

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.

What our passage in [Galatians 5:17](#) declares is that the “flesh” and the “Spirit” are completely “contrary” to each other. Paul refers to this same conflict in [Romans 8:5-6](#) which says,

Ro 8:5 (NKJV) 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. ⁶ For to be carnally minded *is* death, but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace.

He says something similar in [Romans 7:18-19](#),

Ro 7:18 (NKJV) 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.

Obviously, Paul is acutely aware of this ongoing struggle and conflict that is present for every believer, so none of this should come as a surprise to any conscientious believer. This conflict is not a conflict between two opposing natures that are resident in a believer – the divine nature and the sinful nature. As a believer, you only have one nature. It is a new nature and a divine nature given to you at the new birth. So the conflict that exists is between God’s Spirit and the believer’s propensity to sin. It is not a propensity that controls the believer, but one that still exerts a strong measure of influence on them. It is an impulse and propensity that must be personally resisted.¹ It would be spiritually foolish and a grave miscalculation not to take this conflict seriously

In [Galatians 5:17](#), the word “contrary” is the Greek word “*antikeimai*” and it means to oppose. The prefix “*anti*” means against, and the root word “*keimai*” means to be placed. I.e., it means to be placed against something, to lay opposite something, to be opposed to something, to be an adversary.² It carries the idea of being an opponent of someone, and in many cases is actually translated in the noun form as “adversary”.³ For instance, [Luke 21:15](#) says,

Lk 21:15 (NKJV) for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist.

[1 Corinthians 16:9](#) says,

1Co 16:9 (NKJV) For a great and effective door has opened to me, and *there are* many adversaries.

[1 Timothy 5:14](#) uses the noun form of this word in reference to the devil,

1Ti 5:14 (NKJV) Therefore I desire that *the* younger *widows* marry, bear children, manage the house, give no opportunity to the adversary to speak reproachfully.

It is a present tense verb in the indicative mood and the middle voice. So, it carries the idea that the flesh is constantly opposing the Spirit and the Spirit is constantly opposing the flesh. Every honest Christian

¹ Moo, 354.

² Zodhiates, 192.

³ Renn, 17.

is painfully aware that their life at times may fall woefully short of God’s perfect standard of righteousness and that too often they may fall back into sin with a disturbing frequency. Even though the believer is saved and is no longer the slave of sin, he is still subject to the deceitfulness of sin and unfortunately still attracted to its appeals and alluring influences.

In the phrase “**these are contrary to one another**”, the phrase “**to one another**” is from the Greek word “*allelon*” and is called a reciprocal pronoun. What that means is that there is reciprocity towards one another. I.e., what one is doing the other is opposing. Each is reciprocating that intense antagonism that they hold for one another. Dr. Wuest translates this last part of the verse like this - “**And these are entrenched in an attitude of mutual opposition to one another...**” I like that.⁴

So, the real idea in this passage is that when the flesh presses hard on the believer with sinful desires and inclinations, when it is opposing the godly things that the believer may be doing, at that very moment the Holy Spirit is there to press hard against the flesh and to give the believer victory over the temptation, over the sinful inclination, and over the evil desires that may be actually attacking the believer’s mind, will, and emotions.⁵ It is important to reiterate at this point that no matter how strong the lusts of the flesh may actually become, the promptings of the Holy Spirit are stronger. It is not like the Holy Spirit is just an “equal” foe – not at all. It is not as if the “**flesh**” has the ability to overcome the power of the Holy Spirit, so that in the end the believer simply does not know which one will win. For instance, [1 Corinthians 10:13](#) says,

1Co 10:13 (NKJV) No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

I love this verse because it says that God “**will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able...**” The Holy Spirit always intervenes with His spiritual strength that allows the believer to be an overcomer. What is important to discern in all of this is that this passage does not iterate that there will be no struggle. In reality it draws attention to the fact that there will be a struggle, a very strong struggle. It is like there are two enemies fighting each other and both are strong. So, the struggle, the fight, the resistance will always be there. It is a battle that we will never be able to escape. We also have to think of this in the opposite way as well. Whenever the Holy Spirit is leading and prompting us in a certain godly direction, we can always be assured that the flesh is working just as hard in opposing that leading and being adversarial against those promptings. There are so many times in a believer’s life when the Holy Spirit is leading them in a certain direction, but at the same time the flesh is opposing everything that the Holy Spirit is doing – creating doubt, second guessing, injecting fear and anxiety, and developing distrust and hesitation in the believer’s mind and heart.

So what we clearly glean from all of this is that both the flesh and the Spirit are eternally opposed to one another, constantly in an adversarial role against the other. Whatever one is trying to do, the other is always opposing. The Spirit is there to help the believer resist the promptings of the flesh, and the flesh is there to entice the believer to resist the promptings and leading of the Holy Spirit. This reality is always present, always active, and it simply does not matter how long the individual has been saved or

⁴ Wuest, 154.

⁵ Wuest, 154.

how spiritual they may be, the battle of the Spirit against the flesh never ends. The spiritual issue at hand is simple – it is one of choice. The believer must choose which prompting he or she is going to follow, which prompting they are going to allow to control their life, their emotions, their feelings, and how they think. It is the idea once again that God is not going to live the Christian life for the believer.

Now, here is the good part. The more that the believer learns to say “no” to the flesh and to sin, the easier it becomes to say “no”. Eventually, it will simply become a habit, a way of life. The more that the believer says “yes” to the Holy Spirit, the easier it becomes to say “yes”. Eventually, it becomes our way of life, how we live, how we make decisions, and how we respond to temptation and sin. It is critical to understand that the will of every believer is able to always be spiritually victorious over the flesh. It is not necessarily an easy task, but it is something that the believer is able to do because of the divine nature that has been placed within them. So, the more that believers yield themselves to the work and presence of the Holy Spirit in their life, the greater will be their ability to overcome the promptings of the flesh that are always present. If I can state this in another way, this is something that the believer has to learn to do. It is something that they have to choose to do. This is a learning process that must become a normal part of every believer’s life. One advantage that we have is that the more that we actually yield ourselves to the Holy Spirit, the more that we will be able to recognize His leading and compulsions within us. By the same token, if we are learning to hear the Holy Spirit, we will become much more sensitive to what the flesh is trying to prompt us to do. We will much more easily recognize that a particular prompting is not from the Holy Spirit.

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