

LAW, LIBERTY, AND LIFE IN JESUS - Knowing How it all Works

Part twenty-one - Teaching #2171

Sunday, March 13th, 2022 - 10 a.m.

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WHY CANADIAN LAWMAKERS CAN NEVER TRANSFORM HUMAN HEARTS

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:19-26 - “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, [20] idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, [21] envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things — as I warned you before — that those who practice 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, and self-control. The law is not against such things. [24] Now 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.”

I know a lot of Christian people who don't like the lists of specific sins that Paul so frequently uses in his letters. I know Christians who have been duped by careless theologians to think that whenever someone lists sins they are automatically being legalistic. Of course, what they forget is Paul, who uses these lists more than anyone else (perhaps next to Jesus) in the New Testament, is also the one who wrote **against** the dangers of legalism more than any other New Testament author.

We need to note, in addition, that Paul writes this list of sins of the flesh right in the same context in which he calls Christians to walk in the Spirit. That means we know, at least in the Apostle Paul's mind, that there is no contradiction whatsoever between walking in the freedom and life of the Holy Spirit and being specifically ruthless in naming and renouncing sinful activities.

I have a wonderful old book in my library but haven't read in years. The book is called "***Christian Commitment,***" and is written by a now deceased professor at Fuller Seminary, ***Edward J. Carnell.*** Listen to these profound words:

"God never urges Himself to be good. Because He is good. That is, His nature always inclines irresistibly toward righteousness. God is never torn by evil motives. God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. So He does not need to be reminded about the duty of His deity. No one needs to say, 'Now today, God, mind your manners, do what's right, avoid evil, remember the commandments.' When a person is good from root to branch he does not need to be told to be good. His goodness grows like a fruit on a tree."

We all know we are **not** good in that absolute sense. We need to be **warned** about the deeds of the flesh in a way God does not. Lists like the ones Paul and Jesus used are reminders that we need to take our leanings toward sin very seriously. We have what Paul has called ***the flesh, setting its desires against the Spirit*** - **Galatians 5:17** - “**For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don’t do what you want.**” - IPAD TEXT

We studied this process in detail last week.

But, while lists like these are **necessary**, they can also be very **dangerous**. They can be dangerous when they are treated as **ends in themselves** rather than the **result** of the life and work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. In other words, if the crucifixion of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit are left out of the picture, these lists, which are designed to keep the gravitational pull of the flesh in check, can actually **feed and inflame** the power of the flesh in a different way.

Let's say, for an example, that I am a proud person who likes to achieve the best life possible in my own strength so I alone can have all the glory for it. When I see a list of moral vices like this, especially if I respect the **source** of the list (like the Apostle Paul, or the New Testament), I can use that list to prove my natural goodness and my ability to discipline my own appetites and desires. And, the more **successful** I am in doing so, the more I have used that list to ***feed my own pride and independence.***

Remember, "**flesh**" does not mean "**body**" in most of Paul's writings. That's why some of those "**deeds of the flesh**" in verses 19-21 aren't outward "**deeds**" at all. **Envy** isn't a deed as we usually think of the term. Nor is **jealousy**. Yet Paul says they are manifestations of the flesh. So is **pride**. So is **arrogance**. So is **lust**. So is **greed**.

And those kinds of **inward** sins of the flesh can and do thrive in the heart even if the outward visible actions can be made to conform with the law of God. In other words, the list of vices can feed the flesh if I **fail** to remember it at all, which leads to **outward carelessness and immorality**. And the same list of vices can feed the flesh if I remember it and **keep it outwardly**, but do so out of pride, or love of praise and respect, or the desire to be admired more by my family or spouse, or the desire to have a position of leadership in the church.

If I fail to give ***due regard*** to the list I give in to the flesh through ***immorality***. If I use the list to establish my own pride and virtue I give in to the flesh through ***legalism***. But the flesh wins either way and my depravity is more deeply established either way as well.

Let me quickly review some key truths we've already studied in Galatians so we will approach our text tonight with a sound foundation of understanding:

1) **ALL THROUGH THE BOOK OF GALATIANS PAUL HAS SHOWN THAT THE FLESH MANIFESTS ITSELF IN TWO WAYS, NOT JUST ONE**

First, the life of the flesh manifests itself in ***rebellion*** to God's ways. Then, second, the flesh manifests itself when, as a sinner, I am ***unwilling to depend on God's mercy and promise of righteousness in Christ Jesus***. ***Before*** the Fall there was only ***one*** way to sin - disobedience to God's commands. ***Since*** the Fall, there are ***two*** ways to sin - disobedience to God's commands ***and*** attempting to pay God back for our sins on our own terms, and with our own religions.

What Paul does in the book of Galatians is ***start*** with the ***second*** kind of sin (**1-4**) and ***finish*** with the ***first*** (**5-6**). He begins his letter dealing with the false teachers insistence that these Galatian believers need to be circumcised and keep the laws of ethnic Judaism in order to be made complete in salvation. Paul says if they do this Christ will be of no use to them in a saving way - **Galatians 5:4** - **"You who are trying to be justified by the law are alienated from Christ; you have fallen from grace."** - IPAD TEXT

Then, in the last chapter and a half of the letter he deals with the second kind of sin - flat out rebellion against God's laws. He calls upon Christians and says, **"....don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh...."** (5:13).

So, what we're seeing here is a massive picture of Biblical salvation. Through the death of Christ on the Cross the ***guilt*** of my sins is removed and I am forgiven. And then, in addition, through the indwelling presence and power of the Spirit a new ***motive*** for righteousness is established. This means the power of the flesh is defeated both as a ***promoter of carelessness and immorality AND as a proud establisher of my own righteousness.***

- 2) **PAUL CALLS THE VICES OF THE FLESH “WORKS” (OR DEEDS) AND THE VIRTUES OF THE SPIRIT “FRUIT” - WHY?**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:19-22 - “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, [20] idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, [21] envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things — as I warned you before — that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. [22] But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness....”

I used to think that the vices were called “**works**” and the virtues were called “**fruit**” because this proved that the Holy Spirit had produced the virtues *by His power rather than mine*, whereas the vices were called **works** because they were the result of my own contrived efforts.

But I have come to see real problems with this explanation. Fruit grows *naturally*, but these virtues don’t come naturally in my life. I have to work very hard at them. I’m not naturally patient when I’m wronged. I don’t naturally love my enemies. Sometimes it’s hard to keep my temper.

On the other hand, the vices Paul describes as “**works**” don’t require any work at all. These are the traits of character that come naturally to me. It takes no work at all to be impatient or unforgiving or greedy. In the words of **Alexander Solzhenitsyn**, these things “*grow in my heart like lard grows on a pig.*”

So what is Paul trying to say with these labels - “**works**” of the flesh and “**fruit**” of the Spirit? I said I’ve come to see these terms quite differently. I don’t think Paul is talking about the **effort** required to generate either one. Bad trees and good trees bear their fruit with the same amount of effort. No, I think the answer lies in another direction.

First, consider the term “**works**” of the flesh:

- a) *I believe Paul calls the vices of the flesh “works,” not because they require more effort, but because they are all attempts to pay back some debt to the flesh.*

These vices stem from a sense of **entitlement**, of **rights being won**, of **scores being evened out**. This is why people express **anger**. They have been **sold short** in some way. This is why people **envy** others. They don't have something someone else has. And they have a sense of being **left out** or **cheated** by life. This is where **disputes** and **dissensions** come from. People feel they are right and their position is being ignored or scorned.

All of these vices of the flesh are called “**works**,” not because they take effort. They don’t. They are called “**works**” because they are the attempt of the flesh to have God, others, and nature itself **pay the wages of satisfaction it deserves**.

Unlike the fruit of the Spirit, which begins with the outflow of **love**, the flesh sees everyone else as its **debtor**. This is what Paul means in his closing definition of the life of the works of the flesh - **Galatians 5:26 - “Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.” - IPAD TEXT**

Underscore especially those words, “**challenging one another.**” This is a vivid picture of the “**works**” of the flesh; not working in the sense of **earning** something, but working because, separated from grace, the flesh feels itself **entitled already** to all the satisfaction it can find on its own terms. The flesh always feels **owed to**. And the works of the flesh are the **wages** it seeks to exact.

- b) **The virtues of the Spirit are called “fruit,”** not because they are always **effortless**. They’re not. They are called “**fruit**” because they flow **outward** from a sense of **grace received** and **love overflowing** rather than the inward pull of the desperate cravings of the unfulfilled flesh.

Here we come face to face with a profound theological truth. The flesh works like a **vacuum cleaner** because, in rejecting Christ Jesus and His Cross, the flesh has no sense of **grace received**. It can never be fueled by **gratitude** and, as a result, can never overflow in the Spirit with freely given love.

The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, like an overflowing **fountain**, promotes the greatness of Christ in the heart. Not the greatness of self. As mercy and grace and love and promise become the foundation of my walk with God, **so does my faith and trust in Him for my satisfaction and future.** I don't have to fill up my life with the cravings of the flesh.

And this, says Paul, is the fountain of **freedom both to love others, fulfilling the law of God, and, at the same time, overcome the immoral cravings of the flesh:**

IPAD TEXTS - Galatians 5:14 - “For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Galatians 5:16 - “i say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh.”

So, once again, I believe the terms “**works**” and “**fruit**” describe, not the **amount of effort** required in the exercise of each, but the **kind of heart** that generates each.

- 3) **TO CONTINUE WALKING IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT IT IS IMPORTANT TO CONCENTRATE ON THE TWO WAYS OF BEING CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST JESUS**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:24 - “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

To get the clearest possible picture of what this verse means, compare it with another verse we've already studied that says something *similar*, but not quite the *same*. Let me put the two verses back to back:

IPAD TEXTS - Galatians 2:20 - “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Galatians 5:24 - “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

The difference is subtle but extremely important for moving ahead in the Spirit-filled life of holiness. In 2:20 my role in the whole process is *passive* - “I have been crucified with Christ.” In 5:24 my role is *active* - “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

In the **first** case, my crucifixion takes place ***in Christ Jesus***. In the **second**, **I** am the one doing the crucifying. In the first, my involvement is one of placing my faith in Christ's crucifixion on my behalf. In the second, I am actively slaying the dragon of my own flesh.

Perhaps that's the way Paul would have us think of this process of growing in holiness. Perhaps we should stop thinking in terms of "**making a decision**" for Christ and start thinking of the Christian life as the ***slaying of a dragon***. And the battle with the dragon is an ***ongoing battle***.

The dragon has been ***mortally wounded*** through Christ's death on the Cross. Its demise is certain. But it still raises its head to snort and puff and spit out fire and venom against my freedom in Christ. And it's not enough just to "***love Jesus.***" It's very important, but not enough. That dragon must be sliced and jabbed and stabbed on a daily basis.

Can I win this battle by myself, on my own strength? Not in a million years. Paul has already made that perfectly clear and we spent all last week proving it - **Galatians 5:16 - "I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh."**

- IPAD TEXT

This is why Canadian lawmakers can never transform the human heart. The very fact that we **need** these laws **proves** the untouched depravity of humanity. Do you remember the quote by Carnell that God never needs to be reminded of His own goodness?

Every court in the land proves we **do**, very desperately, need to be called to goodness, over and over again. Our country can't hold on to a vague belief in God, however we conceive Him to be, as a left-over value of generations gone by, and expect to see any changes in human hearts. Hearts can only be transformed through a **redeeming God**, Who supplies His Spirit to work in our hearts.

Only the Spirit can bring victory over the flesh. But it is **my** responsibility to **keep in step** with the Spirit - **Galatians 5:25** - "If we **live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.**" - IPAD **TEXT**

Remember, first we must **commit**. Then the Holy Spirit **empowers**. But the Holy Spirit will never **make** the decision to crucify the flesh **for** you. Remember last week's teaching. You must make the decision to **walk** in the Spirit before you will be **led and empowered** by the Spirit. There is simply no way to **lead** a person who refuses to **walk**.

So don't just **claim** you have been crucified with Christ. Crucify the flesh and its passions **for yourself**. Give the Lord's Supper more meaning than just harkening back to an event you can't remember because you weren't there. Take up your cross daily. Find the fruit of freedom and joy that the Holy Spirit wants to cultivate in the garden of your heart. Just remember, the Holy Spirit is the grower, but **you** are the weeder.