matthew and Mark do not have. As a doctor, Luke was interested in medical details and he reveals that Jesus was so afraid, and so dreadfully stressed, He actually bled out of the pores of His skin. That was because the agony He was in, mentally and emotionally, caused capillary blood vessels under his skin to burst. We will never match that, but it is our model:

⁴¹ *And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, ⁴²saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." ⁴³ And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. ⁴⁴ And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*

Luke 22:41-44 (ESV)

Dying to self also means putting the needs of other people ahead of your own needs

Another aspect of dying to self involves putting the needs of others ahead of our own. We all find that extremely difficult because we are so self-centered. Therefore, most of us never even attempt to put others first, let alone make it our consistent practice. We are never going to succeed fully in this objective, but it is realistic to hope we may achieve it from time to time. If we can start to do that there is also reason to hope we can manage to do it more frequently and for longer periods.

The verse below refers to laying down our lives for our friends. We generally interpret that as dying literally, in their place, and some of us may be called upon to do so. However, it also has a wider meaning, which is to lay down our lives metaphorically, in the sense of serving others and devoting our lives to them sacrificially to enable them to hear the Gospel and be saved:

¹² *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.*

John 15:12-13 (ESV)

To lay down our lives slowly in the metaphorical sense, day by day, over years, is probably harder than to literally die for someone, which may only take a moment. It is something we have to persist in, even when everything in our flesh is crying out for us to stop bothering about the needs of others and just focus on ourselves.

Putting off the old self and putting on the new self

Another way the Bible explains our battle with our flesh is to say we must ‘*put off*’ our old self and ‘*put on*’ the new self. In each case it is spoken of as if these were garments that we take off and put on:

²²You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:22-24 (NIV)

So, the new self is spoken of here like a garment we need to put on. But we also have to *continue* putting it back on, again and again, because our flesh keeps reasserting itself. Therefore, by a decision of our will, we can choose to follow Jesus and with our mind we can know it is right to do so. But our flesh resists both our mind and our will and tries to sabotage their plans.

Therefore, we must recognise the existence of that traitor in the camp and refuse to cooperate with the flesh on any point. Say no to its cravings, resist its influence and continue putting on the new self and letting his wishes prevail.

The flesh is weak. Therefore, we need to ask for God's help

Nobody has a “good flesh”, not even relatively speaking. There is no such thing. There is nothing good about the flesh and it has nothing positive to offer. Therefore, we cannot even hope to achieve anything for God or to please Him if we are operating through our old man.

To do something in obedience to God it has to be done through our new man. To achieve that we need to pray for God's help to enable our new man to come to the fore and to gain the upper hand in any given situation. If we pray in that way God will help us operate in the new man, not the old man.

Here we see an example of the apostles letting Jesus down in His hour of great need. In part, that failure occurred because they did not pray for the grace to be brave, or even just the energy to stay awake, at that key moment when Jesus needed them. Instead of doing what was right, and giving Jesus what He needed, they just did what they felt like doing, which was to go to sleep:

³⁷And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? ³⁸ Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ³⁹And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. ⁴¹And he came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴²Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

Mark 14:37-42 (ESV)

In the garden of Gethsemane every disciple failed. If even one of them had prayed for the grace to stay awake, Jesus' ordeal of waiting for His arrest, trial and crucifixion would have been slightly easier. He would have had someone alongside Him to keep Him company as He waited to be betrayed which would have been at least a small fragment of comfort.

As we face times of stress, temptation or testing we need to pray for the grace to operate through our new nature rather than the old. Therefore, when about to have a difficult meeting or conversation, or when you feel you might lose your temper, or when about to do something which may tempt you to pride, why not pray along these lines:

“Father, I am about to enter a situation, or a day, when I will be sorely tested or tempted and where my pride, temper, or self-centeredness is likely to rise up and assert itself. Please give me the grace to operate through my new nature, and for my actions and reactions to please you and to be the opposite of what my flesh wants to do”.

The old self or old man cannot ever be cured or improved - it has to be put to death

God has not provided any cure or remedy for our flesh. He will not improve it, educate it, retrain it, counsel it or modify it. There is only one solution and that is to put it to death. Our old man can't be cured or rehabilitated. It has to be executed, day after day, for the rest of your life, and, what's more, God has specified that *you* must be its 'executioner'!

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.

Colossians 3:5-10 (NIV)

God will not do the executioner's job for you. This is a task reserved for you to do all by yourself on a daily basis. You are to put your own sinful flesh nature to death, just as you might go for daily radiotherapy or chemotherapy to shrink a tumour in your body. You would never try to “cure”, “rehabilitate” or “improve” a tumour, so as to make it into a ‘good tumour’. The only way to deal with cancer is to attack it, and keep on attacking it, without ever being content to co-exist with it:

This battle with our own flesh will never come naturally to us. It will always mean doing the opposite of what our sinful nature would like to do:

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Galatians 5:16-18 (NASB)

²⁴ Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Galatians 5:24 (NASB)

Set your mind on the things of the Spirit, not the things of the flesh

Before we can hope to see any change in our behaviour there must first be a change in our minds. We need to set our minds on the things of the Spirit, rather than on the things of the flesh. It must begin, however, with a decision of the will to start re-programming our minds. Then, as your mind begins to change, it will, in turn, have a positive impact on your will, and on the subsequent decisions it makes.

However, unless we begin by at least wanting to live differently, and pray for the grace to do so, we won't even get started on the process of change. If we try to do it on our own, without praying for God's help, our old man will stop us making any progress. But, if we pray beforehand, there is real hope of becoming able to set our mind on the things of the Spirit:

⁵Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.⁶The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace;⁷the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.⁸Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.⁹You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.¹⁰But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness.

Romans 8:5-10 (NIV)

Starve the flesh (old man) and feed the spirit (new man)

There is an old saying that you should “*starve the flesh and feed the spirit*”. That means you deliberately deny yourself those things your sinful nature craves for. As well as enjoying sin the flesh also has physical needs, for example food. Therefore, fasting periodically from food is an important discipline which helps to subdue the power of your flesh and to reduce its overall hold over you. This has a beneficial effect in every area of your life.

At the same time as fasting to subdue your flesh, you also need to *feed your spirit*. You mainly do this through prayer, Scripture memory, reading the Bible and meditating and reflecting on it. That way your spirit steadily becomes stronger and you begin to hear God more easily. I should emphasise here that “meditating” on Scripture has *nothing whatsoever to do with the ideas we see in false eastern religions*. To them, meditation is about emptying your mind. **You should never do that.**

Biblical meditation is about focusing on a passage and reflecting or “ruminating” on it, as a cow does when it brings back up grass which it has chewed earlier and chews on it again to extract more goodness from it. That is how God gives you new understanding and insights into things which you have read before but never fully understood.

For example, my books on Galatians and the Law of Moses largely arose out of me setting out to memorise Matthew chapter 5. I then started to meditate on verses 17-20 and to ask God to help me to properly understand them. That led, in turn, to Him giving me such a thorough understanding of the current status of the Law of Moses and of why it ended that I was able to write a book on it plus a commentary.

So, don't confuse biblical meditation with the false type practiced in Hinduism, the New Age or Buddhism. True biblical meditation has nothing to do with any eastern religions and is a vital part of strengthening your spirit and also your mind.

At the same time, as you are feeding your spirit, if you adopt an ongoing policy of denying your flesh what it wants, your flesh will gradually become weaker and less of a problem to you. It will never cease to be a problem completely. Your flesh will always trouble you to some extent, until the day you die.

Until then, it is your responsibility to seek to overcome it day by day and not to indulge it or let it have its own way. Just as crucifying the flesh makes it weaker, pampering it makes it stronger. So, if we allow ourselves to indulge in sin we are strengthening that traitor who is living within us.

The importance of fasting if we are to overcome our flesh

Fasting is an important theme throughout the Bible. It was widely practised by the prophets and apostles, and even by Jesus, who began His public ministry with a 40 day fast. You are unlikely to make any substantial progress in subduing the flesh without fasting playing at least some part in the process. Our flesh nature is so closely linked to our physical body that to deny our body what it wants is a powerful tool for conquering our flesh.

There are few things our physical body wants more strongly than food. Therefore, to go without food for a day, or even for three days or seven days, or even 40 days, is an ordeal. There is no doubt about that. The difficulties are very real but, even so, fasting will do a number of positive things:

- a) It will expose any particularly sinful aspect of your nature which God is concerned about. That may sound like a backward step, but it helps you to then address that sin. For example, while fasting, you may find you lose your temper more quickly. If so, those around you will probably notice when you are fasting, at least in your early days. I generally used to fast on Mondays and my PA used to say she would like to have all Mondays off, because of what fasting did to my levels of irritability. I find that while I fast I have reduced levels of patience, self-control and endurance. But fasting doesn't *create* those deficiencies. It simply *reveals* that they are already there by bringing them to the surface. Fasting shows what you really are, so you are no longer under any illusions about the true level of your maturity. Then you can do something about it.
- b) Fasting will also weaken the power your flesh has over you and cause you to have small victories each time. As you persist with fasting, over months and years, changes will come in unexpected ways. You will find yourself overcoming things you had not previously been able to defeat or making progress in areas where you had not done so previously.
- c) It will also sharpen up your 'spiritual hearing' and enable you to hear God's voice, and your own conscience, more clearly and frequently. You will frequently find during times of fasting that you have ideas or notice things in the Bible you had not seen before. You will also have insights or you may discern things you had not realised before.
- d) It will also give you power to share the Gospel or to achieve God's objectives. You may therefore find that breakthroughs come while you are fasting. Or opportunities may arise, or doors may open, that were not there before. It is no coincidence. Fasting leads to answered prayer and that makes a

difference to our *circumstances*. More importantly, it makes *us* different because *we* change. Therefore, we become better able to handle our circumstances, even if they don't change.

Fasting can also be taken too far and turn into 'asceticism'. Man-made religious rules about food can be "a work of the flesh" in themselves.

Fasting is a good thing, provided you go about it the right way and don't become "religious" or arrogant about it, or start to think it can earn you any kind of righteousness. Self-discipline and self-control are obviously good things, but 'asceticism' is not.

That is the belief that you must subject yourself to extreme hardship, even to the extent of hitting your own body with a whip. This is seen in some parts of the Roman Catholic church, especially in the past. But it is a false form of humility, which just creates pride and is actually a work of the flesh in itself, rather than helping to crucify the flesh:

²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? ²² These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

Colossians 2:20-23 (ESV)

Fasting is also good for your health, boosts your immune system, and can even fight cancer

I want to add this short section on the medical benefits of fasting, quite apart from the spiritual benefits, as it may help some people. Therefore, if you can get yourself into a regular habit of fasting, such as one day a week or two days, and/or occasional longer fasts of 3 days, 5 days, 7 days, or even 20 to 40 days, your physical health could be transformed.

You will lose weight, which is critically important in itself, as obesity is a major cause of heart disease and also cancer. But even if a person already has cancer, even at an advanced stage, sustained *water only* fasting can be effective in shrinking and even destroying tumours, as well as killing thousands of cancer cells floating around the body like the seeds of a dandelion.

This little known process whereby tumors and cancer cells are "devoured" by the body during a sustained water only fast is known as "*autophagy*". It essentially means that when the body has no food it has been programmed by God to "eat itself". That means the body has a pre-ordained sequence which it goes through to determine which parts of you to "eat" first, second, third etc until, last of all, it begins to devour one's own organs at the very end of the starvation process.

However, before you get to that damaging stage, where one sees organ failure and death, the earlier stages are very different and extremely helpful. So, the body will begin by eating stored fat but also any tumours. In other words, God has programmed the body to heal itself through fasting and the tumours shrink and are consumed. What's more, fasting also serves to reset the immune system and to 'turbo-charge' it, so it can more effectively fight infections of any kind.

However, “autophagy” only really begins to happen after the third day of fasting. So, if you did a series of 3-day fasts your body would probably never even start the process of autophagy. Also, if you want to see autophagy happening the fast must be *100% water only*, not a mere diet, not even a keto diet. There must be no food at all and it must be maintained for longer than three days, ideally for as long as you can bear it. When doing this it is wise to take electrolytes dissolved in water to replace minerals your body may be short of.

You might ask why no doctor today ever recommends fasting, even though it has all these remarkable benefits, including detoxifying the body and the organs. For example, the best way to detoxify the liver is usually by fasting, not by taking medicines or even “natural remedies”. The answer is that there is no money to be made by recommending fasting. No medicines get sold and the pharmaceutical industry would get no profits.

Therefore, as the pharmaceutical companies control all the medical schools in universities and dictate the syllabus, things like fasting or even dieting, or even eating healthy foods, never get a mention – quite literally. So don’t necessarily be put off by the fact that doctors don’t recommend it, or even that they dismiss the idea as nonsense.

If they advise against fasting then ask them for their specific reasons, together with evidence, and don’t be satisfied with a mere brush off. I say all this because I spoke to a doctor before going on a lengthy fast and he reacted as if I had suggested throwing myself off a bridge.

Of course, there will be exceptions for example if you were already malnourished, or pregnant or diabetic or on certain medications. But your common sense would usually tell you that anyway. Remember the pharmaceutical companies are corrupt and have no qualms about lying to you or even keeping you sick so as to prolong drug sales.

Remember also that doctors today don’t always work things out for themselves. Very often they just do whatever their laptop tells them to do – and that computer was programmed by the pharmaceutical industry. See my talks on modern deceptions for more detail on this.

What does it mean to "*pick up our cross daily*" and follow Jesus?

Have you noticed that when Jesus used this phrase about taking up our cross daily, it was *before* He had been crucified? That's because the people were already familiar with crucifixion and had seen many taking place, probably every week, as the Romans dealt with ordinary criminals. They therefore knew that a man who was about to be crucified may be told to carry his own cross to the place of execution, as Jesus later had to do. So the phrase immediately made sense to them. Jesus spoke of this more than once:

²³And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?
Luke 9:23-25 (ESV)

³⁸And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me
Matthew 10:38 (ESV)

The figure of speech, "*pick up your cross daily*" means being willing to take part in a daily process of self-denial and voluntary self-abasement, or humbling of oneself, by which the cravings of the flesh are denied or postponed, rather than gratified. We have to confront our flesh head on and refuse to yield to its desires:

¹¹And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹²The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. ¹³Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Romans 13:11-14 (NIV)

The cost of following Jesus

Following Jesus comes at a high personal cost. Anybody who is a genuine, active, obedient disciple of His, as opposed to merely accepting that He exists and having lukewarm feelings towards Him, will inevitably experience persecution:

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ⁵⁹To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ⁶⁰And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." ⁶¹Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." ⁶²Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Luke 9:57-62 (ESV)

Paying this cost does not appeal to our flesh because it does not want to suffer or be held in low regard by others. However, enduring these things for His sake will weaken our flesh and undermine its hold over us. The very persecution we will get from being a genuine disciple therefore yields a benefit in that it helps to undermine our flesh.

The ‘works of the flesh’ or ‘acts of the sinful nature’ – how these things are seen in our lives:

Galatians 5:19-21 lists 15 different ‘works of the flesh’, or ‘acts of the sinful nature’. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but these 15 examples are representative of the ways in which our flesh nature manifests itself:

¹⁹The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:19-21 (NIV)

These 15 things can be divided into four broad categories or groups: sensual sins, religious sins, social sins and sins of excess. Let's look at each of these:

a) Sensual sins - fornication, impurity and licentiousness

This refers to all kinds of sexual activity before or outside of marriage. Thus, it means pre-marital sex, adultery, masturbation, and any kind of homosexual activity. It also covers crudeness and vulgarity in our speech, thoughts or actions, plus jokes containing sexual innuendo, lustful thoughts and pornography. So, it covers a very wide range and includes all the ways in which the God-given sexual urge is misused, perverted, taken to excess, or used prematurely.

Sex is a God-given gift, but that does not mean we can use that gift in any way, or at any time, or with any person, that we want. We are responsible for the way we use every gift, including sex, and we will be held accountable for all that we do with it. However, as sinners, we are prone to indulging ourselves, without regard to the consequences. That is a very serious matter, because sexual sin is a sin against our own body, and also a defilement of our body, which is “*a Temple of the Holy Spirit*”:

¹⁸Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. ¹⁹Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

1 Corinthians 6:18-20 (RSV)

³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; ⁴ that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, ⁵ not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God; ⁶ that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. ⁷ For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. ⁸ Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 (ESV)

To refrain from sexual activity also involves self-denial which has a similarly beneficial effect as fasting in that it helps to weaken our flesh. That is especially so if we avoid sexual sin.

¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³ Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.

Romans 6:12-13 (RSV)

b) Religious sins - idolatry and sorcery (witchcraft)

Idolatry is putting anything, or anybody, in the place of God by worshipping it. There are many things we might make into idols, such as career, money, success, fame, reputation, possessions, or even a football team. Sorcery is a form of witchcraft, in particular, where drugs are used as part of that.

Sins of this type, including false forms of worship or idolatry, and even witchcraft/sorcery, originate from the flesh nature. They do so because witchcraft involves the desire to control other people which is a form of exaltation or worship of oneself. Instead we must let others be free to run their own lives while we submit ourselves to be under God's control.

Much of what passes for Christianity today is just people's attempt to create their own god. At the heart of this is pride and self-righteousness. Unbiblical forms of religion are outlets for the flesh nature because they all exalt self rather than denying it. We can also be fleshly where we follow individuals, factions or denominations instead of Jesus Christ:

¹And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. ²I 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, ³for 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? ⁴For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men? ⁵What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one.

⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. ⁷So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. ⁸Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labour. ⁹For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. ¹¹For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:1-11 (NASB)

c) Social sins - hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, self-ambition, dissensions, factions and envy

These eight sins listed above in the heading affect all our personal relationships and cause most of the problems we face in marriage and with our children, friends, colleagues and neighbours. We often seek to justify ourselves when we act in these ways. For example, if we have an outburst of temper we might excuse it by saying it only happened because somebody wronged us. But even if they have, it still does not entitle us to behave wrongly in our reaction to them.

¹⁹Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

James 1:19-20 (ESV)

¹What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.

James 4:1-2 (ESV)

All eight of these sins come ultimately from selfishness, which is therefore the root cause we need to tackle. Why would you hate others or have outbursts of rage towards them if you were not selfish? Temper and rage happen because we feel we are more important than other people and that our needs and wants, and our right to express our views, are more important than theirs. We may not put those underlying beliefs into express words, but that is the unspoken assumption behind such sins.

We cannot cease to sin in these ways merely by deciding to stop. The habit patterns are too deeply ingrained. What we can do, however, is to strike at the foundation of all these sins, which is the obsession with self. As we begin to do battle with our selfishness and refuse to let our flesh have its own way, we gradually undermine the platform on which all these sins stand.

d) Sins of excess - drunkenness and carousing

God views *drunkenness* as an act of the flesh. Therefore, it is sin. Yet, our society treats it as if it was an illness and tells us to call it “*alcoholism*”. But that is the wrong word, as it implies the person is not to blame and is simply ill. The correct biblical term for a person who gets drunk is a “*drunkard*,” not an “*alcoholic*”, because God holds us responsible for the choices we make, including what we drink.

Therefore drinking to excess is a sin, not an illness. And a compulsion to drink, where we can't stop ourselves is actually a sign of having a demon (on the inside). I say that because any form of compulsion, whether it be to drink alcohol or anything else is evidence of the existence of a person who is doing the “compelling”, and that person can only be a demon.

The other word, ‘*carousing*’ might today be translated as “partying”, i.e. partying inappropriately, excessively and drunkenly, such that other forms of immoral behaviour are likely to follow. Doing things to *excess* is at the core of many of the wrong things we do.

Even where things are good in themselves, we can still sin by doing them too much, or too often, or at the expense of other things which God wanted us to do instead. It comes down to exercising self-control and acting in a balanced way, rather than giving ourselves unlimited licence for self-indulgence.

To what extent are we to blame for our own fleshly actions and thoughts?

These various sins of the flesh are not directly caused by demons or by the pull of this world. Those other factors do of course influence us, but our sins are ultimately our own personal responsibility even if demons or other people have tempted us. Our own flesh is usually the most important factor.

We therefore bear the primary responsibility for all our own actions, even if other external factors have influenced us. That said, our flesh nature is very prone to being tempted and influenced. Demons know that and take advantage of our flesh nature to entice us into sin.

That isn't difficult for them. The overall world system does the same at a macro level, and so do the people around us, at a micro level. Advertisers know we are carnal and easily influenced to sin so they focus their efforts on appealing to our lust, pride, envy and vanity, as they can clearly see those sins in us.

How do we control the flesh?

We can never fully defeat or eliminate our flesh nature. It will only finally go, for a Christian, when we die. However, for an unbeliever, it will not go even then, and they will take their carnal nature with them to the Lake of Fire and keep it for all eternity. What an awful prospect - to be sinful and fleshly forever. It is bad enough having to put up with that until we die.

Until then, our aim is to subdue it and undermine it, as if your flesh nature was a hugely overweight person whom you put on a strict diet to force him to shrink in size. You can't achieve this overnight. It is a long term battle and isn't easy. Yet, you can have substantial victories and make real progress if you are determined. There are four main strategies you will need to adopt consistently, over many years:

- a) learn and absorb the whole Bible
- b) be obedient to what it says.
- c) learn to be led by the Holy Spirit, rather than by our own appetites and desires.
- d) learn how to “*consider ourselves dead to sin*”.

Let's look at each of these:

a) Immerse yourself in the Bible - become saturated by it

The Bible has the power to change you from the inside out. As we immerse ourselves in it and study it, memorise it and reflect on it, we are changed and gradually absorb God's values. These then slowly replace the selfish fleshly values and attitudes we had before. The Bible reprograms us and installs new 'software'.

It does not get rid of, or even improve, your old man or flesh. But it does help you to renew your *mind*. That is vital as a renewed, informed mind enables you to exercise your *will* more effectively and helps your will to choose to operate through your new man rather than through your old man.

Your will has to make that choice as to which of your two natures will be 'handed the microphone'. If your will is to be made more capable of making the right choice it needs the benefit of you having a renewed mind, full of knowledge and understanding, which has been changed by continual exposure to the Bible.

Therefore, set out to study *the entire Word of God* so the Bible can 'reprogram' your thinking. To do this you may need to grab hold of yourself by the lapels of your jacket and give yourself a good shake concerning your low expectations as to what is “normal” when it comes to reading the Bible.

Most of us have a mindset that considers it sufficient to have just a tiny little nibble at the Bible each day, perhaps a page or two, or even three. To do more is seen as “over the top” or even eccentric. Therefore, most people, even if they do read the Bible, are the equivalent of a man who eats one chicken nugget per day.

I grant you that “nibbling” is the normal approach to take to the Bible and is what most Christians do. But why on Earth would you want to be normal? What could be more lukewarm than that? You should aim to be way above average and to do all you possibly can. In particular, your aim should be to achieve a dramatic change in the time and emphasis you give to the Bible.

How else can you expect to be “saturated” in it or to have yourself “transformed” by it? Nobody ever became a champion bodybuilder by eating one chicken nugget per day. So set the bar high – much higher than the people around you, and aim to be exceptional, not “normal”. That won't be difficult because most Christians spend very little time reading the Bible and no time at all meditating on it or memorising it.

Be like the writer of Psalm 119 and imitate his wholehearted attitude towards Scripture. All your attitudes, habits, thought patterns, instincts, values and priorities need to change. They must all get into line with what the Bible says, instead of what you have picked up from the world or what your own

flesh wants. The way you think has to be completely transformed and that will never be achieved by just doing what most other people do:

²Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Romans 12:2 (NIV)

It might sound odd to speak of our minds as being 'fleshly', but they are, in the sense of being carnal and sinful. They are programmed to operate on the basis of selfishness, self-indulgence, self-obsession, self-promotion etc. That is why the King James version speaks of the '*carnal mind*' in Romans 8, because the word 'carnal' comes from the Latin word *carne*, meaning flesh:

⁶For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. ⁷Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

⁸So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Romans 8:6-8 (KJV)

As we saturate ourselves in God's Word it seeps into us, like marinating a piece of meat. That is how God gradually 'rewrites our software', step by step, until our minds are transformed and renewed. However, the responsibility for making this happen is ours. We cannot just leave it to God and expect Him to do it for us while we sit back and do nothing. We must actively inform our minds and pursue a new way of thinking:

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:8-9 (NIV)

Paul urges us to focus our minds on very different things from those we have been preoccupied with in the past. We must carefully decide what information, images and ideas we will let into our minds. That means changing the things we watch, read and do and the people we mix with.

We must eliminate anything which could be a bad influence. Start to regulate what you allow into your mind. Whatever goes in will come out again in your thoughts, words and actions. Therefore, only put in those things which God wants to see coming back out of you.

b) Be obedient to all that God says in His Word

We must commit ourselves always to obey God in every situation we face and to act in ways that please Him. So, for example, if we are driving our car on a summer morning, one hazard is scantily dressed young women walking on both sides of the road! We need to avert our eyes but it is not easy when they dress so immodestly. Nevertheless, it can be done.

Simply make a decision to look away, every time, and to focus on the road and the traffic. In that way, as one little victory after another is secured, we will gradually change and the power of the enticement

will reduce. Therefore, learn to walk in moment by moment obedience to God in your daily decisions and reactions.

Then the way you live can be brought into line with the new attitudes that are developing as our minds are renewed through our growing knowledge of the Bible and our application of it. This is how we put the Bible into practice and change our lives by every little act of obedience. It involves a daily putting to death of all that is fleshly in us:

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

⁹Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Colossians 3:5-14 (NIV)

There is also a positive side to overcoming the old man. We not only remove things from our lives. We must also put other things in their place. Paul uses the phrase "*clothe yourselves*". He means these new attitudes and values are '*put on*', as if we were putting on a coat. We pick up that new biblical attitude, or godly way of thinking, and wrap it around us, '*clothing ourselves*' in it.

It is a deliberate decision of the will, which won't happen by itself. Every victory over the flesh is won by a series of choices to deny self and say yes to what God wants. The overall battle against the flesh is won in the countless little decisions you make, over your whole lifetime, to humble yourself, deny yourself and obey God, *especially where you don't want to*.

Your flesh is like a spoiled child. The worst thing you can do is to pamper it. Stand up to it and say no to it. Let your flesh realise you will no longer let it rule over you and that you are resolved instead to rule over it. Your flesh will put up a determined fight, but it will gradually get the message, and lose some of its power. Eventually things will get easier, though never easy.

c) Be led by the Holy Spirit, not by your flesh

As well as getting ourselves 'reprogrammed' with God's written Word, we also need to learn how to be led by the voice of the Holy Spirit on a moment by moment basis. Again, learning how to do this is a life-long process, but it really can be done:

²⁵Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Galatians 5:25-26 (RSV)

Paul expresses the point well below when he speaks of ‘sowing’ to please either our sinful nature or the Holy Spirit. We may not have enough knowledge or maturity to know what is right or wrong across the board but we do have enough to know what feels right or wrong in the specific situation we are in at present. That is the moment where we must choose to obey the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit rather than the loud, strident demands of our flesh:

⁸The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.

Galatians 6:8 (RSV)

As we make each of these small choices we sow something that will either please our flesh or please the Holy Spirit. The more often we choose to please Him, the more we will grow and mature. But if we choose to ‘sow to our sinful nature’ we will reap a bitter harvest as our flesh produces the only things it knows how to make, namely the *works of the flesh*, or *acts of the sinful nature*, as listed in Galatians 5:19-20 which we saw earlier.

d) As Paul said, “consider yourselves dead to sin”

Paul uses this phrase in Romans in the context of how we are justified by faith and how God makes His grace available to us as a free gift if we ask for it. Paul explains that when we are baptised in water then, provided we are baptised as a genuine believer, not as an infant, we are “*baptised into his death*, i.e. into Jesus’ death”. We are also, symbolically speaking, “*buried with him*” as we go down into the waters of baptism:

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 6:1-4 (RSV)

That is what happens at our baptism, *if* we were old enough at the time to understand what we were doing and knew enough to have a real faith. Paul goes even further and says “*our old self was crucified with him*”. One of the consequences of that, for a true believer, is that “*we might no longer be enslaved to sin*”.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For he who has died is freed from sin.

Romans 6:5-7 (RSV)

If we see the full implications of our conversion and of our baptism in water we can more easily achieve victory over our flesh. However, that will only occur if we want that victory, take seriously our new status as a saved person, and change the way we think. A saved person is entitled to consider his old man to have died in the waters of baptism. For anyone who takes that seriously and acts upon it, truly believing it to be so, it becomes possible, *at any given moment*, to choose not to sin:

⁸ *But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him.* ⁹ *For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.* ¹⁰ *The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God .* ¹¹ *So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

Romans 6:8-11 (RSV)

However, although this is available to us, it will not happen by itself, merely by the passage of time, with no involvement on our part. Victory over sin is only possible if we want it strongly enough to take the necessary steps to obtain it. Therefore, start to take control of your body, your emotions, and your mind by decisions of your will.

Then refuse to let your flesh have what it wants, or to lead you into sin. Take seriously your status as a new creation, and the grace that is available to you, and yield yourself to God instead of your flesh. Then choose to do His will, rather than what your flesh wants:

¹² *Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.* ¹³ *Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.* ¹⁴ *For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.*

Romans 6:12-14 (RSV)

Paul speaks of how, before we were saved, we were “*slaves to sin*” but now we *have been set free from sin*. Again, that doesn’t mean we never sin because the truth is we all continue to sin, even after we are saved and even when we become mature. It means that, *at any given moment*, we do not *have to* sin. In other words, we now have the power, moment by moment, to choose not to sin if we want to:

¹⁵ *What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!* ¹⁶ *Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?* ¹⁷ *But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,* ¹⁸ *and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.* ¹⁹ *I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification.*

²⁰ *When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.* ²¹ *But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death.* ²² *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life*

Romans 6:15-22 (RSV)

Over-confidence is a work of the flesh

God wants us to be confident, and even bold. We know that because the Bible commands us to be so. However, as with any other quality, it can be taken too far or misapplied such that what we imagine to be confidence is actually presumption, which is a sin, not a virtue. The essence of this fault is that your

confidence is in yourself rather than in God such that you act rashly or make unwise, inadequately thought out statements which are more about bravado than faith.

When we do that we are operating in our flesh rather than in our new man. A classic example of this is the attitude of Peter and the other apostles on the Mount of Olives on the night Jesus was betrayed. Jesus told them straight-forwardly they would fall away and be scattered that night, i.e. that they would run away and leave Him.

They should have listened carefully to His words and been sobered by them and then asked Jesus to give them the grace not to fall away. Instead they began to “talk big”, making rash, macho promises about what they would do, but without ever asking God for the strength and courage to do those things:

³⁰ And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ³¹ Then Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’ ³² But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”

³³ Peter declared to him, “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.” ³⁴ Jesus said to him, “Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.”

³⁵ Peter said to him, “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.

Matthew 26:30-35(RSV)

Balance is needed here, plus the wisdom and experience that come from previous times where we have got it wrong, because the line between holy boldness and fleshly presumption can sometimes be very fine. Therefore, anyone who imagines this is easy, or that they will never get it wrong, is already being presumptuous.

God is totally realistic about us, as we can see from the fact that Jesus made that prophecy in the first place, plus His willingness to continue to have them as His disciples even after they had deserted Him. He had no illusions about them, and He has none about you either. He is willing to wait for you, and to stick with you, while you grow up as a disciple.

Therefore, be willing to learn from experience, over time, which inevitably includes making a series of mistakes. Then you will become brave enough to do whatever God commands, but wise enough to know you need His help in order to do it.

That way you will avoid talking with the bravado which Peter, and the others, displayed that night on the Mount of Olives. When you face crises then, instead of rushing in, you will ask for God’s help and for the wisdom and courage needed to do it. But you will still go ahead and do it rather than run away.

However, timidity and lack of confidence can also be fleshly, and can be a sign of pride

Life would be much simpler if there was no need for balance, and all we ever needed to do was avoid over-confidence. But the problem is it goes both ways, such that lack of confidence is also wrong and, what’s more, can also be due to being carnal. The point is timidity and lack of confidence are not a sign of humility.

On the contrary, they are frequently due to pride and come from our unwillingness to be seen to fail, or to have done less well than others. On that basis, many will disobey God’s commands because they are more concerned about what others might think of them if they obey than about what God might think

if they disobey. However, they will then excuse their disobedience by saying they are “timid”, or “lack confidence” or that they are “too modest” to put themselves forward.

But the reality may be it is just disobedience borne out of pride and from focusing excessively on themselves and what people might say. In other words, it may just be cowardice, which is a bi-product of selfishness and pride. Of course, not all timidity is due to pride. Much of it is due to demonic whispering, as the demons seek to convince us we are bound to fail, or are not capable, or have no talent.

But, even where that is so, the demons would not be able to deceive and manipulate you in these ways if you did not have pride and a flesh nature. They use these to exert leverage over you by making you anxious about what others might think of you if you were to fail, and therefore to be unwilling to take the risk of obeying God.

Taking sides, and forming exclusive cliques and divisive factions, are also fleshly conduct

Many of God’s people, even the genuine ones, form cliques, factions and groups which display an attitude of superiority or exclude others who are considered to be outsiders or inferior. Often such factions are based on following a particular leader or teacher. Then others, who do not follow him online are looked down on, or even rejected.

It can also happen within a local church where haughty cliques are formed which view themselves as the “in crowd”, and make others feel unwelcome and inferior. There has been such ‘cliquiness’ in every church and workplace I have known. We can, of course, listen to any teachers we choose but we are not to idolize the ones we like or look down on others who do not listen to them.

I went on a tour of Israel and some American ladies in the tour group said they only ever listen to the teaching of one particular Bible teacher, and nobody else. I also know a group in England who are devoted to the teaching of one Bible teacher and who speak of him in equally reverential terms. Such attitudes, and the pride, arrogance and quarrelling it produces, are another aspect of the flesh:

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chlo'e's people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apol'los,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Ga'ius; ¹⁵ lest any one should say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Steph'anas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any one else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

1 Corinthians 1:10-17 (RSV)

Rivalry and partisanship, whereby people take sides, form factions, and feel superior to other groups, are therefore “of the flesh”:

¹ *But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ.*
² *I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready,*
³ *for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving like ordinary men?*
⁴ *For when one says, "I belong to Paul," and another, "I belong to Apol'los," are you not merely men?*

1 Corinthians 3:1-4 (RSV)

Religious hypocrisy and legalism are also works of the flesh

Before we look at this, let me make clear that studying God's Word and following the promptings of the Holy Spirit are not *legalism*, or being '*religious*'. Bible study and obeying the Holy Spirit's voice are good things and are nothing to do with living by a set of rules or observing religious traditions, customs or procedures. Such things are what most organised denominational religion is about, but that does not please God or promote righteousness.

Instead it promotes pride, hypocrisy and self-righteousness, which are all works of the flesh. Jesus upset the Pharisees by not observing their hand washing rituals which had developed as an oral tradition among some of the strictly observant Jews. They had created a mountain of over 3000 extra laws for themselves, all man-made and contrary to God's wishes.

In this way they supplemented the Law of Moses. These illegitimate, man-made regulations were not from the Law of Moses. Jesus always obeyed that. The hand washing requirements, and thousands of other little rules, were added later to form what became known as the '*oral law*'.

But this was purely man-made and had nothing to do with God. Therefore, Jesus did not accept it or abide by it. Indeed, He frequently went out of His way to break the oral law, in full view of everybody, such as when He walked through a cornfield on the sabbath and when He chose not to observe the Pharisees' elaborate hand washing rituals prior to dining with them :

³⁷*While Jesus was speaking, a Pharisee asked him to dine with him, so he went in and reclined at table.*
³⁸*The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner.*
³⁹*And the Lord said to him, "Now you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness."*
⁴⁰*You fools! Did not he who made the outside make the inside also?*
⁴¹*But give as alms those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you.*

Luke 11:37-41 (ESV)

It would be helpful at this point if we defined '*legalism*', as it is a much misunderstood and misused word. As we saw, it does *not* mean obeying God's commands or taking the Bible seriously. Legalism is the attempt by any person, of whatever group or denomination, to earn or achieve righteousness for himself by keeping any set of rules, regulations or traditions, rather than by receiving the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ as a free gift.

Please refer to my commentary on Galatians and the Law of Moses in which I examine all of this in close detail. There is a side of us that loves to create our own rules which we can congratulate ourselves for keeping and condemn others for not keeping. It is a way of creating our own self-righteousness in place of the true righteousness which Jesus transfers freely to all who believe in Him.

Man-made righteousness is not actually righteousness at all. It is bogus, and a work of the flesh, and does not impress God. Therefore, Jesus condemned it as in the above passage. Paul also speaks in Romans of how, in their ignorance, people seek to establish a righteousness of their own:

¹Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. ²For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. ³For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Romans 10:1-3 (ESV)

Jesus also went on to speak of how the Pharisees, whose name has become synonymous with self-righteousness, would observe the tiniest details of their own oral law, but neglect the things that really mattered, such as love and justice. That is typical of those whose hearts are focused on visible rule-observance, and being admired by others, rather than on actually changing in their hearts. Such an attitude is of the flesh and is based on pride:

⁴² "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. ⁴³Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. ⁴⁴Woe to you! For you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it." Luke 11:42-44 (ESV)

The observance of man-made rules and traditions, even good ones, cannot save us or make us righteous. They may impress other people who don't know any better and give them the false impression we are wise but such things do not actually achieve anything in addressing our self-indulgent flesh nature. On the contrary, our flesh is boosted by showing off to other people about our observance of rules:

²⁰ If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations ²¹ "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch" ²² (referring to things that all perish as they are used)—according to human precepts and teachings? ²³ These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. Colossians 2:20-23 (ESV)

Therefore, if we are serious about defeating our flesh, we have to avoid creating our own set of rules or following the rules of some other person or group. All those things can be just as carnal as anything else our flesh urges us to do. That is one reason why Jesus was so against manmade religious rules and traditions and went out of His way to break them when He came across them:

Therefore, we need to enter this battle against our flesh with our eyes wide open, fully alert to the danger of only replacing our more blatant forms of carnality with more subtle alternatives, which seem better, but are still fleshly.

A man who is trying to earn God's approval, and the approval of others, by observing man-made rules and traditions and who takes pride in his own 'success' is possibly just as carnal as a man who drinks, smokes, swears and chases women. Precisely how you manifest your fleshliness is not the issue. What matters is whether you are *acting in the flesh* or not. That is more important than exactly how you are doing it.

In fact, I generally prefer to share the Gospel with an ordinary sinner, who is not religious at all, than with a person who imagines they are already right with God because they are “churchgoers” and are observing the rules and traditions of their denomination. Such people are hard to reach as they are convinced they are already doing well and that God is pleased with them.

Moods, in themselves, can be a normal expression of our God-given emotions and are not sinful. However, ‘moodiness’ is of the flesh and is sinful

We have been looking at some things which many of us would not associate with being carnal or sinful and ‘*moodiness*’ is another one. Of course, there is nothing wrong with us having different moods at different times and therefore feeling sad or happy, playful or serious, quiet or noisy, wanting company or wanting to be alone and so on. Such changing emotions are the result of our varying circumstances, or of our state of health, or even the time of day, and they are not sinful.

God gave us emotions and they are inherently changeable. Therefore, up and down cycles are normal, and not at all carnal. However, what is sinful is to allow our emotions to control us such that our dealings with others are governed by our moods especially where we excuse, and even cultivate, those moods at the expense of others.

So, we have the right to feel sad or down, from time to time, but not to “*take it out on other people*”, such that they pay the price for our moods and are required to tip toe around us depending on what mood we happen to be in. That is self-indulgent and is also unfair to the people who have to live with us or work alongside us. Accordingly, it is never appropriate to be sulky, sarcastic or irritable or to allow ourselves to have outbursts of temper just because we feel like it.

There is always a duty to maintain our self-control even at times when we are struggling. Such times of difficulty do not entitle us to treat others in ways which we would not want them to treat us. Therefore, if we are the sort of person that people are wary of, such that they check our mood before approaching us, then we are acting in the flesh and sinning even though we aren’t engaging in sexual sin or getting drunk.

Irritability and temper are therefore just as much a sign of operating in the flesh as drunkenness

This point about indulging our own moods must be emphasised or the average person is likely to excuse themselves for being impatient, irritable or bad tempered and view such things as only trivial sins, or not sins at all. Above all, they are unlikely to see such conduct as being fleshly or as areas where they need to repent and “crucify the flesh”.

I have been guilty of these sins myself, and have been convicted of the need to exercise more self-control and not to be abrupt with others just because I am under stress and they are being a bit dopey or slow to understand. Such faults are certainly easier to see in others than in ourselves and I am reminded of a tour of Israel which I went on where the guide was snappy and short-tempered. Some of us must have been exasperating, but that did not excuse his rudeness.

Of course, he was wrong to behave as he did but always remember when considering any other man’s faults that God is more interested in what we do to address that same fault in ourselves than He is in what that other man ought to do. Indeed, I have come to feel that where God allows us to see a fault in

someone else it is often for the very purpose of enabling us to see it in ourselves because, until then, we may have been blind to it.

The key point is that such surly, grouchy, “*bear with a sore head*” moods are not something we can allow ourselves to inflict on others and we all need to examine ourselves in this regard. It is not only sinful but self-centred and it also pre-supposes that we are important and others are not. We cannot ignore or excuse such attitudes if we want to grow as disciples.

How can we overcome moods and get rid of our moodiness?

Of course, getting rid of such sins and bad attitudes is a lot easier said than done. Nevertheless, any process of change must begin with the recognition that there is a fault there that needs to be addressed. Until you know that there is such a sin, what it consists of, and that it is to be found in yourself, you won’t even begin to tackle it. That is the first step and we can assist ourselves by asking God to reveal any such faults to us so our eyes can be opened.

From that point on it is a question of giving yourself “a stern talking to” whenever you are in such moods or are sulking or treating others snappily. Ask God at such times to reveal to you anything about your attitude or conduct that is carnal, or that He does not like for any other reason. Those are the prayers He is most eager to answer, provided you really mean it and are not just saying the words parrot fashion.

Then we need to turn upon ourselves, with some strictness, and metaphorically give ourselves a good shake by asking what right we have to speak or act towards this other person in the way we are doing. That might sound obvious but it is actually quite rare for us to do it because it is so contrary to our flesh nature which considers it self-evident that we are right in whatever we say, do or think. Thus, such questioning of yourself will never happen naturally because it runs entirely counter to the grain of our fallen human nature.

Therefore, you must take a hold of yourself, usually when you least wish to do so, and ask such questions as: “*What right do I have to raise my voice or to get into a sour, sarcastic or snappy mood with this person?*” Treat yourself objectively as if you were Person A being questioned by Person B and don’t accept any excuses or let yourself wriggle off the hook. If you don’t cross examine yourself in these ways then, realistically, who else will ever do so or who else will you ever allow to do so?

It is fleshly if we are ‘driven’ such that we “strive” and try to *make things happen by ourselves, at our speed, rather than waiting on God and working alongside Him, at His pace.*

Here is an example of carnality which few would recognise as such. It is the character trait of being driven such that we try to make things happen, all by ourselves, rather than waiting on God, seeking His permission and guidance, and doing things as and when He tells us to. Of course, as with so many other things we are meant to do, it is easier said than done.

Even the best-intentioned people fall into the trap of “*pulling on the lead*” like a dog eager to get to the park, and getting ahead of God and His timing. I know I have done it many times myself, so I cannot point the finger at anyone. For example, when I started my own law firm in 1999 I was in a hurry to

expand it and to take on more staff and more files. That was partly because I felt I had a lot of ground to catch up.

I think also my pride had been hurt by dropping overnight from a successful Managing Partner of an established firm to being a sole trader with no staff, no files, no equipment and no clients. I wanted to prove to the world that I wasn't a failure, which was a carnal motive, not a godly one. It meant I grew the firm too fast and that resulted in me recruiting some people I should never have taken on.

They then caused me a lot of headaches and I had to get rid of them later, which was very stressful. I also spent money too rapidly, due to excessive growth and that also caused me problems. Looking back now, with the benefit of hindsight, I realise I should have been more patient and willing to grow slowly, in accordance with God's promptings rather than my own impulsive will and ambition.

So I learned some painful lessons and, although God still helped me, He allowed me to experience the painful consequences of my headstrong behaviour. I think He had no real alternative if I was to learn the lesson. Perhaps the classic example of striving in the Bible is the way Abram and Sarai, as they were then called, became impatient.

They tried to make God's promises come true more quickly by getting Abram to have a child through Sarai's maid, Hagar, rather than continuing to wait for the already aging, and apparently barren, Sarai to get pregnant herself. Let's begin the story here, in these passages, where the promises are made to Abram about him and Sarai having a son, and a nation of descendants through him, and a land of their own to live in:

¹Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

Genesis 12:1-2 (RSV)

¹⁴The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; ¹⁵ for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants for ever. ¹⁶ I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendants also can be counted.

Genesis 13:14-16 (RSV)

¹After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ² But Abram said, "O Lord God, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Elie'zer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Behold, thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir." ⁴ And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir." ⁵ And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶ And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 15:1-6 (RSV)

The problem arose because many years went by after God made the promise without any child arriving for Abram and Sarai and (understandably) they became discouraged and impatient. I am not criticizing them. I would have become even more frustrated myself. Nevertheless, what Abram and Sarai did was

fleshly in that they tried to get ahead of God and to force His hand by having a child through Sarai's maid, Hagar. That son was called Ishmael but he was not the son God had promised:

¹Now Sar'ai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar; ²and Sar'ai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sar'ai. ³So, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, Sar'ai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. ⁴And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

Genesis 16:1-4 (RSV)

¹⁵And Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ish'mael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ish'mael to Abram.

Genesis 16:15-16 (RSV)

This 'bright idea' had catastrophic results in the end as this child, Ishmael, became the father of the Arab race which, ultimately, gave rise to the false religion of Islam, which has been a thorn in the side of Israel and the whole world ever since. Though waiting for God's timing can be hard, and even excruciatingly difficult at times, the right thing is still to wait on Him and not to try to go ahead of Him or to act without His permission or guidance.

So, Abram should have just waited patiently for Isaac to be born instead of causing Ishmael to be conceived. We must not create our own 'little Ishmaels' either, but instead wait for God to produce genuine Isaacs in our life. In Abram's case it meant waiting 25 years for Isaac to arrive and if you are called by God to serve Him then it is quite possible He will require you to wait patiently, perhaps for years or even decades, before His purposes are fulfilled in your life:

¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly." ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you.

Genesis 17:1-6 (RSV)

The battle with the flesh is a life-long battle. It won't end until you die.

Because our flesh won't go away until we die, we have to continue our battle with it permanently. Even apostle Paul had to. He speaks of his own dilemma and of how he doesn't do what he wants to do, but does the things he doesn't want to do. We saw this in the passage Romans 7:14-25 which is shown earlier in this chapter.

Most Christians give little or no thought to their battle against their own flesh. It is not on their agenda. Some might attempt the battle for a while, but become discouraged when they realise it will never end

until death. If we are to avoid giving up the battle due to discouragement we have to get used to the fact that the fight against our flesh will never end until we die, and we must not let that put us off.

Some may wonder what the point is of fighting such a non-stop battle. There is every point, because your success and growth is measured by the series of small victories you have as you go along. It is also measured in terms of what area of our life the battle is being fought over as time goes by, i.e. over what particular issues and difficulties. If we look closely at this, we can gain encouragement that we might otherwise overlook.

For example, a person might become a Christian and at that point the battle with their flesh is being fought over the issues of theft, lying, adultery, pornography, foul language and drug taking. However, they gradually gain the victory over these things and turn from these sins in genuine repentance. Then, ten years later, they are still struggling against their flesh, but now it is over issues of punctuality, patience, temper etc. There is still a struggle, and the flesh is still refusing to surrender and causing difficulty, but the point is the battle is being fought over very different ground.

That Christian has moved on and has made progress. Nevertheless, to such a person, the demons will whisper that they are "*getting nowhere*" and are "*still not winning*" against their flesh. But it's a lie. That Christian may well be winning. It's just that the victory is not yet complete and is taking longer than they would wish. Even so, it's still a victory and it is his old man, not his new man, who is losing the battle. We must never overlook that or allow ourselves to be discouraged over things about which God wants us to be encouraged.

It's as if we were fighting a battle with the Nazis which begins on the Normandy beaches. It is hard-fought and difficult and there are lots of little victories and defeats each day, even each hour, as the battle slowly grinds along. However, it is the *trend* of the battle that really counts. So, as the weeks pass, more and more French villages and towns are liberated. Then other villages and towns become, for a while, the venue for this ongoing battle as we move from Normandy into the rest of France and then Holland, Belgium and eventually Germany.

It would therefore be foolish if the Allies in World War Two had said in April 1945 as they fought in the heart of Germany that they were "*not winning*". They had come a long way since 6 June when they were in Normandy. Admittedly, the Nazis had fought hard over every street, let alone every town, but they were still being defeated. It is the same with the flesh. It never surrenders but it can still be beaten, step by step. We must therefore encourage ourselves with that thought of making progress, even if it isn't complete or perfect. Then press on, without ever losing heart.

Other people have a flesh nature too, not just us

The flesh is not only a problem for you and me. It affects everyone. Therefore other people's carnality, not just our own, explains many of the problems we experience with them. They act as they do because, like us, they indulge their flesh rather than crucifying it, even if they are Christians.

We need to remember that if we are to understand other Christians realistically and if we are to learn how to be gracious with them. However, when dealing with unbelievers we need to be even more realistic because they are operating entirely in the flesh and have absolutely no idea they are doing so. They are "*dead in their trespasses and sins*" just as we were before we were saved:

¹ And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved.

Ephesians 2:1-5 (ESV)

We tend to justify our own fleshly actions but condemn the same behaviour in others

Our natural tendency is to excuse the ways in which our own flesh rears its head but to condemn the exact same things in others. We need to turn that around 180 degrees and expect fleshly behaviour from other people, and make allowances for it, but be strict and uncompromising with ourselves. Most of us do the opposite. We hate carnality in others and are intolerant of it but we are blind to it, or excuse it, in ourselves. That hypocrisy causes many broken relationships and disputes.

Those could be reduced, or even avoided, by grasping that fleshliness operates in the same way in other people as it does in ourselves and by learning to expect and handle their carnal ways. Unfortunately, doing that isn't easy. Hypocrisy is much easier. Which of us hasn't, on countless occasions, taken offence at comments made about us which we know we make about others, or objected to conduct which we do ourselves? Indeed, it's often precisely because we say and do those things ourselves that we are so annoyed when others do them to us.

How to recognise when something is fleshly

As you grow in the Christian life the problems caused by the flesh become less obvious and more subtle and the battles against it are fought over ever smaller issues. That makes it harder to see what the flesh is doing or even to realise it is still active. We can get to a stage where we think we have 'arrived' spiritually and got past all of that when in fact we are still operating carnally. So, how can we recognise when something we are doing is fleshly? It could be a good thing, such as setting up church or ministry or doing good works for the poor and needy. But it could still be being done in a fleshly way.

That is commonplace, and is not difficult to see when others do it. However, we will only see it in ourselves if we go out of our way to look for it and to ask God to show it to us. An example of where the flesh becomes involved in what would otherwise be good things might be a church leader who is seeking to serve God and to reach lost people, but is using fleshly methods and techniques. He could be manipulative, controlling, and devious in how he handles people.

All of that is of the flesh and God doesn't want any of it even if it seems to be bringing about a "successful ministry". God does not see anything as a success if it is produced by, or through, our flesh. He sees it as sin, and junk, even if we thought it was impressive.

But the flesh can show itself in all sorts of less obvious ways. What if God is calling us to do a certain thing or to serve Him in a certain way, but we set about it in a hasty, impatient, driven way? We might be treading on toes, driving other people faster than they can go and striving to achieve. That is not

God's way and is carnal even though it doesn't look like it. Striving means going about something in a way, or at a speed, or with an attitude, which God doesn't approve of and hasn't authorised.

We can end up pursuing the objective ourselves, in our own way, and in our own strength, without God, and without submission to Him, like an over enthusiastic subcontractor on a building site. He may be pressing ahead faster than the architect wishes to go and doing things which aren't part of his plan, or which are premature. I have done that many times in my own life, but I'm learning to recognise the signs of it much earlier now. It is a sin to which energetic people are particularly prone.

False teaching emerging from psychology which emphasises "*self-esteem*", "*self love*" and any other phrase starting with the word 'self'

Far too many people in the church have adopted the ideas, language and methods of secular psychology, which is an entirely unbiblical set of beliefs. For example, we hear a lot about the need to build and preserve "*self-esteem*". That view has become so widely accepted in the Church that it is now almost beyond challenge. Yet it needs to be challenged, because it is not biblical and does not reflect the truth about ourselves.

Be very wary of anything said by anyone from the whole "psychobabble" industry, because it is false and unbiblical to its very core. I say quite a lot about the heresy of psychology in various of my talks and books so do please refer to those too. I believe psychology is a subject for Christians to avoid like the plague. It is a wholly man made body of teaching which has nothing to do with Scripture.

Indeed, it contradicts what the Bible does teach about human nature, sin, selfishness, pride etc etc. The whole subject only came into being about 100 years ago and the many hundreds of "psychological conditions" they have invented since then are pure fiction which came out of men's imaginations or, more likely, were planted there by demons. Their teachings go against what the Bible teaches about our nature and our conduct.

We are not meant to love ourselves more - we already love ourselves too much

Accordingly, we don't need more self-esteem. We need less. Likewise, we don't need to love ourselves more. We are already head over heels in love with ourselves as it is. We have no need to make it even worse by trying to increase a love of self which is already obsessive.

Jesus simply wants us to increase the level of our love *for others* to match the enormous level of love *we already have for ourselves*, for which the dial is already showing a 'full tank'. There isn't a person anywhere who doesn't already love himself. We often hear of people who supposedly "*hate themselves*" and who need to be "*taught how to love themselves*". But it's not true.

If a woman says she hates herself because of her looks or her weight what she really means is she loves herself and therefore wishes she could look better. She wants that precisely because she loves herself, not because she doesn't. If she really hated herself she'd be glad that she's ugly and would want herself to be punished by being made uglier still. Apostle Paul makes a similar point:

²⁹for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church,

Ephesians 5:29 (NASB)

Thus, when a person says they don't love themselves what they really mean is they don't *like* themselves and wish they were slimmer, richer, cleverer, more popular etc. But they only want those improvements in their appearance or abilities *because they love themselves*, not because they don't.