

# Critical Issues Commentary

A monthly commentary on Biblical concerns that impact you

## Biblical Counseling Part 3 Applying Biblical Solutions to Biblically Defined Problems

written by Bob DeWaay

*"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." (2Timothy 3:16,17)*

In the last two issues we examined some of the deficiencies of secular counseling and secular theories about human attitudes and behaviors and we proposed that God's word contains the necessary answers. Last month we discussed sin as the basic root problem of humanity, and the substitutionary death of Christ appropriated by faith as the essential, God-given solution to this problem. This is an important topic. This month's commentary will explore practical ways to work this out using Biblical truths and principles. According to Scripture, basic, human problems are **relational** and **motivational**. We will study autonomy and the flesh and their expressions in the world through the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life.

### Autonomy and the Flesh

A key word discussed last month is **autonomy**, which means to be self-ruling or independent in relationship to God. It comes from the Greek words "*autos*" which means "self" and "*nomos*" which means "law." Through the rebellion of Adam and Eve the entire human race was plunged into autonomy, seeking to find fulfillment through self-will, self-rule, and self-determination. "Self" as used in this connection denotes the human person in his entirety living in a state of autonomy.

The New Testament uses the word "flesh" (some modern translations use "sinful nature" for the Greek "*sarx*" - lit.

"flesh") with this meaning. Paul said, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (**Romans 7:18a**). The flesh is what one is independent from God having only the motivations of his human nature outside of God's grace.

### The Flesh as a Motivational

Because there are many misunderstandings of the Biblical word flesh, it is helpful to define what the flesh **is not**. God created nature, including humankind and called His creation "good." The essence of evil is not nature itself, but alienation from God. The flesh is to be understood in this context. The word flesh does not mean "natural," or "physical," as opposed to "spiritual" as some misunderstand it. This can be shown by the list of the fruits of the flesh given in Galatians 5:19-21:

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Among these fruits are physical activities (immorality), attitudes (jealousy) and spiritual activities (sorcery), showing that the flesh includes matters of the soul and spirit of man as well as the body. Therefore a better understanding of the term is "all that one is separated from God." "Sinful nature," then, (NIV) is not a bad conceptual translation of the term.

When Jesus says, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (**Matthew 16:24**), the word "self" is used in this same way. This does not mean that there is nothing redeemable about hu-

mans or that there is no sense in which creation in God's image can still be faintly seen even in those who have not turned to Christ. The relational problem is independence from God and the motivational one is seeking self-fulfillment as the primary purpose in life. Embracing the cross is necessary if either of these problems are to be resolved.

However, natural abilities, the possibility of doing a kind, loving or humanitarian deed, the ability to work creatively with the materials of God's creation, and many other matters which show God's original work of creation are still evident even in fallen man. The problem is autonomy. If we exclude God and give His glory to another, even our good deeds are done with wrong motives. Therefore sin extends to both the good and bad things which are done because sin is a motivational and relational issue. To live according to the flesh is to live for self-fulfillment in this life without submission to Jesus Christ and His will for our lives. This is true whether one does heinous evil or is a "pretty good Joe," one who is apparently a good citizen, but sees no need to worship God and give Him the glory He deserves.

Thus Christ's requirement that anyone who would follow Him must deny self and take up His cross is a universal requirement, not to be applied only to those who are obviously horrible criminals. "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (**Galatians 5:24**). This means that all that we have and are must be transformed through the death and resurrection of the cross. We do not merely drop off the "bad" things or give up a few bad habits when we come to Christ, but must die to an entire way of life and take up a new one. This affects even the "good" things we do. It changes **why** we live and for **whom** we live. The Christian counselor must personally embrace the cross in this manner and must be prepared to clearly set forth the claims of Christ through the cross to those who are counseled. The failure to do so causes the frustration of trying to apply Biblical solutions to someone lacking Biblical motivations.

In **Genesis 2:17**, God told Adam and Eve they would die if they rebelled against him. Satan told them that they would not die (**Genesis 3:45**), and that they would become like God (who is truly and properly autonomous because of His essential nature as eternal creator, sustainer and law-giver). Death, spiritual, physical, and eternal is the result (see Oct. 1992 **CIC** article, page 3, col. 1). Satan lied to them and enticed them to join him in his rebellion against the Creator.

In this sinful state, humans are spiritually dead, facing physical death and ultimately God's final judgment in which eternal death will be the sentence. In this state, they are seeking fulfillment in this life only, and are doing so in whatever way seems right in their own eyes. **Romans 8:8** says, "and those who are in the flesh cannot please God." The only hope is the supernatural intervention of God through Jesus the Messiah. The cross of Christ causes a radical and thorough change in all who embrace its scandal. The cross is not a burden, it is an instrument of death. We are looking for solutions to our problems when the Scripture says that we **are** the problem. **Galatians 2:20**: "I have been crucified with Christ; and 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 delivered Himself up for me." God's solution is death and resurrection (**Romans 6**).

### The Three Categories

The fleshly motivation of which we have been speaking is expressed in three ways. "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world" (**1John 2:15,16**). "All that is in the world" describes these three areas of temptation. This does not mean that there are not myriads of expressions of sin and nuances of temptation. It does mean that these three summarize what autonomous human expression is all about. **Hebrews**

**4:15**, "For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin," expresses the same idea. Jesus faced all the major categories of sinful expression that face us, and He resisted them all.

Jesus' temptation in the wilderness is recorded for us in **Luke 4:1-13**. The lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life can be seen to correspond to these temptations. It has been said (correctly I think) that Eve faced these same three temptations. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was "good for food, a delight to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise" (**Genesis 3:6**). Taking what we have already discussed about autonomy as expressed through seeking self-fulfillment in this life without submission to Christ as Lord, how could we understand these three areas of temptation? The lust of the eyes could be understood as seeking self-fulfillment through **what one can have** in this life, of the flesh as **what one can do or experience** in this life, and the pride of life as **what one can be** in this life.

The lie of Satan is that there really is satisfaction, or self-deification to be found through these pursuits.

He blinds those who do not believe to the obvious fact that when they do get what they thought they wanted they are still not self-fulfilled. Like drugs, more is always needed; the more one gets the more one needs and the cravings are never satisfied, just accentuated.

### Temporal Motivations

Another problem with seeking fulfillment in this life through "all that is in the world" is that **this life is short!** John says, "And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever" (**1John 2:17**). There is pleasure in sin for a short season, but the spiritual death (separation from the indwelling Spirit of God) which is the sinner's present state is always imminently about to issue into physical and eternal death. Only Christ can change this horrible situation. Biblical counsel does not claim to be able to

make a sinner happy and self-fulfilled in this life without Christ's Lordship and the power of the Holy Spirit. The problem many pastors face is that the counselee is looking for self-fulfillment in this life only and is ready to judge the pastor's counsel deficient if it does not deliver it.

Christians who "walk in the flesh" and foolishly get their perspective off of God's glory, purpose and will begin to suffer from the same motivational cravings of seeking self-fulfillment in this fallen world where none is to be found. They go from church to church looking for the experience or counsel that will make them feel better and find more excitement in this life without resolving the underlying conflict of **motives**. The crux of the issue is the motivation of our hearts. Are we living for self-fulfillment in this life with no eternal perspective, or are we living to do Christ's will, worship God, and fulfill His purpose even if it costs us self-fulfillment now?

Paul said, "More than that, I count all

---

---

*"Biblical counsel points us to God's Word and God's will, but it will not satisfy those who are motivated by fleshly lusts. . ."*

---

---

things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ" (**Philippians 3:8**). We have a motivational issue, not an educational or experiential one. More knowledge (the secret, autonomous type offered by Satan), more power, more money or more experiences will not turn this world in which we live as strangers and aliens into a self-sufficient, promised land. "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (**1Corinthians 15:19**).

Jesus resisted temptation by turning to God's Word, properly understood and applied. This is also to be our recourse. Biblical counsel points us to God's Word and God's will, but it will not satisfy those who are motivated by fleshly lusts rather than the will of God. It will not satisfy those who are bitter against God

because He did not make them the way they think He ought to have. **Romans 9:20**, “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?” It will not satisfy those like Esau who reject God’s provision (**Hebrews 12:15,16**) and bitterly seek their own. It will satisfy those who like David love God’s precepts. Notice David’s testimony in **Psalm 119**:

Thy word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against Thee. . . I shall delight in Thy statutes; I shall not forget Thy word. . . Thy testimonies also are my delight; They are my counselors. . . This is my comfort in my affliction, That Thy word has revived me. (**Verses 11,16,24,50**)

Also, “By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin” (**Hebrews 11:24,25**). Those who are Christ’s are willing to suffer if necessary in this life, missing the parties and the fun in order to reign with Him in eternity. They will delight in God’s counsel and will find ways to apply God’s Word to their lives and do His will even if it is temporally costly. Consider Peter’s counsel on this matter:

Therefore, since Christ has suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose, because he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God. For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousals, drinking parties and abominable idolatries. And in all this, they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they malign you; but they shall give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (**1Peter 4:1-5**)

Notice that the two major **motivations** are *to live for the will of God* or *for the lusts of men*. These are the options facing us and are at the root of all temptation. This **must be addressed** if Christian

counseling is to be effective. Christians need to be challenged by Peter’s timeless, pertinent message. Whether it is popular or not, this **is** the Biblical message and ought not to be passed over for some paltry and ineffective counsel such as raising one’s love of “self” and other secular replacements which have been offered for the message of Scripture.

### Practical Christian Counsel

In my experience, the primary reason people reject Biblical counsel and seek non-Biblical solutions is that the non-Biblical answers do not require the deep repentance and high cost of personal discipleship and obedience that Biblical ones do. The good news is that God’s grace enables us to do His will and motivates us in ways in which we would not have been motivated on our own. If however, we want a quick fix, the world always has one available. The long term results are the down side of worldly counsel, but many people are not too concerned with the long term, especially Americans. We want to feel good **now!** If we do not many will find a person or situation which will make it happen.

One difficult lesson I had to learn in my early years of pastoral was that I could not solve every problem nor give everyone what they wanted. I spent years trying to help people who wanted the comfortable feeling of a nice Christian environment but wanted none of cost of cross bearing or deep motivational changes. I found that Christianity could not be applied to someone or given to a person like a pill from the doctor. Christianity must be embraced from the heart to be authentic. It is true that Biblical counsel is the best counsel for anyone. It is not true that superficially motivated people who nominally “sample” Christianity will consistently apply this counsel and then experience the fruits of love, joy, peace, etc., that are promised to those who walk in the Spirit. People with whom we worked for years would call when they got into trouble but disappear when called upon to make their contribution to their families and to the family of God.

Counsel by nature is expressed verbally and as such always requires hearing and response from its recipients. Chris-

tian counsel is no different from other counsel in that regard. However, the content, the goal and the means are different. Biblical counsel has a different meaning, comes from a different perspective, and requires different behavior. We are not claiming that we can take Biblical counsel and empty the mental hospitals, or “treat” everyone brought to us. Christianity is a relationship with God through faith and a motivation to do His will by grace. As such it cannot be administered like a pill or a shot. If the message of the cross is rejected, we have no “plan B” to offer.

### Important Considerations

There are several important matters to which the Christian counselor must attend if he or she is to be effective in the Biblical sense. One is that we must not compromise the message of the cross in order to gain popularity numerically or emotionally. It is not always pleasant to speak the truth in love. If we do not clearly, at the beginning, lay out the claims of Christ and the necessity of denying the old fleshly, self-centered, self-seeking motivation and embracing the cross, we are not getting to the root problem. In the late 1970-s a high school student who had grown up in a Christian home came to me for counseling. She said, “I cannot believe this happened, I am a good person.” She had fallen into immorality and felt shame and remorse. She reiterated, “I am a good person and have always done what my parents ask and what the church teaches, I cannot explain why this happened.” I told her, “I have some news for you that you may not expect.” She asked, “What is it?” I said, “You are not a good person.”

I then quoted Scriptures such as the one where Jesus said “only God is good,” and **Romans 3:12**, etc. She was a cultural Christian but had never been confronted with her own sinfulness and the need for the cross. She had been “good” in comparison with others who were “worse,” but had failed to see herself as a sinner needing grace, forgiveness, and the radical change which comes through the cross and regeneration. Rather than look for superficial “rea-

sons” such as “peer pressure” we got to the root of the problem. Thankfully she was willing to accept this Biblical message.

Another important matter is that those who agree with the need for repentance and regeneration are not always properly motivated. During a counseling session, one Christian person told me, “Christians are duds.” I asked, “what do you mean?” The answer was “non-Christian friends are exciting and unpredictable. I never know what they are going to do or say and they are willing to cross the line and take risks; this is exciting to me.” This person was feeling guilty about dating people who were unsaved but liked them better than Christians.

The problem here is being a Christian **experientially** (having confessed Christ and been born-again) but not **motivationally**. The warnings in the Bible about not walking after the flesh were given to Christians. The symptoms expressed in this example are of a double minded person who believes in Christ and His word but is motivated by the lusts of this world. This creates a dilemma which brings many to the counselor or pastor. If such a person is asked whether he or she prays, reads the Bible, and attends church regularly, they will often answer, “yes but it does not work.” By this they mean that their motivation to find self-fulfillment in this world is not being satisfied. Christianity works to conform us to the image of Christ and to change us from the inside out. It does not work to make Christians happy and comfortable who have the same fleshly motivations as sinners. The Christian counselor must stick to the Biblical perspective on this in spite of testimony that it does not “work.”

We must ask, “what is it that you are looking for.” If the answer is, “I want my needs to be met and to be happy,” we have a conflict. We must first define “needs” Biblically, and then determine what would make the individual “happy.” Again the relational and motivational problems must be dealt with. Counselors must resist the continual pressure to get away from seeking the root problem and merely to placate fleshly desires and ideas. I asked the person who called Christians “duds” if the reason for this assessment was that they kept wanting to go to prayer meet-

ings, listen to Biblical teaching, talk about going to the mission field or supporting missionaries and things like that. The answer was, “Yes, that is what makes them duds.” My counsel was to get before God and ask Him to do a radical, inner work through the cross. The answer is not to find a “Christian” group which is more entertaining and does not emphasize the “boring” things mentioned above.

### No Compromise

The Greek word translated “lust” in the New Testament means “strong desire.” Biblical counsel tells us to deny worldly lusts and resist many desires that would be easier to give in to. “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age” (**Titus 2:11-12**). When secular counsel tells us to go out and do what we felt like doing anyway it is joyfully received by many.

How often have we heard the advice, “You have to take care of yourself first and do what you need and want.”? Since the sinful nature has always been motivated to do just that, the carnal mind will seize such advice and consider it good “common sense.” Many marriages have been ruined, children left abandoned, and responsibilities left unattended by people following this advice that the world accepts as a truism. Jesus says that we must deny ourselves. Whose counsel is going to be more popular?

The problem with Biblical counsel is not that it is impertinent or impractical, it is that man considers God's wisdom “foolishness.” **1 Corinthians 1:18** states, “For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” Those who despise the message of the cross do not believe and practice it. “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (**Hebrews 12:11**). If the world wants to continue to offer temporary, carnal solutions to eternal, spiritual problems it will. However, what compelling reason is there for the church to adopt

these for its counsel; and why should Christians believe and do what the world says while ignoring God's wisdom? This problem is what the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah lamented over in Israel throughout their prophetic ministries.

This is the most important, practical consideration for Christian counselors: **do not compromise your message.** Once the transformation of motives and relationships takes place, those who are being counseled will delight to hear the wisdom of God. The entire Bible contains practical wisdom, timeless truths, and sensible answers to the very real problems of life. Christian counselors must be continually educated in Scripture. We must be life-time students of God's Word so that our minds are sharp, our spirits alive, and our hearts full of compassion. We want to know and apply Scripture to our own lives so that we will have real, personally experienced answers to share with those who need them.

There are no “pat answers” to be memorized and glibly repeated. God has provided wisdom to those who ask in faith (**James 1:5-8**) but the double minded will be tossed about in continual instability. Embracing Biblical Christianity is the only answer to the motivational and relational problems which are the root of the human dilemma.

Written by Bob DeWaay, Twin City Fellowship, P.O. Box 8068, Minneapolis, MN 55408; © 1993.

Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

[www.twincityfellowship.com/cic](http://www.twincityfellowship.com/cic)