

Galatians 5:17-21

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The flesh and the Spirit are not only opposed to one another; Paul's description here makes it clear that they are mortal enemies. The desire of the flesh is set against the desire of the Spirit. And these are in direct opposition to one another.

It is interesting to note Paul's observation regarding an outcome of the Spirit and flesh operating within each believer, and vying against one another: we *do not do the things that we really desire to do* (that *we please*, or wish). It seems that in the flesh resides our predominant "doing" and in the Spirit is our dominant desiring. Paul says something similar in Romans 7:19, "For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want."

The ramifications of this passage are enormous, not only for the Galatians, but for any believer. First, it means that the main contest the Spirit and the flesh have within us is a contest to get us to choose who to follow. That means there are three entities living within each believer: the Spirit of the Living God, the sinful flesh (in which nothing good dwells) and us (which at least includes our ability to choose between the two). Paul says in Romans 6:16 that our basic choice is which of these two we submit ourselves to in order to obey. We can obey sin in the flesh, or God in the Spirit. There is not a third option. The "I will do it my way" option is choosing the flesh. Not surprisingly, the "me" flesh option leads to biting and devouring, and the Spirit option leads to *faith working through love*, which will evidence the fruits of the Spirit.

It would be perfectly reasonable for the Galatian (or any) reader to ask "This is all very spiritual and intangible. How can I know whether I am choosing rightly?" Paul answers very directly: we can look at the fruit of our lives, at any point, to see which we are choosing. The flesh produces *immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these*. To the extent a believer's life produces these things, he is not walking in the Spirit, but in the flesh. This is how we can know whether we have chosen the Spirit or the flesh at any point in time.

In Romans chapter 2, Paul addresses the competing Jewish "authorities" who claim to be righteous through following the law. Paul points out that they break the very law they claim to follow. They keep the law in one way while breaking it in another way. Our flesh is very good at dressing itself up as though it is spiritual. That is a compelling reason to listen to spiritual brethren to help us discern regarding ourselves. It is important to bear in mind that the context of this passage is instruction to believers.

Someone might listen to Paul and also say "So what if I sin? We are justified in the sight of God solely by believing in Jesus, and are covered by grace. So there really isn't any negative consequence to selfishness in God's sight. If there is any biting and devouring I will just make sure I am the one who devours the most." Paul heads this sort of thinking off as well. Walking in the flesh has a very negative consequence. *Those who practice such things will not inherit the*

Kingdom of God. This is not a new warning, Paul already *forewarned* the Galatians about this. He reminds them again.

What does this mean? Paul has already referenced being an heir, an inheritor, earlier in Galatians, such as in Galatians 4:1-6. It should be noted that there are different types of inheritances for believers. As believers, we inherit eternal life through faith in Jesus, which is unconditional (we can never lose it). We will inherit glorified bodies in the next life, and nothing can take that away. The emphasis in Galatians 4 is on maturation—exercising the responsibility and authority of heirship, by becoming a “son” who takes on the family’s authority. Walking by faith takes on responsibility to serve. Walking in the flesh leads to childish behavior, and we serve our appetites as our master. Paul will tell us in the next chapter that any time we sow to the flesh we reap the flesh. That includes in this life. If we sow division we will reap strife. When we live the resurrection power of Jesus in this world by walking in the Spirit, we bring Jesus’ Kingdom into this world.

But the warning of loss of inheritance likely includes the next life as well. Colossians 3:23-24 is also written by Paul, and likely applies here:

"Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality."

The key phrase here is “the reward of the inheritance.” This passage is speaking of rewards given by God. Each believer has God as an inheritance unconditionally (Romans 8:17). Nothing can cause us to lose being God’s child. That is work done by Jesus on our behalf. But the inheritance to gain rewards is conditional upon our obedience. If we practice walking in the flesh, we get our reward from the flesh, rather than from God. One available reward is to share the throne of Jesus. This reward is conditional upon sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Romans 8:17). Every child is an heir. Fully possessing the inheritance is something only the faithful believer gains, only the “sons” that exercise responsibility.

What about this list of fruits that are evidence of choosing the flesh?

Immorality has the Greek root "porneia," also the root of the English word pornography. Paul uses porneia when referring to an incidence of incest. Paul also uses porneia in 1 Corinthians 6:18:

"Flee sexual immorality (porneia). Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality (porneia) sins against his own body."

This makes clear that pursuing sexual immorality brings its own destruction, to our body. And the destruction is worse than other kinds of sin, in that it is against ourselves.

Impurity is the idea of being unclean. What would the application of “unclean” be to the Gentiles Paul discipled? We might get an idea from 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8. In this passage, Paul contrasts

impurity with sanctification, and the particular behavior that is impure is defrauding a brother. This again emphasizes that believers can (and do) behave in all these ways. Our flesh never improves. It begins and ends with nothing good dwelling in it. Defrauding is a way to *bite and devour*.

Immorality is a Greek word also translated “adultery,” as in John 8:3. The root of adultery includes envy, to take what belongs to someone else. But adultery is predictably accompanied by destruction, destruction of relationships. The core attitude is focus on self.

Sensuality is the idea of unbridled appetites. *Idolatry* is a practice based on having those appetites satisfied. Pagan idolatry included prostitution, live pornography, and debauchery. It also included appeasing the “power” to get what was desired. Both include an illusion of being in control, when in actuality we are choosing to be slaves of our flesh.

Sorcery is a translation of the Greek word with the root “pharmakeia.” Occult practices, then and now, included the use of drugs. The idea here is a way to gain power over our environment. Drugs alter our mind, so that we don’t have to interact with the world as it actually is, but as our drug-altered mind perceives it. We think we gain control, but instead we become addicts (another word for slave). Or perhaps we seek an occult power to change the world around us. In the quest for power, we again become slaves.

Enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, and envying are all cousins. The essence of these behaviors is to pit one person or group against another in order to gain control.

Drunkenness and carousing have the idea of participating in a drunken party. Both of these activities seek to control the environment around us by creating a drug-induced imaginary world within our heads.

These behaviors do not breathe the spirit of Jesus into our world. They do however lead us into dysfunction, addiction, escape, and ultimately depression. The thing they all have in common: a focus on “Me.” My appetite fulfilled, me in control, me over you. This is the world’s way, but not God’s way. When we self-examine and see these behaviors, it tells us something very tangible: we are walking in the flesh. The answer is to crucify the flesh, to set it aside and instead walk in the Spirit.

Paul exhorts the Galatians to focus on walking in the Spirit rather than trying to follow rules. Rule-following justifies fleshly behavior. Spirit-following unleashes the resurrection power of Jesus.

Biblical Text

¹⁷ For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. ¹⁹ Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife,

jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions,²¹ envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.