

Galatians 5:17

Gal 5:17 (NKJV) 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.

One problem that is very prevalent in the Christian life is the simple fact that we are always in a spiritual struggle whether we like it or not. We are always engaged in this battle between the “**flesh**” and the “**Spirit**”, and it would be utter folly on my part as a pastor to somehow diminish the reality of the conflict or the intensity of the conflict. Either would be an extreme mishandling of Scripture. Paul says that the conflict is so strong that it often times hinders a believer from doing what they know that they need to do. One of the realities that I have come to appreciate more and more over the years is that the conflict that happens between the “**flesh**” and the “**Spirit**” is simply the normal Christian life. In fact, and I know this may sound a little strange, but sometimes it actually bothers me if I am not engaged in some kind of spiritual battle with my flesh. Why say that? Well, it is because the “**flesh**” is always there, always present, always working. There is never a time when it is not “active”, not operating, and not functioning. I.e., it is never passive, never submissive, never lifeless. If I can say it this way, it never breaks down or runs out of gas. To the contrary, it is always, always working against whatever it is the Holy Spirit wants to do in my life. So, if I find myself not struggling in some area that I know God is working on, then most likely my flesh has somehow deceived me that all is well. This may not be an accurate statement, but I think the godlier someone becomes, the more intense the spiritual battle becomes. For the believer who is never really yielding their life to Christ, why would the flesh even want to draw attention to that?

The first thing to do with [Galatians 5:17](#) is to define what the “**flesh**” actually is. Obviously, in this context in [Galatians 5](#), it is not referring to our physical outer shell, but to something else. The Greek word is “*sarx*”. It is a small word with a very big meaning. In the [Galatians 5](#) context, by implication it refers directly to human nature with all of its frailties and ungodly propensities, both physical and moral. It is considered to be the seat of sin in man.¹ It is a reference to a man’s moral weakness, to his personal selfishness, and to a man’s indwelt propensity to sin and failure. In the believer’s life, it is something that will not be eradicated until he has been glorified.

The “**flesh**” is man’s human nature without the influence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Left to just himself and his flesh, man has no chance. We might could say that it is a man without God. Clearly in [Galatians 5](#), Paul is referring to that time in people’s lives when they were not under the control of God’s Spirit, but rather under the control of their own carnal and sensual instincts. Obviously Paul recognizes that it impacts both the unbeliever and the believer as well. When he uses the word “you” in v17, he is talking directly about Christians. In essence, the unbeliever does not even have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and he has no inclination to even hear what the Holy Spirit may even say to him if He chose to do so. The “**flesh**” refers to that which a man does on his own independent of God’s aid, guidance, or enabling. The “**flesh**” in and of itself is corrupt and creates a mind that is darkened. It is an emotional faculty that is corrupted and a will that is literally dead toward God. It has been defined as one’s existence apart from God, and thus it has an innate drive that is opposed to God and to His way of life. The flesh is something that is very comfortable living in sin as opposed to living for God. In fact, it sees the life of God as completely loathsome. It is more than satisfied and has no problem constantly

¹ Strong, 1360.

giving itself to those things that it knows are in opposition to God and His Word.² A man's flesh has no godly drives and no godly aspirations. It is always completely satisfied with sin in any form. At its deepest level, it is completely satisfied to live life without God and without any consideration of God. Instead of the unbeliever controlling his appetites, his appetites are controlling him. It means that the unregenerate life of the lost man is constantly characterized by fleshly things, by fleshly outlooks and perspectives.

Now, there certainly are other verses that clearly describe that the flesh shapes a way of life that is in direct opposition to God. However, and this is good, there are also verses that state that the believer has been delivered from that shaping and control. It is not that the flesh is no longer existent or that it no longer has any influence over the believer, but that it simply is no longer able to control the believer's life. Because of the indwelling Holy Spirit which lives in the believer, the influence of the flesh has been greatly diminished so that it is no longer the controlling and dominating influence in the believer's life. Even though the "**flesh**" is an extremely powerful and formidable foe, it is no match for the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. For instance, [Romans 7:5-6](#) says,

Ro 7:5 (NKJV) For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. ⁶ But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not *in* the oldness of the letter.

The first things that are noticeable in v5 are two phrases – "**for when**" and "**we were**" – past tense. He is clearly alluding to that time in our life before we were saved. Before salvation, sin was literally exercising a full and complete "dominion" over the unbeliever's life, and it is a dominion of which they were not even aware. Even though they may have recognized from time to time that they had failed in some area of their life, they always saw themselves as strong enough to make it, strong enough to pull through whatever was bothering them. The natural man always sees himself as strong, as able, as resilient. He never sees himself as being dominated and controlled by sin. So this idea of being "**in the flesh**" is a position where the individual is constantly succumbing to temptations and continuously being dominated by "**sinful passions**" in their life (v7), most of which they are not even aware. These are passions that lead to sin, and passions that have their final expression in sin. They are the constant propensities toward sin that are constantly polluting the individual's life.

There simply is nothing more fatal than a failure to realize the terrible power of sin. Why is that? It is because sin destroys everything it touches. Sin is very powerful, and yet many people never see it. They ignore it, they disregard it, and they do not even take it into account. They act as if it has no effect on their life, and yet it is the very thing that is slowly destroying their life. They are so often unhappy, bitter, unsatisfied, self-centered, and harsh. However, they never think that it is because of sin in their life. They think that it is somebody else's fault, but not their fault. The truth and reality of what is happening in their life is that it is the incredibly powerful nature of sin operating in and working against their life. [Galatians 6:8](#) says,

² Verbrugge, 518.

⁸For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

For the individual who is lost, there is no reprieve from the influence of sin in their life. There is no means of control over its negative and unseen influence and domination of their entire being. They are slaves to sin and are not even aware of their predicament. In their minds, they see themselves as being free and independent to live however they deem fit, while in reality the corruption and influence of sin is governing everything about their life. Their depravity and sinful proclivities are not even recognized. To the contrary, they are consistently denied and completely ignored.

The phrase that Paul uses in [Romans 7:5](#) to be “**in the flesh**” (v5) is a term for someone who is clearly an unbeliever. It describes what a man was before God saved him. As believers, we still have the “**flesh**” to deal with, but it does not have the same corrupting influence over our life that it used to have. I like the way that John MacArthur describes the flesh as it works in the believer. He said,

“It is a corruption that permeates and influences every aspect of our being – body, mind, emotions, and will. It is what makes us susceptible to sin even after we are made partakers in the divine nature. Though sin does not reign in us, it nevertheless remains in us. It is dethroned, but not destroyed.”

[Romans 8:8-9](#) says something similar,

Ro 8:8 (NKJV) So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ 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.

The contrast here is that to be “**in the Spirit**” is **NOT** to be “**in the flesh**”. What is important to see is that they are two very distinct and different conditions and positions, and everyone is in one or the other. If you are “**in the Spirit**”, then you are not “**in the flesh**”. You still have the flesh, but you are “**not in the flesh**”. I.e., it is not dominating and controlling your life. We know that Paul struggled with the flesh in his own personal life. Listen to how he described the struggle with which we are all familiar. He says in [Romans 7:15-19](#),

Ro 7:15 (NKJV) 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. ¹⁶ If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that *it is good*. ¹⁷ But now, *it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me*. ¹⁸ For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but *how* to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹ For the good that I will *to do*, I do not do; but the evil I will not *to do*, that I practice.

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