

Galatians 5:19-21

Gal 5:19 (NKJV) **Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness,²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies,²¹ envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

As we come to this portion of Scripture, it probably paints one of the “ugliest” pictures of the lostness and depravity of man that is possible. I have always felt that the “listings” in Scripture always had significance simply because they consolidated critical and important information into a very condensed form. There is no explanation with any of these words – just a listing, so it is the consolidation that gives this passage weight. If it was just one word rather than a group listing, it probably would not have the same impact that it does. If Paul had just said “*Now, the works of the flesh are sinful*” and that was it, then most likely it would not communicate its real severity as much as this listing does. To group various words together as this listing does just seems to highlight and underscore what Paul is really trying to get across. Just to read these kinds of words like “**adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath**”, etc. make an impact on me that just a casual discussion would not create.

The other New Testament passage that probably says the same kind of thing as this passage is [Romans 1:18-15](#) – about as ugly of a picture of man’s depravity as can be stated. The doctrine of total depravity maintains that man is inherently corrupted by sin from birth, and because of that he is deprived in every aspect of his being.¹ Obviously, this is something that the lost individual simply cannot accept. Why is that? Well, it is because he sees himself as basically being inherently good. Unfortunately, his view of himself is exactly the opposite of God’s view of him. One of the greatest lessons that any of us can discover is to learn to think like God thinks and to see life the way that God sees life. Unfortunately, that is the last thing that the unredeemed individual is interested in – seeing life the how God sees life.

Now, there are eight overall things that Paul is communicating in this passage that we want to see initially. These are just observations. There certainly may be more, but these observations just kind of jump off the page as we read the passage. If you ever study and take notes at the same time, then these observations are the kind of notes that you should make. Each one of these observations is very important to our understanding of this passage. They may seem overly simplified at first, but in reality they are the message.

- (1) The first observation is that there is nothing good that can be found in the “**works of the flesh**”. There is not one of these words that have any redeeming or spiritual value – not one. Every word is a reflection of a man that is lost or a believer that is utterly disobedient. There is not one word that is a nice, pleasant, virtuous, warm-hearted, and appealing kind of word – not one. My assumption is that when we take each of these words individually and define them, it will be depressing time for everyone. I may just do a “group” definition.

¹ MacArthur, 160.

- (2) The second observation is that the works of the flesh are self-evident. They are obvious, apparent, observable, and quite discernible. There is nothing obscure or hidden about what Paul calls “**the works of the flesh**”. Anyone, lost or saved, can easily recognize them, so being able to identify the “**works of the flesh**” certainly does not demand some kind of extraordinary spiritual discernment or enlightenment.² There are no secrets here. This is wide open to everyone’s view. Whether we realize it or not, everyone is watching, everyone sees what we are like, and everyone hears how we talk. No one is exempt from the scrutiny of others. If we have not figured it out yet, people see us all the time, but they will most likely remember the bad things that they see in us and not the good things.
- (3) The third observation is that this is only a partial listing of “**the works of the flesh**”. In v21 Paul uses the phrase “**and the like**”, indicating that this list is not exhaustive by any stretch of the imagination. We can never exhaust the innumerable ways in which sin can manifest itself. There is an incalculable number of ways in which the flesh can manifest itself in perversions, enmities, excesses, obsessions, and depravities.³ We can just call this a “sampling” of what the flesh is actually capable of doing. Just think of someone like Hitler, Stalin, or Idi Amin. We have already studied that no matter what the flesh is inclining us to do, we can always be assured that it is the exact opposite of what God wants us to do. Please appreciate that this is what creates the conflict within, the fighting within, and the struggles that we have with. It is this constant battle to choose to do the right thing. One of my mottos that I have taught over the years is “*Just do the right thing*”. Where every one of us will struggle is in trying not to do what the flesh is prompting us to do. This battle never ends. It never, ever ends.
- (4) The fourth observation is that Paul is communicating something that he has already communicated to these Galatians – “**just as I told you in time past**” (v21). This is not new information. This is not some kind of startling new information that the Galatians have never heard before. To the contrary, Paul is probably using some of these terms because many of those in his audience had struggled with some of these things before they were saved, and then struggled with them after they were saved. I do not personally need a definition of each of these words. Why is that? It is because I already innately know that each of them is wrong and ungodly.
- (5) The fifth observation is that there is a tremendous difference between someone who simply fails in one of these areas and someone who actually “**practices**” these things as a way of life. In my mind, the word “**practice**” is the key word in these three verses. It is a word that clearly speaks of a continual, habitual, and repeated activity. There are two primary words in the Greek language for “**practice**” and this Greek word in v21 is “*prasso*” and means to perform something repeatedly and habitually. The other Greek word “*poieo*” refers to a single act. The word for “**practices**” is actually a participle (“practicing”) and is in the present tense and active voice. It is the present tense that gives it the meaning of repeated, continual, and habitual.
- (6) The sixth observation is that those who habitually and continually “**practice**” and are engaged in these things as a way of life are not saved and “**will not inherit the kingdom of God**” (v21). I

² Schreiner, 346.

³ George, 391.

constantly use the example that it is the difference between a snapshot and a motion picture. All of us have probably failed in all of these areas in some way or another, but it simply is not the habitual pattern of our life – just a moment of failure. So, when you read this listing, it really should be a great encouragement to you simply because you know that you are not habitually practicing any of these attributes in your life.

- (7) The seventh observation is that the “**works of the flesh**” are characteristics that can apply to either a saved person or a lost person. Just because someone is a Christian does not exempt that individual from committing any of these sins. When we were saved, unfortunately nothing happened to our flesh. That would have been nice, but it simply did not happen. However, what did happen is that God gave the believer the power and grace to “control” their fleshly appetites through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. I love the way that [Galatians 5:24](#) states this,

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

- (8) The final observation is that Paul is using this passage to contrast the differences between the “**fruit of Spirit**” and “**the works of the flesh**”. The way that we know that is by the contrastive conjunction “**But**” that Paul uses when he begins v22. Paul is clearly saying that the contrasts between what the Spirit produces in a person’s life and what the flesh produces are so different that there should never be any mistake in being able to recognize where a person really is in their relation to God. The last thing that we ever want to do is to see someone who has been exhibiting a good number of these very ungodly attributes in their life, and somehow give them the impression that they are saved because they said a prayer 35 years ago. The genuine evidence of salvation is a transformed life today and not a prayer 35 years ago.

Now, what we want to do is to begin to look at each one of these eight observations individually. The first observation is that there is nothing good that can be found in the “**works of the flesh**”. When I read a passage like this, there is not one good thing that is said about the “**works of the flesh**” – not one single thing. All of these words from “**adultery**” to “**sorceries (or witchcraft)**” to “**revelries and the like**” are words filled with a great sense of ugliness and hostility towards God. One unseen technical aspect of this phrase “**works of the flesh**” is that the word “**flesh**” is in the genitive case and is called a genitive of source. The genitive of source is simply a word that indicates the origin of something.⁴ We might call it the “starting point” or from where something comes. What the genitive case simply does is describe something. In every language there are words we use to describe what something is like. For instance, we might say it is a “red” car, or it is a “cold” day, or it was an “expensive” meal. In English, each of those words is an adjective (red, cold, expensive) and not a noun. However, when a noun is in the genitive case, it is also used to create a description of something. For instance, another way of saying “**the works of the flesh**” would be “**fleshly works**”. However, in the Greek language, one important characteristic of the genitive case is that it is more “emphatic” than a simple adjective.⁵ An example of this would be the phrase in [Romans 6:6](#) describing what it calls “**the body of sin**”.

⁴ Easley, *Source Genitive*, 101

⁵ Black, 48.

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.

That phrase carries much more semantic and grammatical weight than would the phrase “**sinful body**” as used in the ISV and RSV. The NLT says “**sinful selves**” which is a much weaker translation. So, what Paul is doing by using the genitive case for the word “**flesh**” is to create it a greater emphasis for the reader. He wants them to know that he is emphasizing that the flesh is the source of this list of sinful attributes.

Now, the point in all of this is simple. It is ultimately an issue of personal responsibility. What is being described in these verses are works that proceed directly from the “**flesh**”, originate directly from the “**flesh**”. The New Testament basically describes that we have three enemies – the world, the flesh, and the devil. That trilogy is always working against us, always working to destroy our lives in some way. It is non-stop in its assault against everyone – saved or lost. However, because the word “**flesh**” is in the genitive case of source, it clearly implies that we cannot blame everything on the devil, or the world, or the culture. Obviously, each of those will use any of these sinful characteristics against us, but the world and the devil are not the source of these 15 sinful attributes listed in [Galatians 5](#). If you know someone who is an adulterer, someone who is a drunk, someone who is always contentious, or someone who always seems to have an angry temperament, then please understand that it is a work of their flesh. If I can say it this way, they have become addicted to their own sinfulness. They know that it is wrong, but they like it and do it anyway. [Romans 2:14-15](#) speaks about this,

Ro 2:14 (NKJV) for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, ¹⁵ who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their thoughts accusing or else excusing them*)

Unfortunately, many segments of the charismatic movement simply blame everything on the devil, so they always want you to be casting out demons or always be rebuking the devil – like he even hears what we have to say. He is not omnipresent and can only be in one place at a time, and quite frankly has much bigger fish to fry than us. I assume that I do not pose any kind of significant threat to him or to his work in the world. I can just see some demon going to Satan and saying “*Pastor Gary rebuked you!*” He would probably say “*Gary who?*” or “*Who cares what Pastor Gary said?*” I am no threat to the devil.

The reality of this passage is that if a person is engaged in any of these kinds of activities, they must come to a place where they accept personal responsibility for their “**works**”. Why is that? It is because my personal “**flesh**” is the source of the problem – not the devil, not the world, not the culture. I love the fact that the Word of God will not allow me to absolve myself of my personal sin. Even though we all have complete forgiveness, God still holds us accountable for how we live our life.

Now, the word “**works**” is the Greek word “*ergon*”, and in this context it refers specifically to the works of men in reference to that which is wrong based on the moral laws of God.⁶ The Word of God is the standard and that standard is the eternal benchmark of what is right and what is wrong, and every one of

⁶ Zodhiates, *ergon*, 649.

these characteristics violates God’s moral standards. Stated another way, each one of these characteristics is a sin against God, an ugly sin against God. For instance, [John 3:19](#) says,

Jn 3:19 (NKJV) And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds (*ergon*) were evil.

[Colossians 1:21](#) says,

Col 1:21 (NKJV) And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works(*ergon*), yet now He has reconciled

Continual evil “**works**” of lawlessness and disregard for God’s Word are the trademarks of those who reject God as well as those who will be judged by Him.⁷ For instance, [1 Corinthians 3:13](#) speaking of God’s judgment says,

1Co 3:13 (NKJV) each one's work(*ergon*) will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.

[Jude 14-16](#) says something similar,

Jude 1:14 (NKJV) Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, "Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints,¹⁵ to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds (*ergon*) which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him."¹⁶ These are grumblers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts; and they mouth great swelling *words*, flattering people to gain advantage.

So, what we want to take away from this little phrase “**the works of the flesh**” is that it is an emphatic term that lays responsibility for these identified fleshly sins at our feet. The Word of God is not going to allow me to absolve myself of my personal responsibility in this area of my life. Now, the good part of all of this to me is that each of us should be able to look at this listing of “**the works of the flesh**” in [Galatians 5:19-21](#) and immediately know that we are not habitually living with these kinds of sins in our life. That one observation alone should be a source of great encouragement that we are in reality one of God’s children and that the latter part of v21 does not apply to our life. To the contrary, we know that we have inherited the kingdom of God through faith in Christ, and that the genuine evidence of this spiritual inheritance is that the Holy Spirit has indwelt us and is working deeply in our lives to conform us to the image of Christ. We can actually see the fruit of God’s Spirit being reproduced in our life, and that is a great source of spiritual assurance for our life. What is that evidence? It is that we are not habitually engaged in the awful and sinful “**works of the flesh**”.

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⁷ Harris, *ergon*, #2024, ep.

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