

THE PROS AND CONS OF MINISTRY

STUDY THREE

Fleshly Failures That Damage a Ministry

2 Corinthians 4:1–7

While you're on this earth, you will wrestle with the old sin nature, and it will forever want to take control of what you're doing. It lurks at every corner, urging you to gratify your selfish desires. The secret is learning how to restrain it through the power of the Spirit. You must rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to guide you, to correct you, to use you, to shape you, to break you, to teach you.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

is hard. Anyone who walks the way of vocational service to God will agree that the path is marked with countless obstacles. Yet they will disagree on what the *biggest* obstacle is. Some will say it is the ever-changing cultural pressures. Others will point out the ever-pressing opinions of difficult people. And who can ignore the ever-present financial challenges?

While these obstacles are big, they certainly aren't the *biggest*. No, the biggest obstacle to fulfilling your calling in ministry is *you*.

Because of the curse of sin, every person is born with what the apostle Paul called "the flesh." This poison of sinful corruption saturates our nature. You can feel it in those quiet temptations that fight against your own well-being and in those subtle desires to reject God's glory and presence.

Yet the temptations of the flesh are simply *desires*. A minister who yields to such desires can uproot decades of fruitful work. But those who instead resist these desires by yielding to the power of the Holy Spirit allow God to cause their ministry to flourish. This *Searching the Scriptures* study soberly examines this conflict between the Spirit and the flesh to help you guard against those fleshly failures.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

To combat the power of the flesh, God graciously offers the Holy Spirit to believers in Jesus Christ. The Spirit also allows Jesus' followers to "come to the Father" in prayer (*Ephesians 2:18*). Offer this prayer by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Father, thank You for giving me the Holy Spirit who allows me to overcome my own sinful desires. As I study Your Word today, help me see, not what I want to see, but what You want me to see . . . what I need to see. I ask these things in Jesus' powerful name. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

In a letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul described himself as working among the ranks of the "ministers of the new covenant." He clarifies this statement by saying that his is a ministry of the Spirit because "the Spirit gives life" (*2 Corinthians 3:6*). He spends the subsequent chapters explaining the specifics of his Spirit-filled ministry of the new covenant.



Observation: New Covenant Ministry

"We never give up." Paul opened *2 Corinthians 4:1–7* with these powerful words. Because of God's mercy, ministers of the gospel shouldn't lose heart, and they instead should choose to serve God with hearts of joy. As you observe these verses, look for what Paul identifies as those fleshly desires that tend to threaten fruitful and joyful ministry.¹

What exhortation did Paul offer to the Corinthians in *4:1*? For what reason could Paul offer such an exhortation?



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What three kinds of behavior did Paul condemn in 2 Corinthians 4:2?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What alternative behavior did Paul encourage in 4:2?

Based on the context of this passage, what are the “fragile clay jars,” and what is hidden in them? For a hint, read 4:6–7 in the New Living Translation.

With every ministry, special mercy is needed. In every ministry, the same things must be rejected. Through every ministry, an authentic example must be modeled.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Interpretation: Failures of the Flesh

In *2 Corinthians 4:2*, the apostle Paul lists three kinds of fleshly failures that damage a ministry: “We have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in trickery nor distorting the word of God” (NASB). The timeless principles behind these commands are valuable for anyone serving in ministry.

You may rarely think about shame, but for those living in the Greco-Roman world, shame was *everything*. Whenever you sin, you experience both guilt and shame. Some people use these terms interchangeably, but they are distinct. While guilt is often private and personal, shame is always public and communal. When a person’s sins come to light, it brings shame to the entire community.

Additionally, some acts that aren’t explicitly *sinful* are still considered *shameful*. Imagine attending a wedding wearing your pajamas. This behavior isn’t necessarily morally *wrong*, but it just doesn’t feel *right*. That’s because of shame! What kinds of shameful things might a minister want to hide? Why is it essential for servants of the gospel to live open and honorable lives?

“Walking in trickery” can refer to any actions characterized by cunning or craftiness. Often this expression describes someone who is ready to do *anything* to reach a goal or to obtain honor—someone with a “whatever-it-takes” mentality. Why is this kind of behavior problematic for a person in ministry?



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What might cause a preacher or Bible teacher to distort God's Word intentionally?

So here's my advice to all of us. Draw on God's mercy. Determine to be authentic. Devote yourself to serving others. Demonstrate grace regularly. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: The Spirit versus the Flesh

No passage depicts the conflict between human flesh and the Holy Spirit quite like [Galatians 5:16–26](#). In these verses, Paul enters this fray to show how followers of Jesus can walk in the Spirit and overcome the desires of the flesh.

According to [5:16–17](#), why are the Holy Spirit and the flesh in constant opposition to one another?

According to [5:19–21](#), what fruits reveal that someone is yielding to the desires of the flesh?



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According to [Galatians 5:22–23](#), what fruits reveal that someone is yielding to the desires of the Spirit?

What words of hope did Paul offer in [5:24](#) to those struggling to overcome the desires of the flesh?

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.” ([5:16](#), NASB). These words should be the motto for anyone serving in ministry. Yet the flesh is subtle. Even someone who engraves truth on his or her heart will still struggle with the flesh. So what can you do? Or better yet, what can you *not* do?



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Application: You Cannot Do It All

As you serve in ministry, your flesh will continually tell you of several things you can do—or even *must* do. The reality is, however, that these things are impossible. Pastor Chuck Swindoll identifies ten fleshly desires that act contrary to the work of the Spirit.

1. You cannot control everything.
2. You cannot change anyone.
3. You cannot fix everyone's problems.
4. You cannot meet everyone's expectations.
5. You cannot dodge hard questions.
6. You cannot avoid tough assignments.
7. You cannot let criticism get to you.
8. You cannot believe all the great things people say about you.
9. You cannot force someone into a responsibility he or she isn't qualified to fill.
10. You cannot do it all on your own.

This list certainly is not exhaustive. What other temptations does your flesh lead you to believe you *can* do even though you truly *cannot* do them? Write two or three of your own statements below starting with, "I cannot . . ."



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So what *can* you do? The apostle Paul exhorts believers to lean on the Spirit and to flee from the flesh. What practical steps can you take right now to lean into the Spirit more fully? How might this kind of Spirit-filled living affect you, your relationships, and your ministry?

The bleak reality is that ministry is difficult. Pastor Chuck's advice? *Quit trying so hard!* This won't necessarily make ministry easier, but fleeing those fleshly failures and getting out of your own way will make your service to God abundantly more fruitful and joyful.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I know that my flesh is weak, but I thank You for giving me Your Holy Spirit, who is stronger than even my fiercest selfish desires. Help me rely on You so that I might lead a life of fruitful service to You. Keep me strong. In Jesus' mighty name I pray. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."

