

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. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

In our last study, we concluded that the more that a believer says “no” to sin and to the flesh, the easier it becomes to say “no”. The more that the believer yields themselves to the work and power of the Holy Spirit in their life, the greater becomes their ability and their resolve to resist the temptations of the flesh and the enemy in their life. Not only that, but the more we yield ourselves to the Holy Spirit, the easier it becomes to hear His promptings that are provided to guide and direct our lives.

Now, Paul’s point in both [Galatians 5](#) and [Romans 6-7](#) is that sin can certainly continue to exercise a very potent and controlling impact on a believer’s life, and therefore, it cannot be taken lightly. The believer’s battle with sin is very strenuous, extremely demanding and exhausting, and that battle is a lifelong spiritual conflict. Sin is so strong that even in the life of a deeply committed believer it has the innate power to contaminate and frustrate his desire to obey the will of God. Paul knew that he was not the servant or the slave of sin, but he also realized that at times he became captive to various sins in his life. Certainly this has been the experience of any committed Christian. No one is exempt from this spiritual conflict. It will always be there and it will always be waging its war against the believer. If I can say it this way, it should simply be seen as just an ongoing part of the normal Christian life.

So, what we glean from [Galatians 5:17](#) is that the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit is a continual reality and the believer is responsible to do two distinct things – “**walk in the Spirit**” (v16) and be “**led by the Spirit**” (18). [Galatians 5:24](#) says all of this in a very strong way when it declares,

Gal 5:24 (NKJV) And those *who are* Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

We will not deal with that phrase in this study, but it is a very powerful statement. In his commentary on [Galatians](#), John MacArthur makes this statement,

“Along with many others in the New Testament, these two verses make it obvious that walking by the Spirit is not simply a matter of passive surrender. The Spirit-led life is a life of conflict, because it is in constant combat with the old ways of the flesh that continue to tempt and seduce the believer.”¹

What all of that means for us as believers is that being able to overcome the influence and impact of the flesh in our life will always require being yielded and committed to the work of the Holy Spirit in our life. No believer can just passively and without any effort “**crucify the flesh**”. A little devotional, a little prayer here or there, just coming to church on Sunday simply will not cut it.

The reality of the Christian life is that any time that we as believers yield our life to the influence and desires of the flesh, at that moment it is impossible for us either to “**walk in the Spirit**” or to be “**led by the Spirit**” or to develop the “**fruit of the Spirit**” or to “**live in the Spirit**”. It is impossible. Why is that? It is because the flesh and the Spirit are eternally “**contrary**” to one another. It is impossible for the believer to be living in sin and be walking in the Spirit at the same time. It is impossible for the believer to always be succumbing to the sinful desires of the flesh, and at the same time to be led by the

¹ MacArthur, 154.

Spirit. Here is what we want to remember. **The conflict is what creates the choice, and we have to make a choice.** God will not make that choice for us. We have to make the choice, we have to choose to be led by the Spirit.

Now, if we are ever going to be successful in our Christian life, then we must understand that this spiritual struggle is just a part of a normal Christian life. There is no relief in sight. I wish that I could simply say that once you get it all figured out that the struggle will not be there anymore, but that simply is not the case. Qualities like perseverance, endurance, resolve, and determination are just as much a part of the Christian life as grace, joy, kindness, and peace. As long as we live in a physical body, we will never move beyond or transcend the spiritual conflict described in [Galatians 5:17](#). It is a permanent fixture of the believer's life. There are some denominations that teach that we as believers can reach a higher spiritual plane, or what is often called a "second blessing" - a term that is generally credited to John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church movement. He taught that this second blessing was an act of God in which the believer was provided spiritual deliverance from two distinct aspects of sin, or what he called inward sin and actual sin. The goal, which is actually a very good goal, is to grow to such a point in our Christian life that we are fully devoted and obedient to Christ. Wesley personally saw this spiritual growth as gradual, and he personally did not teach as some do that it is an instantaneous work of the Holy Spirit provided at what is often called the "baptism of the Holy Spirit". This is generally found in Pentecostal teaching and is taught to be the ultimate experience for the believer. The Assemblies of God website states, "*All believers are entitled to and should ardently expect and earnestly seek the promise of the Father, the baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire, according to the command of our Lord Jesus Christ. This was the normal experience of all in the early church.*" They further teach that "*this experience is distinct from and subsequent to the experience of the new birth*".²

I think that John Wesley is often overly criticized in this area because the heart of what he taught, which I believe is correct, is that every believer needs to both desire and pursue a deeper work of God in his or her life and heart. He would heartily agree with Paul that we should try as much as is possible to bring "**every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ**" ([2 Corinthians 10:5](#)). The word "captivity" means to capture, to take someone prisoner. It means in this context to subdue, to bring into subjection.³ Paul used this word in [Romans 7:23](#) when he said,

Ro 7:23 (NKJV) **But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.**

Some even teach a doctrine called "sinless perfection" which is so contradictory to Scripture that it makes verses like [Galatians 5:17](#) non-sensical. It is almost as if they are teaching that the believer becomes so mature in their faith and so victorious over sin that they personally transcend the spiritual battle against sin. Nothing could be any further from the truth or from the actual reality of the Christian life. To me personally, this is such a dangerous theology because one of the worst things is for a believer to somehow think that they are actually immune and impervious to the enticements of sin in their life.⁴ I have never met anyone who could qualify for immunity and freedom from sin and temptation. Even Christ was tempted in all points just as we are. So, it is important to piggy back on what we have previously studied

² Got Questions, ep.

³ Zodiates, 105.

⁴ George, 388.

because what this huge spiritual struggle communicates to us is that in reality we are “**sons of God**”. The ongoing struggle within us between the flesh and the Spirit is simply another way of validating our sonship. What some people see as a constant source of frustration and discouragement is to me very comforting, very encouraging.

Now, I want to make another point that I believe is very important to this discussion. We know that the flesh and the Spirit are fighting against one another. We know that simply by experience. It is a constant and ongoing battlefield in which we always find ourselves. What we may not realize, however, is that the power and influence of both the Spirit and the flesh, and the one to which we yield ourselves, is what ultimately influences and determines the direction of our lives. You will become what you choose to do. For the most part, each one of our lives is a by-product of the choices that we have made and will continue to make. I cannot constantly be making the wrong spiritual choices and expect to be getting the right spiritual results. A believer cannot just take the position that they can just do whatever they may want to do. That sounds convenient, but it is simply a measure of the fact that the flesh is exercising a stronger influence over our life than the Holy Spirit.

The problem is that if we ignore the spiritual disciplines and graces of the Christian life, then ultimately we will become unconscious of where we really are in our life. For any believer who ignores the many various disciplines of the Christian life, the ultimate result will be one of not growing in their Christian life, of not excelling, of not having discernment, and of not making a spiritual difference in people’s lives. What will ultimately happen is that living disengaged from the leading of the Holy Spirit will become the “new normal” for our life, and in the end will not produce a life that glorifies God. The goal at every juncture of our life is to live under the influence and control of the Holy Spirit. My only other option is to live for myself and if I do that, ultimately, and maybe even eternally for some, I will have wasted my life for those things that have only a temporal value, but no eternal value. I have to keep my mind and my heart fully focused on Christ. As Paul so eloquently stated, “**For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain**”.

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