

HOW CAN I FIGHT TEMPTATIONS & IMPULSIVE THOUGHTS? (GALATIANS 5:16-21)

This is another great question! So, I have *good* news and *bad* news.

Bad News: I wish I could give you, “Three simple steps to rid yourself of temptation.” But the truth is, you’re going to battle temptations and impulsive thoughts for the rest of your earthly life.

Good News: You *can* find victory over temptations, but it *won’t* be a one-time victory...

1. Each moment, there is a war happening within you.

Galatians 5:16–17 “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.”

If you back up to verse 13, Paul tells us that we’re “called to freedom” in Christ, but our freedom is always under attack. The Spirit (who indwells us) and the flesh (remnants of our old sin nature) are “opposed” (*hostile*) to each other. So, there’s a constant conflict within the heart of every believer.

Keep in mind: When Paul says “the flesh,” he doesn’t just mean your *physical*/body. It’s far more than that – it involves your mind, will, and emotions as well as your physical body.¹ So, if the Holy Spirit controls your mind, will, and emotions; you will walk in the Spirit. But if the flesh (remnants of our old sin nature) controls your mind, will, and emotions; you will walk in the desires of the flesh.

You see, the Spirit and the flesh have different appetites, and this is what creates the conflict...

“You are pulled about by two contrary forces: You are dragged downward by the flesh, and you are drawn upward by the Spirit. They will never agree.” – Charles Spurgeon²

¹ George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, p. 387). Broadman & Holman Publishers.

² Slightly Adapted: Spurgeon, C. (2013). *Galatians*. (E. Ritzema, Ed.) (Ga 5:17). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

Example: Even Paul (who wrote this passage), experienced the frustrations that come from temptations and impulsive thoughts...

Romans 7:15; 18-19 *“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”*

Even the apostle Paul – this giant of the faith – was frustrated by the war within himself. You see, we tend to think that our greatest enemy(s) are “out there,” but our greatest enemy is within – our own sinful nature.

“The worst enemy we have is the flesh. All the fire that the devil can bring from hell could do us little harm if we did not have so much fuel in our sinful nature. When we are guarding against foes without, we must not forget to be continually on watch against the foe of foes within.” – Charles Spurgeon³

You see, **verse 17** tells us that there are two different “desires” are battling within you at all times...

- 1) **The Holy Spirit** desires to glorify Christ, saying, “Jesus is the *only* one who can satisfy your deepest longings. He is the one you should glorify, adore, and yearn for.”
- 2) **The flesh** desires just the opposite. It desires to glorify created things rather than the Creator (Rom. 1). The flesh says, “This created thing or person will satisfy your deepest longings. You should adore, glorify, and yearn for this created thing.”

This *IS* the war that’s happening within you at all times. And this leads us to our second point...

2. Each moment, you’ve got a choice to make.

When temptations and impulsive thoughts come, you’ve got two choices. **Choice #1:**

- **“Walk by the Spirit”** (vs. 16) – listening to His voice.
- **“Be led by the Spirit”** (vs. 18) – discerning His will.
- **“Live by the Spirit”** (vs. 25a) – according to His power.
- **“Keep in step with the Spirit”** (vs. 25b) – following His guidance.

³ Slightly Adapted: Spurgeon, C. (2013). *Galatians*. (E. Ritzema, Ed.) (Ga 5:17). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

Choice #2:

- Listen to your own sinful heart and other worldly voices.
- Be led wherever your sinful desires lead.
- And fight temptations with your own strength and power.

And this leads us to our third point...

3. Each moment, your choice will be evident.

If you choose option #1 (walk by the Spirit) then verses 22-23 will be evident in your life (fruit of the Spirit). But, **if you choose option #2** (walk by the flesh), verses 19-21 will be evident in your life...

Galatians 5:19–21 “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.”

In **verse 19**, the word *evident* means “open to view” or “visible.” You see, these “*works*” of the flesh are the outward, visible expressions of the “*desires*” mentioned in verses 16-17. And this is important because the word “*desires*” literally means an *over-desire*. So, our main problem is not so much a desire for bad things, but it’s often an *over-desire* for good things.⁴

In other words, we often over-desire a good thing, turning it into an idol, which causes all sorts of problems...

Over-desires in Sexuality

There are three words in verse 19 that describe works of the flesh in the area of sexuality:

- **sexual immorality** (*porneia*) – It’s a catch-all word for *any* sort of sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and woman.
- **impurity** (*akatharsia*) – The person who has moved beyond occasional sexual sins and now they’re in a continual state of impurity (thoughts, words, actions, jokes, etc).
- **sensuality** (*aselgia*) – This is the next step in this progression. By

⁴ Keller, T. (2013). *Galatians for You* (p. 146). Purcellville, VA: The Good Book Company.

this point, all sexual restraint is abandoned. They now feel no shame or remorse about their sexual sin...

Jeremiah 6:15a [God says] “Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush.”

At this point, they don't even blush when people find out what they're doing. Their whole identity is wrapped up in their sexuality. It *controls* them and *defines* them.

So, it's an *over-desire* for sex (a good gift from God), and that over-desire causes all the twisted sexual issues within our culture.

Over-desires in Religion

There are two words in verse 20 that deal with religion:

- **idolatry** (*eidololatria*) – Worshipping something or someone other than the true God (Col. 3:5).

“We are to worship God, love people, and use things. But too often we use people, love self, and worship things, leaving God out of the picture completely.”⁵ – Warren Wiersbe

- **sorcery** (*pharmakeia*) – It comes from the Greek word *pharmakeia*, which means “the use of drugs” (we get our English word *pharmacy* from this word).⁶

But why pair the use of drugs with idolatry? Because a lot of people throughout the world use mind-altering drugs to have a “spiritual” experience. But the drugs are just faking the work that only the Holy Spirit can do – truly connect you with the Creator. So, in their over-desire for an intense spiritual encounter, they commit the sin of idolatry.

Over-desires in Relationships

In verses 20–21, Paul gives eight “works of the flesh” that can destroy relationships:

- **enmity** (*echthrai*) – A deep-seated hatred toward a person or group of people (James 4:4).

⁵ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 718). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

⁶ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 718). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

"Why should we hate someone over the color of their skin, over a different belief, or over a political issue? We can dislike their position, but why should we also dislike the person? That is the flesh at work." – John Phillips⁷

- **strife** (*eris*) – "Eris" was the Greek goddess of chaos, strife and discord. *Strife* is the outward result of the inward hatred (enmity) for others (1 Cor. 3:3).
- **jealousy** (*zelos*) – An intense longing (over-desire) for something that belongs to someone else – whether it's *tangible* things (car, home, body, etc.), or *intangible* things (their skill, popularity, promotion, applause, etc.).

It's not enough that *you* don't have it; you don't want *them* to have it either!

- **fits of rage** (*thymoi*) – Unhinged anger and rage (people who lose it on planes, in restaurants, violent protests, etc.)
- **rivalries** (*eritheiai*) – This term came from the political culture of ancient Greece, which meant "office seeking."⁸ It's a person who is willing to cross all moral boundaries to *get* and *keep* their "office" (position and power) – Rom. 2:8.
- **dissensions** (*dichostasiai*) – It's the sinful discord that ultimately splits a relationship, church, etc. Paul warns us to avoid people who act like this...

Romans 16:17 "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them."

- **divisions** (*haireseis*) – We get the word *heresy* ("to choose") from this word. It's when you get sucked into choosing a side rather than staying out of the fray and remaining on *God's* side.
- **envy** (*pythonid*) – Similar to "jealousy." It's a deep resentment toward the success or possessions of others (Philippians 1:15).

These are the types of destructive behaviors that show up when we *over-desire* the good gift of earthly *relationships* – trying to find our identity:

- In a dating relationship.

⁷ Slightly Adapted: *The John Phillips Commentary Series*, (pg.167)

⁸ George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, p. 395). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

- In a parent-child relationship.
- In our own ethnic group.
- In a political party.
- In a particular cause or movement.

Over-desires with Substances

Paul gives us two words in verse 21...

- **drunkenness** (*methai*) Alcohol abuse was common in the Roman Empire, but God expects a higher standard among Christians. Remember: alcohol itself is not evil; the problem comes when we *over-desire* a substance – *any substance* – and it controls us.
- **orgies (carousing)** (*komoj*) Commentators debate on whether Paul is talking about sexual sin, or “drinking orgies” (binge drinking), or both (Rom. 13:13; 1 Pet. 4:3). Either way, it’s an *over-desire*.⁹

BEFORE WE’RE DONE, KEEP THIS IN MIND: At the end of verse 21, Paul says, “I warn you that those who do such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God.” The word “**do**” means “to make a practice of doing” – referring to a normal *practice* of these things.

In other words, if this is a person’s normal behavior *without* battling against it, and *without* any remorse for it – there’s a good chance they’ve never been saved. Paul is not trying to undermine the Christian’s assurance of salvation; he’s warning us against complacency with these “works of the flesh.”¹⁰

Takeaways:

- 1) There’s no way you can walk in victory over these “works of the flesh” in your own power. This can *only* be accomplished in the power of the Holy Spirit. The solution is not to pit your will against the flesh, but to *surrender* your will to the Holy Spirit.¹¹ And this is a moment by moment surrender throughout each day.
- 2) It’s important for the Christian to remember that we “belong to Christ Jesus” (vs.24). Your approval from the Father rests on the

⁹ Keller, T. (2013). *Galatians for You* (p. 149). Purcellville, VA: The Good Book Company.

¹⁰ Adapted from Keller, T. (2013). *Galatians for You* (pp. 149–150). Purcellville, VA: The Good Book Company.

¹¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 718). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

faithfulness of Jesus, not on *your* faithfulness. So, we're free to admit when we fail, repent once again, and get back in step with the Spirit.¹² In your struggles, run TO your Father, not AWAY from Him.

- 3) We have to ask ourselves not only *what* we're doing wrong, but *why* we're craving this created thing so much. We have to say: *Lord, this thing is promising to be my "savior" – telling me I can't be happy or fulfilled unless I have it. So, by your Spirit, help me focus on your love until this thing loses its attractive power over me.*
- 4) The unsaved person knows nothing about this battle because he doesn't have the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9). Come talk with me if you feel God calling to salvation!

Small Groups

¹² Keller, T. (2013). *Galatians for You* (p. 155). Purcellville, VA: The Good Book Company.