

Winning the Struggle for Character

Galatians 5:16-25

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The Premise: The basic struggle of the Christian life is between the desires of the sinful nature and the Holy Spirit.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

Galatians 5:16-17 (English Standard Version)

“Flesh” = sarx = sinful nature

“Desire” = epithumia = to strongly desire to have what belongs to someone else and/or to engage in an activity which is morally wrong

When the sinful nature pressures a believer to act out its sinful desires in defiance of God, the Holy Spirit is there to oppose the sinful nature and give the believer victory. But when the Holy Spirit places a course of action on a believer’s heart, the sin nature opposes the Spirit in an effort to get its own way. The purpose of each is to prevent the believer from doing what the other wants him or her to do.

“He was glad of a chance to be alone to recover from the influence of ordinary actual life, which had already depressed his happy mood. He thought that he had already had time to lose his temper with Ivan, to show coolness to his brother, and talk flippantly with Katavasov. ‘Can it have been only a momentary mood, and will it pass and leave no trace?’ he thought. But the same instant, going back to his mood, he felt with delight that something new and important had happened to him. Real life had only for a time overcast the spiritual peace he had found, but it was still untouched within him.”

(From Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy)

How the Sinful Nature Works and What it Wants

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Galatians 5:18-21 (ESV)

The sinful nature is that within us which wants us to be our own savior and lord. This sarx-heart functions “under law”; it rejects the free gift of Christ’s righteousness and salvation, and continues to seek its own. Therefore, 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 project and guard our own lives . . .

(From Galatians for You by Tim Keller)

- **First observation:** There are four different categories of sins.
 - sexual sin: *sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality*
 - perverted religion: *idolatry and sorcery*
 - relational sin: *enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, and divisions*
 - substance abuse: *drunkenness, orgies*
- **Second observation:** This is not a complete list.
- **Third observation:** This list signifies the habitual practice of these sins.

What the Spirit Works in Us

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.*

Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV)

- **Observation #1:** The “fruit of the Spirit” grows up together.

“The fruit of the Spirit is the natural product of His gracious inward influence in my life . . . the inevitable result of his uniting us to Jesus Christ.”
(From The Siege Perilous by S.H. Hooke)
- **Observation #2:** This list of nine virtues is not exhaustive.

How the Fruit of the Spirit Grows

And 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.* Galatians 5:24-25 (ESV)

- Always remember that you belong to Jesus.
- Stay in the ongoing process of heart transformation.
- Actively surrender to the Spirit's promptings.

Take-Home Truth: When we allow God's Spirit to influence our hearts, our lives are transformed.

Application Tips:

- Read and review the "Fruit of the Spirit" list often during the coming year.
- Don't allow yourself to beat yourself up or be hard on yourself as you read. Let it draw you to the heart of our good and beautiful God.
- Use this as a model of what happens when you surrender your life at deeper and deeper levels to the Spirit.
- Begin to see the fruit of the Spirit as God's desire for you.
- During the year, offer this prayer often: "Holy Spirit, I surrender to You. I invite You to transform my heart. As You do, produce Your fruit in me."