Temptation to sin comes through three different avenues—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:15-17). In order for us to overcome sin, we must learn how to handle these avenues of temptation. Pride is discussed in the next lesson. This lesson will focus upon lust—specifically, the lust of the flesh.

There are five different Greek words translated as “lust,” “crave,” or “desire” in the New Testament (epithumia, hedone, epipotheo, orexis, and pathos). These words were neutral terms, referring to any strong desire or craving. However, the words came to be used, almost entirely, in a bad sense. In the New Testament, the word “lust” is primarily a desire for things contrary to the will of God.

Regarding the “lust of the flesh,” the word “flesh” does not refer to man’s physical body. “Flesh” is a word the Bible uses to identify the source of evil appetites residing within man. The flesh is the part of man that desires to serve the “law of sin” (Rom. 7:25). The “lust of the flesh” is a desire for the sinful things enjoyed by our flesh.

Overcoming the “lust of the flesh” is especially difficult because these lusts, cravings, or desires are a part of us; they come from within us. As William Barclay has aptly said, “The essence of the flesh is this. No army can invade a country from the sea unless it can obtain a bridgehead. Temptation would be powerless to affect men, unless there was some thing already in man to respond to temptation. Sin could gain no foothold in a man’s mind and heart and soul and life unless there was an enemy within the gates who was willing to open the door to sin. The flesh is exactly the bridgehead through which sin invades the human personality. The flesh is like the enemy within the gates who opens the way to the enemy who is pressing in through the gates” (Barclay 21-22). Overcoming sin means overcoming the lusts of the flesh, which means we must defeat the enemy within us!
How Fleshly Lusts War Against Our Soul

“Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11). This admonition from the apostle Peter must be taken seriously. Our soul is the most valuable thing we have (Matt. 16:26), and it must be defended at all costs. Fleshly lusts are our enemies because they wage a war against our eternal soul.

Sin destroys man’s soul, and fleshly lusts tempt us to sin. “But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (James 1:14-15). The flesh within us has lusts or desires to sin. It wants to sin. The lusts of the flesh have an alluring power (2 Pet. 2:18). When Satan appeals to and entices the flesh, he is tempting us to sin. At that point, the battle is on to give in to the temptation and satisfy our lust or resist the temptation and deny the fulfillment of our lust.

Some specific sins produced by lust are:

1. **Drunkenness and revelries** (Rom. 13:13; 1 Pet. 4:2-4). For some, the pursuit of particular lusts leads to consuming alcohol. Consumption of alcohol leads to drunkenness, drinking parties, fights, regrets, etc. People turn to drugs and alcohol for various reasons, but it is a lust or desire for the high or escape from reality causing them to continue using drugs and alcohol.

2. **Fornication.** “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God” (1 Thess. 4:3-5). Pursuing the “passion of lust” will result in fornication. There are some obvious things that excite the lust for sexual sins.

**Dancing,** by its nature, supplies an effective avenue through which individuals are tempted to pursue sexual sins. Some verses in the New Testament closely connect the words “lewdness” (lasciviousness) and “lust” (Rom. 13:13; 1 Pet. 4:3; 2 Pet. 2:18). Lewdness is translated from the Greek word **aselgeia** which means “wanton acts or manners, as filthy words, indecent bodily movements, unchaste handling of males and females” (Thayer 79-80). This is a perfect description of modern popular dancing.

Dancing excites the flesh and invites sexual sin. While some Christians try to deny this, those in the world willingly admit it. “The whole range of modern dances are designed
The Lust of the Flesh

Like Job, we need to make a covenant with our eyes not to look upon a woman to lust after her.

**Pornography** certainly supplies an avenue of temptations for individuals to pursue sexual sins. Pornography is not innocent fantasy or a victimless crime. Jesus says the man who looks upon a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matt. 5:28). The whole purpose for pornography is for a man to look and lust. Looking upon naked bodies, either in person or in pictures or videos, excites the flesh and invites sexual sin (2 Sam. 11:2-4).

Pornography is addictive. The sight of naked bodies sends a rush throughout the viewer’s body he wants to enjoy again and again. The sinful images will be burned upon his mind and will poison his heart (Matt. 5:8). Like Job, we need to make a covenant with our eyes not to look upon a woman to lust after her (Job 31:1).

Pornography can also destroy one’s marriage. While viewing pornography does not satisfy the exemption granted by Jesus in Matthew 19:9 (fornication is a physical act committed with our body, 1 Cor. 6:15-18), wives who have discovered their husbands viewing pornography feel as if their husbands have been cheating on them. The violation of trust and feelings of inadequacy (“Why am I not enough for my husband?”) caused by pornography often create a great hurdle in the marriage relationship.

**Immodest dress.** Some parts of the body, when revealed or enhanced by certain types of clothing, excite the flesh and invite sexual sin. The Bible acknowledges the attire of a harlot, which entices men (Prov. 7:10). Much clothing worn today is designed to attract and invite sexual attention. Those who wear such clothing, either purposely or innocently, are placing a stumbling block before others (Matt. 18:6-7).

**Mixed swimming** excites the lust of the flesh with regard to sexual sin in two ways. First, the clothing is immodest (even the most “modest” modern one-piece swimsuits conceal very little of a woman’s body). Second, swimming provides a means for contact between the bodies of individuals, further exciting the lust of the flesh. Any young person who

to express love making” (Sach). Those in the dancing and the medical profession state that dancing is a means of stimulating sexual impulses. Much of what passes for dancing today is simply a gateway to intercourse. Why do high school dances have to be chaperoned? Why do young people reserve hotel rooms on prom night? The stimulation felt on the dance floor is no different from the stimulation felt in the bedroom.
claims they never had to struggle with sexual impulses while visiting a public swimming pool or water park is either lying or needs to have their eyes checked.

3. Homosexuality. “For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due” (Rom. 1:26-27). While many in our society want us to believe homosexuality is a genetic disposition, the Bible states it is the result of an unrestrained pursuit of vile passions and burning lusts. As our society continues to remove restraints against sexual sins, individuals will continue to plunge themselves into a cesspool of perverse and unnatural activities in an effort to pursue pleasure.

Of course, there are other sins caused by the lust of the flesh. These should be enough to show us how fleshly lusts war against our soul.

How to Overcome the Lust of the Flesh

Christians continue to be tempted to sin, so we must learn how to win this war waged against our soul. We are to be active in this conflict. The grace of God teaches us to deny worldly lusts through a practice of self-denial and self-control (Titus 2:11-12). The following are some suggestions of how we can overcome the lust of the flesh through the practice of self-denial and self-control.

1. Have a “can do” attitude. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). The fact that God requires us to overcome lusts means we can. If we do not think we can do it, we defeat ourselves before we start. Whatever desire we struggle with, we must develop a determination to overcome it. We must see it as something we can accomplish.

2. Pray. If we know we have a problem with a temptation or sin, we can pray unto God for help in overcoming it. God wants to help us resist temptation. He knows how to deliver us out of temptation (2 Peter 2:9). He makes a way for us to escape our temptations (1 Cor. 10:13).

The Lord encouraged His disciples to pray as a means of defeating temptation.

“And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one…” (Matt. 6:13).
“Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41).

3. **Walk in the spirit.** "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Gal. 5:16-17). The key to overcoming lust of the flesh is learning to “walk in the Spirit,” to be willing to live according to the direction or the teaching of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the word of God. So long as one is making a purposeful effort to live according to the teachings of the Holy Spirit, he will not act upon his sinful desires.

We have a choice of two paths to walk (Rom. 8:1, 5-9). The two are incompatible. One excludes the other. The carnal mind (flesh) is not subject to the law of God, but the mind walking in the Spirit is subject to the law of God. We need to fill our minds with the word of God and be determined to obey the will of God, not the desires of our flesh.

4. **Control our thoughts.** “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, the things of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:5). Our minds are not our playground. We are to set our mind upon the things of the Spirit, not fulfilling the sinful desires of our mind (Eph. 2:3). Every thought must be brought into captivity to obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). We must set our minds on the things above, not on the sinful things of this world (Col. 3:1-2). We cannot dwell upon the things we cannot have. We cannot go “window shopping” for sin without giving in to our lust or making ourselves miserable.

5. **Arm ourselves with scripture.** The Lord has equipped us with the weapon we need to defeat these worldly lusts which war against our soul. When Jesus was tempted by the devil, He answered every temptation by saying “It is written.” (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). We can cleanse our ways and guard ourselves against sin by hiding God’s word in our heart (Ps. 119:9-11). If God’s word is in our heart, we will be prepared to use it as a means of resisting temptation.

6. **Consider ourselves dead to sin.** “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). Paul put to death his self-will the day he became a
Christian. From that day forward, he sought to fulfill Christ’s will in his physical body. Like Paul, all of those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions (Gal. 5:24). Crucifixion is an execution. There is no peaceful way for these warring parties (the flesh and the Spirit) to co-exist. The “enemy within the gates” must be put to death.

When we were baptized, the old body of sin was buried (Rom. 6:1-6). Why would we go dig it up? Sin is not to reign in our mortal bodies (vv. 11-12). The old man of sin is dead and buried. The new man lives to serve Christ. We cannot go back to our old way of living.

7. **Consider ourselves a slave to God.** We were slaves to sin, but when we obeyed the gospel, we were set free from sin and became enslaved to the One who set us free (Rom. 6:16-17). Slaves have no choice but to serve their master. Christians who do not practice self-control act as if they have no choice but to indulge in the sins of the world. Those who understand they are now servants of Christ realize they have no choice but to abstain from worldly lusts.

8. **Do not put ourselves in harm’s way.** Peter tells us to abstain from these fleshly lusts which war against our soul (1 Pet. 2:11). To abstain does not mean we get as close to them as we can. It means we are to get away from them and stay away from them.

   “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Rom. 13:14). We are not to give ourselves a chance of being tempted, of exciting the lust of the flesh. We must end the battle before it ever begins. If we have a problem with a sin, we must stay away from the people, places, and things tempting us to fulfill these strong desires. This is especially hard in our society, but it is essential.

When we find ourselves in harm’s way, we must take the way of escape and get out before we commit the sin (Gen. 39:11-12; 1 Cor. 6:18; 2 Tim. 2:22).

9. **Make ourselves accountable.** “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16-17). Knowing we will have to give an account to another person can serve as a strong deterrent against sin and could help motivate us to a better practice of self-control.
10. **Consider our example.** “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men” (Matt. 5:13). A Christian’s influence is a very powerful thing, but it can also be a very fragile thing. What would brethren, family, friends, neighbors, etc., think of us if they knew we did not practice self-denial and pursued the lusts of the flesh? Are the immediate, temporal consequences of our sins painful enough to motivate us to control ourselves?

11. **Learn to tell ourselves “no.”** “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matt. 16:24). The first step of following Jesus is learning to deny ourselves—to tell ourselves “no.” Ultimately, we are the only person who can do this. No one, not even God, can keep us from fulfilling the lust of the flesh. While people can help us, the battle with lust is a personal battle we must fight ourselves. We have to be the ones to tell ourselves “No.”

**Conclusion**

Fleshly lusts war against our soul. They entice the enemy within (the flesh). Thus, overcoming lust is both an internal battle and a life-long battle. However, it is a battle God expects us to win by practicing self-denial and self-control. We need to stop waving the white flag of surrender to sin and take the battle for our soul seriously.

**References**


Questions

1. Identify the three avenues of temptation (1 John 2:16).

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

2. What does the word “lust” mean and how is it used in the New Testament?

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

3. Why is overcoming the lust of the flesh difficult?

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

4. What makes fleshly lusts our enemy (1 Pet. 2:11)?

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

5. Describe how one is tempted to sin. What role does lust or desire play in temptation (James 1:14-15)?

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________


   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

7. How does dancing lead to sexual sins?

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

8. What effect did the sight of a naked woman have upon David (2 Sam. 11:2-4)?

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

9. What kinds of clothing are immodest (attract and invite sexual attention)?

   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

10. Name at least two ways mixed swimming excites the lust of the flesh?

    ____________________________________________________________
    ____________________________________________________________

11. How do we know God wants to help us overcome temptation (Matt. 6:13; 2 Pet. 2:9; 1 Cor. 10:13)?

    ____________________________________________________________
12. How do we “walk in the Spirit” (Gal. 5:16-17)?

13. Where are we to “set our minds” (Rom. 8:5; Col. 3:1-2)?

14. What did Jesus use to resist temptation (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10)?

15. How is a Christian to “crucify the flesh with its passions” (Gal. 5:24)?

16. What is a Christian to do when he finds he is being tempted to sin (1 Cor. 6:18, 10:13)?

What do we know about the flesh?

Read Romans 8:5-8 and answer the following true or false questions about the flesh.

1. _____ A spiritual man can set his mind on the things of the flesh (v. 5).
2. _____ The flesh is opposed to the Spirit (v. 5).
3. _____ The consequences of the flesh are death (v. 6).
4. _____ Following the flesh can lead to life and peace (v. 6).
5. _____ The flesh is an enemy of God and is hostile to the things of God (v. 7).
6. _____ If necessary, the flesh is capable of submitting to the will of God (v. 7).
7. _____ A fleshly minded person can please God (v. 8).
8. _____ It is possible to follow the flesh and still belong to Christ (v. 9).