

The Works of the Flesh

A Study of Galatians 5:16-21

There are two possible ways of life set forth in the last portion of Galatians 5. The one is lived in the flesh (with its wicked deeds manifested in verses 19-21). The other brings forth the fruit of the Spirit (producing the beautiful Christian characteristics described in verses 22-23).

As offspring of Adam we inherit the flesh nature, but as sons of God we are given a new life (and nature) which is subject to the Holy Spirit. It is the inborn flesh nature that urges us to give in to evil deeds. By way of contrast, it is the Spirit living within who produces good fruit. The Christian conflict is described in Galatians 5:16-18. "This I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law."

The flesh nature (the sin nature with which we were born), controlled us before we were saved. When we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, and met the conditions of salvation—the Holy Spirit imparted to us a new nature (the nature of God), and now we have two natures. The old nature has not been eliminated, nor has it been changed. Both natures (the old and the new) dwell side by side within us, and so we need to deliberately walk in the Spirit (verse 16) that we don't "fulfill the lust of the flesh." The word "walk" in the original Greek is in the present tense, and speaks of a regular, continuous action.

The word "walk" (verse 16a) means "to advance by steps," but here it is used figuratively, meaning to conduct ourselves day by day in accord with the directives of the Holy Spirit.

The two natures are contrary to one another. They stand in opposition to each other and work against each other (verse 17). This is the reason for the inner conflict which every Christian experiences. All of us sense a civil war within. All people experience a measure of moral conflict within, but Christians find the conflict within is even more fierce than it was in our unsaved days. Satan works hard because he doesn't want to lose our loyalty to him. However, as we learn to walk in the Spirit, the flesh becomes increasingly subdued. The Holy Spirit has been given to enable us to gain the victory over enslavement to sin. Paul describes the struggle more fully in Romans 7:7-25, and tells about the victory in Romans 8:5-9.

Only when one is born of the Spirit, and is yielded to the Spirit's leading, will the individual become victorious over the pull of the flesh nature (verse 18). A holy life is never achieved by our own efforts through our own strength. It is produced as we yield to the leading of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The works of the flesh are described in Galatians 5:19-21. "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."

Paul gives us a list of the works of the flesh. No person can be better outwardly than he is inwardly. He may be able to hide his evil desires for a season, but eventually they will become manifest or evident (verse 19).

We note too that Paul's list of fleshly works is not complete. The list is rather comprehensive, but it is concluded with the words "and such like" (verse 21a). The list of fleshly works includes deeds of impurity, sins of idolatry, sins of hostility, and sins of intemperance—but there are other "works of the flesh."

1. Sins of Impurity

The sins of impurity include adultery, fornication, uncleanness, and lewdness. These are works of the flesh. There is no room for compromise. Immorality shall have no place in the Christian life. William Barclay says that every imaginable form of immorality was commonly and openly practiced in New Testament times—by rulers, philosophers, poets, priests, and many common people—with no sense of shame or remorse. It was the accepted way of life in the ancient world.

Adultery speaks of illicit sex relations on the part of those who are married. Leviticus 18:20 spells it out plainly: "Thou shalt not lie carnally with thy neighbor's wife, to defile thyself with her." Hebrews 13:4b declares that God will judge "whoremongers and adulterers."

There are various forms of adultery. These include the physical adultery (described in Leviticus 18:20), the mental adultery (which involves fantasizing, or saturating the mind with illicit thoughts), and legalized adultery (which includes the remarriage of one who is divorced, when the original partner is still living). And then there is a plan which can be called communal adultery (where men and women live in a community arrangement that allows freedom for anyone to sleep with any other person).

When God established the home He designed that one man should live with one woman, and the two should become one flesh. The sin of adultery is not a trivial matter.

Fornication speaks of illicit sexual relations among the unmarried. A recent issue of U. S. News & World Report indicates that ten percent of all girls in the United States have had sexual intercourse by the age of 13. Couples that live together like husband and wife—before marriage—are living in fornication. As a result of the rampant sexual impurity, hundreds of teenage youth are being infected with venereal diseases every day.

Uncleanness describes those who may not necessarily commit outward acts of immorality, but whose thoughts and desires are unclean. Uncleanness is stimulated by reading pornographic literature, dwelling on obscene pictures, and telling smutty suggestive stories. It is aggravated further by the present-day emphasis on wearing less and less and exposing more and more.

Lasciviousness speaks of uncontrolled lust. Individuals can be guilty of uncleanness, but when they become lascivious, they become so immoral that they shock public decency by their conduct. One who becomes lascivious has gone so far into impurity that he no longer cares what God or what man thinks about his actions.

These have been sins of impurity. Satan is a vicious liar. He has been trying over the years to stir wrong sexual desires by implying that secret adulterous love is more exciting than true married love. The moral

depravity that is sweeping the world is a cause for concern. Sexual misconduct deeply grieves the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

2. Sins of Idolatry

The “works of the flesh” include a second category which we have labeled sins of idolatry. These include one evil called “idolatry” and another called “witchcraft” [sorcery].

Idolatry is the act of giving something other than the true and living God, the principal place in our affections. Most people in our society do not worship gods of wood and stone, but it is easy for us to set our affections on gods of chrome and steel and glass. Some worship the gods of pleasure and fashion and material things. Shopping malls are the cathedrals where multitudes are worshiping in recent times. A newer Milton Bradley game is called “Mall Madness.”

Multitudes plan and scheme for the future like the man in the parable that Jesus told in Luke 12:16-21. The man was prospering financially more and more each year. His barns were full. He was a good man; he was an outstanding farmer; but he was preoccupied with material things. While he was still in the midst of his plans for the future, a Breath out of eternity spoke to him and said, “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee; then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12:20).

Witchcraft is translated from the Greek word *pharmakeia*, which refers to “the use of drugs.” Today, the word “witchcraft” (or “sorcery”) refers to those who claim to have superhuman powers, abilities to cause spells, to use magic, and to attain secret knowledge gleaned from evil spirits. These practices were widespread in the pagan cultures, but Israel was prohibited from allowing sorcerers, spiritists, mediums, necromancers, and the like in their midst. In ancient times drugs were used for a variety of purposes, but especially for abortion.

Many colleges are now offering courses on witchcraft. Superstition is closely related to witchcraft. Some carry a rabbit’s foot, hang a horseshoe above the barn door, cross their fingers when making a decision, or spit when a black cat crosses their path. Believers who have to trust in luck instead of consulting God in prayer, are guilty of minding the things of the flesh.

The popular Harry Potter books place an emphasis on witchcraft. A letter recorded in the August 19, 2000 issue of the *World* magazine expresses dismay at the content of the Potter books. The writer says, “Witchcraft was a part of my life before Christ stepped into my life. [Witchcraft] is not a laughing matter, nor is it child’s play.” We are not to dabble with occult practices—including fortune-telling and witchcraft.

3. Sins of Hostility

There is a third category of works of the flesh, which we have labeled “sins of hostility.” Many of the sins of hostility are closely related, and so there will be only a brief description of each expression of animosity.

Hatred is a strong dislike (a feeling of ill-will) toward another person. The apostle John declares, “Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer, and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15). For some, hatred is a way of life. Such persons are essentially murderers even

though they may never have committed the overt act of murder. We must always be careful to use the word “hatred” only for hating a wrong cause (like intolerance and injustice), not for hating individual persons.

Variance speaks of disputes and quarrels that cause discord among brethren. There are too many church members who are simply not easy to get along with. Many are dreadfully touchy and easily offended. Some are stubborn and bull-headed, and just plain contrary. May the Lord deliver all of us from these carnal and wicked characteristics!

Emulations is a term that speaks of those who desire to surpass others. The Greek word, *zelos*, can denote both good and bad qualities. It is used sometimes to mean zeal and enthusiasm in pursuing a noble task, but here it speaks primarily of a begrudging resentment which envies the good fortune of others.

Wrath speaks of violent forms of anger. It represents storms of uncontrolled temper. It pictures the person who loses control when the car won’t start or the fish won’t bite or the calf won’t drink or the meals aren’t ready on time. The husband who steps out of the room and slams the door behind him because something doesn’t suit him—is displaying such fits of temper. Such conduct indicates that he is still under the grip of the lower nature.

Strife is translated from a Greek word which means “office seeking” or “canvassing for an office.” It describes those who would like to be elevated to a place of responsibility in the church, not so much for the service they can render, as for the prestige it might bring. The woman described as “the mother of Zebedee’s children” (Matthew 20:20), manifested this spirit when she requested that her sons would be granted a position on either side of the Lord in His kingdom. Some will even manipulate events for their own personal gain.

Seditions speak of divisions. The Greek word refers to any kind of commotion within the church that causes what is commonly known as “church splits.” There may be times when separation from an apostate group has a place, but in most cases, the primary duty of every Christian is to witness faithfully right where he is. The most deplorable splits are those resulting from personality conflicts within the church. When there are seditions, the unity and fellowship of the local body of Christ is fractured, and the testimony of the congregation in the community is marred. The divisive tendency (evident in many congregations) is the result of choosing to walk in the way of envy and bickering, rather than in the royal road of love, forgiveness, and magnanimity.

Heresies are ideas (schools of thought) that are contrary to the accepted fundamental historic doctrines of the Christian faith. It seems like some theologians are always trying to dream up something new. All Christians, when listening to teaching and preaching, need to take a lesson from the Bereans, who “searched the Scriptures daily [to find out] whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11).

Envyings speaks of a resentful desire for another’s possessions or advantages. It is closely related to the word emulations named earlier in the text (verse 20). One major difference between the two words is that envy is always bad, whereas emulations are not. The word translated “envyings” (used here in verse 21) is a totally evil concept and has no possibilities for good. The earlier word (emulations) may resent the good fortune of others, but the (envy) being considered here is so resentful that it may plot to destroy the other person.

Murders is a reminder that snuffing out a human life involves more than sticking a knife into another person. It is possible to cast looks that are filled with murder, and to speak words that are intended to slay. Many a husband has brought his wife to an early death by his lack of love, his mean unappreciative spirit toward her, and his unfaithfulness to her.

The evils labeled as hatred and wrath and strife and envyings and seditions are sins of hostility. The ultimate corrective for strife and hatred and violence is respect for human beings, and a genuine love for fellow Christians. We need to join Alexander Whyte in a prayer that he often prayed: “Oh God, let it not be ill with me when it’s well with others. Let me have the Holy Spirit, a fresh anointing of His presence and power, to promote my brother’s good!”

4. Sins of Intemperance

The final category in the list of the “works of the flesh” is what we choose to call sins of intemperance. The two terms in this category have obvious meanings.

Drunkenness is a condition caused by drinking alcoholic beverages. The reference is to being intoxicated with strong drink. In the United States of America there are more than ten million confirmed alcoholics. Nearly four out of five high school seniors have drunk alcohol within any given month. Drunkenness is not a disease; it is, instead, a devastating sin.

When the Judgment Day comes, the lame excuse which says that alcoholism is a disease will not pass. The drunkard is listed in Scripture along with thieves, extortioners, and sodomites, as those who will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Drunkenness has killed more persons than all the wars of history put together. During the Vietnam War, 50,000 American soldiers were killed. During that same period, five times that number (250,000 people) were killed in our own country—by automobile accidents caused by drunken drivers. Drinking alcohol has drained more blood, broken more homes, and brought more misery than any other scourge that has ever cursed the human race. Drunkenness is a shameful and degrading work of the flesh, and obviously has no place in the life of a Christian.

Revellings is a term associated with carousing and debauchery. The Greek word also indicates “wild parties” and “horsing around.” Revellings refers to disorderly merrymaking, including celebrations that are typical at wild parties. The term speaks of engaging in loose, loud, frivolous, and boisterous behavior. The practice of serenading a newly married couple as carried out in some communities (locally known as a “rattle band” or “shivaree”)—relates closely to what is described by the Greek word komoi. Revellings are common (in the world about us) when celebrating weddings, anniversaries, and holidays. The Bible says that our conduct as believers, by way of contrast, should portray a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God (1 Peter 3:4b).

Paul concludes the list with the words “and such like.” This is an indication that the list is not exhaustive. There are many other works of the flesh, similar to those given in verses 19-21a that are just as nefarious as the seventeen sins listed in the text. God surely would include evils such as lying, slander, flattery, murmuring, complaining, covetousness, suspicion, smoking, impatience, rebellion, and injustice.

The tense of the verb translated “do” means to habitually continue in the fleshly sins (verse 21b), rather than an isolated falling into the evil. Those who keep practicing such sins are not being led by God’s

Spirit, and are warned that they shall not inherit God's kingdom. There is a difference between falling into sin (through carelessness), and living in sin (as a settled choice of life). True children of God hate these sins and shrink from them—and if they do yield to temptation, they are in misery until they have confessed the sin and cried to God for mercy.

The way to gain increasing victory over the works of the flesh is found in verses 16 and 18 of Galatians 5, where we are admonished to “walk in the Spirit,” and to be “led of the Spirit.” To be “led” of the Spirit means more than to be guided by Him; it means to be controlled by Him.

-Harold S. Martin