

LIVING BY THE SPIRIT
(Studies in Galatians)
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We are at war! No, I am not talking about a war that involves armies and tanks and planes and bombs and missiles. I am talking about the war we wage every single day—the battle that goes on within each one of us. Here’s how Paul describes it in Gal 5:16-17:

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want (5:16-17, NRSV).

The word translated “the flesh” (σάρξ) is translated by the NIV as “the sinful nature.” Exactly what is “the flesh”?

Let’s keep thinking in terms of war. No army can invade a country from the sea unless it can obtain a bridgehead. Temptation would be powerless to affect us unless there was some thing already in us to respond to temptation. Sin could gain no foothold in our minds and hearts and souls and lives unless there was an enemy within the gates who was willing to open the door to sin. The flesh is exactly the bridgehead through which sin invades us. The flesh is like the enemy within the gates who opens the way to the enemy who is pressing in through the gates.

Do not confuse “the flesh” with “the body.” The body can become the instrument of the service and the glory of God; the flesh cannot. The body can be purified and even glorified; the flesh must be eliminated and eradicated—it must be crucified.

Oscar Wilde once remarked that he could resist anything but temptation. In a humorous way, that’s a fairly good description of how the flesh works. It can resist anything but temptation.

But, before we go any further, we need to back-up. Look with me, please, at chapter 3, the first 5 verses.

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified! The only thing I want to learn from you is this: Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing. Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard? (3:1-5, NRSV).

J. B. Phillips translates the opening words of this passage as, “O you dear idiots of Galatia . . .” Listen to what Paul is saying. He is arguing on the basis of the Galatians’ conversion experience. In the experience of conversion, we were made right with God by the power of His Spirit and not by our own human efforts. The transformation of our lives is a process which we were powerless to begin. Now, having begun with the Spirit, it is sheer idiocy to believe that we can complete the process without the Spirit. It is absolute craziness to think that we can be right with God apart from the work of His Spirit.

Now, let’s return to Paul’s discussion in chapter 5, beginning at verse 18:

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another (5:18-26, NRSV).

When Paul writes to the Galatian Christians, he is terribly upset. Why? Because their preoccupation with keeping the Mosaic Law is splitting their churches along racial lines, separating Jews from Gentiles. In chapter 2, Paul relates the story of Peter’s inconsistent behavior in Antioch. It seems that when the “James Gang” from Jerusalem rode into town, Peter—out of fear of the “knife-happy” circumcisers—separated himself from the Gentiles. Furthermore, his example led to other Jews, including even Barnabas, to refrain from fellowshiping Gentiles. Paul was furious and he publicly rebuked Peter.

Now, I would like to suggest that in his discussion regarding the “works of the flesh” and the “fruit of the spirit” that Paul’s primary concern is for the unity of fellowship among the Galatian Christians. Notice the verses that frame this discussion:

v. 15—If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

v. 26—Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

It is clear that the fellowship of the Galatian churches is fragile and is in danger of being fractured; indeed, it is likely that some fracturing has already occurred.

The first five works of the flesh—fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery—and the last two—drunkenness, carousing—deal with sins associated with the sort of fellowship that went on in pagan temples. The middle eight works of the flesh—enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy—deal with sins going on in the fellowship of the community of Christians. And notice, that by the weight of sheer numbers, the emphasis in the list of the works of the flesh is on those sins which damage, divide, and destroy the unity of those who claim to be Christians. Oh it is so easy for us Christians to point out the obviousness of the works of the flesh in the outside world. Oh it is so easy for us Christians to denounce the sins of the outside world. But are we willing to take our own medicine? Are we willing to be judged by the standards of the Spirit? And if so, what do we find? As you examine the history of the Churches of Christ, who is winning the war? The flesh or the Spirit? As you look at the condition of the Churches of Christ in your own city, who is winning the war? The flesh or the Spirit? And as you subject your own congregation to the scrutiny of the Spirit, who is winning the war? The flesh or the Spirit? Our works of the flesh may not be so obvious to us, but they are obvious to a watching world.

Several years ago, I was auditing a Bible class at a Baptist Seminary. When it was my turn to introduce myself, I indicated that I was a preacher for a local Church of Christ. Immediately I was asked, “Are you affiliated with the United Church of Christ?” After I almost passed-out from shock, I responded by pointing out that there is a huge doctrinal chasm between the Churches of Christ and the United Churches of Christ. And then I sarcastically quipped, “Besides, if you knew our history, you would never accuse us of being the *United* Church of Christ.” Again I ask you, who is winning the war?

Let us look now at the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It seems that Paul has in mind here a kind of “character-sketch” of Christ. In the context of the problems among the Galatian Christians, what Paul is here describing are social traits, not primarily inner qualities of individuals. These traits are absolutely essential if we—as brothers and sisters in Christ—are to maintain the “unity of the Spirit” (cf. Eph 4:3).

Have you ever wondered why Paul speaks of the “fruit” of the Spirit rather than the “fruits” of the Spirit? He speaks of the “works”—plural—of the flesh, but when he comes to the Spirit, he says “fruit”—singular. Why? I believe that Paul uses the singular “fruit” to emphasize the unity and the unifying nature of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit draws Christians together whereas the works of the flesh drive them apart.

We are at war! And Paul lays before each one of us our choices. What will it be?

Acts of hatred OR Love and Joy?
Discord OR Peace?
Anger (quick temper) OR Patience?
Fits of rage OR Acts of kindness?
Acts of selfish ambition OR Acts of generosity?
Dissensions leading to factions OR Faithfulness to others?
Acts of envy OR Acts of consideration?

Perhaps you’re thinking, “Enough already! I get the point. What I need is a practical, down-to-earth example. I realize that Paul says in 5:14 that love is the fulfillment of the law, and then in 5:16 & 25 to walk by the Spirit. What does it mean to love my neighbor, and in particular my brother or sister in Christ, in the concrete circumstances of everyday life? What does it mean to walk by the Spirit?” Good questions. That brings us to chapter 6 and the first 10 verses.

Before I read these verses, I need to bring to your attention a problem we have with our English translations. Actually, the problem is not so much with the translations as it is with English. In English, the word “you” can be singular or plural. I can use the word “you” to speak to any single member of this audience or I can use the word “you” to address the entire audience. I learned to speak English in the South, and I’ve never completely got over that. Now, many who are not from the South do not realize that the word “y’all” is both singular and plural. For example, “Y’all come back” is said whether one person is leaving or whether twenty-five people are leaving. However, the plural

meaning can be emphasized by saying, “All y’all come back.” Anyway, I think all y’all get my point. Now, this confusion does not exist in the Greek language, the language of the New Testament.

In Gal 6:1-10, Paul masterfully weaves together the responsibilities of the individual Christian and the responsibilities of the community of Christians. He goes back-and-forth between what “you” the individual should do and what “you” the community should do. But, this is very difficult for us to see in most English translations. So, I offer you my translation of these verses. I must confess that I have taken some liberties; however, in so doing I believe that I have captured not only the letter, but the spirit, of Paul’s words. Most of all, I have tried to bring out the magnificent way in which Paul deals with the Galatian Christians both individually and corporately.

Dear brothers and sisters, if another Christian is caught in any kind of wrongdoing, all of you—who consider yourselves to be spiritual—should gently and humbly help that person to “get back on the right track.” But each one of you must be careful—each of you must keep an eye on yourself, so that no one will fall into the temptation of thinking, “I would never do a thing like that!” All of you should share each other’s troubles and problems, and in this way you all will obey the law of Christ. The law of Christ is to follow His example of lovingly bearing the burdens of others. Now, if any one of you thinks that he or she is “too good” or “too important” to help someone in need, then such a one is sorely mistaken. Such a one is only fooling himself or herself. Each one of you should judge your own behavior. If it is good, then you can be proud of what you yourself have done, without having to compare it with what someone else has done. In other words, no one is good just because someone else is bad. Each one of us will one day answer to God for our own behavior.

All of you who are being taught the Christian message should help your teachers by paying them. Share with them as they have shared with all of you.

Do not let any one of you fool yourself—no one makes a fool of God. No one can thumb his or her nose at God and get away with it. You will always reap exactly what you sow! If any of you attempt to be right with God on the basis of your own efforts—and especially if you are putting your confidence in the fleshly act of circumcision—you will harvest the consequences of decay and death. On the other hand, each of you who relies on the Spirit to live a life pleasing to God will harvest eternal life from the Spirit. Listen all of you! Don’t get discouraged and give up! The time will come when we will reap a harvest of blessing. So then, as often as we have the chance, all of us should do good to everyone—and we have a special responsibility to do good to everyone who belongs to our family in the faith.

We are living in a time and in a culture where many people are hungering for “spirituality.” Too often, such people have found organized religion and the mainline churches to be cold and sterile. And so, they search elsewhere. The term “spirituality,” as it is used by our contemporary society, has no doctrinal content and it makes no moral demands. (How convenient!) There is nothing that you *have to believe* and there is nothing that you *have to do*. Each individual is free to find his or her own “spirituality”—to find that which makes them feel whole or fulfilled or simply makes them feel good. This is certainly not the biblical view of “spirituality.” Being “spiritual”—according to Paul’s letter to the Galatians—means that you *must believe in Jesus* and that you *must behave as the Spirit directs*. You must believe that Jesus Christ was crucified on a cross to redeem you and to raise you to a new life. And you must live by the Spirit. To borrow from the military imagery of 5:25, you must “keep in step with the Spirit.” Remember, we are talking about the “Holy” Spirit whose purpose it is to make you holy. Faith in Christ and holiness of life— that’s “spirituality.”

We are at war. Whose side are you on?

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