

A Workshop:

UNDERSTANDING THE BATTLE
BETWEEN THE “FLESH” AND THE “SPIRIT”
(Galatians 5: 17-26)

A word of praise for Paul: “In Paul, for the first time since Aristotle, Greek philosophy made a real step forward.” (Sir William Ramsey) And indeed this is true. Greek thought and civilization (such as it was) were stymied on the problem of how to do and bring others to do what they knew to be right. This is a fundamental problem for all who think deeply about life. It is the problem Paul is addressing in speaking about the conflict of the flesh and the spirit in the human being. (Gal. 5:17; cp. Rom. 7:14-24. Also Jer. 17:9)—It is the problem of not doing the good that you would sincerely say you intend to do, that you clearly wish you would do, and that you grieve over not having done. It is the problem of “weakness of will” discussed at great lengths in Book VII of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Some people take a stronger view and speak of *bondage* of the will, meaning that we cannot keep from doing what we know to be wrong. Hence the widely used confession that we sin every day in thought, word and deed.

Here we want to try to understand the basic nature of the conflict between “flesh” and (the human) spirit, or, as I think we should also put it, between human desire and the human will.

Paul’s statement (Gal. 5:17) is that we often, at least, cannot do the things we sincerely wish we would do. (Rom. 7:15) He says this is because there is a conflict between our desires and our **spirit**—the human spirit, which I take to be the same as human **will**, and also the human “**heart**.” I don’t want to try to convince you of this here, But I do think that if you try it out in your efforts to understand scripture and apply it to life, you may find it illuminating—In any case:

What is the “flesh”? It is the natural human abilities, considered in themselves and on their own, unaided by Divine assistance and direction. Flesh is not necessarily bad, and it is certainly not “fallen or sinful human nature. For one thing, it is not human nature, but only one part of it. For another, it is not essentially sinful, fallen, or bad. It is a good creation of God, and has only to keep or be kept to its proper function in life before God. Thus, “the son of the bondwoman (Hagar) was born according to the flesh” (Gal. 4:23)—that is, from normal human abilities. But “the son by the freewoman” (Sarah) was born through the promise and action of God, along with her and Abraham’s normal human ability. (The mark of the action of the Spirit with our action is always the incommensurability of the result with human abilities and efforts.)

“Flesh” cannot, by itself, keep the law, and requires the Spirit with us to do that. If it is merely a matter of what the law demands and what the flesh wants, flesh wins.

The flesh works in desire. Desire is the impulse toward possession or experience of its object. It cares for nothing else but that: “I want what I want when I want it,” the song says. Desires taken by themselves are inherently chaotic (James 4:1-3) and deceitful (Eph. 4:22) Thus, “fleshly lusts wage war against the soul” (I Peter 2:11), the principle of personal unity, and we have to be delivered from “the corruption that is in the world by lust.” (II Peter 1:4)

The human will or “spirit” is different from unrestrained flesh. It considers alternatives. It is our God-given ability by which we have an interest in what is better or best. It takes a broad view of possibilities: and not just of one desire and its object, but of other desires and goods. That is where choice comes in. Choice involves deliberation between alternatives, with a view to what is best. The conflict between the flesh and the (human) spirit is the conflict between desire—what I want—and the will for what is best. And hence it is the conflict between desire and love, which is always directed toward what is good. Love is will-to-good of its object. Illustrate by Jesus’ teaching about anger and cultivated lust in Matt. 5:21-30)

Thus the conflict. Law also is directed toward what is good. Desire says “Let’s have sex.” The law says: A greater good is at issue here, the purity of human love and faithfulness toward other human beings. So “Thou shalt not.” Similarly with “I’ll steal your car” and “I’ll take your life.” These are from the desire of flesh taken by itself. Beyond the explicit law is the general drive toward what is better and what is best. That is the “Spirit” of the law. That is love. Love is committed to the well-being of its object.

Thus far we have spoken mainly of the human spirit or will. That will in its fallen state is paralyzed in the struggle for what is good, better and best, because it has turned away from reliance upon God, which alone can direct and support it in its struggle for what is “better.” That is the conflict of which Paul is speaking. The basic nature of sin is to trust only oneself. When you turn from God (as in “the garden” and daily, if unredeemed), your will becomes blind and helpless before the hammerings of desire. The frightful story of Romans 1 and 7 ensues. (Rom. 1:28-32, II Tim. 3:1-5, Gal. 5:19-21) The turn is to the body in sex and violence because that is significantly under our control and we can (we think) do what we want to with it: fulfill our desires.

In fact, people commonly lose awareness that they even have a will, and come to think that their desires are their will. Then they have no place to stand against their desires. Addiction is mainly a matter of having conceded to feeling domination of the will. This is what is called “the mind of the flesh” by Paul in Romans 8. “The mind of the flesh is death” (vs 6), locked exclusively onto the natural desires and abilities. They think only in terms of what they and others want. They are “dead in trespasses and sins,” ruled by the “world” (socially/historically organized “flesh”) and “the prince of the power of the air.” (Eph. 2:1-3) Their only hope is a birth and new life from above, though action of the divine Spirit, the Holy Spirit. “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me from the law of sin and death.” (Rom. 8:2)

The “works of the flesh,” then (read Gal. 5:19-21) are the natural, inevitable outcome of making human desire supreme in human life.

The “gift” (not human attainment) of the Holy Spirit’s involvement with the regenerate person pursuing holiness is the fruit of the Spirit. (Note: One fruit, many dimensions of character.) (vss. 22-23)

What is the posture of the one now renewed in will by interacting with the Holy Spirit? It is not passive, but active. They have crucified the flesh, with its passions and desires (vs. 24), and live by the Spirit and actively walk by or follow the Spirit. (vs. 25) And, doing this, they are not boastful, confrontive, or envious. (vs. 26)

That is, they are not governed by feelings and desires. They choose the better and the best. What is good is their guide under the Spirit. Their desires are ordered under the will and power of God. They live, in Augustine’s wonderful language, “in the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God and of one another in God,” in “the order that is in beatitude.” And they constantly rely upon the Holy Spirit to guide them and enable them to choose and carry out what is good. They are carried by “resurrection life.” They learn this as disciples of Jesus. In their status as disciples, they experience the process of progressive “spiritual formation” (transformation). They “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (II Peter 3:18) “Spiritual Disciplines” are a part of their strategy for doing this: crucified and yet walking. (Gal. 5:24-25) Dead men walking in newness of life.