

Galatians 5:19-21      “Hope in the War with the Flesh”

GAL 5:19-21 “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

As we’ve studied through this letter the theme is quite apparent, and that is the conflict with the flesh and the Spirit which is contrasted in the law versus the grace of God.

The flesh, or the sinful nature of man, is such that it cannot please God since the root problem has to do with the justice of God who will not allow man to have fellowship with Him due to the penalty of this sin which must be paid for by man, whereby he will be separated from his God and creator forever.

Of course the grace of God was demonstrated there in the Garden of Eden, after Adam and Eve rebelled against the Lord, as He made a promise to them that He would send the seed of the woman to redeem them and bring them back into a peaceful and eternal relationship with Himself.

Much later in man’s history God would again show the progressive result of this promise by choosing a nation through whom this promised seed would come. And through this nation He would also give a codified law which spelled out what He expected of these people.

It was this law which was going to deal with the flesh or sinful nature to place certain restrictions on man’s sinful behavior. And so, there was a good side of the law which was meant to help curb the sinful tendencies of man, and specifically, Israel.

GAL 3:19 “What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come...”

But more than that the law was also to show the inability of man to uphold the law and therefore to force man to look outside of himself and his own abilities to become righteous before God. And so, the law was designed by God to lead men to the Messiah who would save them from the penalty of their own sin.

GAL 3:23-24 “Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”

This clearly shows us that the law could not justify the flesh or make the sinful nature something it wasn't; namely, righteous before God. It could only show the sinfulness of man and cause him to seek another alternative to his salvation. And this Paul pointed out in this same letter.

GAL 2:16 “... a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”

And so when Paul comes to this portion we're looking at this morning he is once again showing the need for a Savior because left on his own man will seek those things which are contrary to God's righteous demands.

And by way of reminder Paul is making it clear to these Galatian Christians, as well as us today, that if we are new creatures in Christ with a new nature, then we must not think that we have the option to pursue that old nature from which we've been delivered.

To the contrary, if we are being led by the Spirit of God, this necessarily means we are not striving to go after the flesh, but we are striving to seek the Lord in obedience in His power. But, on the other hand if we are not seeking after God, then it necessarily means we will be susceptible to the things of the flesh.

And by the way, Paul says, this is what the flesh will produce.

GAL 5:19-21 “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Now, I don't want to spend the entire time this morning dwelling on every detail of those things which are not very edifying, just for the sake of identifying what sin is, but we do need to point out that sin is something we all still struggle with. And when we are not submitting to the Lord then the only other alternative is to submit to self and its evil desires.

And often times those desires will manifest themselves in ways which are not very edifying. And by the way, when we look at the flesh, or the sinful nature, what we're looking at is the natural desire of mankind.

I know it's been said by Psychologists and others that the nature of man is basically good, or at least neutral. And so, man has the ability to be shaped in such a way where he can rise above the baser desires.

The problem with this is that God tells us the exact opposite. Now, this doesn't discount that we have been created in the image and likeness of God, but because of sin our ability to reflect the goodness of God is extremely limited, and given the choice we will choose self over God.

This is what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Christians in Rome.

ROM 3:10-18 "As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

This is a pretty bleak statement, but it doesn't make it any less accurate or true.

The Lord spoke through the prophet Jeremiah and gives a very concise insight into man's problem and it all stems from his heart which affects every aspect of his sin nature which will act out on this nature.

JER 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"

And by the way, it didn't take long for the sinful nature of man, after the fall, to show its utter contempt for God and His righteousness. Remember, it was Cain, because of jealousy of his brother Abel, who murdered his brother in cold blood and then excused himself before God as though he was the victim.

It only went downhill after that until the whole world was doing what came naturally. And what came naturally is what Paul describes in our text. It was then when God had become sad that He created mankind and this is revealed in the early part of the book of Genesis.

GEN 6:5-7 "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth - men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air - for I am grieved that I have made them."

Do you think it makes a difference to God how His most cherished creation in mankind acts? You better believe it. But it also shows how His justice cannot ignore such unbridled sin.

It was the flood of the entire world which put an end to the human race and its sinfulness as God saved 8 people on the ark. But that destruction didn't destroy what was in the heart of man. It only acted as a speed bump. But it showed how serious God is in dealing with sin and how much He hates it.

But in His hatred for sin His love for mankind has never wavered. And His patience and mercy is always at the forefront. And we see this as He dealt with Israel. The prophet Isaiah records these words of God as He mourns over Israel. And yet the Lord continues to extend that mercy and grace.

ISA 65:1-3 "I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.' All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations - a people who continually provoke me to my very face, offering sacrifices in gardens and burning incense on altars of brick;.."

Israel had the privilege of having God in their midst and yet they would prove that the sinful nature is a nature which will still reject God and His mercy.

Man is not basically good. Man is basically evil and corrupt of heart. Now this doesn't mean that man can't do noble deeds, or that man will be as evil as he could possibly be. Only that all of

what man does will still be affected by his heart which does not naturally seek after God.

And so, most people in the world do not become Joseph Stalin's or Adolph Hitler's. But every person in the world certainly has the potential to be such people. Were it not for the grace of God curbing such heinous behavior with civil governments and laws which govern people, this world would be out of control.

What Paul describes in our text would be the norm to the max.

So, what do we have here?

The deeds of the flesh, or as the NIV puts it, the acts of the sinful nature are obvious. Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery according to verse 19.

It would seem these three work in conjunction with each other and in some ways are synonymous though they express themselves in different ways.

Sexual immorality, as used in the NIV, is actually one word in the Greek. It's porneia, and it's where we get our English word pornography. But it has a much broader meaning than simply pornographic material or behavior.

It would include any behavior which would be sexually devious; from homosexuality to bestiality to adultery. And so, Paul tells us that the flesh or the sinful nature naturally desires any degree of this.

The Spirit of God abhors such things and for the child of God in Christ He would prompt him to abhor such things as well. And as such, the new nature we have in Christ does abhor such things. And so, when a Christian pursues this he is reverting back to that nature which rebels against God.

Impurity and debauchery, are variations on a theme. Impurity referring to that which is unclean. Anything which is self-seeking that takes us away from the purity and righteousness of God would be included here.

Debauchery, or as some of your translations put it, sensuality, is any aspect of that baser nature which seeks the pleasure of self without regard for other people or God. It is without shame or regret.

We see this in the world today expressed in most of the sit-coms on TV. You would be hard-pressed to watch any of these programs without seeing some explicit sexual innuendo in the first couple of minutes of the opening credits. Debauchery.

Verse 20 opens with idolatry and witchcraft. The natural man in his natural state has religious pursuits but they are always pursuits of creating gods in their own image for their own power.

Idolatry is usually associated with some graven image man creates to worship, and it would certainly include that aspect of idolatry, but God would include the heart aspect of idolatry.

When addressing many of the same types of sins of the flesh Paul points out to the Colossians that greed or coveting is seen by God as idolatry.

COL 3:5 “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.”

And of course the reason greed is idolatry is because it seeks to replace God with whatever we are lusting after which doesn't belong to us. This is different from normal aspirations.

We might all desire a new house or car, or aspire to a better job. But to covet such things places them on a level where God is replaced by that thing we want, and therefore becomes an idol.

How many witches do you know? Aside from characters we see in movies and TV programs witchcraft or sorcery, as some of your translations have it, is not running rampant. But it is on the rise in this country and for that matter around the world.

And it was prevalent during Paul's day as well. In fact, according to F.F. Bruce in his commentary on Galatians, “sorcery was a serious offense in Roman law; it was dealt with by a standing court.”

One of the negative connotations to sorcery or witchcraft was the tools of the trade which were drugs, some of which were poison. In fact, the word in Greek here in our text for witchcraft or sorcery is pharmakeia, which is where we get our English word Pharmacy, which is a place where drugs are dispensed.

We often think of drug abuse as a modern problem, but drug abuse has been around for millennia and it was also used in the black arts or black magic or sorcery. The flesh or the sin nature will gravitate to such things for the power of such practices; either perceived power over others, or power to alter one's own state of mind or body.

As we continue in our text Paul goes into a litany of behavioral problems which are associated with man's natural sinful desires. They include hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.

I don't think anyone would disagree that these are rather distasteful attitudes, especially when we're on the receiving end of them. And unfortunately, not even Christians are exempt from any of these things. Why? Because we give in to the sinful nature from time to time from which we've been delivered.

And it doesn't please God our Savior when we do such things. It's interesting that all throughout Paul's letters he will often bring up these sinful desires of mankind and will warn God's people to flee from them. And he points out that it's not just the fact that such behavior is not becoming of God's people, but that it personally grieves God.

When addressing the Ephesians he points this out.

EPH 4:29-32 "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."

You see, Paul knew that all of us are susceptible to following through on our sinful desires, but he also expected God's people to choose that which would please God.

He doesn't allow the Ephesians or the Colossians or the Galatian Christians, or for that matter, any believer to blame the devil, or circumstances or anything else in life for the choices we make.

It doesn't mean any of those things don't contribute to our temptations, but when it comes right down to it we're the ones who decide or don't decide to obey and honor God. We're the ones who grieve the Holy Spirit; we're the ones who ultimately make the choices we do.

But we're not left to ourselves when it comes to making those choices for God. The fact that the Holy Spirit indwells us and desires to fill us is clear evidence that we have all the power we need to pursue the things of God while leaving behind those sinful desires which Paul describes in our text.

There are two more out-workings of the flesh Paul points out in verse 21 which can be associated with each other; drunkenness and carousing. The NIV uses the word orgies in place of carousing but the word orgies is really too limited for what Paul has in mind here.

But I do want to point out that the word of God, as opposed to our modern day culture, doesn't have a problem with calling sin what it is. In our politically correct world I know that we're told not to offend certain segments of society for fear of appearing insensitive.

But there is nothing noble about keeping people from the truth of sin and its solution. For example, there is nothing humane in telling someone with cancer that they don't have it or that it doesn't have certain treatments which can put it into remission.

So, why wouldn't we tell people that certain behavior is sin which God will punish, but can be overcome by a choice of faith, instead of giving them the delusion that it's a disease instead of a curable spiritual problem with physical manifestations.

And what Paul is describing here in our text is one of those things. Our culture addresses drunkenness as alcoholism and an addiction which is the result of the disease of alcoholism.

Now, no one in their right mind can make the case that alcohol can't be addictive in many people, any more than certain types of drugs can be addictive. But that doesn't automatically make it a disease. And let me tell you why this differentiation is important for a Christian to understand.

A true disease of the body works independent from what we do to the body. For example, we know that certain types of sinful

behavior can open the body up to virus's and bacteria which when introduced to the body then work on their own. Unless we put certain drugs into the body to combat the disease it will continue to do its destructive work or simply run its course.

AID's is an example of this. But there are many diseases which have nothing to do with sinful behavior. Influenza may not have anything to do with sinful activity. But it is a true disease which finds its way into the body, often through no fault of our own.

But sinful behavior, in and of itself, cannot be seen as a physical disease, especially when the ceasing of that behavior stops the so-called disease.

If you want to stop what the world calls the disease of alcoholism the answer is always the same. Stop drinking. Well, they reply the disease is still there though now dormant, only waiting for the opportunity for more alcohol to be introduced into the system. Duh!

A craving for alcohol may truly be physical in some people. But do we call the normal craving for food an addiction? No. But what the world has done is to take any abnormal craving for anything and automatically call it an addiction, with the express purpose of taking certain responsibilities away from the individual as it relates to choices.

But here's the real problem, and it has nothing to do with the debate over what constitutes an addiction or a disease. The real problem for the Christian is do we take God at His word, or do we subscribe to the world's perspective on certain types of behavior?

Because you see, once you have a behavioral disease, as defined by the world, you're without hope for ever truly becoming free of that disease. Why do you think Alcoholics Anonymous defines a person as an alcoholic for life, whether they drink or not?

If your problem is sin, then you not only have the hope of being physically delivered from that sin, but more importantly you have the cure to the penalty for that sin, which the world cannot offer.

If God calls drunkenness a sin, and the world calls it a disease, which is no fault of your own, and the world is right, then God is cruel. God is unfair. Why? Because God calls such sinful behavior into account and places the burden of that behavior squarely on the shoulders of the individual, where they are to repent and receive forgiveness for their sins.

The world says you can't place such an unreasonable demand on someone who can't help themselves.

And yet, when a person in Scripture contracts a real disease like leprosy or lameness, or any other disease that person is not called a sinner because of that disease alone.

Nowhere in this list in our text or any other list of the bible, which describes sinful behavior, do we see leprosy, blindness, cancer, measles, chicken pox, or any other such disease listed as something where the individual is responsible before God as a sinner, though all of these are certainly the result of the curse brought on by sin in the Garden.

Again, there is no argument from God's perspective what sinful behavior is. And all sinful behavior is punishable by God. And though we might make the argument that sinful behavior is a spiritual disease, we know there is only one cure.

And that cure is spiritual. That cure is Jesus Christ. That cure involves repenting of that behavior as we reach out in faith to the One who died for our sin, and rose from the dead.

Does this mean that once we've repented of our sin that the sinful behavior comes to a complete stop? No, not necessarily. That's partly why Paul is pointing out what the desires of the sinful nature are. But what the Scriptures do teach is that we no longer have to submit to that sinful nature as our master.

A person who has been a drunk all his life and comes to Christ as Lord and Savior has found a spiritual cure to his sin and guilt before a holy God who calls such behavior sinful.

But the physical effects may take time to fully overcome. And it doesn't mean that once the physical effects have been overcome that he can go back to taking a drink.

But when we start calling certain types of sin something other than what they are, we have taken away the ability for people to think in terms of seeking a God who forgives us of sin. If I'm not a sinner, why do I need a Savior?

If I'm not a drunk, which is defined by God as sin, then I'm a person with a disease who can't help himself. And we can apply this same principle to any sinful behavior the world calls a disease.

We're not being loving to the world when it comes to sin if we don't call it what it is and then give them the hope of finding forgiveness from that sin in Jesus Christ. Because here's the alternative as Paul points out in verse 21.

GAL 5:21 "... I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

It is sin which keeps us out of the kingdom of God, not strep throat, not AID's, not hepatitis; behavior which is sinful and against God's holiness. There is hope for the sinner. There is no hope for the addict or the one who thinks sinful behavior is a disease for which he's not responsible to God.

Does this mean that a Christian who may fall into any one of these sins listed here or anywhere else in the Scripture is in danger of losing his salvation? The answer is no, and we'll touch on this next week.

But the warning is no less true. For the one who practices such things without regard for God and His word demonstrates that the law, not the Spirit, is what rules that life and the law will win as death is its reward.

In the meantime, we who find ourselves struggling with such things at times, but like Paul admit that we are doing the very things we don't want to do, take heart. We have a gracious and forgiving God.

1JO 2:1-2 "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."