

Deny Yourselfs...

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Matt 16²⁴⁻²⁸ / Romans 8¹⁻¹⁷

⁵For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (Roms 8)

We have been talking about being spiritual people and we come this morning to my final word on this matter. And it is a strong word, in many ways a tough word. And it is so because it concerns something that is very dear to our heart . And what is this thing that is dear to our hearts? It is our selves, our very lives, our desires, our will, our hopes and dreams. The Bible has a catch all phrase for these things. It calls them 'flesh.' The 'flesh' is that which sums up that part of our life which stands apart from God. All of what is within us that works against God's purposes the Bible deems to be 'fleshly.' Whatever remains unredeemed within us is 'fleshly' – it lives for its own ends, it desires what is wrong and it wars against the Spirit's call to us. The trouble is that for most of us, the flesh is very dear. We like our desires, we like our lusts, they feel good to us, they feel as if they are who we are and, indeed, as if they are life. And it's not even as if every desire is in fact wrong. Indeed that which is flesh is often hard to identify. At one stage in the Church's development all that was related to sex was deemed to be of the 'flesh' and thereby evil. But I think we've moved past this. I think we can say that in the right context sex is a wonderful and God given gift. So how do we identify that which we might call 'the flesh?'

Perhaps the feature of modern life that comes closest to the idea of the 'flesh' is the phenomenon of addiction. Most who are addicts will say without a hint of a lie that their addiction is their life. Without that drug, that habit, that experience, they feel very much as if they would die. And for some they are right. Some who are addicted to powerful drugs will, in fact, come close to death if they simply go cold turkey. It is easy to point the finger at addicts. We understand major addictions such as alcohol and drug dependency but what we so often forget is how pervasive addiction it. And so we who are not identified addicts will sit on the sidelines having our 5th coffee for the day thanking God that we are not addicts like them...

Or perhaps we sneak away to find some guilty pleasure on the web at night when either husband or wife aren't looking... Or perhaps we scoff a 5th piece of cake for the morning because by 11 we got

so hungry and lunch was just that bit far away to wait... Or perhaps we sat down to veg out in front of TV for another 4 hours of doing nothing for the night.

Are you getting my drift here? When it comes to addiction we who point the finger are so often entangled in another less identifiable addiction or one that doesn't have quite so much of a social stigma attached and yet which is, for all intents and purposes just as much an addiction as alcoholism. And when it comes to the 'flesh' the same is true. Yes there are some really identifiable 'fleshly' pursuits such as chasing money or the opposite sex but how often does our non-engagement in such behaviour hide some more socially acceptable yet nonetheless fleshly interest and behaviour?

Take for example busyness. For many in society busyness is a badge of honour. If we're busy we're needed and important. It's fascinating that the desert fathers – the pioneers of the Christian Ascetic movement which challenged the Church to really trust God and who lived around 1700 years ago spoke of busyness as "moral laziness." Busy-ness can also be an addictive drug, which is why its victims are increasingly referred to as "workaholics." Busyness acts to repress our inner fears and personal anxieties, as we scramble to achieve an enviable image to display to others. We become "outward" people, obsessed with how we appear, rather than "inward" people who are able to take time to reflect on who God has called us to be.

We are all people of the flesh and whether our addiction is identified or not most of us will have one. So here's a new definition of addiction. An addiction is 'a behaviour that has become necessary for us to avoid living the life God has for us.' [repeat]

In July 1998, Oscar-winning actor Gary Busey discussed his faith on TV. Though he has starred in over 60 films, including such hits as *Lethal Weapon* and *The Firm*, Busey's off-screen party-boy reputation and police record took centre stage. After attending a Promise Keepers conference, his life changed dramatically. When asked if he thought about God when he was sinking into a drug filled state, Busey said this...

"Of course not. There's no way to think about God. There's no reason to...'cause your number-one relationship is with the dark side of you.... **I learned that addiction is a failed search for spirituality.**"

When we form harmful and dangerous habits, habits that demean us and others what we are doing is filling a hole in our lives, a hole that was not just meant to be filled with so called 'good habits' but which was meant to be filled by a much deeper and more vibrant aspect of life, namely, that which is spiritual. We are creatures of the Spirit. We have spirits and we were meant to be relating to the God through the Holy Spirit. Addictions are so powerful because they tap into this fundamental part of who we are by trying to fill it.

The apostle Paul sets up a problem in Romans 7 which raises this whole issue and the problem can be stated in this way... if I am born a person 'of the flesh' what can I do about it. Am I not doomed to obey the desires of my flesh and therefore to disobey God and if this is the case then how can God judge me since I am simply fulfilling the nature given to me? In Romans 8 Paul brings us the answer

and in simple terms that answer is 'No, not if you have received Christ because in this case as a spiritual person you no longer have only one nature but a new nature is given to you – one that will lead you to live an entirely different life.'

¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Roms 8)

The spiritual person then is one who does not live according to the flesh but not because they've found a new strength in themselves; not because they've become suddenly moral in themselves or because they've suddenly been released from the urges they had before. No, the spiritual person is one who can deny themselves, deny their flesh **because they have another option, a new attractive and viable way to live.** And they have this because they have been filled with the Spirit.

Jesus comes at this from the other end of the equation. In the passage we read this morning from Matthew Jesus says this...

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? (Matt 16)

This is, if you like, always the first movement in following the Spirit. To take the option the Spirit makes available to us we have to be prepared to reject the more obvious option provided by the flesh. Taking the right path begins almost always with rejecting the wrong one even when that wrong path seems like the best, the most fulfilling, the most appealing way to go. Thomas à Kempis the 14th century monk who wrote one of the classic on Christina spirituality called 'The Imitation of Christ' said this in regard to choosing the way of Christ...

'Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear his cross. He has many who desire comfort, but few who desire suffering. He finds many to share his feast, but few his fasting. All desire to rejoice with him, but few are willing to suffer for his sake. Many follow Jesus to the breaking of bread, but few to the drinking of the cup of his passion. Many admire his miracles, but few follow him in the humiliation of the cross.'

The fact is, there is no growing with Christ until we are ready to give away something for Him. If our life is filled with other things what room is there for Jesus? If we cannot be interrupted by Him, who is really Lord of our life? If we refuse to deny ourselves anything for Christ we will not be able to

take the path of the Spirit because our life will be filled to overflowing with the things we have chosen to accept. The great myth of this age, perhaps of every age, is that we can have it all – we can have our way and God’s way; we can have all our pleasures and please God as well; we can remain safe behind the walls of our will and obey God as well.

The spiritual person knows that this is not the case. The spiritual person is prepared at any time to be interrupted by God, to be sidetracked by God, to be called apart from his or her planned way ahead. The spiritual person is prepared to compromise their own expectations in order to follow the path of the Spirit and, in the way, to gain a life far greater than the one we were initially aiming for.

And this is the rub. We are so resistant to denying ourselves largely because the flesh promises great things. If you will only feed me, buy me that drink, let me suck on that cigarette, allow me to pursue my ambition – you will be free; you will have a great life! And yet Jesus makes the point so clearly that our life does not consist in these things and that **beyond** this demanding self and **with Him** lies real life...

²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matt 16)

The spiritual person goes after this life. They are prepared to let go of the ever increasing demands of the flesh so that God may bring them into their true life. They are able to risk denying themselves in order to discover a new land – a land of enormous promise and joy, a land of rest and peace beyond addiction and fear. This life awaits those who are prepared to make room in their lives for God’s Spirit.