

Resisting the Flesh

If you have a bible nearby or on your phone, go with me to Galatians 5. While you're getting there, question for you. Have you ever heard the expression, "be true to yourself"? I would imagine just about all of us have. Slightly more *difficult* question: do you know where that phrase *came* from? Where it *originated*? Believe it or not, it dates all the way back to Shakespeare. It's from his play *Hamlet*. In the context of the play, the line is delivered by a character named Polonius. Polonius, in the story, is sort of presented as a babbling fool. He offers all sorts of cliches and platitudes, many of which are contradictory to each other. And because of this, he is largely *ignored* by the other characters in the play. He's the butt of several jokes, and most critics insist that nearly every piece of advice he renders is anywhere from meaningless to obviously wrong. But *one line* he delivers that Americans have really latched onto, for whatever reason, is "...to thine own self be true." And I don't know about *you*, but to *me*, "be true to yourself" doesn't exactly have the same ring to it once you know that history.

Okay, let's try another one. How about the phrase, "the heart wants what it wants"? That one's not quite as well-known, but probably still somewhat familiar to us. A lot of times you'll hear this one in Hallmark-style Christmas movies, when someone falls in love with someone they shouldn't fall in love with—someone who's not the best choice or is a bit rough around the edges. They'll say, with a deep sigh, "well...the heart wants what it wants." Guess where *that* expression comes from. Maybe you're appropriately hesitant after what I just told you about the last one.

We think that one *first* originated with Emily Dickinson. But it flew pretty under-the-radar until it was *popularized* by none other than the Woody Allen. So here's the story (and warning: it's even worse than the last one). In 1992, Woody Allen famously broke off a relationship with Mia Farrow because of an affair he was having with her adopted *daughter*, Soon-Yi Previn—who he eventually married. Allen was 35 years older than Previn. When pressed about how bizarre and potentially exploitative that type of relationship was, Woody Allen simply uttered the line, "the heart wants what it wants." *Big yikes*, right? *That* story kind of sours *that* expression a bit as well.

Now, I bring those up because I think it's sometimes helpful to learn where certain catchphrases come from—*especially* when they are catchphrases that many in our society tend to *live* and *operate* by. And of course, where an idea *came* from doesn't *always* make it *wrong*. But at the same time, I don't know of many of us that would throw around cliches like "be true to yourself" and "the heart wants what it wants" if it was commonly understood where those cliches *came* from.

But more *importantly*, if we claim to follow Jesus, when we hear expressions like those, it should probably raise a bit of an alarm in our minds. Some lights on our internal dashboard should start to go off. Because **all of those expressions**, depending on their context, **are anywhere from incompatible with the way of Jesus, to diametrically opposed to the way of Jesus**. Especially that one, “be true to yourself.” That one should be a dead giveaway. Namely, because Jesus says *repeatedly* in the gospels, “if anyone wants to be my disciple, they must *deny* themselves, pick up their cross, and follow me.” *Be true* to yourself and follow your heart, versus *deny* yourself and follow Jesus—those are pretty strikingly different mantras.

But to say the least, “deny yourself” feels pretty grating on modern ears. In part, because of how much we’ve taken to heart the platitudes that cut in the opposite direction. As ethicist Robert C. Roberts observes:

*We have been led to feel that the **self** is **sacrosanct** (in other words: **sacred, holy, untouchable**): just as in an earlier time it was thought never fitting to deny **God**, so now it seems never right to deny **oneself**.*

I think that sums it up pretty well, at least from what *I’ve* observed in our present society. **In today’s day and age, in so many ways, the worst thing you could ever do is deny yourself**. So today, I want us to talk about all of this. I want to give us some biblical language for this phenomenon, and talk about why and how we *resist* this way of life as a follower of Jesus. But before we go *there*, I just *reason* with you for a moment. Let’s say you stumbled upon this teaching and you’re fairly put *off* by the fact that I’m saying “be true to yourself” is *bad* advice. That’s understandable. Especially given how *integrated* that mentality has become in our modern world.

So if *that’s* you, why don’t we just *start* here: **even if you *don’t* think “be true to yourself” is bad advice, I want to at least start by showing you why I believe it to be unhelpful advice**. At *best*, it’s sort of trite and meaningless. Allow me to explain with a story. A few weeks ago, I’m standing in line to check out my groceries at Kroger. *While* I’m in line, I’m looking at the variety of celebrity magazines and tabloids available for purchase. On the cover of one of those magazines is Ryan Gosling. *Ken* himself. He is in a full Ken get-up, complete with anywhere from six to eight pack abs, and chiseled pecs. I’m pretty sure some of that is airbrushed, but it doesn’t look that way; it looks like he is just the most in-shape 43-year old man I’ve ever seen. It’s like he’s defied the laws of nature to look 27, while *being* 43.

And in that moment, I think to myself what you’d expect any noble, sanctified, self-respecting Christian minister to think to themselves. I think, *I should work out more*

so I can look like Ryan Gosling. That sounds mature, right? So I start thinking to myself, I'm going to tell my trainer that I no longer want this very normal, reasonable "stay-healthy-and-don't-die" workout plan *he's* got me on. Get outta here with that stuff. I want the *V-shredded* Ryan Gosling abs-and-pecs workout plan. That's what I want. And as I'm standing in line to check out, I'm getting legit excited about this incredible change I'm about to make in my life. Because I've always known, deep-down, that the "*real* me" has chiseled abs. I've *known* it. And now I'm about to manifest it into existence.

...And *then* I look on the *other* side of the check-out aisle, and there is a family-sized bag of Sour Skittles. And they look good. Like *real* good. Those that know me well, know I am a *sucker* for some Sour Skittles. I have basically an inability to turn them down. I then look down at my grocery cart to see if I can justify adding the bag of Skittles to my purchases. And I see, in my cart, the following items. A family-sized bag of Lays Cheddar & Sour Cream potato chips that I have no plans of sharing with my family; four blocks of cream cheese so that Ana can make that sausage and cream cheese dip for a Vols basketball game we're about to watch—the dip that is like 92% cream cheese; and a large tub of Tillamook vanilla ice cream. I see all of that, and I start thinking about how excited I am to sit on the couch for the next three hours, watch the Vols, and enjoy a meal that consists of Sour Skittles, potato chips, sausage dip, and Tillamook ice cream. I think to myself: *those* things truly make up the "real" me. I should follow my heart. I was *made* for that kind of Saturday afternoon.

So here's my question. In that moment, if the most important thing in life is that I should always "be true to myself," **exactly which of those two selves should I be true to?** Because those are two very *different* selves, are they not? Probably *opposite* selves. Ryan Gosling did not get eight pack abs and chiseled pecs by spending his Saturday afternoons the way I *want* to spend *my* Saturday afternoon. Not a *chance*. He's spending his Saturday afternoons with his trainer, a kale smoothie, and like a small bowl of low-fat cottage cheese or something. And that's *it*. So in that moment, which *self* is the self I should "be true to"? I've gotta pick *one*. And I *can't* pick both. And I really, really *want* both of them—they *both* feel like the real me. I've got a problem on my hands.

Here's my point. **Mantras like "be true to yourself," tend to flat-out ignore the inherent complexity of being a human being.** They *ignore* that all of us are a complex *collection* of selves, whose desires often run contrary to one another in significant ways. We want to be *healthy*, and we want to eat whatever we want. We want to *save* money, and we want to buy all the things we *want* right now. We want *peace* and absence of *conflict* at work, and we really want to give our coworker a piece of our mind. As *parents*, we want to be intentional and proactive and *present* with our kids, and we want to let them watch four hours of Netflix so that we can just have a *moment* to rest. I'd be willing

to bet that *a lot* of us feel those types of tensions. **We are *all* a complex collection of selves with different desires and different priorities.**

So *best case*, advice like “be true to yourself” gets you approximately *nowhere*. At *best*, it’s circular and leads right back to the question, *okay—which self?* *Best case*, it’s unproductive and unhelpful. And *worst case*, it leads us down a path of horrible, self-indulgent decisions that hurt ourselves and others. This is an aside, but some of the people I know who have made the biggest mess of their lives have done so in the name of “being true to themselves.” Some of the people *you* know have done the same. So we can choose to live by mantras like that, but I’m telling you: **they’re nowhere near as helpful as our society likes to pretend that they are.**

And that’s at least in *part* because **what our society often calls “yourself,” is actually what the *Scriptures* call “the flesh.”** If you’re new to our church, we’re in a teaching series right now all about what we’ve called the three “enemies” of the soul: the *world*, the *flesh*, and the *devil*. Those three things, we’ve said, are at the core of just about every obstacle we face in becoming more like Jesus. So we’re spending the month of January talking about what those things are, how they function, and how to *resist* them as followers of Jesus.

On the docket today is what the bible calls “our flesh.” So let me give you a definition. When the bible talks about **the *flesh***, it means something like **our base human instincts, *absent* the intervention of the Spirit; what we desire without God.** “Flesh” is the language the New Testament authors use to describe the desire to do *whatever* we want, *whenever* we want, *however* we want, without *regard* for the impact that will have on me or anyone else, in the short *or* long term. Living that way is living “according to the flesh.” It’s what you and I would do if there was never anything to stop us or give us pause about it.

Now, it’s worth pointing out that while we all like the *idea* of being able to live however we want...*none* of us actually want to live in a world where *everyone* operates that way. A world where everybody does whatever they want is a world rife with abuse, and coercion, and manipulation, and sexual assault, and labor force exploitation, and greed, and destroying the environment because it’s economically expedient to do so—and any number of other things along those lines. Things that, come to think of it, we see *constantly* in our present world. So the irony is that none of us actually *want* a world where everyone lives according to their flesh. In many ways, **our world *is* the awful way that it is, because the vast majority of people choose to live according to their flesh.**

Which is why the Scriptures teach over and over again that “living according to the flesh,” is actually no way for people to live at all. So let’s take a look at one of the places that teaches that. If you’ve got your bibles open, this Galatians 5, starting in v. 13:

*[13] You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be **free**.*

So notice, right off the bat: the Scriptures teach that as human beings and as followers of Jesus, we *were* created to be *free*. I think of God’s words to Adam and Eve in the garden on day one: “you are *free* to eat from any tree in the garden.” *Free*. God *created* us for freedom. He then sent Jesus to *recreate* us for freedom. Put simply, God’s desire for his people *is freedom*. That should sound *good* to us. It *does* sound good to us. But at the same time, we’re going to find out that Paul is *defining* freedom a little differently than the common *cultural* definitions we have of it. Keep reading in the second half of v. 13: (“You were called to be free...”)

But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh** (there’s our word); **rather, serve one another humbly in love.

So **whatever *this* kind of freedom is that Paul is describing, it is decidedly *not* “doing whatever we want to do.”** It’s *not*, in every scenario, “following your heart” or “being true to yourself,” right? Because he just said that we *aren’t* to “use our freedom” to “indulge the flesh.” Instead, he says, this freedom *enables* us to “serve one another humbly in love.” That’s different than what people *today* often think freedom means. Today, we tend to think freedom means serving *myself* and doing whatever *I* want to do in the moment. In *Paul’s* view, freedom is for serving *others*. Which, in a *lot* of scenarios, is probably going to involve me intentionally *not* doing whatever *I* want to do. Does that make sense? **Freedom, to Paul, is not doing whatever we *want*—it’s doing what we were *created* for.**

“For,” Paul says—here’s the reason behind it. Verse 14:

*[14] For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor **as yourself.**”*

If you want to know what the entire *purpose* of the laws and rules laid out in the bible is—if you want to know what God wants and expects from humanity—there it is: “love your neighbor as yourself.” Put another way, interact with others the way you would *want*

them to interact with you. It's, to use *Jesus'* language from the gospels, to "do unto others what you would have them do unto you."¹

Which, you'll notice, inherently *requires* a certain level of *restraint*. This is not the most instinctive way to live. The most *instinctive* way to live is to treat others in a way that is convenient and expedient and easiest for me. My *instinct* is to treat my coworkers in whatever way is easiest for me to treat them. Whatever requires the least amount of effort on my part. My *instinct* is to interact with my spouse in whatever way is most convenient for *me*; whatever best serves me and my desires. My *instinct* is to interact with my *kids* in whatever way requires the least amount of effort. **But to "love my neighbor as myself," I have to learn to show some amount of restraint.** Some amount of doing the *right* thing, not just the *easiest* thing. In other words, I will need to exercise *control* over my "flesh."

Otherwise, here's what happens—v. 15:

*[15] If you **bite** and **devour** each other, **watch out** or you will be **destroyed** by each other.*

Okay, real talk: It's hard to imagine a better one-sentence summary of what's going on in a lot of our country right now. In a lot of our *world* right now. In a lot of our *politics* right now. In a lot of our *workplaces* right now. In a lot of our *families* and *communities* and *churches* right now. "If you bite and devour each other"—if you operate with the inability to restrain your flesh and love your neighbor as yourself—*that* is where it leads. Being torn down and destroyed by each other. Whether that's physically, emotionally, spiritually—you name it. That's where that road leads. **That's where every community of human beings will end up if they do not find a way to restrain their flesh.**

So what's the alternative? That's where Paul goes next. Verse 16:

*[16] So I say, walk by the **Spirit**, and you will **not gratify** the desires of the flesh. [17] For the **flesh** desires what is **contrary** to the Spirit, and the **Spirit** what is contrary to the **flesh**. They are in **conflict with each other**, so that you are **not to do whatever you want**. [18] But if you are led by the **Spirit**, you are not under the law. [19] The acts of the **flesh** are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; [20] idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions [21] and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the*

¹ Luke 6:31

*like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will **not inherit** the kingdom of God.*

So the signs that a person is being run and governed by their flesh is that some combination of those things are consistently present in their life. Now here's what's interesting about that list: it's about the *broadest* list of activities you can imagine, right? Like it runs the whole gamut. He mentions sexual immorality, and he mentions *discord*—just your run of the mill disagreeableness. He mentions *witchcraft*, and he mentions *jealousy*—simply wanting things that other people have. He mentions *orgies* (which is a word I bet you weren't prepared to hear in this context this morning), and then he mentions *factions*—just anytime you form cliques and exclude other people from them. I mean, this list and the things on it are about as wide as the sky. A person can be really *obviously* living according to the flesh (witchcraft, orgies and all)—or they can be *subtly* living according to the flesh—just by being sort of grumpy and difficult to please.

But regardless of *which* of those things are present in your life, Paul drops the hammer on all of it at the end. He says, "*I warn you, as I did before, that those who **live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.***" Woof. So Paul seems to be saying that if your life is consistently governed and directed by any of the things on this list—that is a sign that you are living according to the flesh and therefore not walking *with* the Spirit of God. It doesn't matter how *extreme* or *mild* the fruit seems—it's still the *fruit* of a life lived "according to the flesh." So let's just highlight a few of them together—for fun.

First, Paul says that living by the flesh sometimes presents itself in the form of *sexual immorality*. So biblically, that word refers to any sexual activity or sexual fantasy with someone you aren't presently *married* to. Now, I want to be clear: Paul doesn't mean you must never struggle with sexual temptation in order to follow Jesus. Otherwise we're *all* pretty much out of the running. And if that *were* the case, a lot of the bible's *instruction* around God's people *resisting* sexual temptation would be fairly pointless, since none of us ever struggle with that in the first place. But Paul is saying **if your life is consistently marked by sexual immorality—if you have the inability or unwillingness to resist it in any way—that means you are living according to the flesh, which means you are not a follower of Jesus.**

Paul mentions *selfish ambition*. In the original language, that refers to someone who acts only in their own interest and for their own gain, without regard for the negative impact it has on anyone else. So if you only view your life in terms of what's best for you, that's *selfish ambition*. If you show up at LifeGroup each week and only ever ask the question, what's in this for *me*?" or say things like "they better *do* and *talk* about things *I* want to do and talk about," that's *selfish ambition*. If you go to work every day only concerned about

your own advancement and your own goals and your own priorities, without any regard for the people you work *with*, that's *selfish* ambition. **If you consistently live like that, Paul says, you are living according to the flesh, which means you are not a follower of Jesus.**

Paul also mentions *discord* and *dissensions*. So if you're one of those people who just seems to generate conflict and arguments everywhere you go. If *drama* seems to follow you around from relationship to relationship, place to place, and you're the only common denominator. If it doesn't take long once you enter into a friendship, for *conflict* to arise in that friendship. If that's you, Paul says, that is a sign that you are living "according to the flesh," which means you are not a follower of Jesus.

Paul's *point* in this list, it seems, is that the flesh can rear its ugly head in a *variety* of different ways and in different *forms*. But **it all circles back to doing what our base instincts tell us to do, rather than doing what loves and serves and helps others.** Anything that grows out of that core instinct is "the flesh." On the contrary, followers of Jesus should be marked by the *Spirit*. So finish it out with me in v. 22:

[22] But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness and (perhaps most importantly for our discussion today) self-control. In other words, the ability to say "no" to yourself. To your flesh. The ability to live with mastery over it. Second half of v. 23: Against such things there is no law. Notice this next part: [24] Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Okay. Starting from the premise of that last verse in Galatians 5, let's lay out how we *resist* the the influence of the flesh as followers of Jesus. I've got four ideas for you here from the Scriptures. First, we...

Crucify the Flesh

I'm getting that language, verbatim, from v. 24 of our passage. It says "those who belong to Christ Jesus have *crucified* the flesh with its passions and desires." So what does it mean to have your flesh *crucified*? Here's my stab at it. It means that **if you are a follower of Jesus, your flesh is no longer who you are.** Paul hits on this same idea *earlier* in Galatians 2 when he says this:

*I have been **crucified** with Christ and I no longer **live**, but **Christ lives in me**. The life I now live in the **body**, I live by **faith** in the Son of God, who **loved me and gave himself for me**.²*

When you decide to follow Jesus, what happens is that the *old* you is *crucified* along with Jesus. In other words, it's *killed*. *Put to death*. The old version of you is dead and gone. As dead as Jesus was on the cross—that's how dead your old self (i.e. your flesh) is to you as a follower of Jesus. It holds no defining power over you. You are a new creation. So, and this is where it gets important for how we relate to our flesh *now*: you no longer *have* to say “yes” to your flesh. Your flesh has been *defeated* on the cross. **If you say yes to it now, it's never because you *have* to; it's because you *chose* to.**

To put it in slightly more familiar terms for us. You hear all the time that you should “be true to yourself.” I've got a better mantra for us to live by as followers of Jesus. Here it is: “be true to your *new* self.” *Be true to your new self*. The Scriptures would say that you and I have *multiple* selves. *Namely*, we have a *old* self, and a *new* self. The *old* self is the one dominated by our flesh. It's the self that sees *itself* as the center of the known universe; that does whatever it wants to do, whenever it wants to do it. It's the self that only ever thinks about what would feel good, seem good, be good, to me, *right now*.

And just so we're clear, for most of us, *that* self has created more problems for us than anyone else in our lives has. I'm not saying that *other* people *haven't* caused significant damage in your life. But I am saying your *old* self has likely caused more. Your flesh has gotten you into more trouble, more uncomfortable situations, more difficulty, more heartache than anyone else in your life has. So, the Scriptures say “don't be true to *that* self.” *That* self is bad news. That guy, that girl, is a *mess*. / *But* the *good* news is that you have *another* option: be true to your *new* self. Colossians 3 puts it this way:

(if you are a follower of Jesus) ...you have **taken off your *old* self with its practices and have put *on* the *new* self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator**.³

If you're a follower of Jesus, you have a *new* self. Be true to *that* one instead.
Second tip...

Make No *Provision* for the Flesh

I get this one from Romans 13, v. 14. It says this:

² Galatians 2:20

³ v. 10

*But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and **make no provision** for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

Since our old self has been crucified to us, Paul says, let's stop making *provision* for it. If it's not *alive* anymore, it certainly doesn't need to be *fed* and *entertained*—right? In my experience, followers of Jesus spend way too much time making *provision* for the flesh. Allowing opportunity after opportunity after opportunity to let it rear its ugly head. So instead, cut off its supply. Just to give a few examples... If your flesh is inclined to spend way too many hours of the day engrossed in video games: get rid of your console. Or bare minimum, put some time restrictions on it that you can't get around. If your flesh is inclined to look at porn, lock down access to it on your phone. If your flesh is inclined to buy things you don't need, don't go to the mall or to Target in your spare time, and get the Amazon app with one-click purchasing off your phone. If your flesh is inclined to run up the balance on your credit cards, have someone you trust review your statements with you each month and hold you accountable. If your flesh is inclined to spend way too much time on Instagram or TikTok, delete those apps off your phone. If you can't prevent yourself from drinking too *much*, *stop* drinking altogether.

Now, maybe all that sounds a bit stifling or legalistic to you. And maybe it is. But at the same time, I'd be willing to bet that the people who take measures *you* consider legalistic are experiencing more freedom from the flesh than you are right now. Isn't that ironic? *Sometimes*, self-imposed *restrictions* can actually *create freedom*. It's almost like true freedom *isn't* the unhindered ability to do whatever we want. *It's almost like that is fake freedom. It's almost like true freedom isn't doing whatever you want to do, but rather what you were created to do. So if **that's fake freedom, let's make every effort we can to experience true freedom.*** Let's make no provision for the flesh. Hopefully that makes sense. Okay. Third...

Cultivate Life in the Spirit

I'm getting this from back in v. 16 of our passage. Paul says, quote:

*So I say, **walk** by the **Spirit**, and you **will not gratify** the desires of the flesh.*

So in some sense, it might be helpful to think about resisting the flesh as an *outcome*. It's a direct *result* of doing something *else*—and that's “walking by the Spirit.” Which honestly makes a lot of sense if you think about it. If I said to you right now, “don't think about elephants,” what are pretty much *all* of us going to be thinking about? *Elephants*, right? Okay, in the same way, if all we're ever doing is trying *not* to be controlled by the

flesh, what's going to be on the forefront of our minds? Our *flesh*. **If all you ever do is try to say “no” to the flesh, eventually you will probably end up saying “yes” to it.** But if you are actively saying *yes* to something *else*—something *better*—I think saying *no* to the flesh becomes easier and easier over time. So what if *instead* of saying to ourselves “don't give into the flesh, don't give into the flesh, don't give into the flesh...”, we instead decided to make every effort to live and walk by the guidance of the Spirit of God?

What if, in regards to our sexuality: instead of asking “what do I most *want* to do in this area of my life?” we started asking the question, “what does it look like to honor and reflect *Jesus* in this area of my life?” What if, in regards to our money: instead of asking “what do I most *want* to buy with my money?” we started asking the question, “what does *God* most want me to do with my money?” What if, in regards to *conflict* with others: instead of asking “what do I most want to do or say to this person who is really frustrating me right now?” we instead started asking, “how would God have me treat this person and speak to them?” “Walk by the Spirit,” Paul says, “...and you will not *gratify* the desires of your flesh.” And finally...

Don't Fear Failure

This one is brief, but so very important. As followers of Jesus, we do not have to fear *failure* when it comes to denying our flesh. We don't have to panic when we give in to it. Because we have the privilege of knowing that Jesus already perfectly said no to the flesh. He *refused* to take the easy way out. He *insisted* on putting others ahead of himself. He picked up his cross, carried it, and hung on it. And because he did that, our trust in him gives us access to the same type of life. It gives us the *ability* to follow in his footsteps—to deny ourselves, pick up *our* cross and follow him. His death in our place is what makes that entire way of life available to us. Knowing Jesus and living in a relationship with him is what enables us to learn how to resist the flesh.

So in the practice guide this week, we've given you a practice to help you learn how to resist the flesh: the practice of *fasting*. While that might sound weird or random, we discussed last year in our Formation series that fasting is a very tangible way of saying “no” to yourself. And by doing that on a regular basis, you are basically *training* yourself to say “no” to yourself in other ways as well. *Fasting* becomes a way of teaching yourself to deny yourself and say no to your flesh. More info on that in the practice guide at citychurchknox.com if you want to take a look.

For now, let's pray.