

Victory Over the Sinful Nature

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Galatians 5:16-26

Basic Christianity

After conversion, awareness of the need to grow, the need to study as a disciple, and an understanding of the role of Grace and Faith, believers need to see how the Holy Spirit can help us overcome the sinful nature (flesh). NIV translates Paul's use of the word "flesh" as sinful nature, because that is what Paul has in mind. He does not use "flesh" to talk about the needs of the body, but of the sinful impulses that rise up out of our souls. The goal of salvation is to restore us in relationship with God, whereas sin broke that fellowship. If we keep on sinning, that fellowship remains disjointed. The reality is that even once we are saved, our flesh nature does not cease operation. We continue to be tempted. We continue to do things we regret. Yet, there is good news. God has given us His Holy Spirit to help us win the victory over the sinful impulses.

Galatians 5:16-26 NASB

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

¹⁹ Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

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 walk by the Spirit.

²⁶ Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

This passage is well known as a description of the nature of the flesh – the old sin nature. It is literally "flesh." Yet, in my studies, Paul uses the word "flesh" to speak of the sinful passions that belong to our unredeemed sinful selves. Paul wrote this to the Galatians who were under the pressure to return to Law as the method for controlling the sin nature. Yet, the Law is powerless to bring change, because it depends on our self-control that is already corrupted by sin. Instead of more outward codes, Paul reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the guide and power for change.

Through grace and justification, God views us as holy by the blood of Christ. Yet, while we remain in this world, we still have a struggle that lives on between impulses of this world and the Holy Spirit who is leading us toward the character of our future destination, heaven.

1. The Holy Spirit is our guide to overcome the impulses of our sin nature (flesh).

¹⁷ 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.

Paul says the flesh wars against the Spirit. What does this mean? It means the old sin nature continue to try to pull away from the leading of the Holy Spirit. We often find ourselves as the battleground between what God wants in us and what our sinful self wants. These are called lusts, or passions, desires. We will look in a minute as several that the Apostle speaks about. Yet, here, it is necessary to see that the victory over these desires comes by our submission to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Let's back up to verse 16.

¹⁶ **But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.**¹⁷

^{BGT} **Galatians 5:16** Λέγω δέ, πνεύματι περιπατεῖτε καὶ ἐπιθυμίαν σαρκὸς οὐ μὴ τελέσητε.

(I) say but (in respect to the) Spirit walk (make your way) and desire (of the) flesh not (emphatic double negative) (you will) complete.

NIV has “live by the Spirit”, the literal is “In Spirit walk.” Spirit is in the dative, so it means to walk – take the course of your life – in regards to the directions given by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God’s presence to guide us so we do not go into error.

The Holy Spirit is your guide.

He directs us by speaking to us of the need to avoid certain things or to do certain things which will help us be able to reject sinful impulses. If you go on an African safari, you need a guide. There are animals there that can kill you. You don’t do that on your own. The guide will keep you on a safe course because he knows the dangers and the natures of the animals that live there. So, also, the Holy Spirit is our guide to keep us safe when we walk in this sinful world.

The Holy Spirit gives you victory over the sinful conflict.

Paul says the flesh wars against the Spirit. It is a conflict, a war. Yet, notice also what Paul says in verse 16,

and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

Paul uses the verb *τελεω* here. That verb, like the noun *τελεωσ* speaks about the completion of something. Paul acknowledges we struggle. It is not that we have temptations that is bad. The Holy Spirit is trying to help us not complete the acts, not keep on doing things that displease God. There is victory for us when we allow God to guide us through the mine fields. Yet, if we want to stubbornly keep going our way we will find ourselves in a bad place.

Religious rules (Law) are powerless to restrain the flesh.

¹⁸ **But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.**

The struggle of the sin nature is real and it is in all of us. Paul acknowledges that we often fail here. However, we can overcome sin’s power if we keep following the leading of the Holy Spirit. Also, if we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us, we do not need an external Law to keep us doing good things. The Law is powerless because it depends on our human nature, which is under sin’s influence. Paul says we don’t need more tighter rules, we just need obedience to God through the Holy Spirit.

2. The sinful nature is all the character and deeds that lie outside of God’s nature.

¹⁹ **Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, (NIV obvious)**

^{BGT} **Galatians 5:19** φανερά δέ ἐστὶν τὰ ἔργα τῆς σαρκὸς

Lit word order: Manifest but is the work of the flesh

In the Greek, obvious or evident is the first word, and thus an emphasis. It should be obvious that these actions and deeds would be contrary to God’s nature. Yet, to many people in our day, they don’t seem so obvious. Even many Christians have adjusted their thinking to sexual practices that lie outside of God’s will. When the majority of culture pushes for acceptance for these acts, Christians begin to bend and blend to accommodate. In the first century, Paul gave these instructions when the Roman Empire was the dominant culture. “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Yet, not to Paul and the other Apostles. The emperor is not God. Culture is not heaven and is in fact headed to hell. Do you really want to join them on the path?

What are some of these sinful struggles?

Sexual desires that lie outside God's will.

ἅτινά ἐστιν πορνεία, ἀκαθαρσία, ἀσέλγεια, (Gal. 5:19 BGT)

immorality *Porneia* – the word by which we get pornography. *Porneia* speaks of all kinds of sexual fornication.

Impurity – is uncleanness in the sense of sexual activity

sensuality (debauchery) – is to have unbridled shameful sexual practices

Religious compromise – participating in the wayward religions of the world.

Idolatry – worshipping the false religions, idols, and practices of world religions.

sorcery (witchcraft) – practicing the dark arts, reading hands, tarot cards, seeking mediums of spiritual nature. Yet, it includes also meditation on the earth as a spirit – which is a form of pantheism. It includes praying to the dead as if they can help you as a power or aide to life instead of having faith in God. Paul warns us that the spiritual powers of the earth are demons. They will not help us.

Emotional and relational lack of control

jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, ²¹
envying,

All of this list relate to interpersonal relationships issues that lack self-control. Outburst of anger, or internal anger that simmers usually is directed toward others. Disputes, dissensions and factions are conflicts waged against others. They promote “our group” against “their group” for whatever cause. Envy is a root cause of much trouble due to desires for what others have.

Much of anger lives in the realm of an unwillingness to forgive others for their failures. We want grace from God we are unwilling to give to others. Jesus said it does not work that way. God holds us to the same standard we apply to others. All of these issues are resolved by the leading of the Holy Spirit who teaches us to become like Christ who even forgave those who nailed him to the cross.

Textual note:

Murder – is absent in many early manuscripts and likely a later insert by copyists in reference to Rom. 1:29.

It also breaks the theme of drunken deeds. A wide range of witnesses read φθόνοι φόνου (A C D G K P Ψ 88 1739 *Byz Lect* most of the Old Latin vg syr^{p, h} cop^{bo} goth arm eth *a*). Although the shorter reading may have originated in accidental omission due to homoeoteleuton, a majority of the Committee, impressed by the age and quality of the witnesses supporting φθόνοι (Ɑ⁴⁶ Ɱ B 33 81 cop^{sa} Marcion Irenaeus^{lat} Clement Origen^{lat} *a*), was inclined to think that φόνου was inserted by copyists who recollected [Ro 1.29](#).

Participating in inebriation

drunkenness, carousing

While the Bible does not condemn drinking alcohol in small amounts (self-control) it does speak against the abuse of alcohol. Partying in drunkenness is dissipation. It destroys lives. Our minds are not to be out of control, but under the control of the Holy Spirit.

and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Sometimes Paul makes these statements that those who do these things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. They are not part of heaven because they are **outside** of God's holy character. They should not be part of you. If you follow the Holy Spirit, you do not need a Law that says you don't get in if you do this. Instead, the Holy Spirit will speak to you that you need to put these things away because they do not belong to God's people.

3. The results of following the Holy Spirit's directions is character that conforms to Christ's nature.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Jesus uses fruit to identify the character of what lies in the true nature of persons. You know a tree by its fruit. Paul uses fruit to describe the resulting transformation in the character of a person who consistently conforms to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Fruit is never automatic. When you plant a tree, you usually don't get fruit that year, and maybe not for several years. Fruit is a product of maturation as well as identification.

The way the Holy Spirit usually produces each of these fruits is by leading you to leave its opposite nature seen in the flesh. It is the putting away of anger, hate, bitterness, and rancor that develops agape love – the love we see in Jesus Christ. Joy comes because we learn to shift our values from lusting for security in things of this life and trusting our lives to God's care. Patience comes from learning to endure other's failures with forgiveness instead of bitterness and anger. ON and on.

Notice, Paul says that against such things there is no law. When you look at the Laws they are most often negatives "don't do this." Yet the fruit of the Spirit consists of things you can do all you want. You can eat the fruit of this garden all the time.

Self-denial – set aside wants for God's kingdom

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 walk by the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

The key to following the Spirit is to crucify the flesh with its passions and desires and to follow the Spirit. What does that mean? To crucify is to put it to death. To crucify the flesh is to make a mental and spiritual commitment each day that God's glory is more important than getting a need fixed. It is

not a one time does it decision. It is a daily decision, as Paul says, I die daily. It is a regular awareness of the flesh desires and a regular practice of prayer asking God to replace the fleshly want with something better from heaven.

For example, when you are angry at someone, in prayer, give that anger issue to God, and ask God to give you the power to forgive. When you think of a lustful sexual thought, tell God about it. Be honest at everything. Then ask God for a heavenly thought to replace it. Ask God for what you lack, and He will supply it.

Let the Holy Spirit guide you so you can overcome the sin nature.

God has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us in this life so we can have victory over our sin nature. When we sin, it is because we have chosen to agree with the devil instead of God. Repent, turn to God and ask for forgiveness. Just remember, He requires the same forgiveness from you toward others.