

Those that belong to Jesus are helped in the struggle by the Spirit.

“I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. 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. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

19 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.” -- **Galatians 5:16-26** (CSB)

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In 2005, in what was seemingly a stroke of genius, an ad for an office supply store debuted and has since become iconic, a cultural reference of our time. Likely because we, in some deep sense, wish the “universe” would work the way suggested in the commercials.

The Easy Button. To just press a button and solve the challenges before us.

“The fictitious Easy Buttons featured in the commercials possess magical qualities that allow the user to sorcerously solve their (usually office supply-related) issues with the press of a button. The sad irony, of course, is that the real-life version of the product is significantly more disappointing. Pressing it doesn’t summon a rain of printer ink or raise the Great Wall to defend against an invading army. Instead, it just plays a recording of the company’s “That was easy” slogan when you press down the (satisfyingly clicky) button.”

It is a picture of what we want, yearn for, and also a sad description of how most of our get-rich-quick, lose-inches-off-your-wastline, be insta famous, or whatever schemes end up, just slogans but no deliverance.

I think it also gives us a glimpse into the tension of the Christian life. There is no striving in justification - the glorious good news that Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension was for you and secures righteousness, real life, transformation and eternity. But there is an ongoing battle in life to live into our salvation - the outworking of the gospel in every space in which we exist.

The sin to fight, the whispers of the serpent enticing us away, the corrupt teaching persuading us away from hope. We feel it. And honestly, we hate it.

“Bless me, Lord, I'm fighting like a lunatic
Afraid my mind is slipping through my fingertips
I know You're good news, but God, I'm just not good at this
Will I figure it out or is this just how people live?

We all just wanna get better
We all just wanna get better

Bless me, Lord, I can't see past the things I've done
When I'm home and I'm alone, I'm haunted
Just wanna turn up the volume
You are my Gospel, here for me when there is none
God, help me believe that what You've said is what You've done

We all just wanna get better
We all just wanna get better
We all just wanna get better
We all just wanna get better

Ooh-ooh” *Chris Renzema, Better*

Have you ever felt that?

Unpacking the depths of the gospel, in order to course-correct the Galatian Christians, Paul says it isn't easy, but you are helped in this embattled life.

The Struggle is Real

“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.” -- **Galatians 5:17** (CSB)

The Christian life is a struggle, a war between the flesh and the Spirit.

Paul has been calling these believers away from trusting in the flesh, back into a life in the Spirit. Remember that false teachers had come from Jerusalem and were claiming that to be real Christians these Gentile believers had to take on Jewish customs and calendars. They had to “look” like followers of Jesus.

All along Paul has been saying that to “look” like a Christian you believe in Jesus, no longer bound by the law or earning salvation, but living from the gracious gift in freedom.

We love the rally cry of being free from the law - we realize we can’t keep it, we can’t perfectly follow the commands of God because of sin - but we have been rescued by Jesus who kept the law perfectly for us. At the same time that Paul needs us to understand salvation on the basis of faith, he doesn’t want us to abuse freedom and miss the point of it.

When we think of “freedom” we tend to think, ‘I can do whatever I want and no one can tell me otherwise!’ But there is a way of thinking and “using” freedom that leads to danger.

“For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don’t use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love.” -- **Galatians 5:13** (CSB)

This potent gospel delivers freedom - don’t dispose of it, don’t corrupt it and miss the kingdom. Paul is reframing freedom as following the Spirit.

In our text (and in all of life!) flesh and the Spirit are at odds. This is the struggle.

Flesh here is *sarx*. It is not the physical reality but that which the sinful human nature gravitates toward.

The flesh desires what is against the Spirit.

“Desire”, epithumia means an “over-desire”, and “inordinate desire”; an all-controlling drive and longing. This is crucial. The main problem our heart has is not so much desires for bad things, but our over-desires for good things. When a good thing becomes our “god” it creates “over-desires”. Paul says that sinful desires become deep things that drive and control us. Sin creates in us the feeling that we must have this, or that... it becomes a dominating longing.

David Powlison: “If ‘idolatry’ is the characteristic and summary Old Testament word for our drift from God, then ‘desires’ (epithumia) is the characteristic and summary New Testament word for that same drift... The New Testament merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires... for lust, craving, yearning and greedy demand.”

Clearly described in verses 19, 20, 21. Essentially four categories of what the flesh works.

Sensuality - sexual immorality (porneia), sex between unmarried people, impurity which is unnatural sexual practices and relationships, and promiscuity or debauchery which is uncontrolled sexuality.

Religion - idolatry and sorcery - pairing them here means it’s not making good things a “god” but rather Paul is referring to specific occult and pagan practices that were common in the region and day. The first an inadequate substitute for God and the second faking the work of the Spirit.

Relationships - a slew of words describing how the flesh destroys relationships. Self-seeking motives, desiring what others have, a hungry ego, an adversarial attitude. And the wreckage they leave behind; discord, picking fights, fits of rage, anger, dissension, division between people, and factions or permanent warring groups.

Lastly, the flesh works in Addiction - drunkenness and orgies (carousing). Pagan parties attempting a higher plane of existence through intoxication. So a work of the flesh is addiction to pleasure-creating substance and behavior.

The sin underneath all sins - the motive for our disobedience - is always a lack of trust in God's grace and goodness, and a desire to protect and guard our own lives through self-salvation. It is what the flesh produces.

“Why is it so? Because although I'm no longer in the flesh, although it's not my home turf, the flesh is still in me. Bringing Israel out of Egypt took just days, but it took a lifetime before Egypt was out of Israel! They longed for the fish, melons, cucumbers, leeks, garlic, onions, and other exotic delectables of the Nile. That's our battle, too. Day and night, the flesh serenades us with siren songs, seeking to lure our affections away from Christ, tempting us to serve ourselves by our own efforts.”

The warning here is that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom... Paul is referring to habitual practice rather than infrequent, and repented of, lapses.

Paul is not looking to undermine Christian assurance here; but he is aiming to banish complacency. We are meant to battle the flesh, the race in which we set aside the weight of sin that clings so tight to us.

“Don't you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize. 25 Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown. 26 So I do not run like one who runs aimlessly or box like one beating the air. 27 Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified.” -- **1 Corinthians 9:24-27** (CSB)

“Our evidence of being true Christians is not going to war over other people's sin. Our evidence of being true Christians is how much we hate and go to war over our sin.” Preston Perry

It isn't easy, it is a repentant struggle, and we feel it.

“For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it. 19 For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, I am no longer the one that does it, but it is the sin that

lives in me. 21 So I discover this law: When I want to do what is good, evil is present with me. 22 For in my inner self I delight in God's law, 23 but I see a different law in the parts of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and taking me prisoner to the law of sin in the parts of my body. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" -- **Romans 7:18-24** (CSB)

It's a battle.

We Have Help for the Battle

“Spiritual maturity isn't the absence of spiritual conflict; it's the awareness of spiritual conflict. The less holy you feel, the better. The less holy you feel—as long as you are seeking to learn to walk by the Spirit—probably the more holy you actually are in your practice of the Christian life ... because of the resulting dependence upon the Spirit. It's not simply being aware of the conflict and where you are weak—a lot of people are aware of their weakness and don't do anything about it, they feel helpless and powerless. But the Word of God doesn't leave us helpless and powerless, so Paul says, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16).” Tom Holliday

To walk in the Spirit isn't to stroll through the arboretum with butterflies fluttering up from flowers; it's to traverse a battlefield strewn with mines. That battlefield is in your own soul as much as it's in the world, and it rages hot, regardless of how long you've walked with the Lord.

But you are not alone in the battle, you have the promised Spirit dwelling in you and transforming you to win. More than a comrade; a leader, a true north to follow.

We know what the flesh produces, but the Spirit forms us for the fight.

The flesh and its work are gnarly; “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.” -- **Galatians 5:22-23** (CSB)

This is not a pecking order of traits to grab ahold of, it is what the Spirit works in us as we surrender to His leading.

Notice that Paul speaks of “fruit,” not “fruits,” of the Spirit—the fruit of the Spirit is not a checklist to work through but the unified blossoming of a heart liberated by the gospel of grace.

This is Christian growth, us moving forward in freedom from our salvation. And I think calling it fruit helps us see vital realities of the Spirit’s help.

Our transformation is gradual. When you plant a seed in the garden you don’t harvest a minute later. There is tending, watering, exposure to light and heat. And the produce grows over time. What a grace this is for us. This is not pressure for performance but hope in the process. Eventually we get to the point we notice a difference and think to ourselves “I would have never responded that way a few years ago - I wouldn’t have been so patient and self-controlled...” The fruit is growing, gradually.

Our growth is also inevitable. The Spirit’s work will not be prevented in those that belong to Jesus.

We have been watching a show about abandoned buildings and I am always struck by how there is a tree growing out of impossible places. The side of a wall. A notch in a boulder. There is life in the seed and not even concrete or tension can keep it from growing.

If someone has the Spirit in them - which means all Christians - the fruit will grow. Whatever life is like, the fruit of the Spirit will burst through. Your sanctification, becoming more like Jesus is promised.

The Spirit’s work is also internal. The fruit’s roots go much deeper than a list of characteristics. The fruit doesn’t bring life to the tree, but the other way round. A heart remade, desires changed, the nutrients of life sourced in Christ.

And this fruit is uniform. The real fruit of the Spirit always grows up together. You might be gifted in one or two of these things, but if it is the fruit of the Spirit all of these traits are present. They flow together, rooted and growing up in Christ by the Spirit.

“Living the way of the Spirit is what we most deeply “want”, yet the sinful nature continues to generate alternative and competing desires which we experience and can give in to, but which now contradict our most abiding love and goals. The reborn person has both sinful desires and godly desires, but “we” most truly want what our Spirit-renewed heart wants... This is full of hope and affirmation. Even when we are falling into sin, we can say, with Paul: This is not the real me; this is not what I really want. I want God and His will.” Tim Keller

“Walk by the Spirit” implies both direction and empowerment. Decisions follow His guidance and we act with spiritual power the Spirit provides.

We grow as we battle.

Led by the Spirit is to change, and be changed, to be the people we want to be. Spirit-fueled development of Christian character, liberating as it brings us closer to being the people we were designed to be.

“The “yes” of grace is also a “no” to all human strength and definitions of power. Growing in the fruit of the Spirit is relinquishing control—the mark of the flesh—to walk by faith, trusting God—the mark of the Spirit.”

So we follow - we yield to the Spirit in our lives. We live into these things against which there is no law. We find our help and the battle goes on.

We can trust the help, with an eye to the horizon of an end to the battle, because we belong to Jesus.

The War is Won

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

Christ and the Spirit (25) come together as the source of the believer’s life. Christians have crucified the flesh, or died with Christ to sin. Now that the old order of things has passed away for believers, their old sinful selves that belonged to that order have crumbled as well. Pay no attention to them.

“Ruthless crucifixion of the flesh is absolutely necessary for spiritual growth. New life only comes by death and resurrection. But it’s all by participation, by union with Christ through faith, not through fleshly law-keeping.”

Crucified is active and past tense. Done in his crucifixion but also ongoing, throwing the desires of the flesh onto the cross. Empowered by the Spirit and settled because we are Christ’s.

We belong to Jesus. All that is his, is ours. Our approval and welcome from the Father rests not on our character or actions, but on His. We are free to acknowledge where we have given up ground to the flesh in our lives; free to confess where we have not sought to keep in step with the Spirit; free to realize where we have confused our gifts or natural character with the fruit of the Spirit.

This is the freedom Christ set us free for. His victory, his life, his declaration over us, his forgiveness, righteousness, purpose, His Spirit working in us, filling us for the battle knowing the outcome of the war is decided.

And we are heading to the day when the battle will be over. When the desires of the flesh will be extinct. When the fruit will be fully formed in us.

“Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look, God’s dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away.

5 Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look, I am making everything new.” He also said, “Write, because these words are faithful and true.” 6 Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will freely give to the thirsty from the spring of the water of life. 7 The one who conquers will inherit these things, and I will be his God, and he will be my son.” --

Revelation 21:3-7 (CSB)

This is where we are headed - all who belong to Christ Jesus. This is our home. And we are helped along the way there. And on that day we will look back and having rested in Christ and his work with the help of the Spirit, and maybe, just maybe think to ourselves after all, “that was easy!”

Those that belong to Jesus are helped in the struggle by the Spirit.

Come to Christ - believe in his life, death, and resurrection for you. That you could never earn salvation but that he graciously gives himself so you can receive it. Surrender your life to him. It is where flourishing is found.

Crucify the flesh - know you are helped and be honest. We are in this together. The struggle is real. Don't be complacent. Fight! Let's fight together.

Yield to the Spirit - Ask for His help and leading, that you would long for this fruit and an experience of his victory. Let the Spirit into every corner of your life. His gifts are great, his fruit is sweeter.

Your life is meant for more than what the flesh desires. More than what self-salvation can accomplish. For freedom reframed and experienced by the Spirit.

It is his ancient promise realized...

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. 26And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. 27And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.” -- **Ezekiel 36:25-27 NLT**

May it be so with us!