

COLLECTIVE

Life In The Spirit Series (Lesson 2) – The Flesh vs The Spirit

Our connect group lessons this year will focus primarily on Galatians 5.

Read: Galatians 5:16-25

In our 1st lesson, we learnt from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians that true Christian freedom is **freedom from sin**, not **freedom to sin**. It is an unrestricted liberty to approach God as his children, and not an unrestricted liberty to self-indulge in sin.

In this lesson, we are going to continue on his letter from Galatians 5:16-25. Paul tells them that the two main opponents combating each other in Christian conflict are "the flesh" and "the Spirit". Verse 16-17 says "Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify (or you will not fulfill) the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh...."

By "the flesh" Paul tells us what we are by nature and our fallen condition. By "the Spirit" he tells us that the Holy Spirit renews and regenerates us, first giving us a new nature and then remaining to dwell in us. More simply, "the flesh" is what we are by natural birth (old self), "the Spirit" is what we become by new birth (new self) – the birth of the Spirit. And these two, the flesh and the Spirit, are in sharp opposition to each other.

It should be clear to us that "the flesh" and "the Spirit" are in active conflict with one another. They are pulling in opposite directions. There exists between the two a "deadly feud". And the result of this conflict is that "what you will to do you cannot do." (Galatians 5:17)

Every renewed Christian can say "I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self" (Romans 7:22). That is, "I love it and long to do it. My new nature hungers for God, for godliness and for goodness. I want to be good and do good." This is the desire of every Christian.

But, by ourselves, even with these new desires, we cannot do what we want to do. Why? Because of sin that dwells within us. Or as Paul expresses it "because of the strong desires of the flesh which lust against the Spirit."

This is the Christian's conflict – fierce, bitter, and unremitting. It is a conflict in which by himself the Christian simply cannot be victorious. He wants to do what is right, but he can't. Romans 7:18 says "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out."

Reflection/discussion:

What are the situations in your life when you want to do what is right, but struggle to do so?

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So what hope is there? Are we then condemned to continuous defeat?

Left to ourselves, we would be defeated. But if “we walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16), then we would have victory as we would not gratify and indulge the desires of the flesh. We will instead bear the fruit of the Spirit.

What must we do then to control the lusts of the flesh and to produce the fruit of the Spirit?

1) We must crucify the flesh.

Galatians 5:24 says “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. The crucifixion of the flesh described here is something not done to us but by us. It is we who crucify our flesh. It is we who have taken action. We crucify our old nature.

When we crucify our old nature:

- I. We must be **pitiless** towards it – don’t give any grace or leave any space for it.
- II. It will be **painful** – because it is not what our fleshly nature wants.
- III. It must be **decisive** – resolute and complete.

We crucify everything we know to be wrong. We take all our old self-centred nature, with all its sinful passions and desires, and nail it to the cross. And this repentance of ours must be decisive, as decisive as a crucifixion.

So, Paul says, if we crucify the flesh, we must leave it there to die. We must renew everyday this attitude towards sin with ruthless and uncompromising rejection. As Jesus says, we must “take up his cross daily.” (Luke 9:23)

The secret of holiness lies in the degree and decisiveness of our repentance. If we keep repeating a particular sin, it is either we have never truly repented, or we have not maintained our repentance.

When some jealous, proud, malicious, or impure thought invades our mind, we must kick it out at once. It is fatal to begin to entertain it, test it, or consider whether we are going to give in to it or not. We must declare war on it. We cannot try to negotiate with it. We must settle it, seal it for good. We must crucify it.

Reflection/discussion:

Are there areas of your life you know is wrong, and you know you must reject/get rid of decisively, but you don’t?

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2) We must walk by the Spirit.

The way to have victory is to crucify the flesh and to be “led by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:18) and to “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16,25). Being led is passive, walking is active. It is the Spirit who does the leading, but it is we who do the walking.

As our leader, the Holy Spirit takes the initiative. He asserts His desires against those of the flesh (verse 17) and forms within us holy and heavenly desires. He puts his gentle pressure upon us, and we must yield to His direction and control.

But we also cannot make the mistake of just being passive. We must also be active and do the walking – purposefully and in the right way. And the Holy Spirit is the path we walk in, as well as the guide who shows us the way.

Therefore, as we crucify the flesh, rejecting what we know to be wrong, so too must we walk by the Spirit, setting ourselves to follow what is right. We reject one path to follow what is good.

But as much as we need to be ruthless in turning away from the things of the flesh, **we must equally be disciplined in turning towards the things of the Spirit**. The Bible says we are to “set our minds on the things of the Spirit” and to “seek the things that are above”. To “set our minds on things that are above” and to “think about these things” (**whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, lovely and gracious**).

This will be seen in our whole way of life – the things we pursue, the things we enjoy and the relationships we make.

Reflection/discussion:

Think about how you can be better “led by the Spirit” and to “walk by the Spirit”.