

The Cross and the Flesh

by L.E. Maxwell

The sermon emphasizes the importance of crucifying the flesh and living in the Spirit, highlighting the power of the Cross to transform believers and sever relationships with sin.

Scripture: Romans 8:11

Topics: "Living in the Spirit", "Crucifixion of the Flesh"

Description

L.E. Maxwell emphasizes the necessity of confronting the flesh with the Cross, illustrating that the flesh, in its fallen state, is inherently opposed to God and must be crucified to experience true freedom in Christ. He reflects on the struggle of believers to recognize the pervasive influence of the flesh in their lives and the importance of yielding to the Spirit for victory over sin. The sermon calls for a radical commitment to the Cross, urging believers to abandon self-centeredness and embrace a life of sacrifice and service, echoing the teachings of Paul and the wisdom of Amy Carmichael.

Transcript

COULD THE FLESH SPEAK as it faces the Cross, it C would be forced to use the language of one, Amiel, (as recorded by Amy Carmichael). After he had received at the hands of his doctors the verdict which was to him the arrest of death he said, "On waking, it seemed to me that I was staring into the future with wide-startled eyes. Is it indeed to me that these things apply? Incessant and growing humiliation, my slavery becoming heavier, my circle of action steadily narrower? What is hateful is that deliverance can never be hoped for, and that one misery will succeed another in such a way as to leave me no breathing space, not even in the future, not even in hope. All possibilities are closed to me, one by one."

To the flesh the Cross is God's verdict, God's "arrest of death." Paul traveled a long road to learn "that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing." "Is it indeed to me," cries the awakened believer, "that these very things apply?" It does seem to take a long time to learn that the mind of the flesh "is enmity against God." It is therefore "not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." The verdict has gone forth, the sentence executed. The only cure is condemnation, crucifixion, death with Christ. The flesh with all its foul brood has been put to the hanged man's doom. To the accursed tree, Christ nailed the flesh with "the affections and lusts." There, Christ reversed all the processes of nature; the old life was terminated to make room for the new, for death can never inherit life. And "the mind of the flesh is death." The flesh has about it "the smell of infernal associations. It stinks." Since its mind is already death, God sent it to its own place--the Cross.

In speaking of "the flesh" as contrary to "the Spirit," Scripture refers to the whole of human nature in its fallen condition. We read of the wills of the flesh, the desires of the flesh, the mind of the flesh, the wisdom of the flesh, the purposes of the flesh, the confidence of the flesh, the filthiness of the flesh, the workings of the flesh, the warring of the flesh, the glorying of the flesh. Scripture mentions those who walk according to the flesh, after the flesh, make a fair show in the flesh. Man's emotions, his reasonings, his powers--all his thinking and willing and energy--are under the lordship of the flesh. The flesh must go to the Cross. It must be made to face the fact and made to say that "deliverance can never be hoped for, all possibilities are closed to me in such a way as to leave me no breathing space, not even in the future, not even in hope. It is to me these very things apply." The Cross seizes hold of man's fleshly self-life, and carries it to judgment, a judgment so final that it spells death.

Amiel indeed felt it "difficult for the natural man to escape from a dumb rage against" such an inexorable arrest. It is worse than difficult; it is impossible. But with God, the impossible becomes possible. Those who have been born again have gone through this judgment in the person of Christ. To the unbeliever, God says, "They that are in the flesh cannot please God." But to us He says, "Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit." We are assured of this that "they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts." And as we yield ourselves continually unto God, as those who are alive from the dead, we experience that liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. The word of assurance is that, "if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, [and he seems about to say to the Holy Spirit; but he turns to say] not to the flesh, to live after the flesh" (Rom. 8:11, 12). The flesh has been judged and our position is "in the Spirit."

Even though the believer has emerged from the muddle and mixedness of Romans 7 through Paul's command "reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin," the fact remains that he will discover many ways in which self seeks satisfaction through the as-yet-unredeemed spheres of his being. The flesh, the body, all "our mortal coil" is evidently still present in Romans 8. That chapter presents many ways in which mortification must set in. The victorious believer will become aware of many forms of self which must yet be dealt with.

We shall discover: In our service for Christ, self-confidence and self-esteem; in the slightest suffering, self-saving and self-pity; in the least misunderstanding, self-defense and self-vindication; in our station in life, self-seeking and self-centeredness; in the smallest trials, self-inspection and self-accusation; in the daily routine, self-pleasing and self-choosing; in our relationships, self-assertiveness and self-respect; in our education, self-boasting and self-expression; in our desires, self-indulgence and self-satisfaction; in our successes, self-admiration and self-congratulation; in our failures, self-excusing and self-justification; in our spiritual attainments, self-righteousness and self-complacency; in our public ministry, self-reflection and self-glory; in life as a whole, self-love and selfishness.

The flesh is an "I" specialist. These are but a few of the multiple forms of "the flesh" to be discovered and taken to the Cross. "In the Palace of Wurtzung there hangs a hall of glass. It is called the Hall of a Thousand Mirrors. You enter--a thousand hands are stretched out to meet you, a thousand smiles greet your smile, a thousand eyes will weep when you weep; but they are all your hands, your smiles, your tears. What a picture of the selfish man! Self all round, self multiplied, and he is deceived" (Mantle).

It is of God's wisdom that we should not be burdened with the discovery of these many forms of the flesh life all at once. Although emancipated at the life-center of our redeemed beings through the indwelling and

infilling of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, we are still in a fight--albeit on the victory side. Vast areas of the flesh must yet be crucified. We must become Christ-like. As an old black Christian in Africa put it: "The Cross of Christ condemns me to become a saint."

We left Egypt "in haste." Let Egypt leave us "with a vengeance." Look no more that way. Not deliverance but death lies in that direction. "Their horses are flesh and not spirit." Expect not to "run with the hare and hunt with the hounds." Calvary's floods of death are between us and that world. We have been crucified with Christ. There let us stand. Be consistent. Why halt between two opinions? Why be double minded? Why make provision for the flesh? Why not pay your last respects to the flesh?

We are debtors, thank God, not to the flesh to live after the flesh. You are His? Then be His. Be what you are. Be out and out. Obey God. When God says, "Pluck out," don't try to salve your conscience with prayer. When God says, "Cut off," crying will not do.

We are largely creatures of habit. By birth we are selfish, and by long practice we have lived to please ourselves, We have long been debtors to certain fleshly tendencies. We have settled down perchance (wicked notion) that it must be ever thus. There are certain Canaanites that "would dwell in the land." They have chariots of iron. Let us set out a few of the more common and subtle forms of the flesh which are manifest "hangovers" in many Christians.

You may always have been a murmuring, complaining Christian. You sulk and feel sorry for your "sad, sweet self." But you need not do so. "If the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you," He will so quicken your poor mortal, murmuring frame that you will experience the power of the Cross to cancel the complaining. There is a point to be observed, however; the victory will not be automatic. It will be only: "If ye through the Spirit [note that you must co-operate] do mortify [make to die] the deeds of the body" (Rom. 8:13).

You are sensitive, "thin-skinned"? Why not call it sinful pride? The next time somebody reproves you, just say, "You don't know half the truth. If you knew me you would say much worse." This may help you into harmony with the Cross. It will at least be the truth.

The flesh reasons that if your circumstances were only different you could have victory. But circumstances only reveal what is inside. Our insistence here is this: that "the eternal substance of a thing never lies in the thing itself, but in the quality of our reaction toward it. If in hard times we are kept from resentment, held in silence and filled with inward sweetness, that is what matters. The event that distressed us will pass from memory as a wind that passes and is gone. But what we were while the wind was blowing upon us has eternal consequences" (Amy Carmichael).

You may be a zealous Christian. But have you gotten over a fleshly itch for a thrilling baptism of power? Do you demand signs and wonders before you will believe? The flesh seeks to glory in God's very presence. Those who make such imperious demands upon God keep alive the very fleshly, selfish principle which must go to the Cross. In Old Testament ceremony, the blood, representing death, always preceded the anointing with oil, representing the Spirit. Do we forget that the Spirit comes from the Crucified in Heaven? Five bleeding wounds He bears. They still proclaim that the flesh with its passions and lusts was crucified. Nadab and Abihu once offered strange fire before God--and died.

Are you given to gossip? The principle of curiosity is like the troubled sea that cannot rest. Does your tongue cast up a world of mire and dirt? We know a true minister who sought to control his tongue by

taking a red hot poker and searing it. But the trouble was deeper. It was a heart matter. However, his attitude was right. He was willing to burn his tongue if that would help. He later learned how "through the Spirit" to mortify the deeds of the tongue.

Word just comes of a native preacher, until recently a flaming evangelist. His wife was self-assertive. In a certain issue she was manifestly wrong. But the preacher took sides with his wife. He has compromised with the flesh. Now, peace in the home is a wonderful thing, but not at such a price. The Spirit has ceased to use this preacher. Moreover, God gives drastic directions concerning such things when He says, "If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods . . . Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him. But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people. And thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die; because he hath sought to thrust thee away from the Lord thy God" (Deut. 13:6-10). This generation has been "graced" to spiritual softness and death. We do not "fear" as our forefathers did. We need the stiffening of Moses.

Has the reader noticed that when we ourselves are wrong we become very tender toward others who are wrong?--the reason being that we want tender handling. "But syrupy affection never yet led to spiritual integrity. And though it looks so like the charity which is greater than faith and hope, that it is 'admired of many,' it is not admirable. It is sin" (Amy Carmichael). Was the native preacher taken off his feet so easily because he was already unwatchful against the flesh? Did his wife only furnish the self-consideration for which he was already looking? The flesh gave "place to the devil." Satan is not divided against himself. Flesh always cliques up with flesh.

Why is there so little church discipline today? May one reason be that there would be so much tearful tenderness toward wrong-doers? Even the deacon says, "Don't mention my name in connection with this trouble." But he who stands not at the Cross cannot be standing in righteousness. At the Cross God put away sin. "Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person" (I Cor. 5:13).

One of the most manifest forms of flesh is family flesh. Passing by the flesh that bites and devours one another, let us notice its subtler form. It is here that "44 syrupy affection" betrays the best of parents. Their fleshly attachment refuses to lead their children by the way of the Cross. Is it because the parents have not gone that way themselves?

A personal friend of the writer passed away a few years ago. This lady had been brought up to believe that what she liked her system needed and must have--whether of food or raiment. She was not extravagant. Her life just centered in her likes and tastes and preferences. To these she daily bowed. She liked color, bright red especially. She liked fats, was very fond of sweets. She clung to these things "as a cat clings to its home." They were her life. But the Saviour said, "He that loveth his life shall lose it." That is more than theology. It is a great fact, a principle of life; it is inexorable law. And it obtains even in this world. The very things we lust after, hold to, and seek to save for ourselves, we lose--lose those very things, find them distasteful to us, and that sooner than we think. Some months before passing away, color became unbearable to this lady. The flesh had to have bright red covered up. Her whole being revolted at fats. As to sweets--well, the least sugar became sickening. These had been her life--now she loathed them. She had loved her life, had never lost it, refused to lose it--now she loathed it.

The Saviour said: "Remember Lot's wife. Whosoever shall seek to save his life (preserve it alive is the thought) shall lose it." Had Lot's wife not left Sodom? Indeed she had. But her flesh still fed on Sodom's sweets, and so she had not left it, had not lost it. To, God, Sodom was only fit to be turned to a cinder; to Lot's wife it was still worth saving. She still sought to save her "life" from the falling fire--not her bodily life (for she was already outside the city),--but the things of her desire, the things of her world still back there in Sodom. She loved that life, longed for it, looked back and lost it--her life in Sodom, her bodily life, her all. There she stood, a pillar of salt, an eternal warning to those who live after the flesh.

My friend, the Lord is coming. What is your life? Is it lived in the Spirit? Oh the power of the Cross to, sever every relationship that would bind us to the flesh! We are debtors only to the Holy Spirit. Give the Cross full place in your life; abandon yourself recklessly to the Crucified, for over His crucified life the flesh has not one speck of power. Let the Cross seize upon you and sever you from that dominating thralldom to the

flesh. "Every strong conviction ends by taking possession of us; it overcomes and absorbs us, and tears us ruthlessly from everything else." Has the Cross so seized upon your life? If it has, you can live for self nevermore. Rather, you will cry out with a determined saint of yore, "Oh my God, hear the cries of one on whom Thou hast had mercy, and prepare my heart to receive whatever Christ has purchased for me. Allow me not to rest short of it. Put a thorn in every enjoyment, a worm in every gourd, that would' either prevent my being wholly thine, or in any measure retard my progress in the divine life" (T. C. Upham).

We cannot better close this chapter than by quoting from that bed-ridden saint and soldier of India, Miss Amy Carmichael. She knew the pathway of suffering. She bore in her body the marks of the Lord Jesus:

We who follow the Crucified are not here to make a pleasant thing of life; we are called to suffering for the sake of a suffering, sinful world. The Lord forgive us our shameful evasions and hesitations. His brow was crowned with thorns; do we seek rosebuds for our crowning? His hands were pierced with nails; are our hands ringed with jewels? His feet were bare and bound; do our feet walk delicately? What do we know of travail? of tears that scald before they fall? of heartbreak? of being scorned? God forgive us our love of ease. God forgive us that so often we turn our faces from a life that is even remotely like His. Forgive us that we all but worship comfort, the delight of the presence of loved ones, possessions, treasure on earth. Far, far from our prayers too often is any thought of prayer for a love which will lead us to give one whom we love to follow our Lord to Gethsemane, to Calvary--perhaps because we have never been there ourselves.

Writing in this cold-war world, how can one tolerate the softness of the flesh, the love of ease, the self-pity and self-saving which has all but killed Christian testimony! Oh, the pain, the shame, the heartbreak of it all!

Lord, when I am weary with toiling,

And burdensome seem Thy commands,

If my load should lead to complaining,

Lord, show me Thy Hands,--

Thy nail-pierced Hands, Thy cross-torn Hands,

My Saviour, show me Thy Hands.

Christ, if ever my footsteps should falter,
And I be prepared for retreat,
If desert or thorn cause lamenting,
Lord, show me Thy Feet-
Thy bleeding Feet, Thy nail-scarred Feet,-
My Jesus, show me Thy Feet.
O God, dare I show Thee
MY hands and MY feet.
-Brenton Thoburn Badley.

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