



It might surprise you but one of the greatest benefits I received from the time I spent in prison was a spiritual one, one that relates to a particular doctrine of the Bible. The doctrine I'm speaking of is the absolute depravity of our fallen nature. Never have I experienced so much perversion in such a small space. I'm not going to bore or shock you with the details, but I do want to point to one example that relates to the passage we'll be looking at this morning.

Now anyone who has ever been incarcerated longs to experience freedom again. Makes sense! And once a certain amount of time has been served that lawbreaker can then be released. They can make parole, provided they agree with certain conditions; conditions like no drinking or drugging or fighting. But here's where all the problems begin. The staggering statistic that 90 percent of parolees end up back in prison illustrates the point that our sin nature, regardless of intent, can't handle liberty. For many it means running amok, returning to destructive lifestyles that refuse to honor God or the rights of others. You would think that after years of being locked up one would cultivate a greater respect for freedom. But time and time again we see the same results—the conditions, those laws that provide the contractual basis for a prisoner's release are rarely, if ever, honored. And the point is, freedom becomes God's acid test for all of mankind, not just the unsaved. Yet our sinful nature always fails that test. So the question we want to consider this morning is: How do we, as Christians, handle our freedom? And why does it seem like such a struggle to honor God in our choices?

This morning we are going to look at the dynamics of what Paul calls the **flesh**. Turn with me to Galatians 5, starting in verse 16. Paul writes, *"walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh."* In this foundational passage, Paul starts by emphasizing the fact that God calls us, as Christians, to walk in a new way. Now, we all know what it means to walk. We've been doing that since we were about 18 months old. The word Paul uses, *parapateo*, means, "to walk about," and is the most commonly used word for Christian conduct.

I can remember my daughter Jessica's first attempts to walk. She was so determined, but her little legs were not yet strong enough to support her. So I would help her until she was able to put one foot in front of the other. Most of the time she wobbled. Other times she fell. Then there were those truly blessed days when she didn't stumble at all. In the same way the Holy Spirit helps us

to walk. As we rely on Him, He coaches us like a faithful father; empowering us in our weakness, encouraging us to follow Him. And just as I was so pleased by Jessica's first, feeble, stumbling efforts, God the Father is also pleased by our attempts to walk with Him. Each time we fall He picks us back up again. He knows perfectly well that our own efforts will never bring us anywhere near His perfection. We'll fall down. We'll skin our knees until the spiritual muscles needed to walk in a new way are developed. In fact, failure is always built into the long-term process of growth. Anyone who has ever tried to learn a new skill or adjust their lifestyle knows it's a process of "baby steps"—most often three steps forward, two back. But no matter how many times we stumble, if we intend to move forward we have to get back on our feet. One of my old mentors used to say, "the mark of a mature man or woman is not that they don't fall but that they make the necessary adjustments so they fall less frequently." We should probably take those words to heart.

Secondly, Paul tells us that our progress will be opposed by strong fleshly desires. Verse 17 explains it this way, *"For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please."* Whenever we make a decision to walk by the Spirit, whenever we say, "I'm ready to make a change," do you know what's going to happen? The flesh is going to arouse a desire to do the complete opposite.

Here is the reason why people struggle so—the flesh doesn't want to die. Every Christian has an antagonist within, one that is diabolically opposed to our reborn nature. This is the flesh, that inherited selfishness that impels us to pursue our own interests at the expense of others. It's a word that speaks of life apart from God. Furthermore, the flesh has great power. It's by no means eradicated because we may be Christian. If you don't agree, then ask yourself where that last ugly or ungodly thought or desire came from. It didn't come out of a vacuum, but from the old nature that is still resident within all of us. There is a relentless spiritual tension within every believer, one that hits us with discouraging regularity. The Living Bible puts it this way, "and our wishes are never free from their pressures." Isn't that the truth! So we all know, from experience that this is true. This spirit-flesh conflict goes on throughout our lifetime. We never get so mature that we don't experience it. And we never face a day where there aren't choices that must be made in regards to it. So what do these choices look like?

A fisherman came into town every Saturday afternoon with his two dogs. One was white, the other black. He had taught them to fight on command. So every Saturday all the people gathered at the town square and made wagers with one another as to which dog would win. Some days the white dog would win. Other days the black one would. But no matter what day they fought the fisherman always won his bets. After awhile the others began to get suspicious. So they asked him how he was able to hedge his bets. He replied, "It's easy! I starve one and feed the other. The one I feed always wins because he is stronger."

What this story teaches is that which dominates will depend on which one we are feeding. If we are feeding ourselves spiritually, through God's word, our prayer life, our fellowship with one another and yielding control to the Holy Spirit, then He will rule. But if we become spiritually anorexic and neglect our daily disciplines then the flesh will dominate. This is one of the reasons that in counseling I always ask people what their disciplines look like. Without a healthy regimen of prayer, scriptural reflection and relational supports, we have little chance of succeeding.

*"Now the deeds of the flesh are evident."* Paul tells us that these deeds, these outward acts or marks of the flesh, are plain to see. All we need to do is flip on the television. Grab a magazine. It's on the front page of the paper as we are sipping our morning coffee. It's plastered across the billboards as we are driving to work. Our culture is constantly showcasing the flesh. So Paul divides them into four categories, beginning in the sexual area: **immorality**, from the Greek word *porneia*, from which our word pornography is derived, "impurity, and sensuality." These three words cover all sexual offenses, whether premarital or extramarital, illicit sex or unnatural lust. They are all part of what Paul calls the deeds of the flesh.

The second area is of religious nature: **idolatry and sorcery**. Idolatry is anything outside of God that takes or usurps the worship of our heart. Pleasure, power, property or prestige, even relationships to another person, can become idolatrous if exalted above God. And by sorcery Paul is referring to the rituals associated with these practices.

The third category concerns personal relationships: **enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying**. It's interesting to note that all these relational vices were currently undermining the fellowship within the Galatian church. In verse 15 he warns them, as he must warn us, *"if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed."* The Greek word for bite was used in connection with various words meaning **abuse** and refers to conduct more fitting wild animals, like a dogfight, than to brothers and sisters in Christ.

And the fourth category has to do with excessive drinking or alcoholism: **drunkenness and carousing**. All the deeds in these

categories are simple examples of how sick Christians can get when the flesh rather than the Spirit is served. It's like a little sketch of life with God taken out of the middle.

In light of this, Paul holds up a solemn warning in verse 21. He says, *"I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."* This verse doesn't mean that we can lose our salvation. If our sin were too great for God's grace, He never would have saved us in the first place. Because the tense of the word translated 'practice' is present, it indicates a compulsive or addictive tendency towards acting out of the flesh rather than an occasional relapse. So Paul's point is this: continuous trafficking in sin shows a lack of spiritual life in the unsaved, whereas occasional relapses are a sign of the flesh rearing its ugly head in the saved.

Regrettably there are many Christians who do many of these things in the name of freedom. What they fail to see is that such activities subject them to slavery. When liberty becomes license not only is the great privilege of liberty abused but those who abuse it are themselves shackled and imprisoned as a result of their own choices. I have observed this countless times. For whatever reason—perhaps the tension that has resulted from a difficult marriage, a season of economic insecurity, or the residue left over from unattended emotional wounds—when we log off spiritually, when we stop looking for a spiritual solution, we tend to log on to its counterfeit in the flesh. The tragic result is that, oftentimes, we distance ourselves further and further away from the very thing that can call us back to the truth.

Years ago, I did some counseling with a middle aged man. On paper his life worked. By the world's standards he was a "success." But there was something missing. Though he went to church every Sunday, he was, none-the-less, spiritually disconnected. Then one night he was surfing the Internet and accidentally stumbled upon a porn sight. At first, he was shocked and disgusted by the explicit images and quickly logged off the sight. But something took hold of him and, despite his resolve, he found himself logging back on that same night. What began as a casual encounter very quickly became a daily preoccupation, eating away at his dignity and taking control of his life. And it wasn't long, thereafter, that he began seeing prostitutes, selling out physically to what he had already given his mind over to.

Do you see the progression here? It begins with a spiritual or emotional deficit that's been left unattended. Any external object of gratification can then trigger a desire for a counterfeit solution. And once we give ourselves license, decay and death will then enter into our experience. In other words, the seeds we casually sow to the flesh will always produce an abundant harvest of rotten fruit.

In stark contrast to this portrait of the flesh Paul then characterizes the fruit of the Spirit. In verses 22—23 he says, *"But the*

*fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*" The sanctifying power of God lives within each believer, with the capacity to mold and perfect us into the people He wants us to be. But we must choose to allow the Holy Spirit to work within us. As we do so, God will produce spiritual fruit that's like a ripe cluster of grapes. This fruit can't be produced through self-effort. Nor are they a reward for doing good deeds, like a merit badge or blue ribbon. Fruit is the result of a life of faith. The first three, **love, joy and peace**, concern our relationship with God. He is our first love and first joy, and because of His grace we are at peace. The next triad, **patience, kindness, and goodness**, describe our relationships with other people. We will seek their best and put up with their worst. And the final three qualities, **faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control**, concern our self-ward relationship. For the most part, we are able to master our passions and maintain a godly lifestyle. Then Paul adds for the purpose of emphasis, *"against such things there is no law"* because these qualities of character, obviously, fulfill it.

So how can we overcome this inner conflict between flesh and spirit? Paul's brief answer in verses 24–25 is: we must crucify the flesh and walk by the Spirit. *"Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit."* Notice that the crucifixion described here is not something that is done to us but by us. We are the ones who have been called to take the action. This is the way of the Cross. Jesus humbled Himself and became obedient unto death. For us as Christians, there is no journey, no path set before us, aside from the one that He Himself walked. And, just as Jesus emptied Himself in obedience to the Father's will, we too are being asked to abandon ourselves in the same way. Outside of the cross there is no other place for our sin to go. God, through His Spirit, wants to change us into the image of His Son. Therefore, He is devoted to healing everything that stands in the way of His perfect love. So He calls every Christian to take up his or her cross daily and walk to that place of crucifixion where every use of our body that is in service to the flesh is to be put to death.

But what does that look like, practically speaking? Paul tells us that we can crucify the flesh only *"by the Spirit,"* through His ministry and power. Romans 8:13 tells us, *"if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body you will live."* Only the Spirit of God can give us the desire and discipline to reject it. Our part is to take the initiative to act. There is a beautiful painting by Briton Riviere that illustrates this movement. It shows Daniel's posture in the lion's den. He is standing there with a single-minded devotion, his back against the problem and his face looking towards the heavens. I believe this is the posture that God calls us to in regards to those things that have the capacity to devour our

spiritual lives. It often seems that no amount of turning towards the problem does anything but fuel its growth. The flesh exploits our weakness. The lions smell the fear. So God calls us through His Spirit to turn away and, like Daniel, trust in Him for our deliverance. This is not an unhealthy form of denial, but coming to acknowledge a greater reality. Through God's Spirit we can choose to neglect these diseased aspects of our character to death. This is how our true repentance is walked out in our daily lives.

Personally, I've learned to distinguish three emotional cues that help to identify the stirrings of the flesh. First, there is restlessness within. Secondly, there is irritability toward others. Finally, there is a discontentedness in regards to my circumstances. These emotional triggers demand an immediate response or gratification. Oftentimes it's very subtle. One of the things we want to do is to objectify these emotional responses. In other words, identify what's causing these feelings to be aroused without reacting to them. Some people "believe it because they feel it" and this is simply not an accurate measure of biblical truth. So please, separate out feelings from facts. This is critical to the process of crucifying the flesh. Once the feelings are recognized as fleshly we must then seek to identify the false beliefs that are fueling the emotional responses. Our beliefs are the filters by which we interpret reality. It's our beliefs that fuel the attitudes and emotions that drive certain behaviors, in that order. By naming the false beliefs we are able to lift them from the unconscious into our conscious awareness. It's only with the conscious mind that we can confront them and seek, in the name of Jesus, to have them removed. To correct these false beliefs, we must then turn from what is false and affirm what is true through God's Word. And, finally, we need to act on what is true. The moment we take action, the moment we start walking in line with the Spirit's direction, is when life change occurs. This is what Paul is referring to when he encourages the Galatians to *"walk by the Spirit."*

But there is an important difference in being "led by" and "walking by the Spirit" that Paul intends for us to understand. Being *"led by the Spirit,"* as Paul refers to in verse 18, is in the passive tense. It's something that's being done to us. The verb is used of a shepherd leading sheep, or of wind driving a ship. In other words, it's the Holy Spirit who takes the initiative to assert His desires against those of the flesh. But it would be wrong to conclude that all we need to do is passively surrender to the Spirit's control. On the contrary, we are to **walk**, actively in the right way. It's the Spirit who does the leading, but we who are called to do the walking.

Remember earlier we said that the verb **walk** in Galatians 5:16 means, "to walk around." In verse 25, where Paul says, *"If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit,"* the word means, "to walk in line or conduct oneself rightly." The idea seems to be that since we, as Christians, have divine life indwelling us we are to act in line with that life. So as we "crucify the flesh," rejecting

what we know to be wrong, so too we must “walk by the Spirit,” by following what we know to be right. We reject one path to follow another. And because of His work within, we can begin walking in a way that is more reflective of Christ’s character. We will begin to experience life where there once was death or decay, peace rather than war. We will be able to walk uprightly because He who is upright is walking alongside, empowering us to love as Jesus loved. By this the law is fulfilled; not through any external means or regulations but through Christ’s Spirit who helps us to exercise our choices in a way that God intended.

We began this morning by saying that to walk according to the Spirit is a freedom issue. Every moment of every day we are free to choose for or against Him. However, our freedom in Christ should never be taken for granted. It is not license to do as we please. On the contrary, it means that we are free to serve God and glorify Him through our actions, something we are incapable of in our flesh. Neither is walking in the Spirit self-determination. Sometimes we think that the harder we work for God, the more spiritual we’ll become. We wake up in the morning, square our shoulders, grit our teeth, take three deep breaths and determine in our hearts to live for the Lord. Now I’m not against hard work or spiritual disciplines. But this has more to do with yielding into the work He is already doing. So it is not so much about determination as dependence; not about trying but trusting. This requires that we firmly grab hold of our identity in Christ. We are spiritually alive and through His power we are able to say no to the flesh. And as we walk in obedience to His call upon our soul, we receive more of the abundant life He has reserved for us as His children.

Oftentimes when I get quiet, the Lord leads me back to the places I’ve been, to the prison experiences that seem so far removed

from the present. I remember the concrete walls. I can smell the stench and decay, all those years of walking without the Spirit guiding me. I just get so grateful; grateful that through His grace I no longer have to live as a prisoner to sin. That doesn’t mean I don’t choose to at times. But the flesh has been crucified and I don’t ever want to withdraw the nails as if Christ’s sacrifice never happened.

Chuck Colson tells the story about visiting a Brazilian prison that, oddly enough, was run on Christian principles.

“When I visited the prison I found the inmates smiling, particularly the murderer who held the keys, opened the gates and let me in. Wherever I walked I saw men at peace. I saw clean living areas, people working industriously. The walls were decorated with Biblical sayings from Psalms and Proverbs . . . My guide escorted me to the notorious prison cell once used for torture. Today, he told me, that block houses only a single inmate. As we reached the end of a long concrete corridor and he put the key in the lock, he paused and asked, ‘Are you sure you want to go in?’

“‘Of course,’ I replied, ‘I’ve been in isolation cells all over the world.’ Slowly he swung open the massive door, and I saw the prisoner in that punishment cell: a crucifix, beautifully carved by the inmates, the prisoner Jesus, hanging on a cross.

“‘He’s doing time for the rest of us,’ my guide said softly.”

Christ has taken our place. So there is no need to remain in that cell. In all my years of living within prison environments I can’t ever recall hearing of a discharged prisoner wanting to stay. When the steel gates open, prisoners leave. So the question for us is: since our freedom has been secured in Christ why live as if it were not true? Why, in heaven’s name, would we ever want to walk back into that prison again?