

***Doing Whatever We Want?***

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**Galatians 5:16-26 (vv.16-17)**

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Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 32 & 43

Dear Friends of our Lord Jesus,

There are times when doing whatever we want seems attractive.

When Mom says, “Don’t eat those cookies” and your taste buds say, “They are so good.” That’s when you want to do whatever you want.

When you’re writing a test and you don’t know the answer, your eyes say, “Look at the paper of the smart girl beside you.” You glance around for the teacher’s eyes because you want to do whatever helps you.

We all fall into the traps of the flesh. I struggle with resting in God’s care at times. Normally, I think I’m pretty good at it. Probably better at in things that I know I can’t control, like when Patsy had cancer 5 years ago. But not as good in the small stuff, it seems. And I was reminded of that a few weeks ago.

Our car broke down while we were out on my weekend off. And I knew exactly what was wrong and could have fixed it myself if...  
if I had just two or three tools. But they were at home.  
if I had the part I needed. But it was Remembrance Day and almost everything was closed.

At one point, Patsy remarked how I was handling it very well. That was a reminder to me that I don’t always do so; otherwise she probably wouldn’t have noticed! But it was only on the outside. Inside I was writhing and wrestling. And it was so unnecessary. And I knew it but I couldn’t stop myself from being inwardly frustrated and anxious. I still can’t really believe how tormented I was over a relatively small problem.

Thankfully we were able to get a rental car. I found a store where I could get the tools I needed. I had them in my hand. And then I felt the Holy Spirit speak to my heart like a gentle mother to her child, “It’s okay. You don’t have to do it yourself. You might be able to do fix it but is it worth ruining your time away? It’s time for you to rest and leave this job to someone else.” And, you know, the moment I surrendered the need to do it myself, the anxiety I was feeling started to drain away. Almost instantly and more and more over the coming hours. We went to the hotel. Patsy and Jess went to a show. And I spent a few hours alone, doing some devotions, singing hymns by myself—because no one but God could appreciate my voice. I was getting in step with the Spirit. I needed to reflect on my “I can do it myself” attitude and learn to enjoy God’s gift of letting someone else take care of this problem. I had spent time praying for the Lord to help us get the car fixed but he helped me see that I needed fixing more than I needed to fix the car.

That’s what Paul wants us to learn in our text today. We have to learn to say no to the desire to have it our own way at times. And that’s because sometime the things we desire just aren’t good for us at a given time—like in my situation. And

other times because they are just plain wrong. Our Bible reading sets up this struggle as the tension between living by the flesh—doing things my own way—and living by the Spirit—doing things God’s way.

So, it might be wrestling with stealing from Mom’s cookie jar. It could be desiring to cheat on a test because we don’t want our teachers or parents to know that we didn’t study. It could be fighting God’s desire to rest in him. It could be fighting with our spouse and contemplating divorce. It could be battling with an addiction—to pornography, drugs, alcohol, smoking, overeating or something else. It could be greed, anger, bitterness or worry. Paul gives a list in vv.19-21 of some sins but the list could be much longer. These are all desires of the flesh, things that drive us to get our own way but keep us from surrendering to the Lord and doing what the Spirit says is best for us.

The Lord tells us in our text that he has something far better for us:

*Gal 5:16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature (more literally called “the flesh”).<sup>17</sup> For the sinful nature (flesh) 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.*

## **Fighting the Flesh**

The Lord wants us to see that there’s a war within us. A battle between the desires of the flesh, sinful desires in us and the nudging of the Holy Spirit and the clear teaching of his inspired Word.

*Gal 5:17 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.*

They are in conflict with each other. So the battle for us is to say no to our sinful desires every day and yes to the Spirit’s desires for us. “*They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.*” (NIV 2011)

That requires recognizing the flesh for what it is.

*Gal 5:17 For the sinful nature (flesh) desires what is contrary to the Spirit...*

When you simply live by the desires of the flesh, you do whatever you want and aren’t even aware that God might have a different way for you to live. At the very end of chapter 4 Paul illustrates this using Abraham. He says that when Abraham decided to do things his own way—to help God, as it were by having a child with someone who was not his wife—it resulted in the birth of Ishmael. And that led to serious problems in Abraham’s family. That, in turn, led to Abraham sending Ishmael away and led to two nations being formed that opposed each other. And, quite frankly, that remains a problem to this day in the Middle East. Abraham followed the flesh—doing what he thought would fix a problem. He might have been well-intentioned, but he tried to do things his own way, rather than trusting God’s way. He pushed ahead with his own plan instead of heading the Spirit.

Paul writes about the resulting misery and struggle in Galatians 4:29.

*Gal 4:29 At that time the son (Ishmael) born in the ordinary way persecuted the son (Isaac) born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now.<sup>30</sup> But what*

*does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son."*

Paul's point here is that we must learn to stop living by the desires of our own heart. Instead, we must get rid of them just as Abraham had to get rid of Ishmael.

Living by the flesh might seem like a good idea at times, but it never is. Doing whatever we want is not going to serve us well when our desire is a sinful or hurtful one. The flesh will always lead us astray.

To fight the flesh we must realize that we are new creatures in Christ. Christians no longer have a nature that can only listen to the flesh. You and I are not slaves to the flesh anymore. When we are enslaved to sin, we can't do any different. But Galatians is all about helping the Jewish Christian understand that living by the law isn't freedom, though it may look good on the outside. Jew and Gentile alike must rest in Christ's finished work for us. Jesus has set us free from slavery to our own sin as well from slavery to legalism. Every believer needs to come to cherish our strong and all-sufficient Lord Jesus. We must learn over and over again to rest in him with all of our struggles with the flesh, regardless of whether it's worrying too much, drinking too much, being sexually immoral, greedy, factious or anything else that Paul mentions, and more.

Over and over in his letters the Apostle Paul shouts that we died to the sinful desires of the flesh. It's not that we don't have them anymore. We certainly know we do. Instead, here's what we need to know: *they don't have us anymore*. Sinful desires of the flesh no longer have us enslaved! Christ has broken off the shackles of sinful desires for us. He has smashed them. We are free from their ability to hold us down so that we are trapped, addicted, enslaved and helpless. Indeed, we all need to know that sin is not our master. Christ's victory over sin and Satan on the cross and through his resurrection guarantees our freedom, victory and new life.

That doesn't mean we have complete victory on this side of eternity. Nor does it mean that we don't go back to sinful desires or that we always run from them as we should. William Hendriksen, a great Bible scholar, wrote: "The *believer*, while still on earth, experiences an agonizing conflict in his own heart, but *in principle*, has already gained the victory, as the very presence of the Holy Spirit in his heart testifies." It's important for us to remember and believe that we don't have to say yes to the sinful desires of the flesh. Through Christ we can say no to sin and yes to the Spirit. But it's a lifelong struggle. It "takes time, intense effort and exertion." It's a constant battle.

Think about what we read together from Q&A 32 of the catechism: *By faith I am a member of Christ and share in his anointing*. And one of the things we are empowered for through this anointing is "to **strive** (which is like continual fighting) with a good conscience against sin and the devil in this life." But then adding to that, Q&A 43 reminds us that "Through Christ's death our old selves are crucified, put to death and buried with him!" This means that "the evil desires of the flesh may no longer rule us." It doesn't mean that we can't or don't listen to those desires of the flesh to do whatever we want. But it does mean we have Christ's power to say no now!

## Walking by the Spirit

That brings us to walking by the Spirit. We know that the flesh and the Spirit are at war in us as Christians. We also know that we can live in the victory over our sinful nature that Christ has won for us. It's a lifelong challenge, to be sure. But it is doable because Jesus has defeated sin through his own death and resurrection for us. Now then, to help us live into this victorious life, Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Paul tells us,

*Gal 5:16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*

Another way of thinking about that is this: "Feed the Spirit and starve the flesh."

I like the story of a grandfather talking with his grandson. He says to the little boy, "There are two wolves inside of us which are always at war with each other. One of them is a good wolf which represents things like kindness, bravery and love. The other is a bad wolf, which represents things like greed, hatred and fear."

The grandson stops and thinks about it for a second. Then he looks up at his grandfather and says, "Grandfather, which one wins?"

The grandfather quietly replies, "The one you feed."

If we want to walk in the Spirit, we need to be sure that we are starving the flesh and feeding ourselves the things of the Spirit? Let me give you a few ideas.

#1. You grow strong in your walk with the Spirit by reading the Bible. That's pretty basic. But I dare say that we can probably all do better. We need the truth planted in us so that as we walk through life and face choices along the path, we know what's right and what's not. Then our ears are open to the Spirit.

#2. Pray. Again, a basic teaching. But prayer goes hand in hand with the Bible. We pray for the Holy Spirit to give us greater understanding of what we read in the Word he inspired. And we pray for the Holy Spirit's strength live out what we read.

#3. Take what the Spirit gives. Next Sunday, for example, we hope to have the Lord's Supper again. And this is a means of grace. It's one of the ways the Holy Spirit feeds our spirit. There's mystery in it. There's faith involved. But there's no denying that the Holy Spirit works in us to strengthen our faith through the means of grace. And the means of grace include doing what you are doing right now too: Listening to God's Word. Along with reading the Bible and praying, take in these Spirit-given gifts for growing our faith stronger.

#4. Do what's right. Sometimes we miss out on feeding the Spirit because we don't do something we know he's prompting us to do. We might not necessarily be doing a wrong thing, but are we doing the right? I can't hold myself up as a stellar example of this. But the story I shared of our weekend getaway and our car trouble, helped me relearn the joy of listening to the Spirit's prompting. When I listened to the Spirit's call to leave the problem to someone else for once, I

received peace. And that gift of peace just inspires me to step out next time too and do what I believe the Spirit is nudging me to do.

Paul gives us a whole list of things not to do. Things to avoid because they feed the flesh. Then he gives a list of the fruit of the Spirit. These are attitudes and actions that flow from being in step with the Spirit.

The Spirit is always prompting us to do the right thing, with the right attitude. And to get into that right way of doing things, we sometimes have to start by just doing it. We keep choosing to do the right instead of feeding the flesh by doing the wrong. So, if you battle with greed, for example, fight the flesh and walk in the Spirit by doing what's right. Paul makes clear that if something promotes love, then it's from the Spirit. So if you're trying to fight greed, learn to give money away. That helps you break free from enslavement to money and you find the joy of giving as you love your needy neighbour.

And #5. The last idea I have this morning is to lean on one another. I think this is a big one.

As we battle the flesh, the Holy Spirit is giving us one another. Every time Paul writes "you" in this passage, it's plural, not singular. That speaks to how the Spirit works in community for God's people. For many of the things of the flesh that we battle, we can walk in the Spirit and break free from the flesh by using the support of a sister or brother in Christ. If you watch the Grey Cup this afternoon, you'll see players working together to achieve a touchdown. Similarly, congregation, if you're trying to break free from pornography, get someone to hold you accountable, someone you can call when you feel tempted. It's similar when you're fighting any addiction or sin. When we walk in the Spirit with one another, we have support and acceptance and encouragement on the journey. Denial won't last. Secrets are exposed. Guilt and sin are confessed in safety. Grace and forgiveness are given freely. And loving, prayerful support ensures that the one struggling isn't left to fall back into the trap of the flesh but is supported as he or she learns to walk in step with the Spirit.

As we hear the Apostle Paul calling us to walk in the Spirit, let us be encouraged to fight the flesh—those sinful desires to do things our own way. And let us yield—in the strength our Lord Jesus won for us—to the prompting of the Holy Spirit who lives in us and works for our good each and every day. Just as it takes the tender leaves of early springtime to rid the oak tree of the withered leaves that hang on all winter, so it only the living Spirit of God that can expel the deeds of the flesh. It is only the good that can push out the bad. And the good and gracious Holy Spirit lives in us. Let us live in his strength.