

Free: The Message of Galatians Then & Now

Lesson Nine – Walk Free

Galatians 5:16-26

Beloved, we are in Christ and have been set free from sin, Satan, and self. Our life in Christ stands in the vicarious atoning sacrifice of the cross and the victory displayed by the empty tomb. While the abundant life of Christ is available to all believers, it is not automatic. We must “keep standing firm” (Galatians 5:1) in this freedom and “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16). To “walk [in] the Spirit” means to have our daily lives under the Spirit’s control.

I. The Fight (Galatians 5:16-18)

As believers we have 3 very real enemies—the world, the flesh and the devil. Dr. Adrian Rogers said, “The world is the external foe; the devil is the infernal foe; the flesh is the internal foe” (Dr. Rogers, *Victory Over the Flesh*, Adrian Rogers Sermon Archive).

The **world** is a philosophy of thought, a system, an organization headed up by the devil. Ephesians 2:2 calls him “the prince of the power of the air.” The world is constantly bombarding us with messages peddled by the world in an effort to squeeze us into its mold. The world primarily uses media (print media, televised media, the internet) to try to influence us how to act, how to dress, how to think, etc. Paul warns us in Romans 12:2, “Do not be **conformed to this world**, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind**, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (emphasis mine).

The **devil** is “a murderer” and the “father of lies” (John 8:44). His goal is “to steal and kill and destroy” (John 10:10) what is rightfully ours in Christ. We are cautioned, “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

The **flesh** is described as the indwelling principle of sin that remains within us even after conversion (see Romans 7). According to one commentary, “the flesh, denotes mere human nature, the earthly nature of man apart from divine influence, and therefore prone to sin and opposed to God” (Logos).

In our study today, Paul is focusing on the role of the flesh in our daily decisions. The flesh cannot be redeemed, rehabilitated, or restored. It must be crucified—therein is the challenge! Paul writes, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16).

Here, [the flesh] means, “a left-over, free disposition to sin that we have from our father Adam.” It is in us all. It is the carnal desire of the lower part of your nature. And the Bible calls that *the flesh*. And I told you this morning that, if the world were to evaporate, and

the devil disappear, you still have the potentiality to sin (Dr. Rogers, *Victory Over the Flesh*, Adrian Rogers Sermon Archive).

“Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). We are operating either in the energy of the flesh or the power of the Holy Spirit. The potential for living a holy life is ours because of the cleansing power of the blood of Christ and the indwelling Spirit. It is a matter of obedience, of yielding to Him, of surrendering ourselves to Him, moment by moment.

Paul exposes the gritty warfare that rages within—between our desperately wicked, sinful tendency toward unrighteousness and the Holy Spirit’s work to draw us in the way of obedience and righteousness. The Spirit and the flesh have very different appetites, which is what creates a perpetual conflict. “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” (Galatians 5:17). We have both the Spirit of God and the flesh indwelling in us, although the Spirit is infinitely more powerful than the flesh. The activity of both in our lives directly connects to our will and the choices we make. The flesh is demanding and relentless, unlike the still, small voice of the Spirit who will not force His will on us. We are created with the ability to choose to indulge the flesh or yield to the Spirit of God. One leads to defeat, and the other to victory in Jesus.

Be forewarned. The flesh is so exceedingly deceptive that if it cannot trick us into indulging our base desires, it will dress up in religious activity in order to gain respectability.

If the flesh is not allowed to indulge its repulsive side, it will indulge its religious side. It will dress up in its Sunday best and go to church. It will walk the aisle, submit to baptism, sing in the choir, teach a Sunday school class, and indulge in good works. It will sing, pray, and take Communion. It will wear a hair shirt, fast, and deprive itself. It will carry a Bible and go on visitation. It will go to Bible school and seminary and get ordained to the ministry. It will write articles for Christian magazines and review books. It will even become a missionary. There is nothing that the flesh will not do. It is a great doer. It will persuade us that all of this “doing” is just what God wants. It is just another way of putting us under law (John Phillips, *Exploring Galatians: An Expository Commentary*, p. 164).

In summary, Paul tells us that victory over sin is not the result of strict adherence to the law. Legalism is little more than behavior modification, attempting to control the flesh with externals. This proves to be a short-term fix to a long-term problem! When we attempt to control the flesh by sheer willpower, it will be revealed eventually, and generally produces a disproportionate response to an unrelated situation. Only by the Spirit working within us and our surrendered wills can we experience victory. “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law” (Galatians 5:18).

II. The Flesh (Galatians 5:17-21)

We have seen Paul strongly denounce the error of legalism being championed by the Judaizers. Now he corrects the other extreme—license. We are called to liberty in Christ! Our liberty does not, however, give up the right to live anyway we choose. Rather it gives us the power to live as we ought in Christ Jesus. As Paul addresses this tenet of our faith, he contrasts the deeds of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit.

The flesh is cunning and wily, enticing us to indulge in its base appetites. James sets forth an explanation of how the flesh operates in the lives of believers. James 1:13-16 says,

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.

While we are all familiar with the flesh and its enticements, Paul lists them for us—just in case we need to be reminded of the depth of depravity our flesh is capable of. It is not an exhaustive list because the apostle adds "and things like these" (Galatians 5:21), indicating it is possible to expand it!

Paul concludes his thoughts on the flesh with this word of caution: "Those who practice such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:21). While a believer may intermittently get pulled into these sins, genuine repentance and confession will lead to restoration and forgiveness from the Lord. But those whose lifestyles continually and habitually demonstrate indulgence in the deeds of the flesh have every reason to doubt their so-called conversion experience as it is evidence that they were not genuinely born again and "will not inherit the Kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:21). He created a comparable list in Romans 1:28-32,

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

Paul wrote a similar theme in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11,

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers,

will inherit the Kingdom of God. **Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God** (emphasis mine).

Paul is talking about people who abandon themselves to a lifestyle habitually dominated by these deeds.

A word of caution here. Such strongly worded passages often lead us to step into a role which is not ours, that of judge, as we observe the habit patterns of others. Paul did not mean for his lists of dirty deeds to become a checklist for determining whether a person is saved or not. If any of us were to be caught in a weak moment or on a bad day, we would all fail such a test and be judged by others as one who is outside the Kingdom of God.

Paul writes, "So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way" (Romans 14:12-13). In other words, judge yourself against God's Word and leave judging others to the Lord. Psalm 75:7 says, "God is the Judge." He alone knows the heart and only He can rightfully judge the deeds and motivations of the heart. 1 Chronicles 28:9 says, "The Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts." Beware beloved, of judging another; at the very least we will probably come to a wrong conclusion. We should be fruit inspectors (Matthew 7:15-20), but the role of judge is for God alone.

Beloved, we have been washed by the blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sin. Isaiah 1:18 says, "'Come now, and let us reason together,' says the LORD, 'though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.'" At salvation all our sin debt, past, present and future, was paid in full! And, praise God, we are continually being cleansed "by the washing of water with the word" (Ephesians 5:26), by the Holy Spirit.

III. The Fruit (Galatians 5:22-26)

In contrast to the deeds of the flesh, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit. Notice the word **fruit** is in the singular form.

"The single form stresses that these qualities are a unity, like a bunch of grapes instead of separate pieces of fruit, and that they are all to be found in all Christians. In this they differ from the 'gifts' of the Spirit which are given one by one to different people as the church has need" (F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, p. 262).

Those who are obedient to the Word and dependent upon the Spirit of God produce beautiful, nourishing spiritual fruit that catches the eye of unbelievers while ministering grace to the body of Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can produce the fruit, but He does not do it automatically for us. We must crucify the flesh and appropriate what was accomplished on our behalf at Calvary.

The struggle between our flesh and our new nature is real. Yet there is more truth to help us win this battle. Paul explains that those who know Jesus Christ do not have to respond to the flesh because they **have crucified the [flesh] with its passions and desires**. This crucifixion refers to our identification with Christ in his death and resurrection (Galatians 2:20). When Christ died, our flesh was judged. This does not mean our propensity to sin has been eradicated or rendered inoperative. We must accept that our old nature has died with Christ and that as new people we have an increasing power to resist sin (Romans 6:10–12) (M. Anders, *Galatians-Colossians*, Logos).

Through His death, burial, and resurrection the Lord Jesus makes Himself available to us by the Holy Spirit in the measure to which we make ourselves available to Him. As we draw on the divine resources of the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit will produce His fruit in our lives.

In Christ we have been **set free** from the external control of the law to operate in the internal control by the Holy Spirit. Hallelujah! What a Savior!