

“The War Within”

(Galatians 5:16-18 ~ Part 2)

Introduction

➤ The faithful Christian life is a battle – a war waged in the trenches of the hearts and minds of every believer. This war is not between countries or nations; it is not a fight for political or governmental authority; it is not a battle for material prosperity, physical wellbeing, or emotional security. It is a fight for the souls of mankind.

Our biggest battle is not the conflict that is going on around us but the conflict that is going on within us. Simply put, the ‘war within’ is the Christian’s battle against temptation (the non-Christian knows no such battle as he/she is under the dominion of sin, unable to truly renounce sin or live righteously; see Rom.8:7-8). It is the fierce inner battle between the “*old self*” (Rom.6:6; Eph.4:22; Col.3:9; 2Cor.5:17) and the “*new self/creation*” (Gal.6:15; Eph.4:24; Col.3:10; 2Cor.5:17).

➤ In Galatians, this war is described as the battle between “*the desires of [our] flesh*” and “*the desires of the Spirit*.” Turning to Galatians 5:16-18, we find Paul (writing words inspired by the Holy Spirit of God) describing the spiritual battle that every Christian faces.

Gal 5:16-18 ~ “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

➤ As Christians, we must not minimize, trivialize, or ignore this spiritual battle. We must not foolishly think that we are somehow beyond this struggle, in some way spared from this war.

➤ Before Jesus had arrived at the Garden, just hours before He would be arrested and crucified, He shocked the apostles by saying that all of them would “fall away”:

Matt 26:30-31 ~ “And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. ³¹Then Jesus said to them, ‘You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’”

➤ Peter, and the rest of the apostles, could not believe that Jesus would say such a thing. They could not imagine ever denying or forsaking Him as their Lord and Savior. Speaking for all the apostles, Peter adamantly denied that he would ever deny Jesus:

Matt 26:33-35 ~ “Peter answered him, ‘Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away.’ ³⁴Jesus said to him, ‘Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny [*aparneomai*; to deny utterly] me three times.’ ³⁵Peter said to him, ‘Even if I must die with you, I will not deny [*aparneomai*] you!’ And all the disciples said the same.”

Luke 22:31-34 ~ “‘Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you [2nd, per. pl.], that he might sift you [2nd, per. pl.] like wheat, ³²but I have prayed for you [2nd, per. sg.] that your [2nd, per. sg.] faith may not fail. And when you [2nd, per. sg.] have turned again, strengthen your [2nd, per. sg.] brothers.’ ³³Peter said to him, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death.’ ³⁴Jesus said, ‘I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny [*aparneomai*] three times that you know me.’”

➤ The sifting metaphor is a powerful imagery. For the process of sifting wheat involved separating the wheat from the chaff by beating or rolling over the wheat. The devil wanted to thoroughly test Simon (in fact, the “you” is plural indicating that Satan was asking to “sift” all the apostles). Satan wanted to thresh – or, to put it in our contemporary vernacular, “thrash” – Peter’s faith and life. Satan had asked Jesus if he could take apart, dismantle, the apostles’ faith – and Jesus did not say “no.” Jesus forewarned Peter, and all the apostles, that they would be relentlessly and ruthlessly attacked by the devil.

Of course, Jesus was right. When Jesus was arrested, Peter and the rest of the apostles all fled to avoid being imprisoned and/or killed.

Luke 22:54-62 ~ “Then they seized [Jesus] and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house, and Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵And when they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat down among them. ⁵⁶Then a servant girl, seeing him as he sat in the light and looking closely at him, said, ‘This man also was with him.’ ⁵⁷But he denied it, saying, ‘Woman, I do not know him.’ ⁵⁸And a little later someone else saw him and said, ‘You also are one of them.’ But Peter said, ‘Man, I am not.’ ⁵⁹And after an interval of about an hour still another insisted, saying, ‘Certainly this man also was with him, for he too is a Galilean.’ ⁶⁰But Peter said, ‘Man, I do not know what you are talking about.’ And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.’ ⁶²And he went out and wept bitterly.”

➤ Another biblical example would be Jesus Himself.

Luke 4:1-2 ~ “And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness ²for forty days, being tempted by the devil. ...”

Luke 4:13 ~ “And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.”

➤ We must not be arrogant or complacent, thinking that we are somehow immune to Satan’s attacks (since Satan attacked the apostles, and Jesus, we can be assured that he will also attack us!). The Bible is replete with wartime language and images to awaken us to the reality that we are in a spiritual battle.

1 Peter 5:8 ~ “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

Eph 6:10-11 ~ “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. ¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.”

2 Cor 2:11 ~ “... we are not ignorant of [Satan’s] designs.”

➤ Only those who are truly saved, possess the indwelling presence and power of God’s Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:38; Rom.8:9-11). In addition to being the deposit which guarantees our salvation (2Cor.1:22; 5:5; Eph.1:14), the indwelling Spirit enables/empowers believers to walk in obedience to God by empowering them to “*put off*” (Eph.4:22-24; Col.3:9), to “*put to death*” (Rom.6:6; 8:13; Col.3:5), to “*renounce*” (Tit.2:12) their sinful and worldly desires.

Gal 2:20 ~ “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Gal 5:24 ~ “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

Gal 6:14 ~ “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

Rom 8:7-8 ~ “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

➤ Galatians 5:16-18 can be outlined with three major headings.

1. The Command (vs.16)

- First, we need to identify the command in verse sixteen: *“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh”* (vs.16). It is found in the imperative verb “walk” (*peripateō*). This Greek word (used almost 100 times in the New Testament, but only here in Galatians), is used literally to refer to a person “walking around” (primarily in the Gospels), or figuratively to describe the way in which a person is (or should be) living or behaving (cf. Eph.2:1-3, 10; Col.1:9-10; 1Jn.2:3-6).
- Christians are commanded by God to *“walk by the Spirit”* (vs.16). That is, to live in obedience and submission to the Holy Spirit of God. This is not an elective for Christians, or something that Christians do only when it is easy, beneficial or convenient. As Christians, we are to be living each day “in step” with the Spirit’s leading as He leads us in wisdom, godliness and righteousness. This is not theoretical, or even mystical. It is the conscious and willful decision to obey the commands of God – to *“walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him”* (Col.1:10; cf. Rom.6:12-13; 13:13-14).
- Notice the assurance that is given in verse sixteen: *“... walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh”* (vs.16). As we will see, the way to not *“gratify the desires of the flesh”* is not simply trying to resist or repress our fleshly (sinful) desires. The way to overcome sin is not merely trying to overcome sin, in our own strength, passion or wisdom. The way to overcome sin is to do so by walking in the Spirit. We simply cannot *will* ourselves to be godly, or pull up our “spiritual/religious bootstraps” and gut-out a righteous life. We are fully depended on God’s enabling and leading.

Yet, we cannot passively wait on God to make us live righteously or force us (against our wills) to live a holy life. Walking by the Spirit does not release us from the responsibility we have to strive for godliness. While we cannot walk by the Spirit apart from God’s enabling power, we also cannot walk by the Spirit without deliberate and conscious effort on our part.
- The truth is, while we are saved by God’s grace alone, we are not sanctified by God’s grace alone. God commands that we participate with Him in our own personal holiness. We cannot (on the one hand) live a holy life on our own, and we cannot (on the other hand) live a holy life without conscious and sincere effort on our part (see Jn.15:1-5; Gal.2:20; Col.1:28-29; Phil.2:12-13)
- So here is a promise given to us by God: *“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh”* (vs.16). The natural, supernatural, result of walking by the spirit is not gratifying the desires of our sinful flesh. The Greek word translated *“gratify”* (*teleō*) refers to that which is accomplished, perfected or completed [note: similar to the word Jesus used when, from the cross, He said: “It is finished”; Jn.19:30]. In Galatians 5:16, Paul is using this word to describe the carrying out or fulfilling of one’s sinful desires. In other words, our sinful desires will be thwarted – our temptations will be unfulfilled, unsatisfied – as we yield to the will and work of God’s Holy Spirit.
- Notice the order: *“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh”* (vs.16). When we walk by the Spirit, we will not gratify the desires of the flesh. The opposite is not true (i.e. not gratifying the desires of the flesh does not lead to walking by the Spirit). Again, it is only through walking by the Spirit that we can keep from sinning (i.e. gratifying the desires of the flesh).

2. The Conflict (vs.17)

- One reason for this is that a Christian simply cannot be walking in the Spirit and in the flesh at the same time. In verse seventeen we read: *“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”* (vs.17).

The *“desires of the flesh”* (vs.16, 17; cf. 1Jn.2:16) refers to any and every sinful desire (see *“works of the flesh”*, Gal.5:19-21). This includes not only the sinful desires that come from our physical appetites and bodily actions, but also sinful desires that come from our minds, our mouths, our wills, and our emotions.

- These *“desires of the flesh”* are *“against”* (kata) the desires of *“the Spirit”*, and the *“desires of the Spirit”* are *“against”* the desires of *“the flesh”* (vs.17). More literally, verse seventeen could be translated “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh.” Paul summarized this by simply stating that *“these are opposed to each other”* (vs.17). The word translated “opposed” (*antikeimai*) describes something that is in conflict with, or even hostile (adversarial) to, something else. The believer simply cannot walk in the flesh and by the Spirit at the same time. When we are living in the flesh we are living contrary to the Spirit, and when we are living in the Spirit we are living contrary to the flesh.
- This is the battle within. As Christians, we (ultimately) want to do that which God has called us to do; we want to be obedient, godly, and pleasing in His sight. But our (sinful) flesh fights against those spiritual desires and affections.

Satan cannot make us sin; he cannot possess the life of a true believer. But Satan can influence us through temptation, deception and seduction. Satan has no power of the Spirit of God, that resides in every true Christian, so he uses our flesh as the beachhead of all his attacks.

Our battle is to resist the devil (Jms.4:7), putting on the armor of God in order to stand against the schemes of the devil (Eph.6:11), and submitting to God as we walk by the Spirit of God. This is our greatest battle. It is a daily, moment-by-moment, battle to keep in step with the Spirit of God.

- Perhaps we can all relate to Paul’s personal battle with his sinful flesh:

Rom 7:15-25 ~ “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ...”

- Our only deliverance from this battle within is the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. A person simply cannot live by the Spirit apart from being saved and sanctified in the Spirit.

Romans 8:5-8 ~ “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

Romans 8:12-14 ~ “So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”

- The result of this conflict is that when the believer is truly walking by the Spirit they will not gratify their sinful desires. However, when the believer is walking in the flesh they will not gratify the desires of the Spirit – i.e. the desires of the flesh *“keep you from doing the things you want to do”* (vs.17).
- ✓ **Illust:** The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546), whom I quoted from previously, was an ordained priest in the Roman Catholic Church until he discovered the true Gospel that a person is saved by God’s grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone.

“When I was a monk I thought I was lost forever whenever I felt an evil emotion, carnal lust, wrath, hatred, or envy. I tried to quiet my conscience in many ways, but it did not work, because

lust would always come back and give me no rest. I told myself: ‘You have permitted this and that sin, envy, impatience, and the like. Your joining this holy order has been in vain, and all your good works are good for nothing.’ If at that time I had understood this passage, ‘*The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh,*’ I could have spared myself many a day of self-torment. I would have said to myself: ‘Martin, you will never be without sin, for you have flesh. Despair not, but resist the flesh’” (Martin Luther; *Luther’s Commentary on Galatians*; 5:17).

3. The Conquest (vs.18)

➤ The solution to our proclivity to sin is not to pit our desire to be righteous against the desires of the flesh, but to actively surrender our wills to the leading of the Holy Spirit – i.e. the presence and power of the indwelling Holy Spirit in our lives. We simply cannot win the battle against sin in our own strength or by our own wisdom. We must seek continually to be led by the Spirit of God.

This means that we faithfully avail ourselves to the resources God has given us: prayer and the Scriptures. If we are not immersed in the Word of God, and faithful in prayer, we will struggle to know the will of God. The goal of the Christian life is to live like Christ. To accomplish this, we must be ever-conscious of God – His truth, His presence, His character, His power, His attributes, His will, and His glory. When we neglect the study of His word and the discipline of prayer, we are more apt to drift away from God and more susceptible to the attacks of the devil.

➤ We must remember, however, that our pursuit of walking by the Spirit must not be fueled by legalism or any heartless/mindless religious activity. We must be careful not to turn spiritual disciplines (i.e. prayer, Bible study, etc.) into religious routines or rituals. For, as the Pharisees put on inglorious display, a person can pray and read the Bible and not be walking in the Spirit (or even saved!). Walking by the Spirit of God is not simply being dutiful in Christian activities. It is humbly submitting to God, and consciously following His will for your life.

➤ The apostle Paul put it this way: *“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law”* (vs.18). As we saw in Galatians 3:23-4:7, the (mature) Christian no longer needs the law of God to guide them because they are led by the Spirit of God. To be *“led”* (*agō*) by the Spirit is essentially the same as walking by the Spirit. However, it has the added meaning of being compelled and directed. In other words, when a Christian is truly led by the Spirit of God the law is not the main means of their sanctification; the Spirit is. The Spirit-led Christian is free from the law – not free to do whatever they want, but free to do all that God wants (Rom.6:1-2; Gal.5:13; 1Pet.2:16).

Those who are living by the guiding power of the Spirit in their lives and are fighting each day against the influence of the sinful nature do not need to be supervised and restrained by the law. They have something far greater than the external law(s) of God. They have the indwelling presence and power of God’s Holy Spirit – every moment of every day!

Romans 6:14 ~ “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”

Romans 8:1-4 ~ “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

➤ To put it another way, the Christian is not free *to* sin but freed *from* sin. That is, the Christian has been freed from not only the penalty of sin (justification) but also the very power of sin (sanctification) – and one day the very presence of sin (glorification). The Christian is no longer helplessly dead in sin, no longer powerlessly under sin’s control, no longer unable to say no to unrighteousness. At the moment of true conversion, the Christian is able to live (for the first time) a righteous, Christlike, life.

Conclusion

- So, what does it mean to “*walk by the Spirit*” (Gal.5:16), to be “*led by the Spirit*” (Gal.5:18), or to “*live by the Spirit*” (Gal.5:25), and to “*keep in step with the Spirit*” (Gal.5:25)? Simply put, living by the Spirit is walking in obedience to God. It is living, in the power and presence of God, according to the Word and will of God.
- Let me try to summarize all that we have been studying by offering nine words for your prayerful consideration:

Walking by the Spirit is ...

supernatural – God enables and empowers the Christian to know and obey His commands.

internal – it stems not from external (religious) demands but the indwelling presence and power of God.

tangible – it requires personal discipline and yields spiritual fruit that is evident.

willful – it takes conscious and sincere effort on the Christian’s part.

arduous – it requires continual, faithful, and sacrificial work.

extensive – it spreads to every part of the Christian’s life (e.g., actions, inactions, attitude, words, thoughts, feelings).

abiding – the Christian lives and perseveres in Christ.

progressive – though not constant or perfect, the Christian is ever-growing in Christ and becoming more like Christ.

glorious – the more the believer is conformed to Christ the more God is glorified.

- The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther was a prolific hymn writer. Arguably his most famous hymn is “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”, which he wrote in 1529 based on Psalm 46. Luther said, “We sing this psalm to the praise of God, because God is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends His church and His word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh and sin” (James M. Boice, (2005). *Psalms 42–106: An Expository Commentary*; p. 388).

A Mighty Fortress Is Our God

(words and music by Martin Luther; 1529; from Psalm 46):

Verse 1

A mighty fortress is our God / A bulwark never failing
Our helper He amid the flood / Of mortal ills prevailing
For still our ancient foe / Doth seek to work us woe
His craft and power are great / And armed with cruel hate
On earth is not his equal

Verse 2

Did we in our own strength confide / Our striving would be losing
Were not the right Man on our side / The man of God's own choosing
Dost ask who that may be / Christ Jesus it is He
Lord Sabaoth His name / From age to age the same
And He must win the battle

Verse 3

And though this world with devils filled / Should threaten to undo us
We will not fear for God hath willed / His truth to triumph through us
The prince of darkness grim / We tremble not for him
His rage we can endure / For lo his doom is sure
One little word shall fell him

Verse 4

That word above all earthly pow'rs / No thanks to them abideth
The Spirit and the gifts are ours / Through Him who with us sideth
Let goods and kindred go / This mortal life also
The body they may kill / God's truth abideth still
His kingdom is forever