

The Spirit vs. the flesh: the war within

Galatians 5:16-18

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The Apostle Paul is often considered to be one of the spiritual giants of the Bible, but even he struggled at times. Listen to his words in Romans 7:15-20. Can you relate?

“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

Every Christian is called to war within and this warfare is ongoing, difficult, and fraught with disappointment and failures, but also with joy and hope in the Holy Spirit. It cannot be avoided. Negligence gives victory to one side, and Spirit-led diligence gives victory to the other. A Christian who understands the nature of the battle, the source of his or her strength and the ultimate outcome and prize that is promised, will war with greater efficiency and success than one who does not know these things.

In Galatians 5:16-18 Paul describes the war within with these words:

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

In the scriptures we see the word “walk” used many times. Ephesians 5:2 says to “Walk in love.” Psalm 81:13 God wishes that “Israel would walk in my ways.” Psalm 1:1 talks of “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.” 1 John 1:6 tells us that “If we say that we have fellowship

with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth." 2 Corinthians 5:7 reminds us that *"we walk by faith, not by sight."* As we read these verses we see that "walk" refers to the manner in which we live. It is our way of life. We are to walk in His ways, thus live in a way that follows God's commandments.

Every believer is commanded to "walk by the Spirit." The Spirit of God dwells within every person who has repented and believed in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:16). But it was not always this way.

In the beginning God created man and woman in the image of God. The first man and woman, Adam and Eve, related perfectly with God. In Genesis 3 we see that this perfect relationship was lost. Adam and Eve rebelled against God and were separated from God because of their sin. Mankind was now separated from all the resources of God. They were now limited to their "flesh." This term "flesh" includes our physical bodies and the rest of our being that we possess apart from God. The flesh is weak. When combined with our sinful desires it creates fertile soil for the temptations from Satan. In the flesh, our hearts are turned away from God and cannot reach out for God, because we each are spiritually dead (Colossians 2:13).

The other combatant in this war within us is the Spirit. Without the Spirit our heart only desires the things of the world. With the Spirit new desires and affections are granted. We now are given a hunger and thirst for righteousness. We are now able to desire God and holiness. The flesh still exists, but it is no longer the ruling partner. The Spirit has now been given so that sin can be defeated and a love for Christ can reign in our hearts. Because of this war within us, we are now called to "walk by the Spirit and to not gratify the desires of the flesh."

It is somewhat like the Glasgow Coma Scale. This is a test that is given to those who have just sustained a head injury. It is based on stimuli. The general idea is this. At first the medical personnel speaks to the injured person. If they do not respond, then they touch them. If there is no response, they then cause pain, and so on. The response helps the medical personnel to know how best to treat the injured person.

It is similar to us in our spiritual lives. How sensitive are we to the voice of the Holy Spirit? Do we hear His voice? Do we respond immediately? Or do we ignore, delay or not even hear the Spirit in our lives? Those who are sensitive to the Holy Spirit recognize the Spirit's leading in their lives and respond immediately in obedience. This causes their sensitivity to grow. The opposite is also true. Those who harden their hearts or ignore the Spirit's urging find that their heart grows cold and drawn to the desires of the flesh.

It depends on whether we are nurturing the Spirit in our lives or nurturing the flesh. Galatians 6:8 says it like this, *"For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."* Are we living life in such a way that it is sensitive to the Spirit or more drawn to the desires of the flesh?

We have been invited into a love relationship with Jesus Christ. It is similar to a marriage relationship. If a husband nurtures his relationship with his wife, their love grows and matures. If not, their hearts are prone to selfishness, rebellion and even unfaithfulness. It is the same in our

spiritual relationship with Christ. If we nurture it, our desire for Christ begins to rule over all other competing desires, and this ruling desire leads us to holiness.

We see this in the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42. We see a stark contrast between one who is sensitive to the workings of Christ, and another who is so “distracted by many things” that she misses out on the whole experience.

In these verses we see a story of “busy-ness” that is probably not that different from our own lives. Martha was hospitable, but she offered a hospitality that seemed to fit more with her expectations of how things should be than how Christ, her guest, would like them to be. What was her motivation? From her words and Jesus’ response it seems that her motivation had somehow become a love of self. It could have been a desire for value, reputation, control, or many other things. We don’t know for sure, but scripture casts it in a negative light when we see the word “distracted.” She was an authentic follower of Christ, but in this moment she had become distracted by her own desires.

In verse 41 Jesus tries to help her, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” Martha had responded with what she thought was righteous anger, but in the end she wasn’t “right”eous at all. How did she start out as a servant to others and end up as the boss? Even to the point of “correcting” Jesus? We do the same thing. We get so focused on our job, family, income and reputation that we miss what God wants to do in our lives. Martha had the Messiah, God in the flesh, seated in her house, and yet she was distracted by setting the table and “getting the tea ready.”

She was so unaware of what God was wanting to do in that moment. If we want to avoid this same error, how do we live a life that is in tune with God? Our goal is to be sensitive to the Spirit every moment of every day. We see in Galatians 5, we are to walk in the Spirit, be led by the Spirit, bear fruit of the Spirit, and live in the spirit. This is to be the norm, but to many being sensitive to God seems to be the exception.

There is a pastor who describes our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit like a little dove that sits on our shoulder. Every word and action creates an environment that is either welcoming or disturbing to the little dove. In some ways our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is the same. Based on our obedience or disobedience, our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is affected. Based on the softness or hardness of our heart in a given situation, our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is affected. Based on the busy-ness or peacefulness of our lives, our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is affected. Based on our godly or ungodly priorities, our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is affected. Based on our trust or worry in a given situation, our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is affected. Based on our mercy or unforgiveness, our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is affected. Based on our generosity or greed, our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is affected. Based on our anger or kindness, our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is affected. Based on godly relationships or only ungodly relationships, our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is affected. Based on our time spent in prayer and Bible reading, our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit is affected.

There are intentional ways of living that help people become more sensitive and submitted to what God wants to do in their lives. The Bible teaches us about fellowship, hospitality, generosity, serving others,

contentment, peace, priorities, compassion, confession, forgiveness, purity, accountability, stewardship and many more. In the midst of our hurried and stressful world there are ways of organizing and managing our lives that help us be more sensitive to the things of God.

Living a God-sensitive Lifestyle comes in many different forms. It depends on your season of life, your work situation, your family responsibilities, your time in history and much more.

To be sensitive to the Spirit in our lives we must be reconciled to others. Is there anyone who you need to apologize to or forgive? How are you taking care of yourself physically? It is difficult to stay attentive to God and His holiness if we are exhausted, not getting enough sleep, not exercising and not eating well. Would you describe your heart as filled with gratitude? As we intentionally become aware of all the blessings that we have been given, it moves our hearts to a humble place that is nearer to our heavenly Father. Are we good stewards of all that God has given us? When we realize that all we are and all that we have are His, we begin to live life rightly and more sensitive to His Spirit.

How sensitive would you say you are right now to the Holy Spirit's work in your life?:

- A)** I sense God working in my life and through my life on a regular basis.
- B)** From time to time I sense God working, but not too regularly.
- C)** I don't sense God working in my life at all.

Today ask God how you can live differently in your relationship, your desires and in your walk. Let Him lead you to significant changes that will nurture the Spirit, starve the flesh and bring true victory in your life.