

Walking in the flesh

Galatians 5:19-21

Pastor Tim Melton

Have you ever experienced spiritual exhaustion, where you were focused too much on religious activities and neglected your spiritual relationship with Christ? Or maybe when you tried really hard to be holy but continued to fall to habitual sin. In the end you found your self exhausted and frustrated, because you just could not get the Christian life to function the way you thought it was supposed to? If this is you, you need to know that inside of each follower of Christ there is a civil war waging.

Each follower of Christ is involved in a constant battle that is taking place within. It is between the Holy Spirit, who now lives in us, and our flesh that was the former dark ruler of our hearts. As we walk, abide and dwell in the Spirit we walk in holiness. At the same time we are bombarded by the influences of our world. Because of this, if we neglect to submit to and nourish the Spirit, we will be overcome by the desires of the flesh.

The flesh is our old nature that is enslaved to sin, is characterized by selfishness and has no affections for God. The Spirit is of God. He now lives within us. Through Him we have been born again. The Spirit convicts of sin. Reveals the truth of the scriptures to us. Intercedes on our behalf to the Father. He grants us desires and affections for God. He stirs us up and moves us towards holiness. He is the one who brings our hearts to love God and to love our neighbor.

In Galatians 5:16-18 Paul says this:

“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.”

“Walk” refers to the manner in which we live. It is not just a one moment event. It is the ongoing direction or trajectory of our lives.

Now other translations say walk “in” the Spirit. This has been the source of confusion. Walking “in” still can give the sense that it is our power and will that keeps one walking in the Spirit just like we might say be “in” the center of God’s will. It makes one think that “in” means location. But this more correct translation of “by the Spirit” teaches us that the Spirit is the power, the change agent, the source of any holiness that is present in our lives. He is the one that carries us in our faith and receives all credit for our sanctification. The Spirit, who now lives within each believer, is the source of all Christian character and spiritual fruit. It is He who now sets the direction of our Christian walk, because He lives in us.

Paul’s logic would have sounded like foolishness to the Jewish false teachers that he was up against. The false teachers believed that for one to be right with God he or she must obey all of the religious rules. Secondly they believed that it was rules and fear of punishment that made people behave properly. Their view of righteousness was based on external motivation and external behavior.

In contrast, Paul taught that once you become a follower of Christ, you no longer have to focus on all the religious rules and rituals. You are free in Christ. The religious zealots would argue that without external restraints one can’t be righteous, but Paul would argue that with the Spirit living in us the restraint has now gone internal. The Holy Spirit is the one who convicts, purifies, restrains and compels us towards holiness.

The *Tale of the Second Husband* may help illustrate this point. There once was a married couple whose marriage was not healthy. The husband was domineering and difficult. Every day before he left to go to work, he would write a list of things that his wife would have to do while he was gone. Every evening when he arrived home, he would take the list and make sure she had completed her tasks. He would either get angry because the tasks had not been completed, or upset because they had not been done up to his standards. It was a very difficult life for the wife.

Eventually the husband died and the woman married another man. This man was kind, loving, humble and very appreciative. One day while he was at work, she was cleaning one of the closets and she found one of the old lists. As she read it she realized that she was still doing the same things, but it was now totally different. Before she had worked out of fear and punishment. Now she served out of love for a precious husband who loved her in so many ways.

The Christian life is similar. Yes, there are ways of serving and obeying God, but they come from a heart of love, not a demand for rigid law keeping. God’s love compels us. This is the internal motivation that Paul is talking about.

The Holy Spirit lives within each believer, but then why do we not always walk by the Spirit? Because we cease to yield, to submit, to obey, to follow and to nurture the Spirit who lives within us. We are not daily meditating on and living in the truths of the gospel. We often return to the patterns of the flesh. We revert back to our old, sinful ways of making life work for us. We are faced with challenging situations and, instead of trusting God and walking by the Spirit, we go back to those life patterns and methods we used before we met Christ. We cease nurturing the Spirit. We cease putting aside

everything that hinders and the sin that so easily distracts us from Christ. We cease making times for those intimate moments with Christ, His Word and His people. We neglect the only source of power that we have to live the Christian life, and we find ourselves defeated and in a spiritual wilderness. It does not mean that we are no longer Christians, but if this pattern continues, in the long term it might mean we never knew Christ in the first place.

In Galatians 5:19-21 Paul now makes it clear what walking in the flesh looks like:

“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, 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.”

These verses serve to help us evaluate our spiritual condition while also seeing the characteristics of life that will result if we choose to walk in the flesh.

Paul’s list of sins of the flesh can be broken into four categories. The first sins in the list are sexual in nature and show how one defiles himself (1 Cor. 6:18). The second category of sins have to do with worship and defiling one’s relationship with God. The third category of sins are social in nature and defile one’s relationship with other people. The fourth category are sins of excess, where the full extent of sinfulness has been reached and restraint has been removed.

Sexual immorality relations (*porneia*) was the general word for illicit sexual relationships. Premarital sex and extramarital sexual would both fall into this category. This sin is near to the heart of God because the imagery of a man and a woman, in an exclusive, lifelong relationship, is one of the clearest pictures that we have of Christ’s relation with us.

If we have not committed these sins we must not feel self-righteous. Remember Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount. It was not based only on external righteousness. If one has lusted in his or her mind, he is also guilty of sin. Sin can also be found in our thoughts and desires.

The next sin in the list is **impurity**. It speaks of a faith that has been undermined by the things of this world, it is the faith of a beguiling and unstable soul that cannot cease from sin (1 Timothy 4:2; 2 Peter 2:14), or of the double minded man who will not draw near God nor cleanse his hands so that he might purify his heart (James 4:8).

This word is referring to uncleanness in one’s thoughts, words, deeds and heart that keep one from coming humbly into the presence of God. It might be similar to when we talk of not observing the Lord’s supper in an unworthy manner. For those of you who benefit most from a word picture, this word in Greek (*akatharsia*) is used in other writings to mean the pus that oozed out of an unclean wound. That is the picture of impurity.

Sensuality is unrestrained indulgence in sensual pleasure. It is the idea that one has gone so far into lust and desire and sin that they don’t even care what anyone thinks about it. Their sins are now in

public. At least before they used to hide it, now they are shameless. They no longer blush, make excuses or try to justify. They just arrogantly and blatantly flaunt their sin.

Paul then lists idolatry and sorcery. Worship is where we place our full devotion, trust and adoration. That which rules our heart. In one sense **idolatry** is false religion or pagan worship. Most of us will claim to be innocent of that type of idolatry, but be careful. Idolatry can be whatever we give our ultimate allegiance to: career, money, reputation, power, pleasure, companionship, freedom or even desires for peace, hope, joy or success. None of these desires are worthy to be worshipped.

The word for **sorcery** in Greek is *pharmakeia*. It is the source for our word pharmacy. In Paul's day the word would refer to the poison or drugs that were often used in practices of sorcery. Sorcery is a blatant turning one's back on God and turning towards evil spirits, to control and manipulate life to fulfill one's own evil desires. At times, even to the point of exposing oneself to spiritual strongholds of the evil one.

Enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions and envy are sins that take place in relations to other people. In previous studies we discussed the idea of relational cannibalism. In Paul's words, "*don't devour each other*". The false teachers that Paul was facing were supporting a return to legalism, but legalism leads to relational cannibalism. Legalism exalts law over grace and replaces faith with works. For the legalist, his focus is on "being made right with God by obeying God's rules." That can only end one of two ways. One can see himself as self-righteous and deserving of God's love. This leads to pride. The other option is to fall into sin, failing to live up to God's standards. This results in living a life of fear and guilt, defeat and competition, or desperately needing the approval of others.

As followers of Christ we have been forgiven of sin. We have received freedom found in love. As our needs are met in Christ we are freed to no longer look out for our own concerns, but to focus on the needs of others. A non-believer's needs have not been met in Christ. Because of this he or she will desperately seek ways to meet their own needs. It will be impossible to meet their own needs, but their desperate, godless attempts, will result in the works of the flesh to which Paul is referring. This might also be true of Christians who are not walking near to Christ and thus not experiencing the resources of Christ that are sufficient to meet our every need.

Drunkenness, orgies and things like these are sins of excess, where the full extent of sinfulness has been reached and restraint has been removed.

In the final verse of this text, after listing these works of the flesh, Paul says this, "*Those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*" We must return to scripture's idea of "walking" to better understand what Paul means. Whether it be in the flesh or by the Spirit, it is referring to those who continually orient their lives towards works of the flesh. A Christian will sin periodically, but only those who walk in the flesh as a way of life will not inherit that kingdom of God.

In Galatians 5:19-21 the Apostle Paul gives us a clear description of one who is walking in the flesh. It is important to note the Apostle's statement that the sins listed are EVIDENT and clear signs of unbelief and lostness. A question we might first want to ask is just how evident are such sins to unbelievers?

And, how evident are such sins to Christians? Also noteworthy is the warning he gives to those who do such things: *“they will not inherit the kingdom of heaven.”* This is a warning he actually repeats in other Epistles (Romans 1:28-32; 2:8; Ephesians 5:5-6; Colossians 3:5-6). Who is Paul warning: Christians or unbelievers? The most likely answer is that the warning is an exhortation for both the Christian and a warning for those false professors among them who say “Lord, Lord” and do not do the things He says (Luke 6:46). That is to say that the warning is actually serving two (or more) purposes, but is particularly defining the typical conduct of those who profess to be Christians but are not (2 Corinthians 11:26). This shouldn’t surprise us. For as we know from the parable of the sower, the seed (the Word of God) that falls on good ground (which represents a heart regenerated by the Holy Spirit or a born again heart) brings forth fruit (Mark 4:13-20), but the second and third grounds in the parable receive the same seed, (the Word of God), but do not produce the fruit (Mark 4:17, 19). All three of these grounds (or hearts) are in view in this passage. That being said, it does not mean that Christians will never be guilty of any of these sins, but should not be in a habit of committing these sins. Upon hearing Paul’s warning, true believers will, by God’s grace, be pricked in their hearts over such conduct, and be stirred up by the Spirit to seek Christ to root it out. The unbeliever, one hopes by God’s grace, will be driven to desperation and to repentance and faith in the only one who is righteous: Christ (cf. Romans 2:4; 8:20). Of course, there will always be those who will be hardened in their sins more and more by such warnings, and ultimately receive eternal judgment. So it is that the gospel is to those who are being saved a savor of life unto life but for those who perish, it is the savor of death unto death (2 Corinthians 2:16).

The works of the flesh that Paul lists here are really no different than those sins he sets out in his other Epistles (Romans 1:28-32; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5). But what we should really be focusing on here is on what we can learn about God and ourselves from these sins or works of the flesh. The first thing we should notice is that the works testify to both fallen man’s unrighteousness as well as to the righteousness of God in Christ. For these works are the exact opposite of the Christ-like conduct we are, entirely by God’s grace, exhorted to exhibit (Matthew 5-7; Philippians 1:27; Colossians 4:5-6; Ephesians 5:15; 1 Timothy 4:12; 1 Peter 2:12; 2 Peter 1:15). Furthermore, and as we know from the Apostle Paul’s explanation in Romans, it is God Himself who gives men and women up to all these types of sins when they suppress the truth about God in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18-25). God does this, we are told by the Apostle, to remove any excuse from them, but also to demonstrate His own supreme righteousness and great longsuffering and patient forbearance (Romans 2:4). This he expressly does in the hope that, in the face of his goodness and patient forbearing, we, his creatures, might finally repent and seek him in our desperation (Romans 8:20). In the end, therefore, the vices of fallen man actually serve as a testimony to the glory of Christ our Lord, and a tool that drives some to repentance.

After hearing Paul’s writing some would admit that their lives are characterized by such sins, but still claim that they are followers of Christ. Scripture teaches that this is not possible. In Mathew 7:17-21 Jesus puts it in these words:

“Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does

not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

This was the case of the false teachers who were infecting the Galatian church. They taught rules and regulations, but their hearts were far from God. Rules will never be enough to make a person holy. Only the Holy Spirit living in the heart of man can bring conviction of sin and holy desires that result in a holy life. This was Paul's theme. One will never be made right with God by trusting in the flesh and trying to be holy in his own power. It is as one puts their trust in Jesus Christ that the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within him and makes him new.

This could be illustrated by thinking about different types of boats or ships from centuries past. Some were propelled by many men who worked endlessly with oars, straining against the sea to move ahead. Others were more fortunate at times to set their sails and catch a wind that would move them ahead at greater speed and with much less exertion. This is a good picture of many of our Christian experiences. Like those using the oars, we have worked hard in our own power to move ahead in our spiritual lives, and the results have been minimal and the effort has resulted in spiritual exhaustion.

The other option is to put up our spiritual sails. The Greek word for Spirit is also the word for wind (Pneuma). That is an interesting correlation. As a sailboat sets its sails and yields to the direction of the wind it is driven along effortlessly. May we do the same. May we no longer trust in our own strength and will power to be made righteous. Instead, may we yield to the will of the Spirit in our lives and be carried along towards the holiness that only God can work in our lives.

Today, as we remember these words of Paul, may followers of Christ be convicted of sin where needed so as to walk uprightly with God. May non-believers be convicted of sin, repent and come to salvation in Jesus Christ. May we each be stirred to greater holiness as we walk in the Spirit and rest in Him.

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Jesus

(Matthew 11:28-30)