

THE FLESH VS. THE SPIRIT

SERIES: FREEDOM FIGHTERS

By Steve Zeisler

Patrick Henry got it right when he said, “Give me liberty or give me death!” Liberty is a succinct reference to life itself. There are two alternatives: life or death.

The book of Galatians, a treatise on liberty, is one of the great texts of the Bible, and as we’ve noted before, it has a place of honor not only in the context of Scripture, but in history as well. This is one of the documents in the New Testament that God has repeatedly used to bring about reformation, to renew the church, to set dormant believers on fire. Martin Luther’s commentary on Galatians was instrumental in bringing about the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Paul begins chapter 5 with this wonderful, ringing declaration: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Now, the yoke of slavery, we discover to our surprise, is religious performance. Galatians 3:3-5: “After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?...Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?” The phrase “human effort” is a rendering of the Greek word *sarx*. *Sarx* is translated “flesh” in the old versions and the NASB. We’ll see it translated “the sinful nature” farther on in the NIV. There’s not a simple way to put this word in English. But it’s clear that Paul is saying in Galatians 3 that, having begun by the Spirit, these believers were tempted to turn to human effort to reform themselves. They were going to act in religious ways that would impress the people around them. Paul calls that an activity of the flesh, manmade religion, loveless self-promotion.

In 5:16 we read, “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Here again is the same word *sarx*. He goes on to list behaviors like debauchery, witchcraft, hatred, and drunkenness. These, too, are expressions of the flesh in our lives. It is striking, and unexpected for most of us, that religious performance, carried out with determined self-discipline, for the applause of the crowd, to magnify ourselves (even if subtly), is not different from debauchery, drunkenness, and witchcraft! Both human efforts at law-keeping and lawlessness are equally fertile ground for pride to assert itself. The disciplined do-gooder and the debauched drunkard have the same problem. This text is explosive! It is dealing with realities that are not obvious, that have to do with God’s working at the depth of who we are.

The word *sarx*, however we translate it, deserves definition. John Stott writes, “Our fallen human nature, which we inherited from our parents and they from theirs, is twisted with self-centeredness, and therefore prone to sin.”(1) *Sarx* is not physical flesh. It is not the visible part of us as opposed to the invisible. In fact, from the New-Testament discussion of this term, it is apparent that both the spirit and the flesh, which are opposed to each other, are incorporeal. Remember, Jesus said you can’t see the Spirit, just as you can’t see the wind (John 3:8). You can tell the wind is blowing only when the trees move. In the same way you can see the spirit and the flesh only by their effects, by what they produce.

The flesh is the conviction that I am the most important thing in the universe. It is ultimately worship of myself—my pleasure, my exaltation, my success, my reputation. I will defend myself against, exalt myself over, prefer myself to any and every other person. There is an enormously self-centered core in me. Even self-destructive behavior is an expression of personal power. If God says he loves me, I’ll destroy what he loves, to prove my superiority.

This being the case, it makes sense that religion of the kind we are describing is a great place for the flesh to perform. Galatians 1 identifies this kind of religion as acting for the approval of human observers. I do “churchy,” religious things because I gain status in the eyes of the people around me. It’s inherently competitive.

And of course, self-indulgence is an equally good place for the flesh to express itself. I will please myself. My advantages and pleasures are more important than concern for truth or love of others.

The great problem is how to change something invisible that is so deep within us. It’s not easily targeted.

I am the problem

Each generation sets itself to challenge the previous generation in some ways. Children overturn the values of their parents only to see their children do the same thing. The pendulum swings back and forth, but nothing really changes in human nature.

Marxists claimed that redistributing wealth would change human nature. Of course it didn’t.

Modern technology makes the same sort of claims. We will break through somehow, gain power by harnessing the possibilities of physics so that human nature will ultimately change. But technology only allows immorality and greed and hurt to be expressed more effectively. Modes of communication are better, but we have nothing worthwhile to communicate. Greed has new objects to demand. Technology makes coveting enormously attractive; there are so many more things to covet.

We taint all the beautiful things we create. Romance novels, travel brochures, Mormon missionaries, sales pitches of all sorts make promises they can’t keep. Everywhere we turn, whether in religion or in secular pursuits, we take ourselves with us. Remember the famous words of Pogo: “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

If you’re old enough, you might remember the evangelistic campaign of some twenty years ago. “I FOUND IT!” suddenly appeared everywhere—billboards, brochures, bumper stickers, evangelistic material. This simple phrase was intended to pique the interest of unbelievers. What was “it”? Believers could respond to this interest with a word of testimony to Christ. I assume some good came of it. But it struck me over the years that a better phrase to pique the interest of unbelievers, get behind defenses and create conversation, might be “IT’S NOT WORKING.” When they asked, “What’s not working?” you could point to whatever they were doing—their emotional defenses, their pursuit of some prize, the relationship they hoped would pay off.

It’s probably a good idea to read the book of Ecclesiastes once a year or so. The most capable person in the history of the human race ran some experiments. Solomon, as the story was told, had every advantage of good religious training. He had riches, power, and brilliant intellect. He decided to see what would happen if he pursued pleasure for himself, knowledge for himself, riches, the authority of government, family-building, and so on. And over and over again, at the end of the experimenting, he concluded, “It’s worth nothing!” The best we can do only creates a sense of loss and sorrow. It’s good for us to be reminded of that periodically. The experiments we would like to try have all been tried before. There is nothing new under the sun. What we hope will pay off, somebody has hoped in before, and it has never paid off.

In Galatians 5:13-24 alternatives are offered. What is the good news? What breakthrough is there in this problem of the sinful nature?

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

There are four phrases in this text that use the word *sarx*. Verse 13: “Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature...” Verse 16: “Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Verse 19: “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious...” And verse 24: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature...” It will be most helpful to spend some time looking at the fourth of these of these first.

The sinful nature has been executed

Verse 24 refers to what is prior in time: we have *already* crucified the sinful nature. What does that mean? Crucifixion is, of course, a form of execution. If you belong to Christ, the *sarx*, the sinful nature, has been executed. This powerful drive that resists God, that has affected everything we are, that has taken what is good and ruined it, that has propelled us to do what was wrong and has promoted selfishness in subtle and gross ways, has been killed.

There are some very important things that flow from that. If our sinful nature, our *sarx*, has been executed, it means that it has no future. All possibilities have ended for it. It often seems to us as if what propels us to do wrong, to resist God, to give up and fold in on ourselves, is growing stronger all the time. But in fact, if you belong to Christ, it is not growing stronger all the time. It is dead. It will never feel any harder to say yes to God than it does right now.

Most of us have some familiar sin that we find ourselves defeated by regularly. Let's say it's jealousy. I covet what certain people have and I envy what they can do. Despite my best efforts, when I see them, my insides begin to boil and I am overcome with jealousy. And it feels as if I must give in to this jealousy. It feels as if I must treat them badly. I must stew in the jealousy. And if I don't give in to it now, I am going to give in to it someday anyway. I always do. So why not give in to it right now?

Let's say the problem I always give in to is lust. What's the point of resisting? I could say no for a day or an hour, but it always overwhelms me. So why not give in right now and get it over with?

Let's say the problem is having outbursts of anger at people over and over again. I can't control my anger. It consumes me. I know it's going to get me eventually, so why not just give up and get it over with now? I can't change.

If the flesh has been crucified, that means that saying no the next time, and the next, and the next, is not going to get more difficult. The flesh is not going to be re-animated, or add extra armament to its attack.

You've probably seen the satellite pictures of hurricanes out in the ocean. A tropical storm somewhere out there is gathering strength. The hope is that it will come to land quickly, because the longer it hovers over water, the more powerful it becomes. We sometimes think of sin that way: the longer we resist it, the more it's going to throw at us. But that is not true. There is no strength for it to gain. It's no longer a living thing.

It is as if we live in a canyon where there used to be real voices that yelled horrible things at us, accusing us, tempting us, pressuring us, hurting us. They were loud, insistent, and frequent. But they have been stilled. They're dead. Yet because we live in the canyon, there are echoes of the old voices. We still hear the old persuasion. Echoes can often be so loud and clear that they sound just like someone saying something again. But no one is saying it again. There is no new pressure being exerted to do what is wrong. There are only echoes of the old persuasions, over and over again, that have access to our habits of thought.

If you belong to Christ, the flesh in you has been executed. That's the point of Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Something remarkable happened when you were united with Christ in his execution and resurrection. You are not the same person.

We tend to think that what has always been true remains true. For example, we think when we feel lonely that we will never be loved, that there will never be a companion for us. No one will ever understand us. But the truth is that if we belong to Christ, we are not alone now and we never will be again. We are each the temple of the Holy Spirit, the companion of the Son of God. The eye of the Lord of the universe is always on each of us, and he is attentive to everything about us.

We tend to feel guilty again when we hear the echoes in the canyon rehearsing our failures. We hear the voices say again and again what so many have said and what we have said to ourselves, that we will never be any good, that the bad will always outweigh the good in us, that nothing will ever change. But that is not true. We are not guilty anymore. Someone paid the price. The voices that say those things can never get louder. What we are hearing is from the past. The voices are only repeating what they said before. We have been invited to a banquet at the table of the Lord. The future is not with our flesh but with the Lord.

Not only does the flesh not have the ability to grow stronger in its influence, but what will grow stronger are the voices of the truth, the new words being spoken into your life by God himself that remind you of your value. There is a vision you can see only from a distance now of a city where you belong, of a home you will have someday, a reality that is going to fill the universe. In that day you will be face-to-face with the Lord Jesus, laying the crowns he gave you back at his feet in worship of him. All of that is coming in the future, and the truth of that vision is what is getting stronger.

Struggle and hope

We can make two practical observations in this passage. The first is in 5:17: "The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." This is very much like Paul's cry in Romans 7:24: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" It will remain true that for the rest of our days on this earth we will not be able to simply do whatever we want. We still live in the canyon, and there will always be echoes, reminders, persuasions that speak where the grooves are worn deepest—failure, pride, self-promotion, self-indulgence. We will find ourselves persuaded to want what is wrong. We are going to live in this tension for the rest of our days on this planet. We must train ourselves by attention to the truth, by the power of the Spirit, to want righteousness.

Second, we can be sure that everything has changed. If we belong to Christ, the flesh has been crucified. The future is glorious. We have an answer to the voice of the old ways. Conflict is never going to end, but real growth

is possible and we should expect it. We are not the same people. We have weapons to fight with now. We have the possibility of being different from the way we've always been.

Have you ever dreamed of Eden? Most of us have a wistful longing for what was before the Fall, when human beings were exactly the way they were supposed to be. There is a lot about Eden that you could wish for. It would have been great to see the beauty of this earth before human behaviors of all kinds scarred it. It would have been wonderful to have harmony with the created world that was never once broken. It would be magnificent to live as the first human pair did in simple love-filled, joyful intimacy and abounding creative activity.

But do you know what would be the greatest thing of all about going back to Eden? It would be to wake up every morning and do whatever you want—with no guilt intruding on your thinking, no fear of anything, no suspicion that God is unhappy with you, no regrets about anything you've ever done. None of us will have that experience until we go to be with the Lord.

But consider this: The New Testament also teaches that we have been given something more than Adam and Eve had in Eden! The gospel proclaims the “deep, deep love of Jesus” (2) for sinners. We know that God loves his enemies, not just his friends. Romans 5:17 says this: “For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, *how much more* will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.” The reign of Christ doesn't just cancel out the problem of sin and take us back to where the human race was at the beginning. We have been given much more than we lost, and in response, our adoration of him will expand for eternity.

In the next message (Discovery Paper 4691) we will come back to the tension between the *sarx*, the flesh, and the Spirit. We'll consider practical advice on how to live this out. There is great hope here. The Spirit does what we cannot do. There are wonderful insights ahead.

NOTES

(1) John Stott, *Only One Way*, © 1968, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

(2) *O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus*.

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