

Galatians 5:16-26

The Flesh and The Spirit (Part 1)

Introduction: The main emphasis of the second half of this epistle is that life, lived by faith, in Jesus Christ, is a life of freedom. Paul wants these Galatians to continue in this freedom that they have through the free grace of God in Christ. Despite the fact that we already have been saved by Christ, we must be continually diligent to remember, to preserve, rejoice in and live in accord with our salvation. So we can experience the end, the goal that God purposed in our salvation - Freedom.

But as Paul warned “we can fall away from Grace”, meaning we can lose that freedom by falling into legalism (trying to earn the favor that we already have with God through faith in Jesus) or into liberalism (falling back into bondage because we are abusing our freedom).

Paul now explains to us how we can stand firm in the freedom that Christ has given us.

1. The War

1. **“Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”**

1. So many people have ideas about what it means to “walk in the Spirit”. This ranges anywhere from being a celibate monk or nun to following every whim of emotion that goes through your body - The scripture knows nothing of these ideas about the Holy Spirit, or “walking in the Spirit”. -The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. He is the one who was sent into the hearts of all that by faith receive Jesus as savior and Lord. He eats away at the lies that we have believed so long about God, ourselves and the world. He gives us a new disposition - one that is inclined and empowered to keep God’s commands. He comforts us with his presence. He causes

us to know the love that God has for us. He produces Christ likeness in us, and does the works of Christ through us...

2. "(The Holy Spirit) is presented as our sanctifier who alone can oppose and subdue our flesh (vs. 16-17), enable us to fulfill the law so that we are delivered from its harsh dominion (vs 18), and cause the fruit of righteousness to grow in our lives (vs-22,23)). So the enjoyment of Christian liberty depends on the Holy Spirit. True, it is Christ who sets us free. But without the continuing, directing, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit our liberty is bound to degenerate its license." -John Stott
3. The thing that Paul wants us to understand specifically in this passage about walking in the Spirit (and maybe you already know this by experience) is that it is an internal war. This passage shows us that as Christians there are two nature's working in us. Hence the war like tensions.
4. Paul is contrasting the Natural Self (The Flesh), our sinful nature, with the Renewed Self (The Spirit) -who you are in Christ. The flesh in the New Testament, when opposed to the Spirit, does not refer to our physical nature as opposed to our spiritual nature, but to the sin-desiring aspect of our whole being as opposed to the God-desiring aspect.

2. What Does the Flesh Want?

1. In v.16 and in v.24, Paul calls the desires of the flesh "*epithumia*." In the older versions, this word was translated "lust" which led the people to think of sexual desire. In modern translations the word is just translated "desires" but that is maybe even more unhelpful. Literally, *epithumia* means an "over-desire," an "*inordinate desire*," an *all-controlling drive and longing*.
2. This is crucial. That means that the main problem our heart has is not so much desires for bad things, but our over-desires for good things. When a good thing becomes our "god" or salvation, it creates "over-desires." Paul is saying that sinful desires become deep things that drive and control us. Sin creates within us the feeling that we must have this-or-that.
1. "If 'idolatry' is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then 'lust' [*inordinate desires*], *epithumia* is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for that same drift. See summary statements by Paul,

Peter, John, and James (in Gal.5:16ff; Eph.2:3, 4:22; I Pet. 2:11, 4:2; I John 2:16; James 1:14ff,) where epithumia is the catch-all word for what is wrong with us. The tenth commandment [against 'coveting,' which is idolatrous, inordinate desire for something]...also...makes sin 'psychodynamic.' It lays bare the grasping and demanding nature of the human heart, as Paul powerfully describes in Romans 7...the NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires...for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed 'idolatry' (Ephesians.5:5 and Colossians 3:5)." - David Powlison

2. So the Flesh wants to glorify anything but God, especially self - which is the definition of Idolatry. The Flesh has this way of convincing us that we are validated only if we have these things, and that we are nothing without them.
3. The "flesh" is idolatrous, over-desires that arise from a heart that is afraid to trust God and desires rather to be its own Savior and Lord.

2. The Works of the Flesh

1. **"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, [d]runkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."**
2. There are three words having to do with the works of the flesh in the area of sexuality:
 1. sexual immorality - "*porneia*" - sexual intercourse between unmarried people
 2. impurity - "*akatharsia*" - unnatural sexual practices and relationships
 3. debauchery - "*aselgia*" uncontrolled sexuality
3. There are two words having to do with the area of religion:
 1. idolatry – "*eidololatria*"
 2. witchcraft. "*pharmakeia*"
 3. Because idolatry is paired with witchcraft, it is not referring to the very broad inclusive practice of making good things like career

into a "god" (cf. Eph.5:5 and Col.3:5). Rather, he is referring to the very specific occult and pagan religious practices.

4. "Idolatry and sorcery were examples of the sins of pagan worship, the first providing an inadequate substitute for God, and the second counterfeiting the works of the Spirit" (D.Guthrie, Galatians, p.137).
4. There are eight words that describe how the flesh destroys relationships:
 1. Four describe destructive attitudes:
 1. selfish ambition - "*eritheia*" - competitiveness, a self-seeking
 2. envy - "*phthonoi*" - coveting, a desire for what others have
 3. jealousy - "*zelos*" - the zeal and energy that comes from a hungry ego
 4. hatred. "*echthrai*," - hostility, an adversarial attitude
 5. Four describe the results of these attitudes in relationships:
 1. discord - "*eris*" – argumentative, "fight-picking" behavior
 2. fits of rage - "*thumoi*" - outbursts of anger (leading to #3)
 3. dissensions - "*dichostai*" - divisions between people
 4. factions - "*aireseis*" - permanent parties and warring factions
 6. There are two words that refer to substance abuse:
 1. drunkenness
 2. orgies
 3. These two words are linked. Orgies are not "sex-orgies" but "drinking orgies." One of the works of the flesh is addiction to pleasure-creating substances and behavior.
 1. All of these works of the flesh lead further and further away from what it means to walk in the Spirit. Whether it is indulging in sexual practices apart from God's given direction and design, whether it is religious attempts to do without God, etc. whether religious or irreligious, these works of the flesh are attempts to satisfy self, to be our own saviors apart from God.
3. **What Does the Spirit Want?**
 1. One of the most interesting statements is in v.17, which says, "***The flesh over-desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.***" Notice that Paul does not actually say that the Spirit "over-desires" [how could the Spirit *inordinately* desire something?], yet the construction indicates that the Spirit has passions and yearnings as well, and that they are at least as

strong! What is it that the Spirit longs for? Jesus teaches that the Holy Spirit will come into the world to “*glorify me*”(John 16:14)

1. The ultimate purpose of the Spirit’s operation in the Christian is to change us into the likeness and character of Jesus Christ. (cf. Rom.8:29 – “He *predestined us to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.*” and Eph.4:13 – “*Till we reach maturity, the fullness of the stature of Christ.*”) So the ultimate goal is not some kind of general comfort, strength or power, but concrete, practical change in our character--how we think, feel, and act habitually and naturally.
 2. So, while our flesh “glorifies” and adores and lusts after all kinds of created things and conditions and people, the Spirit “glorifies” and yearns for Jesus. The Spirit speaks of the beauty and greatness of Christ. The Spirit, then, longs to show us Christ and to conform us to Christ.
 3. Tim Keller points something out that I’ve never seen before and it’s easy to overlook, but Paul makes an extremely telling statement when he says, “***They are in conflict with each other so that you do not do what you want.***” (v.17c) This is a parallel passage to Romans 7:22-23 where he says that “***I delight in the law in my inmost being***” yet he discerned a power “***in my members, at war with the principle of my mind, bringing me captive.***” In other words, the Spirit is what we most deeply “*want,*” yet the sinful nature continues to generate alternate *desires* which we experience and can give in to, but which now contradict our most abiding love and goals. The reborn person then, has both sinful desires and godly desires, but “we” most truly want what the Spirit-nature wants. This statement is filled with hope and affirmation. Even when we are falling into sin, we can say, with Paul, “This is not the real me; this is not what I really want. I want God and his will.”
2. **How then do we walk in the Spirit?**
1. First, it is as Paul says in vs 24, “**By crucifying the flesh with it’s passions and desires**”.
 1. “Crucifying the flesh” is really the identification and dismantling of idols. It means to put an end to the ruling and attractive power that idols have in our lives, and thus to destroy their ability to agitate and inflame our thoughts and desires. Verse

24 is about attacking sin at the motivational level, at the root, rather than simply setting ourselves against sin at the behavioral level.

2. Real changes in our lives cannot take place without discerning our “characteristic flesh,” the particular idols and desires that come from it, what is really underneath these behaviors. We have to ask ourselves not just what we do wrong, but why we do it wrong. We disobey God in order to get something we feel we have to have. That’s an “over-desire,” *epithumia*. Why do we have to have it? It is because it is a way we are trying to keep “under law.” It is something we have come to believe will authenticate us.
3. To crucify the flesh is to say, “Lord, my heart thinks that I *have* to have this person or thing or I have no value. It is a false-Savior. But this is because I forget what I mean to you, as I see in Christ. By your Spirit, I will reflect on your love for me in Him until this thing loses its attractive power over my soul.” (Expulsive power of a greater affection)

Conclusion:

Paul says that the remaining sin in our hearts, the “*flesh*” (Gal.5:16), is the drive to continue to live “*under law*” (Gal.5:17). In other words, underneath every problem and difficulty is a residual self-righteousness, left-over systems of self-salvation. Why are we bitter? Why are we in despair? Why are we worried? Because something more important than Jesus is operating as our functional righteousness and worth. Why do we do many of the good things we do? The same.

If we don’t repent of the self-righteousness under our sins, we won’t be able to break the real power and dynamic fueling them. If we don’t repent of the self-righteousness under our good deeds, we will set ourselves up for anxiety and anger when things don’t go well (because we will feel God owes us).

The gospel leads us to repentance, but not to merely setting our will against superficialities. Without the gospel, superficialities will be addressed instead of the heart. Some (e.g. the religious) will focus and work simply on changing behavior, while others (e.g. the irreligious) will focus and work simply on changing or accommodating emotions. But repentance for self-righteousness gets at what is under both behavior and feelings.

I can't say it enough but this is why the word of God, the Bible is so important, vital, in the life of the believer. It clearly shows us how God has met all of our needs and promises to continue to meet all of our needs in Christ Jesus. God's word of truth, along with the Holy Spirit, eat away at the lies of the flesh, to strengthen what we really want - to walk in the Spirit, to glorify the one who gave up everything, to redeem us.