

“The Flesh Against the Spirit”
Galatians 5:16-21
(Preached at Trinity, July 7, 2013)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. After laboring hard to defend the freedom we have in Christ, in **Verse 13** Paul stresses our responsibility in the Gospel. As I stressed before, freedom doesn’t mean anarchy. The Christian has surrendered his will to Christ. The Christian has thrown down every bastion of independence and has vowed absolute allegiance to Christ.
Paul stresses:
Galatians 5:13 NAU - "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do not turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh"
2. Paul wants us to be clear on the matter of sanctification.
 - A. Just as we are not made right before God by human efforts in keeping the Law we are also not sanctified or made holy through human efforts alone.
 - B. The Christian lives his life in submission to the Holy Spirit who dwells in him. Only the Holy Spirit can produce true righteousness. This doesn’t rule out the great effort by the Christian. The Bible doesn’t teach passive submission or the so-called “let go and let God” but active striving after holiness. But the Christian doesn’t strive by his own power.
3. In the remainder of this chapter Paul will be setting forth the great contrast between the life lived after the flesh and the Spirit-filled life.
Christians are in a fierce battle. In order to effectively fight a war one has to know his enemy. We fight against a three-fold foe.
Satan attacks us with a relentless assault.
1 Peter 5:8 NAU - "Be of sober *spirit*, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."
Ephesians 6:11 NAU - "Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil."
The world - this present age continues to exert its influence upon us
Romans 12:2 NAU - "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."
James 4:4 NAU - "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."
Our own flesh is at war with our redeemed nature
1 Peter 2:11 NAU - "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul."

4. Paul says, "walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." There are several ways the term "flesh" is used in the Bible.
- A. One simply speaks of the substance of our body. It can refer to the flesh of man or of any other creature – the physical aspect of the creature.
- Of Adam we read
Genesis 2:21 NAU - "So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place."
 - Of the incarnation of Christ we read
John 1:14 NAU - "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth."
 - Of the Passover lamb we read
Exodus 12:8 NAU - "They shall eat the flesh that *same* night, roasted with fire, and they shall eat it with unleavened bread and bitter herbs."
- B. The word "flesh" is also used in a negative moral sense to describe sinful human feelings and desires. It speaks of corruption and self-indulgence.
- Romans 7:18 NAU** - "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh"
- Romans 8:6-8 NAU** - "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, ⁷ because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God."
- Romans 8:13 NAU** - "for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."
- Ephesians 2:3 NAU** - "Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest."
5. Paul never strays far from teaching the contrast of the Law and Gospel.
- A. If you seek reconciliation to God through the Law you must be prepared to keep the whole Law.
- Galatians 5:3 NAU** - "And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law."
- B. No one can keep the Law. It makes demands but provides no means of keeping it. It cannot produce Godliness.
- C. The flesh is weak and powerless to keep the Law and fulfill its demands. Trying to keep the Law by the flesh will always result in failure and leave us condemned. For Paul, being "under the Law" is to be under its demands without the power to fulfill them and thus under its condemnation. As Christians we have been freed from the Law's demand for perfection—it can no longer condemn us.
- Gal. 5:18** - "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law."
- D. As we've seen, this doesn't mean the Law has ceased or that God has established a new standard of holiness. It simple means that Christ has fulfilled the Laws demands for perfection. God has pity upon our weakness.

6. Paul recognizes that a misunderstanding of the Law can result in many perversions of our freedom, not only towards legalism, but also towards antinomianism or over indulgence of our sinful flesh. As Christians we see ourselves under God's dominion, ruled by God's Law—but the Law is no longer an impossible burden. God has written His Law upon our hearts. By God's Spirit we have been raised from the corruption of sin to new life in Christ. The Holy Spirit dwells in us leading us unto obedience. But the remnants of sin are still with us warring with our redeemed soul.
7. Therein is the warfare. Instead of walking according to the flesh we are to walk according to the Spirit. Paul gives a command and a promise.
Command: "walk by the Spirit"
Promise: "you will not carry out the desire of the flesh."
8. This morning I want us to consider this great conflict between the flesh and the Spirit
Galatians 5:17 NAU - "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please."
- I. First, let's look at the nature of life lived according to the flesh
- A. To walk after the flesh means to be regulated by the undisciplined appetites and desires of our fallen nature
1. The lost man walks only after the fallen propensities of their human nature
 2. They are in the flesh, of the flesh – they seek to satisfy the flesh
By this we mean they seek to satisfy their own desires above all else.
 3. As I often say, "People do what they want to do." They want to fulfill the desires of their hearts. They feel fully justified in their actions.
 4. Without Christ our whole life is spent seeking those things which bring us pleasure without regard for what pleases God. The lost man seeks earthly pleasure more than God.
2 Timothy 3:4 – "lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God;"
- B. The lost man's mind is captivated by this world
1. He is always thinking about the things of this world
 2. He is guided by the ways of this world
 3. The things of this world are the chief objects of his conversation
 4. This is why Paul tells us in **Romans 12** to turn away from the mindset of this age
Romans 12:2 NAU - "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."
 - a. It is an age that rejects God's reign
 - b. It is an age that lives for the here and now
 - c. It is an age that rejects absolute truth and embraces the foolishness of human reason
 - d. We must have our minds continually transformed by the Word of God.
- C. A life lived void of the life of God results in all manner of corruption
Verses 19-21 - "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are . . ."
 1. This is in no way an exhaustive list of vices of the human heart. Paul adds at the end: "And things like these . . ."

- a. There is no end to the ways the sinful human heart can devise to express its sinful corruption
 - b. Genesis 6 describes it
Genesis 6:5 KJV - "And GOD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every imagination of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually."
 - c. Paul seems to be dividing the corruption of the flesh into several categories
2. "immorality (πορνεία), impurity, sensuality," – sexual impurity
 3. "idolatry, sorcery" – spiritual corruption and religious idolatry
"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image"
 4. "enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying" – sinful passions that put us at enmity and discord with other people.
 5. "drunkenness, carousing" – open displays of excess and intemperance
 6. Paul concludes that the one governed by the lust of the flesh has no part in the Kingdom of God.
Galatians 5:21 NAU - "that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."
Romans 8:6-8 NAU - "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, ⁷ because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God."
Romans 8:13 NAU - "for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."
 7. Paul isn't telling us that all who sin are excluded but all whose lives are given over to the lusts of the flesh. He is speaking of the impenitent.
πράσσω – a present participle – an ongoing continual practice – a life dominated by these things.
 8. If a person does not repent and look to Christ by faith alone he will remain under the curse of the Law and continue to be dominated by the works of the flesh.

II. The flesh is at war with the Spirit

- A. With regeneration and salvation the Holy Spirit enters the Christian
 1. It is the Holy Spirit that brought us to faith and repentance
 - a. He is the agent of our sanctification as He is working in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure.
 - b. He continually renews our mind through His Word teaching us the will of God
Romans 12:2 NAU - "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."
 2. Christians have been changed – a radical transformation

3. We have true freedom—freedom to follow Christ, freedom to walk in the Spirit, freedom to obey the Law without being condemned by the Law.
 - a. This is the meaning of **Verse 18 Galatians 5:18 NAU** - "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law."
 - b. In Christ we have been given a new heart to obey the Law
Romans 8:3-4 NAU - "For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."
 - c. To be under the Law is to have no power for obedience
To be under the Spirit is to have the power to live a righteous life.
The Law is written on our hearts.
- B. But the flesh is still alive
1. Justification does not affect the *condition* of the sinner but the *state* of the sinner in which he is declared righteous through the righteousness of Christ.
 - a. Luther captured this with the Latin phrase:
"simul iustus et peccator" – "At the same time just and sinner"
 - b. The Christian knows well the sin that still dwells within him
 2. While our transformed heart desires the things of God our flesh continues to seek carnal satisfaction
 3. Paul spoke of this many times
Rom. 7:18 - "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not."
Galatians 5:17 NAU - "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please."
 4. There is a terrible struggle within. The flesh cries out to be satisfied but our righteous heart desires to please Christ.
 5. And Satan is continually lying to us seeking to convince us that the way of the flesh will be most satisfying
Matthew 4:3 NAU - "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread."
Matthew 4:8-9 NAU - " Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory; ⁹ and he said to Him, "All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me."
- C. "so that you may not do the things that you please."
Two ways to understand this
1. As a Christian you can no longer do the things you used to do. The lost man continually indulges the flesh. Because of our new nature we can no longer do all of the things that please the flesh

2. Because of the continual warfare of the flesh we find ourselves unable to do all that our righteous heart desires
Romans 7:15 NAU - "For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to *do*, but I am doing the very thing I hate."
Romans 7:18-19 NAU - "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not. ¹⁹ For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want."
3. Both are true –
The flesh opposes the Spirit so that a Christian is sometimes hindered from doing that which is righteous.
The Spirit opposes the flesh so that the Christian is no longer able to live after the flesh.
These two forces are in constant warfare.
The Christian life is a conflict of desires. Our new life led by the Spirit is in continual conflict with the flesh.
4. The Christian battles hard. He understands the power of his own flesh and maintains strict control
1 Corinthians 9:27 NAU - "but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified."
5. But it is a battle fought by the power of the Holy Spirit

Conclusion:

1. There are several things we need to understand about our sanctification.
First we have to understand the great contrast between the Law and Gospel.
 - A. The Law condemns us but provides no power for obedience. And obedience to the Law cannot produce Godliness. When we live only by the power of the Law we are defenseless against the power of our own flesh.
 - B. Under the Gospel we have been given the Holy Spirit who gives us the power for obedience and good works. In other words He produces godliness in us. While Israel had the Law on tablets of stone we have the Law written upon our hearts.
2. While the Holy Spirit dwells in us we are still in conflict with our flesh that hasn't yet been annihilated.
Although the battle against our flesh is long and difficult it isn't forever. We are assured of the ultimate victory.
Romans 8:30-31 NAU - "and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. ³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us?"
3. As believers in Christ we continue to seek the leadership of the Holy Spirit trusting in His power to overcome the flesh—the promise to us.
Galatians 5:16 NAU - "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh."