

Life in the Spirit

Galatians 5:13–21

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

² Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. ³ I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. ⁴ You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

⁷ You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? ⁸ This persuasion is not from him who calls you. ⁹ A little leaven leavens the whole lump. ¹⁰ I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is. ¹¹ But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. ¹² I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

PRAY

2

One event can change the world. I am going to quote, with my best accent (which will be rather poor) something that I think you will immediately recognize and be able to quote with me before I even get to the 2nd clause of the statement. I'm not aiming for an acting award; I just want to see how much this resonates with you. Ready?

“Yesterday, December 7, 1941— a date which will live in infamy— the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by the naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. The United States was at the moment at peace with that nation...” He went one to say, “I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese Empire.” President Franklin Delano Roosevelt

One event can change everything. 75 million people died globally in World War II. 75 million. There are likely people in this room whose family tree was altered by December 7, 1941, and the events that flowed from it. Certainly the world was altered. As significant as that event was for the United States in the middle of the 20th Century — indeed, for changing the course of the entire world, that act of war fades into infinitesimal unimportance in comparison to the act of cosmic treason against the eternal Holy God when our first parents, in Genesis 3, raised their rebellious fists as an act of war and treason. In their act of war, every single soul that came after them died. Every single soul.

God appointed Adam as our federal head — we were all in his loins, according to the scripture. When he fell, we fell. When he died, we died: we died spiritually, in an instant; and then physically, under the curse of sin. **His *curated* sin became our *inherent* sinful nature.** And since his act of rebellion, a state of war has existed between Holy God and sinful man.

Sinful rebellion is our nature — that is, apart from Christ. It is the core of who we are naturally — from the time we were conceived, Psalm 51 tells us. The war is rooted in two opposing loves. Yes, loves — at least for the Christian. We began to explore this last week, and today and next Sunday, Lord willing, we will look deeper at the war of opposing loves in vv. 16 & 17 of our text. But first I want us to take an overview of (1) the sinful nature, (2) the new heart that Christ gives, and (3) the work of the Holy Spirit that is the central focus of this passage.

Let's consider both the root and the fruit of this treasonous war on our part. The root of the war — the primary enemy — is what the bible calls our flesh, or our original sinful nature inherited from Adam. It's not referring to our skin; it's referring to our fundamental problem: the old stony, sin-bent heart. At

3

this point we understand clearly what the bible means when it refers to our heart. It's our will, our affections, our loves.

That original nature is spiritually dead in sins and trespasses as Ephesians 2:1 tells us. Though our physical bodies have life for the number of our days, our spiritual nature is born dead; unable to please God; it does not even seek him in any way. (Matthew 6:32, Romans 3:11) The only thing our old nature seeks is what feeds its deadly desires. It drives us to lust, to covet, to pursue what does not belong to us. The works of this old nature are described beginning in **v. 19**. We won't spend a lot of time on them because they are fairly obvious and don't need a lot of explanation. But I want us to note how different things group together in different realms, as John Stott describes them, so we understand how pervasive and saturated with depravity our old nature is from every angle.

The first trio of sinful proofs are in the **realm of sex**.

v. 19 — Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality...

These sexual sins involve both body and mind, and of course the affections; lust. Not just a sexual act, but also mind work, whether through the eyes or the imagination. It is a broad category that describes any sexual behavior, public or private, that is outside of the marriage of one man and woman. It is comprehensive. Next ...

v. 20 — idolatry, sorcery...

These sins are in the realm of religion; they involve worship, and who or what we run to for help and power. Note that we **are** worshipers at the core. We are hardwired to worship. But what we worship by nature is not God, but things we use to dethrone God. We **don't not** worship if we refuse to worship God; we simply worship what is not God — idolatry; and tamper with powers of evil in sorcery rather than submit to God's power, and rule, and reign. The third realm, as John Stott describes it is society:

v. 20b – 21a — enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy...

This **realm of society** describes the relationships broken and battered by the sinful nature. Oh! how we feel the battle of our old nature playing out in every relationship on every level. We pit ourselves against others, covet and are jealous they have something we don't, fight to get it, and when we don't — or even if we do — rage with anger, causing further division beyond the original parties. Next...

4

v. 21b — drunkenness, orgies ... Stott calls it the **realm of drink**. The inordinate use of alcohol, individually and collectively.

And the list is not comprehensive: the **end of v. 21** — and things like these. A catch-all category for anything that fails to produce conformity to Christ, anything that derails holiness of life and the use of the resource of life to glorify God and advance his Kingdom.

These things are the fruit of the old sinful nature. These are the naturally occurring, regularly, consistently produced works of a heart that is has not been made new — a heart that is not converted to Christ. Let's pay very close attention to what is happening here, and understand what the Paul is driving at.

v. 21b — I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

We have just catalogued a list of what our root sinful nature produces; All of its fruit is deadly. We have to deal seriously with Paul's warning here, "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." That is a **sober warning**. There really can be no greater warning of danger than saying that if you do this, you will suffer eternal damnation. And every one of us has reason to tremble, because every one of has seen our sinful natures produce exactly this fruit.

Here is where we need to embrace and stand in awe of what God has done for Christians in giving them a new heart. The ESV translates the phrase, "those who do such things," which is an accurate translation in a word for word sense, but does not help us understand what is going on in Paul's precision vocabulary. Several English translations help us understand the unchecked practice of these sins as indicators that the heart has not be changed. In other words, those who continually, habitually practice these sins have hearts that have not been changed by new affections for God. The Apostle is not saying that any commission of one of more these sins earns a direct trip to Hell... but as the NIV translates, those who live like this — with no compunction, no conviction, no desire to do differently, no awareness that there needs to be change — those who habitually live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. They are not conflicted. They are comfortable with these sins.

5

Now we started by talking about a war between the old nature and the new nature. I hinted that the war had to do with what we love. Two loves fuel the fire of the battle. That is what we are talking about in vv. 16–17. Paul statement about those who live like this... does that sound like a battle to you? Do you hear in that statement any give and take of ground on the battlefield? No. Those who are outside of Christ have no battle at all because their heart that loves sin is giving itself to sin, and being satiated by sin, and there is no battle to be had.

Working back up the passage now, in v. 16, look at the battle in the heart of one who does belong to Christ. Four times “love” words are used in vv. 16–17 — “... walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” What is the “love” word that shows up there? What is the word that deals with my affections? Desire! The desires of the flesh — that’s love. It shows up two more times. Again in v. 17, the desires of the flesh; then the desires of the Spirit. Then at the end of v. 17 — to keep you from doing the things you want to do. What is the “love” word there? Want!

Now I said this was an overview sermon, and we will come back next week and unpack more thoroughly why we must have walk by the Holy Spirit or we are completely disarmed. But let’s take look at the nature of the battle we live in now, and will live in until the last breath leaves our bodies.

The Christian life is one of battle and war. It is a war primarily rooted inside of us, not outside of us, as the new heart the Christ gives creates new loves and affections in our heart. We teased that out a bit last week. But as we looked at the love words in vv. 16–17, look at the war words in v. 17. What words of conflict do you see there? Against the Spirit, against the flesh, opposed to each other. These are battle words. And they describe the lifelong battle that believers experience in putting the old nature to death and having Christ formed in the inner man, the character and heart.

This battle against the old nature to the death is not a surprise to anyone who has seriously considered the words of Jesus. **Mark 8:34–35** — “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross [*the instrument of death*] and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

Putting our old nature, with its loves and desires that war against the purity and holiness of Christ, against the love for God’s word and God’s ways — putting that old nature to death to the only way to life in Christ. We cannot move at once toward love and life in Christ and at the same time embrace love of sin and works of death.

6

Thus **v. 13** — You were called to freedom, brothers ... [I remind you from last week that the freedom here is freedom from the guilt and condemnation of the Law. Christ absorbed the condemnation and guilt of sin so that we won't] — **You were called to freedom. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.** No! How could we? After that long overview of the old nature warring against the new nature in Christ — old love of sin counter-balanced by new love for God and his ways... How could we use the freedom we have to give way to the old lusts and appetites of the sinful nature that drag the soul to the pit of Hell. It is inconceivable. And in keeping with the war imagery, giving us more insight into the challenges of our sanctification, the phrase “opportunity for the flesh” can be translated as a military term. It captures the idea of strategic location or base from which effective attacks can be launched. As we saw all the rockets launched into Israel 3 weeks ago — thousands of them — many, if not all of them were launched from mobile missile launchers that were difficult to eliminate. As soon as they fired their missiles, they moved, making them extremely difficult to catch. That is exactly what Paul's warning is about the old nature and giving it any opportunity. If you aren't battling its old sinful desires, that old nature is going to fire a thousand deadly rockets at you because you've given it a strategic opportunity. What kind of missiles? Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

We must know our enemies. I use the plural because our external enemy is Satan. He is a schemer and a murderer. He comes to steal, kill, and destroy, as Jesus says in John 10. But we have an internal enemy in our old nature, and that old nature is spring-loaded to ensnare us, or shoot deadly missiles straight into our soul, if possible. Hence, Romans 13:14 — make **no provision** for the flesh, to gratify its desires. and the wise, concise John Owen quote: Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.

Alright, pastor! I'm convinced! I see that there's a war, and I'm ready to fight and win! How do I do it.

The Galatians were trying to do it with cutting rituals of the flesh, and festivals, and dietary laws — all of the flesh. Based on what we've seen this morning, how do you think the weapons of circumcision and diets helped win this spiritual battle? Worthless! If it took a supernatural work of God's Spirit to bring you from spiritual death to life, it will continue to take the Spirit to produce Christ-likeness.

v. 16 — But I say, walk **by the Spirit**, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

7

Spiritual battles must be fought with spiritual weapons.

- We are not naturalists — we cannot fight with material weapons to be sanctified.
- We are not gnostics who endeavor to think better, or subscribe to some intellectual regimen or philosophy that will equip us think better — this is a battle at the level of love!
- We are not ascetics who see evil only as immoral acts and behaviors which need to be controlled and eliminated through severe discipline and filters on computers, however helpful that might be in the short-term...
- We are **supernaturalists** fighting a supernatural war — a spiritual war — and we have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit who supplies supernatural resurrection power — the same power exerted when God raised Christ from the dead (Ephesians 1:20) — If we don't fight the battle this way, it will be lost.

Walk by the Spirit. One step at a time, through the day, through the evening, when the old nature is firing missiles, when you feel strong, when you feel weak, when you are busy, when all is well... walk by the Spirit one step at a time. He is our sanctifier, doing what you cannot do.

We will take up here next week, continuing to dig down on this issue of new love and affection from a new heart from Christ. And now that we feel, I pray, more deeply and desperately the need of the Holy Spirit to be conformed to Christ's image and his desires, we will examine the assignment of the Spirit and see how he helps us in our sanctification, our journey to the teleios — Christ formed in you.

PRAY — Help us, Holy Spirit. Fall fresh on me. Stir up a fire of love for God, hatred of sin, and a zeal to be conformed to the image of Christ. May the works of the flesh be defeated and cast out of our lives through resurrection power.

GOSPEL THREAD

COMMUNION