

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pastor Eric Chang

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THE FLESH IS WEAK

Matthew 26:41

We are approaching the end of our study on the words of Christ and I realize that we never really talked about the biblical concept of the flesh. The Bible teaches that within the immaterial part of man, we find the soul, the spirit, the heart, the conscience, the mind, the will, and ... the flesh. The flesh, *sarx* in Greek, is a complex word, with multiple facets. In this lesson, we will study it from the ethical point of view.

We will use Matthew 26:41 as the basis for our study. Matthew 26:41 reads like this.

Matthew 26:41. Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Here we find Jesus at a very intense moment of His life on earth, a few hours before His arrest. He was in the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples. He told them, *Sit here while I go over there and pray* (v. 36). Then He took three of his disciples (Peter, James, and John) farther into the garden. He asked them to stay there and *keep watch* (v. 38) with him while He went still farther into the garden to be alone and to pray. Deeply distressed, the Lord said in his prayer, *My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will* (v. 39). When He came back, the disciples were asleep. *So you could not keep watch with me for one hour?* Jesus said (v. 40). He had hoped that they would support Him in that fearful hour by remaining awake. But it did not happen. The disciples were not able to keep their eyes open. And that is when Jesus said, *Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.* These words contain spiritual principles of great importance which every Christian must know.

The apostles were willing

Let's examine Jesus' statement. *The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.* The disciples were willing to stay awake with Jesus. They were willing to keep watch with him. There was no lack of willingness. Willingness was not the problem. The problem was the flesh. It is weak. The flesh prevented them from accomplishing what they wanted to do, i.e. to stay awake with Jesus.

It is important to understand correctly the word 'willing' here. 'The spirit is willing.' I find that the English translation is a bit too weak. It is more than just a 'willingness.' The Greek word actually means 'eager.' The spirit of the apostles was eager to be with Jesus. *Prothumos* is the Greek word. It is made up of two parts: 1) the word *pro*, which means 'forward'; 2) and *thumos* for 'passion.' 'Forward with passion.' Thus *prothumos* expresses enthusiasm, zeal, commitment, conviction. It is not

just saying, 'OK, I'm willing to stay awake, if you ask me to do so. Otherwise, I'll take a nap.' Not at all. The disciples were really eager to keep watch with Jesus.

This is the same word that is used by Paul in Romans 1:15 where he says, *I am eager (prothumos) to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome*. Paul was not just willing to preach the gospel. He was burning to get the gospel to the Romans and to the Gentiles.

'The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.' In that statement, Jesus is saying that the eagerness of the spirit is being stopped by something. And that something is the flesh. The flesh against the spirit. As you can see, Jesus is dealing with a 'classic' problem of Christian discipleship: the problem of the flesh opposing the spirit. Every Christian has experienced it. This spiritual conflict is felt from the very first moment a person comes into contact with the gospel. Think of the time when you first heard the gospel or when you started to be genuinely interested in the Bible. If you were too close to the Word of God, the flesh rose up and tried to stop you. If you were considering becoming a Christian, the flesh reminded you of all the problems that such a decision might give you. And then you hesitated.

The weakness of the flesh

'The flesh is weak,' Jesus says. What does it mean that the flesh is weak? What is the nature of that weakness? In Greek, it is the word *asthenes*. It is also made up of two parts: 1) the privative alpha; 2) and *stenos* which means strength. 'Without strength, being deprived of strength.' That is what the Greek word literally means.

In the NT, *asthenes* is often used for physical illness. The reason is easy to understand. Because when you are a sick, you are weak. Remember the last time you had the flu? You were hit by a fever, your muscles were aching, you had no energy. You stayed in bed for a few days completely exhausted, without strength. In Acts 4:9, *asthenes* is used in reference to a cripple, a man who was born lame. *If we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick (asthenes) man, as to how this man has been made well*. This man was weak because he was a disabled person.

So the body is weak because of illness. But the flesh is weak because of what? Here is a verse that can help us answer that question. Romans 5:6: *While we were still weak (asthenes), at the right time Christ died for the ungodly*. Do you see? The flesh is weak because of sin. In this verse, Paul describes the non-Christian state of existence as 'weakness.' 'While we were still weak' means 'at the time when sin had dominion over us.' And therefore the flesh, weakened by sin, made us vulnerable. We were spiritually weak. You see that this weakness is the result or the effect of sin dwelling in the flesh.

Here is another verse where the word 'weak' occurs. Hebrews 7:28: *For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak (asthenes); but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever*. The high priests were weak men. This also should be understood spiritually. The high priest was weak because he, like everyone else, was subject to sin. He could not win the battle against sin. He was weak. He was sharing the weakness of all mankind, i.e., the bondage to sin.

The flesh neutralizes us not only in doing spiritual things, but it can also neutralize our capacity to understand spiritual things. Spiritual insight is not a matter of intelligence. Spiritual insight is primarily a matter of how much the flesh is influencing a person. A person may be very intelligent, but his intelligence will not help him understand spiritual realities if the flesh, working within him, opposes his mind to grasp spiritual things.

In Romans 6:19, Paul says this to the Romans. *I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to*

lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. Notice again the ‘weakness of the flesh.’ ‘I have to use simple terms,’ Paul says, ‘because of the weakness of your flesh’. Why were the Romans weak? Because they were carnal. Their lack of spirituality forced Paul to ask them to offer themselves as slaves to righteousness. And this carnality had a blinding influence on their mind. It blocked their ability to grasp spiritual truths. That is why Paul had to speak to them in simplified language.

This being said, what is the flesh exactly? The flesh is part of every human being. This part is weak, limited and temporal. The flesh itself is not sinful, but because of its limitation, it is liable to sin. The flesh is that disposition in the human nature to sin and to oppose God. *The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit*, Paul writes in Galatians 5:17.

This conflict between the spirit and the flesh, Paul describes his own struggle in Romans 7:18-19: *For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.* ‘I want to do what is good, but I can’t. And the evil I do not want to do, that I do.’ Notice that there is no lack of will in Paul. He is willing to do the good. The problem is again the weakness of the flesh, where evil dwells.

Setting the mind on spiritual things

How then we do deal with the problem of the flesh? This is what Paul writes a few verses later in Romans 8:5.

Romans 8:5. For 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.

Notice the words ‘set their minds.’ They appear twice: setting the mind on the things of the flesh, and setting the mind on the things of the Spirit. What is the point that Paul is driving at here? We know what it is to set our mind on this and that. It is to think about something, usually something specific. I set my mind on the tasks that I have to do at work. I think about my tasks at work. I set my mind on my relationship with a friend. I think about my relationship with a friend. Paul is not talking about just one act of setting the mind upon something. The words ‘set their minds’ means ‘to be preoccupied’ with a particular thing, to have your mind absorbed in something.

The principle behind that verse is this: what is in your mind, is what you are. What your mind is preoccupied with constitutes what you are. Proverbs 23:7 says, *For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.* What a man thinks about determines who he is. Reflect on the day you just had. What preoccupied your mind? What drew your attention the most? What did your mind indulge in most of the time? The answer to these questions will show what kind of person you are.

Paul gives us two possibilities: you are either carnal or you are spiritual. The carnal thinking, the preoccupation with the things of this world, which is focused on the physical and the temporal, we all had this kind of thinking at some point in our life. For the carnal mind, spiritual things will be perceived as an intrusion, as an annoyance, as a distraction. On the other hand, for the spiritual mind, carnal things will be seen as a distraction or even as a danger, a lethal danger. Let us read the following verse, Romans 8:6.

Romans 8:6. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

To set the mind on the flesh is death. That is the danger. The fate of the carnal mind is death, i.e. spiritual death, being separated and cut off from God eternally. ‘It is death,’ not ‘it will be death.’ The carnally minded person is dead now, while he lives on this earth. And he remains dead even when he enters the next world.

To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. The person whose mind is preoccupied with spiritual things is filled with life and peace. He dwells in life, the life that comes from knowing, believing and understanding God. He is also full of peace, confident that his sins are forgiven and that he is now acceptable to God. He walks through life in the peace of God, knowing that God is with him. Life and peace are the destiny of the spiritually minded person.

Renewing the mind

Can a carnally minded person become a spiritually minded person? The spiritual reality is that the carnal mind will never accept to become a spiritual mind. It is just too contrary to its nature. In order for the mind to be changed, something drastic has to take place. Paul calls that the ‘renewal of the mind’ in Romans 12:2.

*Romans 12:2: Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the **renewal of your mind**, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

‘Don’t let the flesh keep you in the world. You must let God transform you by renewing your mind.’ This renewal has to do with something ‘being made new’. It is not just a reformation. It is bringing into being something that did not exist before. Paul talks about becoming a ‘new creation’ (2Corinthians 5:17). This happens by faith as ‘you offer (by faith) your body as a living sacrifice to God’ (Romans 12:1).

But remember this. Being renewed does not mean that the problem of the flesh is disposed of. The flesh does not disappear even after a person has become a new creature. There will always be, in the believer, a struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. The renewal of the mind is the first step. But setting your mind on the things of the Spirit is not something that comes automatically. The believer has to put that into practice as he learns, by the grace of God, to live each moment under the direction and control of the Holy Spirit.

The flesh is weak. So, Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The Lord Jesus was telling his disciples that, because of the weakness of the flesh, they must watch and pray so that they do not fall away when temptation comes. Their faith will be tested when they see Jesus rejected, tried, crucified, dead. Their faith will be tested when they face confusion, disappointment, guilt, fear, loneliness. Temptation can only be destructive. If you are not watchful, temptation will close on you like a snare, like an ambush, and it will destroy you.

Entering into temptation

Does that mean that we can be tempted to the point of losing our faith? What about the security of the Christian? We were talking about Romans 8. What about the last two verses of Romans 8: *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8:38-39)?

Here is my position. The Christian is invulnerable, i.e. he cannot be defeated by any external attack. There is no external power that can grab you and pull you away from God. The believer who wears the whole armor of God is able to resist any of the devil’s attacks (Ephesians 6:11). Satan can do nothing to you, externally. And I emphasize the word ‘externally’. Because the devil can catch you internally, from the inside. How? Through the flesh. The flesh in you can be vulnerable to the influence of the enemy outside. Temptation comes from the inside, and it strikes where you are the most vulnerable, at your weakest points. Temptation does not use external force. No one drags you into a temptation. You walk in it by yourself. There lies all the power of temptation.

In the OT, Samson was a man nobody could beat. He was invulnerable to attacks. The Philistines tried many times to catch him, but never succeeded. He was so strong that he was able to massacre an entire army of Philistines by using only the jaw bone of a donkey. Externally, Samson was invincible. But internally, he had a weakness: the love of women. He had many women in his life, the most famous one being probably Delilah. Seeing that they could not get Samson by force, the Philistines bribed Delilah to find the secret of Samson's strength. After three attempts, using the soft approach, playing the game of seduction, Delilah was able to make Samson divulge his secret: the Nazirite vow prohibiting the cutting of his hair. If his hair is cut off, he will lose his strength. She got Samson to sleep on her lap and while he was sleeping, his hair was cut. That is when he lost all his strength. The Philistines were then able to seize him. You see, there was no fight, nor argument. Nothing forceful. Through constant persuasion and temptation, Samson walked directly into the trap – of his own will.

Watch and pray

The flesh is weak. Therefore watch and pray. That is the practical instruction that the Lord Jesus gave to His disciples. What does it mean to watch? Watching means to stay awake, to stay in the light and to walk in the light. You do not walk in darkness, when people sleep.

In 1Jn 2:8-11, John explains in very practical terms what it means to stay awake.

1 John 2:8. Yet I am writing you a new commandment, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

9 He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still.

10 He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling.

11 But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

When you enter into temptation, you walk in the darkness. You do not know where you are going because you cannot see in the dark. Temptation leads to a trap. If darkness has blinded your eyes, you will walk into that trap without knowing it. When Samson woke up, *he did not know that the Lord had left him* (Judges 16:20). He did not know that his strength had gone away.

Here is the spiritual principle that John is telling us. To watch is to walk in the light. And to walk in the light is to love other people. And as you aim, by the Spirit of God, to love other people, you will find that the flesh will not be able to influence you. Yes, this principle sounds so simple. But you try it and you will discover how true it is.

You see, by nature, the flesh is selfish. It is inward looking. The flesh is the opposite of loving. When you apply yourself to love another person, you are denying the flesh. You give the flesh no space in you. In that way, the desires of the flesh will no longer be gratified (Galatians 5:16).

And finally, pray. Pray that when temptation comes, you will be enabled by the power of God to bear it.