

Galatians 5:16-18 “What Does it Mean to Live By the Spirit?”

GAL 5:16-18 “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.”

Whenever we talk about this concept of walking in the Spirit as opposed to walking in the flesh there immediately arises a sense of tension each believer in Christ is confronted with the moment he or she believes on the Lord till the day he or she dies.

This tension will never be fully overcome in this world. We will always fight it until we are in the presence of the Lord. I know there are groups who claim to be able to reach perfect holiness in this world as they espouse the notion that they actually overcome the desire and the power of sin in their lives.

But I'm here to tell you that at best they are deceived and at worst they are liars. To suggest that we can perfectly overcome the desires of the flesh in this world is to blatantly deny the plain teaching of the Scriptures.

Paul himself tells us that he too had this conflict where the spirit was willing but the flesh was weak.

ROM 7:18-19;21;24-25 “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God -through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.”

If you think for a moment that the apostle Paul was some super-saint devoid of the desires we all face then you don't understand Paul or the sinful nature we in Christ combat on a daily basis.

By the way, I've had people tell me that this passage of Scripture in Romans was Paul describing himself before he came to Christ. In fact, I had a man tell me to my face that Romans 7:25 read,

“What a wretched man I was.” He didn’t have his bible with him at the time. I told him to go home and re-read it.

Paul clearly said, “what a wretched man I am,” present tense. And the only thing he meant was that in light of the gift he had been given in Christ, in light of the Spirit of God who indwelt him, in light of the grace of God bestowed on him, he still struggled with the sinful nature, and didn’t like it.

He concluded that since he had no excuse to sin, when he did sin, he was only expressing a disregard for God where he could then only describe himself as wretched. It doesn’t mean he was living a despicable and contemptible life where sin was running rampant in his life. It rather shows his disdain for the desire to sin which still existed and from which he labored to depart by the power of the Spirit.

And then he clearly told the Philippians that as best we try we will never attain to a pure holiness in this life, again contrary to what some groups say they have attained to.

PHI 3:10-12 “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

Now, we have to be careful here because we could resign ourselves to the notion that since we’ll never fully overcome the effects of the sin nature in our lives we can use the excuse that when we do sin it’s only a part of us we have to live with.

Paul wasn’t content to live with this. And this is why he adds to his agony of being a wretched man who still sins, his joy of knowing where his deliverance lies, both in the penalty of sin and its power when he says in Rom..7:25, “Thanks be to God -through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.”

Paul understood what it meant to walk in the Spirit despite the fact that he struggled with the sinful nature.

Some of you will notice that in your translations verse 16 of our text actually uses the word flesh. We touched on this last week, but by way of reminder the word in the Greek is sarx and it does mean flesh. The NIV and other translations substitute the word

sinful nature as a way of describing what the word flesh in the context means.

The reason the Scriptures use this word flesh is because it describes that part of man which is effected in an outward way. For example, when we look at the 10 commandments we quickly realize that God is addressing behavior. You shall honor Me, You shall not steal, you shall not murder and so on.

But the word flesh is not limited simply to outward behavior. This is why one of the 10 commandments also addresses our thoughts. You shall not covet is the last of the 10 commandments which deals with our desires which may not be carried out.

The Lord says, not to covet our neighbor's house, wife, manservant, maidservant or anything that belongs to our neighbor. You don't have to actually obtain any of these things to be guilty of this command. To simply covet is sufficient to be found guilty.

And this by the way, is another reason we know those holiness movements down through the ages, which suggest we can completely overcome outward sin are simply bogus, because our thought life comes into play when we discuss sanctification, being conformed into the image of Christ.

And so, when the Scriptures use the word flesh in regards to our sinful desires it's not limited to only outward behavior. It addresses the heart of man, his sinful desires which cannot be fully quenched because it is a nature we were not only born with, but also a nature which still exists in both unbelievers and believers.

The difference between a believer and unbeliever is that an unbeliever has only one nature, a sinful nature which cannot please God, whereas a believer has two natures. One which is sinful and one which is holy. One which desires to please only self and one which desires to please God.

And there's the struggle. And there's the choice every believer must contend with. This is why I ended last week's study with some questions. Why do we struggle so? Why is it so hard to make the right choices? Why don't I seem to be more motivated in the Spirit?

As to why we struggle the answer is clear. How do you get away from yourself? If you have two natures which are waging war against each other how do you separate them when they both live in you? The answer is you can't.

We're stuck with both natures until the day we die, or until Christ comes back for us. But the issue for you and me in Christ is not how do we get rid of the one nature, it's how do we deal with it as we pursue the other?

This brings up the next question: Why is it so hard to make the right choices? Part of the reason has to do with what we want at any given time and the circumstances surrounding that desire.

For example. My desire for ice cream at breakfast is practically nil. And so, at that moment my temptation for ice cream, if you will, is low. However, at the end of the day, after dinner, my temptation is very high and if given the choice I will always give in. Now, I'm not suggesting that eating ice cream is sinful, just that I like it, because it satisfies my craving for sweets.

Well, in a similar way our desire for sin is always there because it satisfies a craving for the sinful nature. Now, here's issue. If eating ice cream creates a problem for me physically, for example, drastically increasing my cholesterol, then I have to make some choices in light of that truth.

In a similar way, to choose to pursue sin, knowing that it will not only displease my God who purchased me with the blood of His Son, but will also prove that I have disregarded that new life, that new nature which my Lord wants me to follow, shows that I have made a choice which will not promote that new life I have in Christ and therefore will not promote the glory my God deserves in my life.

But then the question comes down to this. Why won't I pursue that new nature at times when given the choice, or as I posed the question last week, why don't I seem to be more motivated in the Spirit?

Think about it. If we as believers have the Spirit of God indwelling us, the same Spirit who was involved in creating this entire universe, the same Spirit who is Almighty and powerful, the same Spirit who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, then how do we claim to be weak when it comes to making the right choices to follow after the Lord?

Well, as stated earlier we were born with a sin nature which has had years of being satisfied. But it really comes down to submitting to the Lord with the new nature He's given us. It's a

conscious choice with a realization that we have an obligation to God because of what He's given us in Christ. Paul puts it this way.

ROM 8:11-14 "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation - but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."

In other words, the deeds of the flesh and the deeds of the spirit are evident. But to satisfy either they must be pursued with choices that understand the consequences for each. If we conclude that to sin makes no difference to God, since He is an understanding, merciful and forgiving God, then we have reached the wrong conclusion about the nature of God and His abhorrence of sin.

But if we know what He desires and in that understanding we actively pursue those things which promote the new nature then we have fallen into the arms of our God who can and will use us to bring glory to Himself. You see walking in the Spirit is not some passive pursuit.

If we think that somehow God will just take away every sinful desire then we don't understand how God works. A woman once told me that until God takes away the desire to have sexual relations with her boyfriend she concluded that God was going to be patient with her in that relationship while permitting her to continue on. And so, she was going to wait for God to eliminate that desire.

I thought, then you want God to put you into a coma. Many of our desires are not meant to be taken away. They are meant to be properly used. The desire itself may not be sinful, but when expressed in a way that dishonors God they then become sinful.

So, one of the first things we want to do in creating an environment for pursuing the Spirit is to take advantage of knowing the will of God. What is God's will concerning how I live for Him?

Well, we know for example that the will of God for us is to be made into the image and likeness of our Lord and Savior. This is

what is known as our sanctification. Jesus spoke of this when praying to His Father on behalf of His disciples and all of us.

JOH 17:17 “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”

The process of sanctification is a process which as I said is not passive. If we're waiting to be sanctified as God takes away desires then we'll never overcome that nature we've been born with and is quite powerful.

I've never smoked cigarettes, but I know people who have told me that quitting is one of the hardest things to do. And I've also had these same people tell me that they're praying for God to take away the desire to smoke. Well, God is most certainly capable of taking away such a desire.

But to expect God to work this way is to expect God to work against our own will which He wants us to surrender to Him. That woman I mentioned earlier could have had her prayer answered in such a way where God took all sexual desires away forever.

It's like, yeah I'll solve your sinful desires, I'll just take away all desires. Well, that takes away our will to choose. And one thing God wants from all of us is a true love which expresses itself in true choice. That's why Adam and Eve were given a choice. Yes, they were created perfect, but they weren't created to be robots.

And so, we want godly desires which are motivated by godly heart felt choices. But here's where that tension comes back into play. We can't make godly choices without God. We can't truly walk in the Spirit without the Holy Spirit's involvement.

But we can't simply think that the Spirit will accomplish this without our hearts and minds engaged as we actively seek Him in love. This is why the phrase, “let go and let God” has the potential to take us back to a passive approach to our sanctification which is not biblical.

If we know that there is a war raging in our inner members then we need to be engaged in that war with the idea of overcoming the enemy. And by enemy I mean that in metaphorical terms as the sinful nature must be seen as in opposition to the Spirit.

That's the point Paul makes in our text.

GAL 5:17 “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.”

There is a sense in which we must approach this life with the idea that there will be a constant struggle. There is nothing passive about fleeing from sin. Why do you think the Scriptures are constantly warning us about making the choice to seek after the things of God while avoiding the old sinful desires?

ROM 6:12 “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.”

Nothing passive there.

EPH 4:22-23 “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Nothing passive here. In fact, in the next verse Paul then gives an example of how the Ephesians were to practically carry out this command to put off the old self in favor of the new self in Christ. And you’ll notice it involves a simple choice. An active choice.

EPH 4:25-32 “Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. “In your anger do not sin”: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

It doesn’t get more practical than this. Choices is what Paul is talking about. But for the first time in our lives in Christ we are able to make right choices for the right reasons and with a power from on high.

Paul is telling believers in Ephesus, if you're speaking falsehood about others then stop it. Don't entertain the flesh which wants to put others in a bad light.

Do you get angry?; maybe with your wife, or neighbor or family member? Don't let the day end without dealing with it and asking for forgiveness. Are you stealing from someone? Then make the choice to stop it. Don't let the flesh gain the upper hand.

Are unwholesome words coming out of your mouth? Then don't open your mouth. You remember what our parents used to tell us? If you haven't got something nice to say, then don't say anything at all.

That's one way of avoiding an unwholesome word. But an unwholesome word also involves our choice of words. The choice of words we use can be either of the flesh and sinful, or of the Spirit and edifying.

James talks about the tongue and its use in both arenas.

JAM 1:26 "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless."

JAM 3:7 -11 "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?"

It's true, no man can tame the tongue. But God can. Are we showing the world who is in charge of our tongues as we give God the dominance over our tongues? Are we making the choice to use our tongues or our lives to God's glory?

In that moment where we're tempted to go back to the ways of the old nature, do we consider the promptings of the Spirit? Do we consider the will of God according to His word in that moment, and then make a choice to honor Him?

Now, we must understand that when we make the choice to honor Him with our lives we can't take credit for that. Yes, God expects



us to choose, and yes God wants us to involve our wills, but without God's Spirit working in us we could never please Him.

And the beauty of this relationship to the Spirit is that it comes with a promise as we pursue the things of the Spirit.

This is what Paul means in verse 16 of our text.

GAL 5:16 "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

The beginning of verse 16 is in the form of a command. "Live by the Spirit." This is not a request. But in so doing, as we pursue the things of the Spirit of God, the promise is connected to it. "And you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

What is so exciting about this is that it gives us the hope that the more we obey the Lord in the power of the Spirit by making those choices against the flesh and for God, the less inclined we will be to carry out the desires of the flesh.

What this means is that over time the desire to sin becomes less and less. The desire to use our mouths in a godly way takes precedence over using our mouths in an ungodly way. The desire to encourage each other takes precedence over wanting to speak negatively of others.

This is a work of the Spirit, but it's a work in conjunction with our godly choices which God wants us to make.

But we must never think that living or walking in the Spirit can be relegated to a set of rules which we put in place. This was the danger in Galatia as the Judaizers were employing the law as a means to not only be saved but to stay saved. This is the point Paul makes in verse 18 of our text.

GAL 5:18 "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law."

The Spirit of God wants our hearts. As I said last week, the law was never designed to change our hearts. That's not a function of the law. And this was a problem for many Jews in Israel. They felt that only obeying the letter of the law was sufficient. But the Lord had much more in mind.

He explained to them that to truly obey His word He must first have their hearts.

1KI 8:61 "But your hearts must be fully committed to the LORD our God, to live by his decrees and obey his commands, as at this time."

This is exactly what the Lord told Israel when it came to the giving of the law through Moses.

DEU 6:4-6 "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts."

And yet, we know their hearts strayed from God despite the fact that they continued to go through the motions.

ISA 29:13 "The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men."

This is key. When our hearts are seeking God then our lives walk in His ways, in His Spirit. But all of this is for the specific purpose of worshipping God with our lives. When our lives are in conformity with His Spirit according to His word, as we choose life, and choose the Spirit, we find that our worship of the Lord touches every aspect of our lives.

Whether it's our mouths, our dealings with people inside or outside of the church, whether it's our attitudes toward those who despise us, when we are walking in the Spirit these areas of our lives will be effected in such a way, where when we are tempted to react in the flesh, we will say, "no, Lord I choose to worship you. I choose to obey You because I love You, knowing that You first loved me."

If we think walking in the Spirit is waiting for the Spirit to give us some ecstatic desire to obey then we will be always looking for an experience to determine our choices and desires rather than simply choosing to love God in obedience to what He has already made clear in His word as to what pleases Him.

If we understand that walking in the Spirit is the act of worship, then it makes our choices so much more meaningful as we are now given an opportunity to worship God with our lives instead of just

viewing it as one more battle we successfully overcame in the Spirit.

One attitude gives God glory in the decision we make, while the other attitude pats ourselves on the back when we do the right thing.

It was for freedom that Christ set us free. And the freedom we have in Christ is to choose to demonstrate our worship for the Lord in a way we never could outside of Christ. The next time we're tempted to go down a path which is not God-honoring, we need to ask ourselves, am I worshipping God in this decision?

If not then we need to understand that we are then walking in the flesh, the sinful nature from which we've been delivered and for which Christ gave His life. If we have made the choice to honor God then we can know that we are worshipping God in Spirit and in truth.

In its most simplest terms this is what it means to walk in the Spirit. And the idea of walking means we're going forward to God and away from the temptations of the world.

2CO 6:16-7:1 "What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."