

### Galatians 5:16-26

**Gal 5:16 (NKJV) I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> 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.**

In studying this passage, it is important to take some time as we enter into this section on the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit to do some more in-depth teaching on this constant struggle that exists between these two spiritual entities – the flesh vs. the Spirit. I feel somewhat passionate about this simply because I spent over five years trying to both understand the issue, and how to accurately address and apply the issue in a practical way. I am personally convinced that there is a great deal of theological confusion surrounding this whole topic, and it makes how [Galatians 5:16-26](#) is approached even more important. For instance, there are many Christians who take the position that the negative attributes of the works of the flesh can consistently exist in a Christian's life without any concern as to whether or not that person is genuinely saved. That is a very frivolous and almost flippant handling of the passage. It is hard to conceive how someone that is serious about understanding Scripture could maintain that position after a careful study of the passage. If we take [Galatians 5:21](#) seriously, that people who have certain lifestyle attributes will not inherit the kingdom of God, then this becomes a very important theological section of Scripture for every believer.

Now, to add more credence and weight to this passage in Galatians, it is my contention that to some degree that Galatians is simply a kind of shorter version of Romans. [Romans 6 and 7](#) address this conflict in much more detail and provides a lot of meaningful insight into the actual struggle that believers have in this area, so I want to spend a little more time in that part of Scripture to help clarify the struggle and conflict that is addressed in [Galatians 5](#). This is a very doctrinal subject, a theological battleground for many. It is not always easy to initially understand, so it is something that we need to study cautiously and carefully if we are going to arrive at the correct understanding of this conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. One very important verse is [Romans 6:6](#) which says,

**Ro 6:6 (NKJV) knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.**

Obviously, there is a very close connection between [Romans 6:5](#) and [Romans 6:6](#), but it should be appreciated that there is a sharper tone to what is being said in v6. In v5, for instance, Paul says that the believer was united with Christ in His “**death**”, but in v6 he makes a deliberate change in the wording to that of being “**crucified with Him**”.<sup>1</sup> If I can say it this way, is one thing to die, and quite another to be crucified. The verb “**crucified**” conveys the idea that something has been completely destroyed, and in this case it is what Paul calls the “**old man**”. It is important to appreciate that the idea of dying for the believer is something that happened to them once at salvation, but there is also the sense in which it is something that happens every day.<sup>2</sup> Paul said in [1 Corinthians 15:31](#) that “**I die daily**”.

So, to further reiterate this idea of dying, [Romans 6:6-10](#) simply restates and elaborates what already has been affirmed in [Romans 6:3-5](#), namely the idea that believers have “**died to sin**”. Some form of the word “**dies**” (“**crucified, death, died, dead**”) occurs nine times in these five verses, so it becomes apparent that the theme of having “**died to sin**” is at the forefront of Paul's argument and is what he wants to emphasize. What he repeats is what he is emphasizing. It is what he wants his readers to see

and understand. Because Christ willingly gave up His body to death, atonement was made for sin and the way opened for the Spirit of God to have the fullest access into and the most powerful operation within the human heart. It is the very work of God to counteract and destroy the spirit and soul of sin within the believer so that they “**should no longer be slaves of sin**”.<sup>3</sup> The consistent testimony of those who are maturing in their faith is that they are overcomers. Sin is certainly in their life, but it is not something that is completely dominating and controlling their life. Why is that so? It is because they are no longer “**slaves of sin**”, but have become “**slaves of righteousness**”.

Essential to the believer’s practice is their knowledge of very fundamental and basic truths. The Christian life cannot be lived in an intellectual vacuum void of a knowledge of God’s Word. If a Christian is going to be able to grow in their Christian life, it is essential that they understand certain vital and indispensable biblical principles.<sup>4</sup> A Christian void of spiritual knowledge will quickly lose their way and become prey to the destructive influences of the flesh. So, spiritual knowledge is one of the important foundational elements of a successful Christian life. Paul actually uses the word “**know**” or a form of it six times in [Romans 6-7](#). However, it should be noted that just having spiritual knowledge is not sufficient. In fact, for a believer to have biblical knowledge, but not appropriate it in their life, is actually a sin. [James 4:17](#) declares,

**Jas 4:17 (NKJV) Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin.**

[Hebrews 10:26](#) gives a very stern warning when it declares,

**Heb 10:26 (NKJV) For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,**

The simple fact still remains, however, that in order for a believer to grow spiritually requires the acquisition and application of spiritual truth into their life. From beginning to end, the Christian life is founded on spiritual knowledge, biblical principles, sound doctrine, and life-changing truth found only in the Word of God. So, if someone simply chooses to ignore and carelessly disregard the truth, in reality they are neglecting the one thing that they need the most in order to grow spiritually. In essence, Paul begins [Romans 6:6](#) with the assertion that living a victorious life over sin begins with biblical knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Notice again what he say – “**knowing this...**” Too often the current Christian culture has been a detriment to deeply encouraging believers to a deeper pursuit of biblical understanding. In many places doctrine has become a spiritually moot point. Between an easy-believism mentality and a fundamental lack of interest in doctrine and theology, the average believer has succumbed to a spiritual lethargy and doctrinal indifference that fosters mediocrity. Doctrine is for living, so when someone ignores and disregards the foundational dogma of Scripture, the inevitable result is an inability to understand and appropriate God’s life transforming truths into their lives. Rather than becoming the “**pillar and ground of the truth**” ([1 Timothy 3:15](#)), the church has become the seedbed for spiritual mediocrity. Rather than passing on the truth in a convincing and persuasive way, the church is passing on a kind of meaningless spiritual rhetoric that is having very little impact on the lives of the next generation.

Now, notice that [Romans 6:6](#) contains three very closely related clauses. There are certain things that the believer simply knows because of their personal spiritual experience.<sup>6</sup> Paul states that something

happened in order that something else may happen in order that a third thing might happen, and each clause begins with the introductory word “**that**”.

**<sup>6</sup> knowing this, (1) that our old man was crucified with Him, (2) that the body of sin might be done away with, (3) that we should no longer be slaves of sin (emphasis added).**

The goal, the objective, and the target is the third clause, or third conclusion, “**that we should no longer be slaves of sin**”. The end purpose is that believers should be free from the tyranny of sin and that they should no longer be a slave to sin. In the KJV, the word in the last phrase is translated “**serve**” – “**that henceforth we should not serve sin**”. The tense of the verb “**serve**” is the translation of a present tense, active voice infinitive which means that the believer should not keep on serving sin as a slave or serve sin as a habit of life.<sup>7</sup> However, before that can happen Paul states in his second conclusion that the “**body of sin**” has to be “**done away with**” so that believers should “**no longer be slaves of sin**”. This idea of “**the body of sin**” being done away with is a very important spiritual reality that anyone who is going to live victoriously in their Christian life must understand. This is the “**knowing this**” aspect that Paul mentioned at the beginning of v6. The “**body of sin**” has to first be rendered powerless and inoperative so that the believer can experience and enjoy personal spiritual freedom in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

The “**body of sin**” naturally, innately, and inherently brings with it a slavery to sin from which an unredeemed individual simply cannot free himself or herself. By its very nature and inherent power in the life of a non-believer, sin has the ability to coerce obedience despite personal resistance to its demands. It is so strong and powerful that the only way that it can be rendered inoperative is by the believer’s union with Christ.<sup>9</sup> The “**body of sin**” is where the corruption of the individual works. It is the seat and the instrument that sins uses to provoke, to fuel, and to stimulate its actions. It is expressive of the whole person as being corrupted by sin in their life.<sup>10</sup> Christ was the One who overcame sin for believers, and in their union with Him, believers are able to draw from His victory. That is one of the primary benefits of the death of Christ – so that “**the body of sin**” might be rendered powerless.

At this juncture in his argument, it is important to appreciate that in [Romans 6:6](#) that Paul introduces several important terms. The first is the phrase “**old man**”. This is what he declares was actually crucified. The term “**our old man**” is referring to the person that the believer was before Christ or the person that they were in Adam. It is a term used only three times in Scripture ([Romans 6:6](#), [Ephesians 4:22](#), and [Colossians 3:9](#)), and it always refers to the old, unrenewed self that the believer was before conversion.<sup>11</sup> Arndt and Gingrich define it as the earlier, unregenerate man, and Westcott defines it as the whole character that represents the former self.<sup>12</sup> It is that corrupt and polluted nature derived from Adam, and that it is very much a deprivation of the image of God and a universal pollution of the whole man.<sup>13</sup> The term denotes those sinful passions and evil propensities that existed within the believer before their heart was renewed. It refers to the love of sin and the indulgences created by that sin, and all in contrast to the new disposition that exists after the soul is converted.<sup>14</sup> It includes the old self, the old life, the sinful self, the sinful life, a corrupt nature, a depraved nature, an unregenerate nature, and a sinful nature. Thus it refers to life that was always being lived outside of God and without God.<sup>15</sup> Paul is skillfully using a contrast to make his point, so the contrast becomes his emphasis. It is similar to how the Apostle John in [1 John 1-2](#) constantly uses contrasts to define the difference between a genuine Christian and a pseudo-Christian. The contrast is the point.

The word for “**old**” is the Greek word “*palaios*” and means old with respect to use or something that is worn out and fit only to be discarded.<sup>16</sup> It is a term that refers to the believer’s previous life, what he was prior to salvation. It refers to that which is old simply because it has been superseded by that which is new. In other words, the “**old man**” has been superseded by the “**new man**”.<sup>17</sup> For instance, [Ephesians 4:24](#) says,

Eph 4:24 (NKJV) **and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.**

What Paul is saying is that the “**old man**” is now something with which the “**new man**” is to be finished. All of this should be clearly evident. The “**old man**”, the one who was crucified with Christ, is simply not compatible with the “**new man**” who is now in Christ.

If I can say it a different way, I simply cannot live the way that I use to live. I cannot do it. It is actually somewhat repulsive to me and how I think and how I want to live. It is imperative that the believer grasp the foundational truth that the old has given place to the new.<sup>18</sup> It is not that the believer is to now crucify the “**old man**” or to kill the “**old man**”. That is not the point at all. What Paul has clearly stated is that the “**old man**” has already been killed. Paul says that the “**old man**” was crucified with Christ Himself.<sup>19</sup> The contrast is between the unregenerate man and the regenerate man, between the “**old man**” and the “**new man**”. Paul wants to make this clear, so he represents the “**old man**” as having been crucified.<sup>20</sup> [Colossians 3:9-10](#) states it this way,

Col 3:9 (NKJV) **Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man (past tense) with his deeds,<sup>10</sup> and have put on the new man (past tense) who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,**

Dr. Barnhouse argues that the death of the “**old man**” is a past tense verb representing that the death of the “**old man**” has taken place “positionally”.<sup>21</sup> However, that is not what the text actually states. From a practical outworking, a believer always has to appropriate a positional truth into their Christian life. However, the dying that is depicted is in the indicative mood, aorist tense simply stating it as a fact that has happened. The believer’s task is to live their Christian life in the faith of the words that their “**old man was crucified with Christ**”. If the “**old man**” did not actually die with Christ, then the “**new man**” cannot live in Christ because he is not actually a “**new man**”, but is still “**in Adam**”.<sup>22</sup> The application of doctrine is never automatic, but must be appropriated once the believer realizes the truth embedded in the doctrine.

Barnhouse further says that Paul is not proposing the idea that the “**old man**” now becomes inactive and is neutralized so that he no longer has an impact on the believer. In fact, he says that would be a very erroneous perspective, and especially in light of the believer’s personal experience. Barnhouse says that Paul is not trying to convey that the “**old man**” has departed and therefore no longer has any effect on the believer.<sup>23</sup> However, that position simply misses the point. Why would Paul say that the “**old man was crucified**” with Christ, a phrase fully identifying that death has taken place, if the “**old man**” could still retain an influence on the individual? Once someone or something dies, it loses its influence on what it previously influenced. Clearly Paul is saying that something very strategic took place – something in someone actually “**died**”. If the “**old man**” is dead, then it cannot have an ongoing residual and enduring impact on the believer. Why? It is because the “**old man died**”. That clearly seems to be

Paul's point, so why espouse that the "old man" is still retaining a negative and positional influence on the believer's life? Later on in [Romans 7](#) Paul will talk about the "flesh" and what he calls the "law of sin" as what the believer is actually struggling with, but not the "old man". He never brings the "old man" up again in his argument. Why is that? It is because he died. As identified earlier, the term "old man" is only used three times in all of the New Testament – [Romans 6:6](#), [Ephesians 4:22](#), and [Colossians 3:9](#). The "old man" and the "law of sin" are very different terms with very different implications for the believer, so it is imperative and essential that they be understood as different aspects having different effects on the believer.

Paul's point is very clear - to be "in Christ" means that an individual is not the same person they previously were. A great change has occurred. It is not that the believer's life has been renovated or restored in some way, but that the very life of God has been given to them.<sup>24</sup> This is a remarkable truth that the believer now has a new and fully functioning life within them that was not previously a part of their life. A divinely ordained transaction has taken place and because it is divine in nature, the result is that it creates divinely ordained consequences. A failure to grasp this simple, yet profound truth is an area that leads to accepting false professions as legitimate conversions. The very nature of salvation is that it is life-transforming, but too often the church has both accepted and propagated false conversions by not identifying that supernatural and godly changes are a normal part of the salvific work of God in a believer's life. Those changes serve as a legitimate and valid means of testing the reality of someone's confession. The identification of legitimate spiritual changes should be viewed as both objective and reasonable. In fact, it would be spiritually unreasonable to not maintain those tangible and objective expectations within a local fellowship. That is why when Galatians 5 addresses these very negative attributes, Paul is making a distinct contrast between a believer and a non-believer. When someone looks at the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, there is literally no comparison between the two. It is simply the difference between light and darkness. They are so different that it impossible to try and connect them.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Barker, 552.

<sup>2</sup> Morris, 251.

<sup>3</sup> Clarke, *Romans 6:6*, ep.

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, *Conscience*, 214.

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, *Conscience*, 215.

<sup>6</sup> Hodge 180.

<sup>7</sup> Hobbs, 79.

<sup>8</sup> Hodge, 181.

<sup>9</sup> Hodge, 181.

<sup>10</sup> Owen, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Conner, 209.

<sup>12</sup> Earle, 166.

<sup>13</sup> Poole, 497.

<sup>14</sup> Barnes, 592.

<sup>15</sup> Preacher's, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Hobbs, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Vine's, 807.

<sup>18</sup> Kittel, 769.

<sup>19</sup> Boice, 667.

<sup>20</sup> Murray, 219-220.

<sup>21</sup> Barnhouse, 93.

<sup>22</sup> Newell, 213-214.

<sup>23</sup> Barnhouse, 93.

<sup>24</sup> MacArthur, Faith, 116.

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