

Galatians 5 pt. 3 v16-21 The Spirit v. the Flesh

Paul has labored persistently in his writing to correct the faulty doctrine that the Galatian churches were required to adopt the Old Testament Law in order to be justified by Christ.

He has demonstrated in chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 that justification comes by faith in Christ alone and that the Law is unable to justify us in God's eyes since we are unable to keep it. Rather, we put our faith in Jesus Christ, the perfect law keeper, the perfect high-priest, and are thereby made righteous.

Having laid the doctrinal groundwork for that fact Paul arrives at the application portion of his letter.

This is quite a famous portion of the Scriptures where we are instructed in what are called the fruits of the Spirit, but before we get to the fruits of the Spirit we have to examine what Paul calls the works of the flesh.

Paul lays out for the Galatian churches the culmination of what it is that he has been driving home - the juxtaposition between the Law and Faith, and now we see in our text the juxtaposition of the flesh and the Spirit.

V.16 - Having written extensively on the burden of the Law we come to the resulting logical conclusion.

The instruction we receive is that by walking in the Spirit, we will “not gratify the desires of the flesh.” (NIV)

Take a minute to consider the theological implications of what is going on in this statement.

The instruction is quite clear but it is weighty, substantial, meaningful - we are to walk in the Spirit. This is coupled with Paul’s assertion of what happens when we walk in the Spirit.

In the strongest terms Paul writes here that the result will be that we will not feed the weakness of our flesh with all of the subsequent guilt and shame.

As a matter of fact the language Paul uses is emphatic in its characterization that when we walk in the Spirit the lusts of the flesh are found to be impossible - think about that!

The original language that Paul employs here has been called, “the strongest way to negate something in Greek.” Paul’s choice of

language, it is said, “rules out even the idea as being a possibility: ‘ou μή is the most decisive way of negating something in the future.”

Wallace, D. B. (1996). Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament (p. 468). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

We have enough here to theologize for hours. We could discuss what it means to walk “IN” the Spirit? Or, what does it mean to walk? What is the Spirit? What does it mean to gratify the desires of the flesh? How is Paul so certain that by walking in the Spirit we won’t fulfill the lusts of the flesh?

I certainly feel like my flesh nature takes over sometimes even when I strongly desire to walk in the Spirit!

V.17-18 Paul makes allowance for this common human condition, and points out that those who are led by the Spirit are free from the Law.

The Holy Spirit, being equal in power, authority, and glory with the Father and the Son, reigns over the Law - even as the Son has fulfilled the law which was given by the Father.

Now, Paul is somebody who knows how real this fight is. He knows first-hand that the desires of the Holy Spirit and the lusts of the flesh are opposed to one another.

The flesh, our human body, seeks gratification in the earthly plane, the Holy Spirit seeks to glorify God for eternity, including here in our earthly bodies.

How can the two exist together in harmony? They don't. This is the truth that each of us discovers everyday.

Do not despair. If it all depended on us we would surely be lost - but Jesus Christ, who walked in the Spirit, has paved the way for us. And, He has given us the Holy Spirit to empower us to walk as He walks, in holiness, free from the Law.

Paul experienced this same struggle personally, and adds detail to the back and forth that plays out within our own bodies and minds as believers.

[Rom 7:15-25 NKJV] 15 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. 16 If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that [it is] good. 17 But now, [it is] no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 18 For I

know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but [how] to perform what is good I do not find. 19 For the good that I will [to do], I do not do; but the evil I will not [to do], that I practice. 20 Now if I do what I will not [to do], it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. 22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin. [Rom 8:1-2 NKJV] 1 [There is] therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.

V.19-21 The works of the flesh - what are they?

Notice that they are characterized as “works” rather than fruit. Works are fabricated, wrought by our hands.

Also, in Paul’s mind, as inspired by the Holy Spirit, the works of the flesh are plain to see, clearly known.

He then constructs a list of those things that are seen as exemplary of the desires of the flesh, the human condition.

Be careful not to blow through these lists when Paul gives them, but take time to consider each term. In that exercise we are able to find that while some of the sins may not apply to us, most certainly some do apply to us more fully than we would care to admit.

Keep in mind that this isn't meant to be a personal report card or a new written law but a means by which to discern the evidence of walking in the Spirit as opposed to the flesh.

In this we clearly find our need for a Savior, our need for repentance, and comfort for our own shared condition with the rest of humanity.

As we consider these marks of corruption bear in mind that our Lord Jesus, was devoid of any of these, though He was tempted by all of them and He died for all of them.

As we begin our examination I pray you will forgive the uncomfortable nature of this list. However uncomfortable we know that God's Word is true, and holy, and good and useful for instruction so let us forge on.

Adultery - the violation of the marriage covenant. Some texts do not include this in Paul's list rather confining this and the next term fornication under the broader term of "sexual immorality."

Relative to adultery Jesus taught us that it is more than the physical act that is viewed by God as adultery but the desire of the heart is equally condemning.

[Mat 5:27-28 NKJV] 27 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 "But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Fornication - πορνεία - sex outside of the marriage covenant, strictly for self gratification. This is not uncommon in our society, it's not really taboo at all, but is a clear demonstration of what Paul is talking about in regards to the body warring against the Spirit in pursuit of its desires.

Uncleanness - "ἀκαθαρσία, ας f: the state of moral impurity, especially in relationship to sexual sin."*

Lewdness - "ἀσελγεία, ας f: behavior completely lacking in moral restraint, usually with the implication of sexual

licentiousness—‘licentious behavior, extreme immorality.’...In some languages the equivalent of ‘licentious behavior’ would be ‘to live like a dog’ or ‘to act like a goat’ or ‘to be a rooster,’ in each instance pertaining to promiscuous sexual behavior.”*

So these first few appear to be grouped together. By them we get a very clear picture of what it means to live after the flesh and how that manifests itself in reality.

Please note that this didn’t make Paul blush. He was willing to tackle the issue (sometimes going on within the church) in order to bring correction.

We find that the next two go together as well: Idolatry and Sorcery

Idolatry - the worship of idols, other deities, constructed by human hands.

Sorcery - one text (Thayer’s) remarks that this may have been connected with the ancient pagan cults. We also know that this is the lifestyle that some early christians came out of, as it is today. Also, note the use of the Greek term: φαρμακεία, drug use was also potentially related to the pagan cults.

While we have relegated this behavior to fiction in our hyper-intellectualized society this was very real and continues to be very real for people - especially in the New Age cults.

The early church understood this was a reality, even on Paul's journeys we find this account:

[Act 19:18-20 NKJV] 18 And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. 19 Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned [them] in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and [it] totaled fifty thousand [pieces] of silver. 20 So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed.

After these the next several also go together centered around division, discord, and contention.

Hatred - another of the works of the flesh, not many are exempt from that even if we pay lip service to it. We may say, "I don't hate anybody," but our hearts know better.

Contentions - "ἐπίσημα, ἰδος f: conflict resulting from rivalry and discord—'strife, discord.'"* This is the act of people contending with

one another - Paul warned about biting and devouring one another in v.15 - the end is destruction.

Jealousies - born out of rivalry with others. Oftentimes jealousy is characterized not only by covetousness - wanting what somebody else has, but also feeling like we deserve what they have more than they do.

Outbursts of wrath - unable to control ourselves we are likely to spew hate and curses at others.

Selfish ambition - all too common in our society, looking out for number one, ourselves, step on somebody else's neck to get ahead either overtly or covertly.

Dissensions - disagreement that leads to division. Again born out of rivalry - feeling like we need to faction off into our dissenting camps. This is the person who is always the dissenter, or dissenting voice.

Heresies - we might think we know what this term means, "bad doctrine." That is the ecclesiastical or church meaning it has picked up over the generations. Originally this term meant, "a division of people into different and opposing sets."* Literally it meant, a "choosing," with

the added weight of dissensions arising from diversity of opinions and aims. (Thayer's)

Envy - what's the difference between envy and jealousy? Is Paul repeating himself? Perhaps, the two words are certainly similar. Although this term indicates "a state of ill will toward someone because of some perceived advantage," a simple reading also includes the notion of a "grudge." (Thayer's)

So many of those we could lump together in the realm of divisiveness. The works of the flesh manifest themselves in divisiveness many ways.

Murders - speaks for itself. But keep in mind that murder is often the culmination of one or many of the other manifestations of the works of the flesh.

Drunkenness - the Bible does not explicitly prohibit drinking alcohol, but lists drunkenness as one of the clearly evident works of the flesh.

[Eph 5:17-19 NKJV] 17 Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord [is]. 18 And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, 19 speaking to one

another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,

Revelries - goes with drunkenness, big parties formed around the goal of achieving maximum drunkenness. Quite pervasive and even acceptable in the human condition.

And the like - so this list isn't exhaustive, there are other works of the flesh that are similar to these that Paul says are so dangerous and wounding to us that they separate us from God's promise.

Those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Who is Paul writing too? The churches in the region of Galatia! Paul's letter is not an open letter to the Pagan nations. This is to the churches!

Understand that these things are born within us! These are not external demons we are fighting but our intrinsic sin nature!

[Jas 1:14 NKJV] 14 But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed.

We know that the Spirit and the Flesh desire to rule over the other. We know that people slip and mess up and that we all struggle with sin. But Paul warns us, more than once, that if we continue to embrace the works of the flesh rather than walking in the Spirit we are essentially withdrawing from the Kingdom.

[Rom 8:6-8 NKJV] 6 For to be carnally minded [is] death, but to be spiritually minded [is] life and peace. 7 Because the carnal mind [is] enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. 8 So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

What Paul illustrates in verses 16-21 is the futility of the human condition apart from Jesus Christ. We have all been found guilty of these things. But, we have a redeemer. We have the Holy Spirit, by whom we have hope.

These works of the flesh demonstrate our own personal agency and complicity with sin as we live out our lives in this world.

While an in-depth examination of our sin nature may seem depressing, the reality is that the sin nature of our flesh is not unopposed. We are not consigned to a life of perpetual failure in this body. The Holy Spirit stands against it!

The creator of all flesh, God, desires/longs for, our whole person not just that invisible part of our person.

God, in the person of the Holy Spirit will prevail over our flesh and He will rule over it and He will bring about fruits to His glory.

**All Greek Lexical meanings taken from:*

Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1). New York: United Bible Societies.

Thayer, J. H. (1889). A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti. New York: Harper & Brothers.