MESSAGE FOR NOVEMBER 1, 2026, FROM GALATIANS 5:19-24

We continue in our series of messages from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Last week we looked at three verses in chapter five. To provide a context for this morning's message, we need to briefly review what we said because our text for this morning is a continuation of the section we began last week. **Paul is revealing how believers can live in the spiritual liberty that Christ purchased for us on the cross.** Last week, we began the very heart of Paul's treatment with verse 16. "**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."

Those verses address an enormously practical truth that believers must apply every day. Namely, **God's call on us to walk or be led by the Spirit of God.** We also saw that, though it's clear that believers walk in spiritual liberty, under grace and not the law, Paul also reveals that **this life of liberty is lived out in a state of persistent spiritual conflict for the believer**. This conflict is between **the desires of our sinful flesh** and **the opposing desires of the Holy Spirit** who indwells believers. We spent most of our time last week focusing on that spiritual conflict. We saw that it can be fierce, is never-ending in this life, and **its one reason believers can easily feel discouraged and even wrongly assume that there must be some must spiritual escape from the conflict.**

Occasionally, it's worth dwelling on the truth that **we should not expect perfection in this life and that this spiritual conflict we experience is not opposed to God's plan for believers but is actually *part of his plan*.** This ongoing conflict glorifies him because **it demonstrates his grace seen in believers who are willing to fight to be obedient to him** and because **the reality of this conflict causes the believer, every day, to be thrown onto God's mercy in childlike faith and dependence.** This conflict can be heated at times and wearisome which is why **we must encourage one another in our shared battle against sin.**

At the same time, however, it would be a grave misunderstanding to come away from this section of Galatians believing that "*Because being a Christian is hard and there is conflict, I should therefore just expect to live mostly in spiritual defeat and mediocrity in this life before Jesus comes back."* That is decidedly NOT what Paul teaches in this chapter(!), and we're deeply mistaken if we pull that message from this text. Next time, Lord willing, we'll see that **Paul's message is actually one of great hope for overcoming our sins thanks to the supernatural work of the Spirit in every believer.**

This morning, however, we begin where we left off last week as Paul lists the "works of the flesh." Today, we'll only be looking at verse 19 through the first half of verse 21. These "*works* of the flesh" are outward expressions of "the **desires** of the flesh" when we allow them to gain control. Paul writes, "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these…" Before we examine these individually, here are four important overarching truths about these works of the flesh.

First, ***this list is not exhaustive***. At the end of the list Paul says, "and things like these…" That tells us that **he is giving *a representative list* of 15 vices,** not unlike the other so-called "vice lists" in some of Paul's other letters. Related to this, because over half of these "works of the flesh" are

interpersonal sins, he's probably not simply randomly choosing sins. As we saw last week with **verse 15 where Paul alludes to interpersonal conflict in the Galatians churches,** in these verses he's probably focusing on sins that were plaguing the Galatians. There are many sins that don't make his list that are also clearly sinful "works of the flesh." Lying is not on the list, nor is stealing or gossip or slander or many other things that God hates.

A second truth about this list is seen when Paul introduces his list with, "now the works of the flesh are *evident*" or obvious. He's written about the "desires of the flesh" in what we saw last week. Here, he wants us to know that ***it doesn't take any discernment to recognize when we or other believers are being controlled by "the desires of the flesh."*** **Those desires are evident to all** in the very recognizable "works of the flesh." In light of how obvious these sins are, it's worth asking, ***"If 'the works of the flesh' are so obvious then why does Paul go to the trouble of listing them?"***

One reason is the same here as it is in other places where Paul lists particular sins. That is—**the Holy Spirit seeks to use these lists to expose and convict us of the sin in our own hearts as we look into the mirror of God's word**. Anytime we see lists of sins like this in the New Testament, we should be asking, "*Does this describe me?" "Are any of these part of my life?"*

A third truth about these lists is seen when we notice that sins that we tend to think of as being more scandalous like "sexual immorality" and "sorcery" **are listed right alongside sins that many believers wrongly fail to even confess as sin,** but of which we are all guilty**.** This third truth is that ***we must never segregate "works of the flesh" like "jealousy," "envy," and "strife" into a lower class of sin than more outwardly "scandalous sins" as if they are less reprehensible to God than others***. God is holy and hates all sin. Finally, a fourth truth is that ***this list pretty clearly divides into four sections***. The first section speaks to ***sexual sins***, the second section to ***sins involving false religion***, the third and longest section lists ***sins that destroy interpersonal relationships*** and a fourth set of ***sins related to a lack of self-control.***

The first three "works of the flesh" Paul lists here are sexual sins— "sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality." "Sexual immorality" is a translation of the word *porneia,* which is **a broadly defined word that is used in the New Testament to describe any departure from the Biblical norm of sex occurring only within marriage.** This would include premarital sex, incest and any other sexual sin. It's no accident that Paul lists this one first. The first reason for its priority is because **this sin was so rampant in the Roman world with its pagan and highly sexualized religious practices.** That meant that not only was it true that all shame had been removed from sexual sin, this culture had perversely sanctified it.

Sexual sin was part of the pagan religious practice through what were called "shrine prostitutes" and because in **the Roman Empire sex had been made part of its religion, there was no cultural stigma attached to it.** A second reason "sexual immorality" is prominent in this list is because, whatever the fallen world mistakenly says about it, **sexual sin is a distinctively rebellious and destructive sin**. Paul says in First Corinthians 6:18-19, "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. [19]Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own."

Although all the works of the flesh are evil and its mistaken to say that some sins aren't as serious as others to a holy God, Paul does say that **sexual immorality occupies a unique place in that *it alone is a sin against our own bodies which are temples of the Holy Spirit***. That means that

sexual sin is uniquely defiling for believers to commit because it is a sin against God's temple—his dwelling place. The church, as it exists in our own sexually permissive, no-holds-barred culture, must never forget the unique evils of sexual sin.

One of the most vivid differences between the early church and the surrounding pagan culture was in **the area of sexual purity**. **There was a stark difference between the church and the world in this area**. How disastrously different from today where **teens and young adults who claim to be believers practice sexual sin at the same rate as the world and where the rate of marital infidelity among believers is only a few percentage points behind the world.**

We can easily contrast that with how **God used the early church to *radically transform a debauched sexual culture*.** One commentator writes, *"In nothing did early Christianity so thoroughly revolutionize the ethical standards of the pagan world as in regard to sexual relationships."*[1] God used the church to radically change the prevailing sexual culture **as people were converted, repented of their sexual sin, and began living sexually chaste lives for Christ.** It's simply not true that in cultural terms, "*You can't turn back the clock*." Sure, you can. With God's empowerment. The early church did that for the pagan culture *because they were so different* than the culture.

Next, Paul lists "impurity" as a work of the flesh. This word is often listed in Paul next to "fornication" which refers to the sin of sexual activity before marriage but, impurity includes more than that. It also **includes impurity in speech and attitude**. With this in mind, it's possible for Christian married couples, where, as Hebrews tells us, "the marriage bed is undefiled," to commit impurity by selfishly treating your spouse as a sexual object. Impurity in this sense is **taking what God intends to be sacred and set apart between a husband and wife within the marriage covenant and treating it like any pagan would—as an exclusively recreational activity.** Its intended by God to be an act of covenant renewal in marriage.

Finally in this list of three sexual works of the flesh is "sensuality." This is also translated "indecency" and refers to **making public what God intends to be kept private.** This can happen through **illicit public confessions about things that should be kept private.** More brazenly, its manifest in what we would call "publicly indecent acts." By extension, this also includes **immodesty where clothes are worn that publicly reveal or suggest what only your spouse should see**. This is a work of the flesh and in our world that is every bit as sexually corrupted as the first century pagan Roman world, sexual purity is a place where a repentant church today can shine a bright light in a very dark world.

The next section of this list contains **works of the flesh related to false religion**. The first is "idolatry." This may be expressed through the actual bowing down to a graven image, but it's much more frequently a matter of the heart. As we saw yesterday for those who were here, Colossians 3:5 speaks of "covetousness which is idolatry." **Idolatry is treasuring or craving anything more than you crave or treasure God.** The believer's first and strongest passions must be for Christ and his kingdom. Whatever drains away our passion for Christ is an idol and is a work of the flesh.

Second, related to false religion is "sorcery." To our ears, this might be the most sensational of the sins Paul lists. The Greek word for this is "*pharmakeia.*" Originally, this meant **using drugs to poison someone** and that meaning tragically remains applicable in contemporary society. If a

[1] Fung, 256, *Galatians,* quoting Duncan, in his commentary on Galatians, p171ff

pregnant woman takes a so-called "morning after" pill and kills her unborn child, that's sorcery as expressed by this word. She's taken a death potion targeted at her child.

The meaning of sorcery goes beyond that narrow understanding, however. Tom Schreiner describes sorcery as "*a desire to be in touch with the spiritual realm through humanly invented means."*[2] More than that, **sorcery is *seeking to control the world around you* by spiritual means apart than God**. Rhonda Byrnes' bestselling book "The Secret" is drenched with this form of sorcery. She writes, "*Nothing* [good or bad] *can come into your experience unless you summon it through persistent thought*" (p.28) and "*Your thoughts are the primary cause of everything."* She is teaching that your thoughts can control your world. Biblically defined, that's sorcery—a "work of the flesh" as Paul lists it. This is all over the culture today and the church must not be taken in by it.[3] Its sorcery.

The next section of this list of "the works of the flesh" is the longest and includes **eight works, all of which in some way are destructive to human relationships**. "Enmity" is first in this section, and this means either *internal or outward hostility toward someone.* This is NOT the same as interpersonal conflict. **We can be in conflict with each other and even strongly disagree with one another without being at enmity with each other.** Enmity goes well beyond conflict to **contempt.**

When we're in conflict with one another, we simply differ about an issue. With enmity, it's personal. This is disdain, disgust, hatred or other similar dispositions that simmer deep in your soul. When we harbor these feelings, we're not under the Spirit's control, we're in the flesh. ***Conflict*** is inevitable in a fallen world, but when believers practice biblical peacemaking by doing things like **praying to first get the log out of their own eye** or by **patiently clarifying the other person's position**, **or giving them the benefit of the doubt,** the conflict isn't sinful. Enmity is always sinful.

Next is "strife." "Strife" is a work of the flesh seen in people whose first course of action in a conflict is NOT to pray or get the log out of their own eye or clarify the other person's position. **Their first response is to fight.** Strife is opposed to the Spirit's response which is to do things like "overlook the offense" [Proverbs 19:11] or "let love cover a multitude of sins" [1 Pet. 4:8]. In a person guilty of strife, **there's no safety on the trigger of their tongue, or their computer keyboard or their heart**. People guilty of strife tend to come out with gun's blazing. God hates it and it destroys relationships.

"Jealousy" is another work of the flesh that is destructive to relationships. Jealousy and envy—(which comes later), are often equated, but they're not the same. Jealousy is "*an intolerance of rivalry.*" That can be a good thing. When appropriately expressed, **it's good for a husband to be intolerant of rivals for his wife's affection.** It's good for God to be intolerant of rivals to our affection for him—he is a Jealous God who will never tolerate a rival for his place of priority in our life.

But jealousy is a sinful work of the flesh when it degenerates into **a petty fear that someone will become equal to, or better than me.**[4] Perhaps the classic Biblical example is King Saul's jealousy of David. Rather than delight in David's military prowess and in what it could do to bless the nation of Israel, instead **Saul wrongly saw David as a rival and burned with jealousy toward him.** Perhaps there's someone in your life who is better than you at something and, rather than rejoice at God's

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[2] ESV Study Bible Notes, Tom Schreiner on Galatians 5:20, p. 2254.
[3] Don Whitney's web page, http://www.biblicalspirituality.org/secret.html

[4] Bridges, Jerry, *Respectable Sins, 151*

grace to him/her, you resent them. *They* get the recognition—*they* get the position, everyone likes *him.* When you feel that way, that's a work of the flesh you need to repent of.

"Fits of anger" is self-explanatory. This is seen in people whose **temper causes others around them to feel like they have to walk on eggshells for fear of igniting their very short fuse.** You never know when this person will go off. It is sinful and its condemned by God. If this describes you, spend time with God about it and go to a believer you trust who can help you with this.

Paul next lists "rivalries" as a work of the flesh. This is **the sinful desire in people that causes them *to selfishly work to get their way* in a church or other group by rallying other people to support their selfish agenda**. Rather than seeking after God and Scripture to see if their ideas or goals are his will for the group or church, and then prayerfully trying to compel others to move in a given direction, **this work of the flesh covertly seeks to build a base of support from which to overwhelm those who disagree with you.** This is the kind of faction-building that Absalom did in preparation for the coup he pulled on his father, King David. This is manipulative, power politics. Tragically, this can and does happen in the church and it's a work of the flesh.

"Dissensions" and "divisions" are similar to each other and are also toxic to relationships. Again, we see this **when a person's ultimate goal is to accomplish his/her own selfish agenda**. "*Divide and conquer*" is the tactic utilized to get what they want. Rather than try to lovingly compel those who disagree with them, **divisive people will try to divide the opposition in some way in order to push through their agenda.** This is so toxic to a church that when its seen in a fellowship, Paul says in Titus 3:10, "**10** As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, *have nothing more to do with him,"*

This work of the flesh values building personal kingdoms more than the kingdom of God or what's best for the organization. I can attest that **people who practice this work of the flesh can and do split churches**. Finally in this group is "envy." Envy is resenting someone else for something they have, but you would like to have. Jerry Bridges, in his book "Respectable Sins" helps us understand envy. He writes, "*Usually there are two conditions that tempt us to envy. First, we tend to envy those with whom we most closely identify. Second, we tend to envy in them the areas we value most."*[5]

For instance, if you hear that some Hollywood celebrity buys a new boat or sports car or beach house, you probably won't envy him because you don't know him. But **when your friend in church or a co-worker with whom you closely identify** is blessed in an unusual way, the green monster of envy can show up. Likewise, you may not envy someone who can brilliantly play a violin concerto if you're not a violinist, but if you know someone who shares one of *your* talents, professional skills or spiritual gifts who is getting recognition that you are not, that may trigger the temptation to envy.

Both jealousy and envy are sins that we're more likely to commit in relation to our friends and acquaintances, not our enemies. The Spirit-controlled response to another person's blessing is to "rejoice with those who rejoice." We are called to be happy for others when they are blessed and/or receive recognition or praise. Becoming resentful or embittered because someone else is getting something we would enjoy is a sinful work of the flesh that must be repented of.

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[5] Bridges, 149

The final section of "the works of the flesh" includes "drunkenness" and "orgies or "carousing." These are both issues of self-control, the first with excesses connected to alcohol and the second with partying and sexual carousing. If you struggle with either one of these you need to repent and show the fruit of repenting by talking to someone about it.

After Paul lists these works of the flesh he gives **a second element of his treatment in the second half of verse 21** where he states ***the consequences of living under the influence of the sinful desires of the flesh***. He says, "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." Paul here draws the ultimate bottom line. He says that these "works of the flesh" will keep you out of heaven. That's what he means here, but if we're to keep from misunderstanding this warning, a couple of clarifications are important here.

First, when Paul speaks of "those who do such things," he's not referring to **people who *have at one time, or another* committed these works of the flesh.** If that were the case, none of us would get to heaven. **The verb he uses here means *those who make a practice* of doing these things**. There is an established pattern of these works in a person's life--that is what he warns against. If that is true of you and you were to die this afternoon unrepentant, there is no hope for your soul given by Paul.

I want to linger here for a moment **to allow the Holy Spirit to impress upon us the weight of this.** A settled pattern of "sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these" will land the so-called "believer" even with the most impressive history of church attendance and ministry in eternal torment in hell.

A second clarification in this section on "the works of the flesh" relates to the question, "***How is this section, which tells us that our behavior plays a significant role in our eternal destination, (how is this) consistent with the rest of the book of Galatians where Paul says that our works will not get us into heaven*?"**

First, notice the very careful wording Paul uses here. He does not say, "*Those who do such things will not earn or merit the kingdom of God."* He says, "…those who do such things will not *inherit* the kingdom of God." I hope you hear the huge difference there. This word translated "inherit" is important because **its consistent with what we've seen in this letter where our sonship to God through Christ is so important**. Chapter 3:26 says, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."

Think about sonship for just a moment. Sons are heirs. That is--they inherit things from their Father. But sons—if they're true spiritual sons **also *resemble*** their Father**. One of the tests of sonship is—do you resemble your Father—do you increasingly remind people of your Father?** One problem in the church today is that **everyone wants to *inherit* from their Father, but many are not nearly as are impassioned about *resembling* their Father.** Paul's point here in this warning about not inheriting the kingdom of God is simply, ***you can't have the inheritance of a son without the resemblance of a son.***

What Paul says here does not contradict grace at all. He is saying by implication that **if you are a true son who will inherit from your Father, you will increasingly resemble him in your attitudes and actions. But if you practice as a pattern of unrepentant behavior, the works of the flesh,**

then you don't resemble your Father and therefore you are not a true son. Therefore, you will not qualify for the inheritance of God's sons—eternal life.

We want to conclude by introducing the hope believers have in the gospel which we will, Lord willing, finish next week. If you find yourself in a pattern of one or more of "the works of the flesh," **this concluding spiritual death sentence Paul pronounces here is NOT the final word**. There is hope in the gospel—first, **to be forgiven the penalty of these works of the flesh** and second, **to walk in triumph over their enslaving power.**

God did the work through Jesus on the cross to set people free from the enslaving power of these and other sins. The first step is to **agree with him that you are in sin** and by his grace, **experience the brokenness that comes to any child who knows that he has grieved his loving Father.** God knows nothing of a confession of sin that is cavalier and insincere. David tells us in Psalm 51:17 that "The sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." Paul says much the same thing a bit differently in Second Corinthians 7:10, "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret…" The sorrow doesn't earn forgiveness; it's merely an indication that the Holy Spirit has made you aware of the severity of your sin against God's holiness.

If you're in Christ, your forgiveness was purchased by Jesus 2000 years ago and **nothing you do can add or take away from what he did for you.** The penalty you fully deserve for your sin, he paid with his blood on the cross. If we're to find freedom from the enslaving works of the flesh, we must first, by faith, receive his forgiveness. Romans chapter six teaches us that if we can't first, **by faith trust in the reality of Christ's forgiveness of us**, then we can't, by faith, be liberated from any sin. And that comes only as we look to Christ and believe the gospel of forgiveness through Jesus.

Agreeing with God about the works of the flesh of which you are guilty, allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal God's hatred of it, experiencing the brokenness and godly sorrow that come from that, and claiming your forgiveness in the gospel put you on the road to triumphing over enslaving works of the flesh. As one of our tracts says, there are only "two ways to live." One is to selfishly pursue your own sinful agenda through the works of the flesh. Another is to pursue Christ and his kingdom as we walk by the Holy Spirit and grow to increasingly resemble our heavenly Father. Where are you this morning?

Don't leave here without getting right with God. Go to him and confess your sin—experience the brokenness of heart that true sons feel, receive his forgiveness as you look in faith to Jesus and the cross where your pardon was purchased. May God give us the grace to have his hatred for the works of the flesh and walk in the liberty we have in Christ for his glory and our joy.