

**Galatians 5: 16 and 17; “The Flesh Versus the Spirit”, Message # 38 in the series –  
“Christ has Set us Free”, a Bible Study conducted on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023,  
in the Afternoon Worship Service.**

When Paul says: “I say then”, he is drawing a conclusion from what he previously said in verse 15. In that verse he warned the believers in the churches of Galatian against their biting and devouring one another when they disagreed with each other over the doctrinal issues related to the law. He was saying that to bite and devour one another was to be in the flesh in their using harsh, bitter, and angry words with each other. What could they do to prevent these kinds of God-dishonoring verbal exchanges from taking place? 2 things are found here which they would need to learn and do in relation to living the Christian life. We will need to learn them as well. Paul tells them, 1<sup>st</sup> – That we should walk in the Spirit, and then we will not fulfill the lust of the flesh. And 2<sup>nd</sup> – We should learn to understand what is going on inside our own hearts; that a spiritual battle exists there.

**1<sup>st</sup> of all – Paul tells us that we should walk in the Spirit, and then we will not fulfill the lust of the flesh.**

Verse 16 says: “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” Let us understand that there are these 2 principles at work in the life of Christian; the flesh and the Spirit. The Spirit of God gives spiritual life to those who are trusting in Christ, so that they may learn to do what is right, what will honor God, and show our love to our brothers and sisters. The flesh is what we are by nature apart from Christ’s grace. Paul is assuming here that we as Christians do understand that we still have “the flesh” with us as a Christian person. The Christian is here exhorted to walk in the Spirit.

What does this mean, to walk in the Spirit? To walk in the Spirit is to go about to live your Christian life, doing all that you do for God, loving Him and keeping His commandments, by faith in Christ. You do this by the power of His Spirit, which He supplies and gives to you. Each newborn babe in Christ must come to understand the difference between these 2 principles. It is the difference between what their old fleshly nature wants to do, and what the Holy Spirit wants them to do. The Holy Spirit works in accordance with the Christian’s new nature, influencing their mind and giving them the desire to do what is right. In this holy way, then, if the Christian does walk in the Spirit, he or she will grow up to be a mature Christian.

Turn with me over to Romans Chapter 8, and verse 5. “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.” “For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” “Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.” “So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.” ‘Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.’

To live “according to the flesh” is to live the life of an unbeliever, a person who does not really know God. This person who is living according to the flesh is living according to their own thoughts of what God is like, and they will develop their own way of thinking how God should be worshiped and served. People who live this way are really living according to the flesh; they set their minds on the things of their own earthly thoughts. They set their minds on the pleasures, and activities of the world, and they disregard what God would have them to do. What is it that you are focusing upon? If it is not God and His word, then you have a carnal mind.

That carnal mind is enmity, it is hostile towards God and His truth governing your life. You are not subject to the law of God, and neither can you be without the grace of Christ. You cannot please God in this state of resistance to the Spirit’s motions. You will consciously be living apart

from the saving, teaching, and keeping work of the Holy Spirit. God is not in all your thoughts. Look over at Psalm 10: 4. “For the wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts.” “His ways are always prospering; Your judgments are far above, out of his sight; as for all his enemies, he sneers at them.” “He has said in his heart, ‘I shall not be moved; I shall never be in adversity.’” “His mouth is full of cursing and deceit and oppression; under his tongue is trouble and iniquity.”

This is how people are who do not know God live. They are living according to the flesh. They need the New Birth. They need a new nature. They need to be made new creatures in Christ. But the Christian has been given a new nature. It is called the seed of righteousness in 1<sup>st</sup> John 3: 9 – “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.” It is God and Christ who have sent the Holy Spirit into the heart of every believer in Christ to create in them a new nature.

In the New Birth the Christian receives a new identity in Christ. In this new nature there is a seed of righteousness which is planted in their heart. And it will grow up to bear fruit for God. The Holy Spirit’s work is always perfect, even while the believer’s work is not. But the believer is made a partaker of the divine nature and in accordance with that work. He does not practice sin, and will not ultimately tolerate or approve of any known sin. This is because God is at work in him, to change his whole attitude towards the toleration of sin.

2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 1: 2-4 – “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” The way that the Holy Spirit is first received is by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Turn with me over to the gospel of John Chapter 6, verse 57. “As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.” “This is the bread which came down from heaven – not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead.” “He who eats this bread will live forever.” “These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum.” “Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can understand it?’”

“When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, ‘Does this offend You?’” “What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?” “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing.” “The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” “But there are some of you who do not believe.” “For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him.” “And He said, ‘Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.’” “From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with him no more.”

We see here that it was the living Father who sent the Lord Jesus. Jesus lives because of the Father. That is, as a man and as the only Mediator between God and man, He had His life, and His appointment to do all that He did to secure our salvation. By His holy life and His sacrificial death, He would purchase for us the Holy Spirit’s working in our life. All this was from God the Father. There were some of Christ’s professed disciples who did not believe this.

Jesus was trying to show them the connection between their believing in Him, and their receiving the Holy Spirit to work in their heart. They needed to feed by faith upon Christ spiritually and live, but they thought that He was talking to them about eating His physical body, and so they were troubled over the saying that they must eat His flesh and His blood. It was the Spirit alone who could give them life and the correct understanding. The flesh would profit them nothing towards their becoming His true disciples. But it was because they were walking according to the flesh that they stumbled over this saying and went back from following Him. In

order to be saved and to have the power to live a life glorifying to God, Jesus was saying that they must partake of Him, the bread of life, by faith. “The one who eats this bread of Christ Himself and His words, would live forever.

But it is the Spirit who gives life, Jesus says. He gives life in regeneration; He gives saving faith. And He gives the right understanding of Christ’s words. The flesh, your own efforts and your own understanding, apart from the Scriptures and His guiding you into the truth of them, will profit nothing. You cannot walk in the Spirit unless you have received the Spirit. And you cannot receive the Spirit without faith in Christ.

**2<sup>nd</sup> – We should learn to understand what is going on inside our own hearts; that a spiritual battle exists there.**

Verse 17 – “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.” Once you have the Spirit, it does not mean that the flesh (the Old Man, the old sinful nature) has gone entirely away. The dominion of sin is gone. The power of sin has been broken over you. You have experienced a real death to sin. But there are still some corrupt remnants of sin which remain in the your as a law or principle. These remnants of sin lust against the Spirit’s good motions in your life. You love God’s law, but you find that you are unable to do and keep it without great resistance and hindrance coming to you from the flesh.

Romans 7: 14-21 – “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.” “For what I am doing, I do not understand.” “For what I will to do, that I do not practice, but what I hate, that I do.” “If then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good.” “But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.” “For I know that in me, (that is, in my flesh) nothing good wells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.” “For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.” “Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.” “I find then a law, that evil is present with the one who wills to do good.”

These verses are a good example of what is often taking place in the believer’s experience. The flesh is lusting against the Spirit and the Spirit is lusting against the flesh. There are both new desires and old desires which exist as spiritual realities within you. You find yourself in the midst of a battle that is going on within yourself. Notice how Paul says that in his flesh he finds “no good thing”. The flesh, the Old nature cannot be made better by grace. Its motions and desires and actions must all be mortified, and sins must be repented of.

But the Holy Spirit and His powerful working are here set against the sinful impulses which the Old Man, your flesh, will try to get you to do. And so, all of this, the Spirit’s working with the New Nature against the flesh to mortify its lusts, and the flesh lusting against the Spirit to hinder God’s purpose, all of this fulfills the righteous purpose which God has, which is your becoming righteous and holy in all of your behavior. You will, over time, learn to overcome the world and the flesh. All of this is of God’s appointment and His working in your life.

John Gill says: “By “the Spirit” is meant the internal principle of grace in a regenerate man, and is so called from the author of it, the Spirit of God, whose name it bears, because it is his workmanship; and from the seat and subject of it, the soul or spirit of man; and from the nature of it, it is spiritual, a new heart and a new Spirit; its objects are spiritual, and it minds, savors, and delights in spiritual things: and the meaning of the lusting of the one against the other, for it is reciprocal, hence it follows, that the one wills, chooses, desires, and affects what is contrary to the other; so the flesh, or the old man, the carnal I, in regenerate persons, wills, chooses, desires, and loves carnal things, which are contrary to the Spirit or principle of grace in the soul; and on the other hand, the Spirit or the new man, the spiritual I, wills, chooses, desires, approves, and loves spiritual things, such as are contrary to corrupt nature.”

In what kinds of situations, then, does this battle between the flesh and the Spirit take place? It is interesting to note that some people in the church at Corinth were being compared to carnal unbelievers over in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3, verses 1-3. “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.” “I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal.” “For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?”

So we see here that being carnal, being fleshly minded, although it is something that cannot predominate in a Christian, it is true that sometimes as a true Christian, that you may fall into that mindset for a time. Why does this happen? It is not that the person is unregenerate; it is because they are not walking in the Spirit. Walking in the Spirit is being spiritually minded, and it brings life and peace as Romans 8: 6 says. But turn with me over to James Chapter 4, and verses 1-6. “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?”

“You lust and do not have.” “You murder and covet and cannot obtain.” “You fight and war.” “Yet you do not have because you do not ask.” “You ask and you do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.” “Adulterers and adulteresses!” “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” “Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world make himself an enemy of God.” “Or do you think that the Scripture speaks in vain, ‘The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?’” “But He gives more grace.” “Therefore He says: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’”

You see, God’s purpose is to make each Christian into a humble believer who will respond to the motions of the Holy Spirit in their heart; not to become worldly, not to covet what others have, or fight and war with them; not to pursue the pleasures of the world, but to pursue greatness and glory of knowing God for yourself. The Spirit who dwells in you will yearn jealously for this. Pray that you will too. Let us think upon these things and determine by the grace of God to fight this good fight against the flesh by the power of the Spirit who has been given to us. He gives more grace. He gives a greater grace.