

Galatians 5:17-18 Commentary

PREVIOUS

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Magna Carta of Spiritual Emancipation
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See Also:

[Paul's First Missionary Journey](#)

[Paul's Second Missionary Journey](#)

[Paul's Third Missionary Journey](#)

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This is one of the best resources for Bible maps as the maps also include helpful short descriptions of the events portrayed on the maps.

SUMMARY CHART:
EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS

Gospel of Grace Defended		Gospel of Grace Explained			Gospel of Grace Applied		
Defense of the Gospel Gal 1:1-2:21		Freedom from Legalism Gal 3:1-4:31			Freedom to Love and to Serve Gal 5:1-6:18		
Labor		Liberty			Life		
Authority Not Opinion		Freedom Not Bondage			Spirit Not Flesh		
Personal Autobiography		Doctrinal Accuracy			Practical Application		
Paul the Apostle (Gal 1:1-24)	Paul's Authority (Gal 2:1-21)	Justified by Faith not Works (Gal 3:1-9)	Justified by Faith not the Law (Gal 3:10-4:20)	Grace and Law Cannot Co-Exist (Gal 4:21-31)	Position and Practice of Liberty (Gal 5:1-15)	Power of Liberty (Gal 5:16-26)	Performance in Liberty (Gal 6:1-18)
Vindication		Exposition			Application		
Testimonial and Apologetic		Doctrinal and Argumentative			Practical and Hortatory		
Biographical Explanation		Doctrinal Exposition			Practical Exhortation		
Authentication of Liberty		Argumentation for Liberty			Application of Liberty		
Style or Tone: Vigorous, blunt, aggressive, direct, corrective, urgent, brief, righteous anger, strong words							
Theme: Justification by Faith and not by Works of the Law							
Author: Paul in large letters (Gal 6:11)							
Recipients: Churches in Galatia (Gal 1:2) (Most likely the Southern Region)							
Christ in Galatians: Jesus is the Source and Power for the believer's New Life. (Gal 2:20, 5:16)							

CONTRAST OF GRACE AND LAW

LAW	GRACE
The law prohibits	Grace invites and gives
The law condemns the sinner	Grace redeems the sinner.
The law says DO	Grace says IT IS DONE.
The law says, Continue to be holy	Grace says, It is finished.
The law curses	Grace blesses
The law slays the sinner	Grace makes the sinner alive.
The law shuts every mouth before God	Grace opens the mouth to praise God.
The law condemns the best man	Grace saves the worst man.
The law says, pay what you owe	Grace says, I freely forgive you all.
The law says “the wages of sin is death”	Grace says, “the gift of God is eternal life.”
The law says, “the soul that sins shall die”	Grace says, Believe and live.
The law reveals sin	Grace atones for sin.
By the law is the knowledge of sin	By grace is redemption from sin.

The law was given by Moses	Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.
The law demands obedience	Grace bestows and gives power to obey.
The law was written on stone	Grace is written on the tables of the heart.
The law was done away in Christ	Grace abides forever.
The law puts us under bondage	Grace sets us in the liberty of the sons of God.

Related Resource: Purpose of the Law

An Outline of Galatians - [D Edmond Hiebert](#)

THE INTRODUCTION (Galatians 1:1-10)

1. The salutation (Galatians 1:1-5)
 - a. The writer (Galatians 1:1-2a)
 - i. Paul, the Apostle (Galatians 1: 1)
 - ii. The brethren with him (Galatians 1:2a)
 - b. The readers (Galatians 1:2b)
 - c. The greeting (Galatians 1:3-5)
 - i. The contents of the greeting (Galatians 1:3a)
 - ii. The source of the grace and peace (Galatians 1:3b-4)
 - iii. The doxology (Galatians 1:5)
2. The rebuke (Galatians 1:6-10)
 - a. His astonishment at their fickleness (Galatians 1:6-7)
 - i. The reason for the astonishment (Galatians 1:6)
 - ii. The explanation of the departure (Galatians 1:7)
 - b. His assertion about its seriousness Galatians 1:8-9)
 - i. The seriousness asserted (Galatians 1:8)
 - ii. The seriousness reaffirmed (Galatians 1:9)
 - c. His attitude in the matter (Galatians 1:10)
- I. PERSONAL: THE VINDICATION OF HIS APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY (Galatians 1:11-2:21)

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 - a. The origin of his Gospel through revelation (Galatians 1: 11-12)
 - i. The assertion as to its nature (Galatians 1:11)
 - ii. The manner of its reception (Galatians 1:12)
 - b. The previous conduct of the one given the revelation (Galatians 1:13-14)
 - i. The manner of his former life known to them Galatians 1:13a)
 - ii. The description of his former life (Galatians 1:13b-14)
 - a. In relation to the Church of God (Galatians 1:13b)
 - b. In relation to Judaism (Galatians 1:14)
 - c. The description of the revelation received (Galatians 1:15-17)
 - i. The source of the revelation (Galatians 1:15)
 - ii. The subject of the revelation (Galatians 1:16a)
 - iii. The purpose of the revelation (Galatians 1:16b)
 - iv. The response to the revelation (Galatians 1:16c-17)
 - d. His independence of the Jerusalem apostles (Galatians 1:18-24)
 - i. The first visit to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18-20)
 - a. The time of the visit (Galatians 1:18a)
 - b. The purpose of the visit (Galatians 1:18b)
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 - ii. The subsequent absence from Jerusalem (Galatians 1:21-24)
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2. How his Gospel was confirmed by the apostles at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:1-10)
 - a. The circumstances of its presentation to them (Galatians 2:1-2)

- i. The journey to Jerusalem (Galatians 2:1-2a)
 - ii. The presentation made at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:2b)
- b. The outcome of his presentation of his Gospel to them (Galatians 2:3-10)
 - i. The maintenance of his position, as seen in Titus Galatians 2:3
 - ii. The conflict with the false brethren (Galatians 2:4-5)
 - a. The presence of the false brethren (Galatians 2:4)
 - b. The refusal to yield to their demands (Galatians 2:5)
 - iii. The approval of his Gospel by the Jerusalem leaders (Galatians 2:6-10)
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 - b. Their approval of his Gospel in full (Galatians 2:7-10)
 - 1. The basis of their approval (Galatians 2:7-9a)
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 - a. The insufficiency of the law (Galatians 2:15-18)
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 - e. The question about the basis of God's work among them (Galatians 3:5)
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 - a. The means of Abraham's justification (Galatians 3:6)
 - b. The identity of the sons of Abraham (Galatians 3:7)
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 - b. The limitations of the law and its relations to faith (Galatians 3:15-4:7)
 - i. The covenant with Abraham unaltered by the law (Galatians 3:15-18)
 - a. The illustration of a man's covenant as binding (Galatians 3:15)
 - b. The fact illustrated is the divine promise to Abraham (Galatians 3:16)
 - c. The application of the principle of an unalterable covenant (Galatians 3:17-18)
 - 1. The law did not alter the promise (Galatians 3:17)
 - 2. The inheritance is not through law but promise (Galatians 3:18)

- ii. The true place and purpose of the law (Galatians 3:19-29)
 - a. The temporary nature of the law (Galatians 3:19-20)
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 - c. The law as a child-leader to Christ with His blessings (Galatians 3:23-29)
 - 1. The old position under law (Galatians 3:23-24)
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- a. The illustration of the position of the heir as a minor (Galatians 4:1-2)
 - b. The application of the illustration to believers (Galatians 4:3-6)
 - 1. The condition of bondage as minors (Galatians 4:3)
 - 2. The position as free sons through God's Son (Galatians 4:4-6)
 - a. The sending of the Son of God (Galatians 4:4-5)
 - b. The sending of the Spirit of God (Galatians 4:6)
 - 3. The conclusion for the believer (Galatians 4:7)
2. The appeal for them to drop their legalism (Galatians 4:8-31)
- a. The acceptance of Jewish legalism is a return to bondage (Galatians 4:8-11)
 - i. Their past condition of bondage (Galatians 4:8)
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 - 1. The one representing a covenant of bondage (Galatians 4:24b-25)
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 - iv. The conclusion from the story (Galatians 4:31)
- III. PRACTICAL: THE LIFE OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY (Galatians 5:1-6:10)
- 1. The call to maintain their Christian liberty (Galatians 5:1)
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 - i. The consequences of accepting circumcision (Galatians 5:2-4)
 - a. It renders Christ useless to them (Galatians 5:2)
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 - d. It constitutes a fall from grace (Galatians 5:4b)
 - ii. The attitude of the true believer (Galatians 5:5-6)

- b. The condemnation of the false teacher (Galatians 5:7-12)
 - i. The explanation for their defection (Galatians 5:7)
 - ii. The characterization of the teaching (Galatians 5:8-9)
 - iii. The condemnation of the one troubling them (Galatians 5:10-12)
 - a. The confidence he has in them (Galatians 5:10a)
 - b. The troubler will bear his judgment (Galatians 5:10b)
 - c. The refutation of charges that he preaches circumcision (Galatians 5:11)
 - d. The wish that these teachers would go to the consistent end (Galatians 5:12)
- 3. The life of Christian liberty (Galatians 5:13-6:10)
 - a. It is directed by love (Galatians 5:13-15)
 - i. The believer called to liberty (Galatians 5:13a)
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 - iii. The fulfillment of the law through love (Galatians 5:14)
 - iv. The results of the lack of love (Galatians 5:15)
 - b. It is a walk in the Spirit, not in the flesh (Galatians 5:16-25)
 - i. The command to walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16)
 - ii. The conflict between the Spirit and the flesh (Galatians 5:17-18)
 - iii. The contrasted products of the flesh and the Spirit (Galatians 5:19-23)
 - a. The works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21)
 - b. The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)
 - iv. The persons living by the Spirit (Galatians 5:24-25)
 - c. It is a life of mutual burden-bearing (Galatians 5:26-6:10)
 - i. The burden of moral faults (Galatians 5:26-6:5)
 - a. The warning against wrong attitudes towards others (Galatians 5:26)
 - b. The attitude of humility in restoring the fallen (Galatians 6:1)
 - c. The duty of mutual burden-bearing (Galatians 6:2)
 - d. The proper attitude toward self (Galatians 6:3-5)
 - ii. The burden of temporal needs (Galatians 6:6-10)
 - a. The exhortation to communicate with their teachers (Galatians 6:6)
 - b. The law of the spiritual harvest (Galatians 6:7-8)
 - c. The encouragement to well-doing (Galatians 6:9-10)

THE CONCLUSION (Galatians 6:11-17)

- 1. His reference to his large letters (Galatians 6:11)
- 2. His rebuke of his adversaries (Galatians 6:12-13)
- 3. His confidence in the cross (Galatians 6:14-16)
 - a. His glorying only in the cross (Galatians 6:14a)
 - b. His crucifixion through the cross (Galatians 6:14b)
 - c. His evaluation of things through the cross (Galatians 6:15)
 - d. His benediction upon those accepting this principle (Galatians 6:16)
- 4. His marks of apostleship (Galatians 6:17)

THE BENEDICTION (Galatians 6:18+)

Galatians 5:17 For the **flesh sets** its **desire against** the **Spirit**, and the **Spirit against** the **flesh**; for **these** are in **opposition** to **one another**, **so** that you may not **do** the things that you **please**. (NASB: Lockman)

Greek: [e gar](#) sarx [epithumei](#) (3SPA) [kata tou pneumatos. to de pneuma kata tes sarkos: tauta gar allelois antikeitai.](#) (3SPMI) [hina me a ean thelete](#) (2PPAS) [tauta poiete.](#) (2PPAS)

Amplified: For the desires of the flesh are opposed to the [Holy] Spirit, and the [desires of the] Spirit are opposed to the flesh (godless human nature); for these are antagonistic to each other [continually withstanding and in conflict with each other], so that you are not free but are prevented from doing what you desire to do. ([Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))

Barclay: For the desires of the lower side of human nature are the very reverse of the desires of the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are the very reverse of those of the lower side of human nature, for these are fundamentally opposed to each other, so that you cannot do whatever you like. ([Westminster Press](#))

KJV: For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.

NJB: The desires of self-indulgence are always in opposition to the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are in opposition to self-indulgence: they are opposites, one against the other; that is how you are prevented from doing the things that you want to.

NLT: The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

Phillips: For the whole energy of the lower nature is set against the Spirit, while the whole power of the Spirit is contrary to the lower nature. Here is the conflict, and that is why you are not free to do what you want to do. ([Phillips: Touchstone](#))

TLB: For we naturally love to do evil things that are just the opposite from the things that the Holy Spirit tells us to do; and the good things we want to do when the Spirit has His way with us are just the opposite of our natural desires. These two forces within us are constantly fighting each other to win control over us, and our wishes are never free from their pressures.

Weymouth: For the cravings of the lower nature are opposed to those of the Spirit, and the cravings of the Spirit are opposed to those of the lower nature; because these are antagonistic to each other, so that you cannot do everything to which you are inclined.

Wuest: for the evil nature constantly has a strong desire to suppress the Spirit, and the Spirit constantly has a strong desire to suppress the evil nature. And these are entrenched in an attitude of mutual opposition to one another so that you may not do the things that you desire to do. (Eerdmans)

Young's Literal: for the flesh doth desire contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit contrary to the flesh, and these are opposed one to another, that the things that ye may will--these ye may not do

FOR THE FLESH SETS ITS DESIRE AGAINST THE SPIRIT AND THE SPIRIT AGAINST THE FLESH: e gar sarx epithumei (3SPA1) kata tou pneumatos to de pneuma kata tes sarkos:

- Ps 19:12, 13; 51:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11, 12; 65:3; 119:5, 20, 24, 25, 32, 35, 40, 133, 159; Ps 119:176; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Isaiah 6:5; Matthew 16:17, 23; 26:41; John 3:6; Romans 7:18, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25; 8:5,6,13; James 4:5,6)

THE STRUGGLE OF A LIFETIME

Literally this verse reads "for the flesh doth desire contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit contrary to the flesh."

John MacArthur makes the observation that "Along with many others in the New Testament, these two verses (Galatians 5:17-18) make it obvious that walking by the Spirit is not simply a matter of passive surrender. The Spirit-led life is a life of conflict, because it is in constant combat with the old ways of the flesh that continue to tempt and seduce the believer. ([MacArthur, J. Galatians. Chicago: Moody Press](#))

For (gar) or because are **terms of explanation**. In context Paul presents the reason why we will not fulfill the desires of the flesh if we walk by the Spirit, namely because of the fact that the flesh and the Spirit are at enmity with each other ("their mutual contrariety"). In other words, we cannot be controlled simultaneously by the Holy Spirit and our fallen flesh. It is one or the other. If you are yielding to the strong desires of the fallen flesh, you are allowing the flesh to control your thoughts, words and deeds.

Whenever you **term of explanation** always pause and ponder with the **5W/H'S** - For example, you can always ask "What is the author explaining?" (Why?, Why now?, How?, etc). These questions will "force" you to go back and re-read the preceding text and in the process you are establishing the **context** which is key to accurate **Interpretation**. As this discipline becomes a habit, you will find that the practice of slowing down will allow your Teacher, the Spirit (1Jn 2:20, 27, 1Cor 2:10-16) to illuminate the text. You will be amazed at the insights you will glean. And I would submit that as you practice pondering the text, you are in fact beginning to practice the blessed discipline of **Biblical Meditation**. (E.g. see the promises associated with **meditation** - Ps 1:1-note, Ps 1:2-note, Ps 1:3-note, Joshua 1:8-note). As an aside the little conjunction "**for**" is found 7629 times ("because" is found 1330 times) (NAS77) which will give you many wonderful opportunities to hone your skill of interrogating the text and engaging in Biblical meditation.

The flesh sets its desire - Paul personifies **flesh** as the active enemy of the **Spirit**, and emphasizes that these two forces are locked in a constant struggle, a battle every believer experiences as part of their "normal" Christian life.

Barnes sums up the first part of verse 17 "The inclinations and desires of the flesh are contrary to those of the Spirit. They draw as away in an opposite direction; and while the Spirit of God would lead us one way, our carnal nature would lead us another, and thus produce the painful controversy which exists in our minds. The word " Spirit" here refers to the Spirit of God, and to his influences on the heart." (Albert Barnes. Barnes NT Commentary)

Flesh (4561) (**sarx**) - see notes on Galatians 5:16 for discussion of flesh, which in this context describes that aspect of our fallen nature, inherited from Adam, which is prone to commit sins, is opposed to God and which continually seeks its own desires. **Flesh** is the personality of man controlled by **Sin** and directed to serving self rather than serving God.

Flesh refers to our "*unredeemed humanness*", which is that part of every believer which gives us our propensity to sin and which will only be removed at the time of our future redemption when we are glorified. In the meantime, we must face the fact that we will have continual internal conflict.

Flesh can be looked at as the best (and the worst) anyone can do in himself or herself before God, but even the "best" of the flesh is totally unacceptable because God's standard is perfect holiness! Because the flesh has nothing in common with God's power, one can either be a person of the Spirit (a Christian) or a person of the flesh (one who runs his or her own life without depending on God), but one cannot have it both ways.

Richison writes that...

There is no such thing as peaceful coexistence between the **flesh** and the **Spirit**. Coexistence, yes. Peaceful coexistence, no. There can be no compromise between the flesh and the Spirit because to capitulate to sin is to violate the Spirit. If the flesh is up, the Spirit is down; if the Spirit is up, the flesh is down.

The check and balance to our sin capacity is the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot allow the Holy Spirit to control us by suppression or eradication of sin but by the counter action of the power of the Holy Spirit.

A spiritual titanic tug of war takes place in every believer. The non-Christian does not have that same kind of struggle for he is nothing but "flesh." He has no other reference point. Once a person comes to know Christ, he enters a significant spiritual struggle. This is partial proof that he is born again.

A Christian out of fellowship with the Lord is out of joint spiritually. Although he has the indwelling Spirit in him, that does not necessarily mean that he "walks in the Spirit." If he doesn't walk with the Holy Spirit, he is out of fellowship.

The "**flesh**" of the believer is just as foul as the unbeliever. The sin capacity of the believer never gets better. God never regenerates it. We cannot refine it. It never improves. God never blesses it. Our "flesh" is exactly the same as an unsaved person. God will have nothing to do with it. We dare not ignore the power of the flesh in our lives.

When God saves a sinner, He imparts a brand new nature to him, which he never had before and he cannot lose. We can no more lose the new nature than we can lose the "flesh." We cannot lose either one of them.

We keep the "flesh" until we see the Savior. Then He will remove it from us forever. ([Verse by Verse Notes](#))

The reader should be aware that some writers have offered the notion that there is no longer a conflict in believers, an absurdity they base on the false supposition that the **Old Man** has been completely eradicated. It would be wonderful if this were true in this life, but Scripture does not teach this doctrine. Naturally, the flesh should be becoming increasingly subdued as the believer matures in his or her faith and learns by grace to walk in the Spirit. But to reiterate, the flesh is not eliminated until we are glorified. It follows, that believers are never released from the necessity of consciously choosing to go in God's way. There is no escape from the need for all of us to depend wholly on God's grace to live as more than conquerors.

NO ESCAPE!

Unfortunately we cannot escape the continual conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. Many have tried to escape, reasoning that if they could just get away from the temptations of the world, then they could gain the upper hand and be able to prevail in this ongoing struggle. Many of the early monks choose to leave the urban areas and live in the deserts, living in caves and on mountains, far removed from the attractions and distractions of society.

Jerome (circa 347-420 AD), a so called "early church father" (translator of the Latin Vulgate, a contemporary of Augustine), testified

to the continuing conflict of the flesh and Spirit, even after removing himself to the desert where the days were hot and the nights were cold, ostensibly far from worldly temptations...

O how often," he says, "I imagined that I was in the midst of the pleasures of Rome when I was stationed in the desert, in that solitary wasteland which is so burned up by the heat of the sun that it provides a dreadful habitation for the monks!"

And again: "I, who because of the fear of hell had condemned myself to such a hell and who had nothing but scorpions and wild animals for company, often thought that I was dancing in a chorus with girls. **My face was pale from fasting, but my mind burned with passionate desires within my freezing body; and the fires of sex seethed, even though the flesh had already died in me as a man.**" (Luther, Martin: Lectures on Galatians. Walk by the Spirit) (see also Jerome's [Original Reference](#)) (Bolding added for emphasis)

A man can take himself out of the fight (at least he thinks he can), but he can never take the "fight" out of the man, because this conflict is within and thus is carried along wherever he goes, be it the desert or the mountaintop. The conflict is unrelenting and the danger we face is either becoming complacent or apathetic about the struggle or on thinking that we can "manage" the struggle by our own ingenuity, by our techniques and

Spurgeon - The worst enemy we have is the flesh. Augustine used to pray, "Lord, deliver me from that evil man, myself." All the fire that the devil can bring from hell could do us little harm if we did not have so much fuel in our nature. It is the powder in the magazine of the old man that is our perpetual danger. When we are guarding against foes without, we must not forget to be continually on our watchtower against the foe of foes within... You are pulled about by two contrary forces: You are dragged downward by the flesh, and you are drawn upward by the Spirit. They will never agree. These two powers are always contrary one to the other. If you think that you can help God by getting angry, you make a great mistake. You cannot fight God's battles with the devil's weapons. It is not possible that the power of the flesh should help the power of the Spirit.

Sets its desire (1937) (**epithumeo** from **epi** = at, toward {the preposition "epi-" in the compound is directive conveying the picture of "having one's passion toward" } + **thumos** = passion) (See study of noun **epithumia** for more detail) means literally to set one's passion upon something (or someone).

Epithumeo is a neutral word which simply describes the manifestation of strong desires or impulses, longings or passionate cravings directed toward an object. Whether those desires are good (in Galatians 5:17, supernatural desires initiated and enabled by the Spirit) or evil (desires initiated and empowered by the fallen **flesh**) is determined by the **context**. Note that Paul's use of the **present tense** identifies this battle of opposing desires as a lifelong struggle.

The first use of **epithumeo** in the NT is illustrative of the negative meaning, for Jesus says...

everyone who looks (present tense - keeps on looking) on a woman to **lust** (**epithumeo**) for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. (Mt 5:28)

(Another negative example) Now these things (Israel sinning and being punished in the OT) happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also **craved** (**epithumeo**). (1Cor 10:6)

(Another negative example) You **lust** (**epithumeo**) and do not have; so you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. (James 4:2)

The second NT use of **epithumeo** illustrates the "positive" meaning...

And he ("the prodigal son") **was longing** to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. (Luke 15:16)

(Another positive example by Jesus) And He said to them, **I have earnestly desired** to eat this Passover with you before I suffer (Luke 22:15)

Guthrie makes the point that in Galatians 5:17 the use of **epithumeo** "brings out the more active side of the lust of the flesh"

Against (2596) (**kata**) is a preposition which has the primary meaning of denoting motion or direction from higher to lower and thus generally means downward. In the present context, **kata** expresses opposition against or hostility toward (properly down upon). Another Scriptural use of **kata** expressing hostility is found in first Peter...

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly (**sarx**) lusts (**epithumia**), which wage war (strateuomai in the present tense = pictures continual warfare in this life) **against** (**kata**) the soul (psuche, psyche). (1 Peter 2:11-note)

Comment - (cp **kata** with similar meaning of opposition to in the following passages - Mark 9:40 - "he who is

not **against** us is for us", 2 Cor 13:8 - "we can do nothing **against** the truth", Ro 8:31 - "If God *is* for us, who *is against* us?", Mt 12:30 and Lu 11:23 - "He who is not with Me is **against** Me", Mt 5:11 - "say all kinds of evil **against** you falsely on account of Me", Acts 6:13 "incessantly speaks **against** this holy place and the Law", Jude 1:15 "harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken **against** Him", Mark 14:55, Mt 26:59 "kept trying to obtain [false] testimony **against** Jesus to put Him to death", et al)

Spirit (4151) (**pneuma** from **pneo** = to breathe or blow, Hebrew = ruach [07307], Latin = spiritus) primarily denotes the wind, the air, breath, or life. Pneuma later came to refer to the spirit, which, like the wind, is invisible, immaterial and powerful. It also refers to the incorporeal part of man, which like breath leaves him at death and which has God-consciousness. With his spirit, man interacts with God. He worships God by means of his human spirit when that spirit is energized by the Holy Spirit and He serves God in the same way.

In the present context **pneuma** signifies the **Holy Spirit** Who indwells all believers at the time of their new birth (1 Cor 12:13). The Christian life began by the Spirit as Jesus explained to Nicodemus declaring...

5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the **Spirit**, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

6 "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the **Spirit** is spirit.

7 "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

8 "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the **Spirit**." (John 3:5-8)

And just as salvation began by the Spirit (Gal 3:3; 4:6, 29), in the same way salvation (now referred to as sanctification) must continue by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit is the Source and Sustainer of our supernatural life in Christ.

Lightfoot makes the point that "Throughout this passage the **pneuma** is evidently the Divine Spirit; for the human spirit in itself and unaided does not stand (**Ed note**: Nor does it stand a chance!) in direct antagonism to the flesh"

Spurgeon writes that "I know in my own soul that I feel myself to be like two distinct men. There is the **Old Man**, as base as ever, and the **New Man**, that cannot sin, because he is born of God. I cannot myself understand the experience of those Christians who do not find a conflict within, for my experience goes to show this, if it shows anything, that there is an incessant contention between the old nature—O that we could get rid of it—and the new nature—for the strength of which God be thanked! **Do you not find it so?**"

Findlay writes that...

The opposition here affirmed exists on the widest scale. All history is a battlefield for the struggle between God's Spirit and man's rebellious flesh. In the soul of a half-sanctified Christian, and in Churches like those of Corinth and Galatia whose members are "yet carnal (fleshly) and walk as men," the conflict is patent. The Spirit of Christ has established His rule in the heart; but His supremacy is challenged by the insurrection of the carnal (**sarx**) powers. The contest thus revived in the soul of a Christian is internecine (relating to conflict within one's soul); it is that of the kingdoms of light and darkness, of the opposite poles of good and evil. It is an incident in the war of human sin against the Holy Spirit of God, which extends over all time and all human life. Every lust, every act or thought of evil is directed, knowingly or unknowingly, against the authority of the Holy Spirit, against the presence and the rights of God immanent in the creature. Nor is there any restraint upon evil, any influence counteracting it in man or nation or race, which does not proceed from the Spirit of the Lord.

The spirit of man has never been without a Divine Paraclete. "God hath not left Himself without witness" to any; and "it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth." The Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, is the Spirit of all truth and holiness. In the "truth as it is in Jesus" He possesses His highest instrument. But from the beginning it was His office to be God's Advocate, to uphold law, to convict the conscience, to inspire the hope of mercy, to impart moral strength and freedom. We "believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life."

This war of Spirit and Flesh is first ostensibly declared in the words of Genesis 6:3. This passage indicates the moral reaction of God's Spirit against the world's corruption, and the protest which in the darkest periods of human depravity He has maintained. God had allowed men to do despite (malice, contempt, injury, spite) to His good Spirit. But it cannot always be so. A time comes when, outraged and defied, He withdraws His influence from men and from communities; and the Flesh bears them along to swift destruction. So it was in

the world before the Flood. So largely amongst later heathen peoples, when God “suffered all nations to walk in their own ways.”

Even the Mosaic law had proved rather a substitute than a medium for the free action of the Spirit of God on men. “The law was spiritual,” but “weak through the flesh.” It denounced the guilt which it was powerless to avert.

With the advent of Christ all this is changed. The Spirit of God is now, for the first time, sent forth in His proper character and His full energy. At last His victory draws near. He comes as the Spirit of Christ and the Father, “poured out upon all flesh.” “A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you. I will put My Spirit within you” (Ezekiel 36:25, 26, 27): this was the great hope of prophecy; and it is realized.

The Spirit of God’s Son **regenerates** the human heart, **subdues** the flesh, and **establishes the communion** of God with men. The reign of the Spirit on earth was the immediate purpose of the manifestation of Jesus Christ.

But what does Paul really mean by “**the flesh**?” It includes everything that is not “of the Spirit.” It signifies the entire potency of sin. It is the contra-spiritual, the undivine in man. Its “works,” as we find in Gal 5:20, 21, are not bodily vices only, but include every form of moral debasement and aberration.

Flesh in the Apostle’s vocabulary follows the term spirit, and deepens and enlarges its meaning precisely as the latter does. Where **spirit** denotes the super-sensible in man, **flesh** is the sensible, the bodily nature as such. When spirit rises into the supernatural and superhuman, flesh becomes the natural, the human by consequence. When **spirit** receives its highest signification, denoting the holy Effluence of God, His personal presence in the world, **flesh** sinks to its lowest and represents unrenewed nature, the evil principle repugnant and alien to God. It is identical with sin. But in this profound moral significance the term is more than a figure. Under its use the body is marked out, not indeed as the cause, but as the instrument, the vehicle of **Sin**. **Sin** has incorporated itself with our organic life, and extends its empire over the material world. When the Apostle speaks of “the body of sin” and “of death,” and bids us “mortify the deeds of the body” and “the members which are upon the earth,” (See Ro 6:6-note, Ro 6:12-note; Ro 7:4-note, Ro 7:23, 24-note; Ro 8:10, 11-note, Ro 8:12-note, Ro 8:13-note; Col 2:11, 12-note, 13; Col 3:5-note) his expressions are not to be resolved into metaphors.

On this definition of the terms, it is manifest that the antagonism of the **Flesh** and **Spirit** is fundamental. They can never come to terms with each other, nor dwell permanently in the same being. ([Galatians 5:16-26](#)
[Christ's Spirit and Human Flesh](#))

FOR THESE ARE IN OPPOSITION TO ONE ANOTHER: tauta gar allelois antikeitai, (3SPMI):

- Gal 3:21; Matthew 12:30; Romans 7:7,8,10, 11, 12, 13, 14; 8:5, 6, 7, 8)

For (gar) elaborates or explains why the desires of flesh are in conflict with those of the Spirit. See **term of explanation**.

Spurgeon describes the traitor within —

A garrison is not free from danger while it has an enemy lodged within. You may bolt all your doors and fasten all your windows; but if the thieves have placed even a little child within doors, who can draw the bolts for them, the house is still unprotected. All the sea outside a ship cannot do it damage till the water enters within and fills the hold. Hence, it is clear, our greatest danger is from within. All the devils in hell and tempters on earth could do us no injury if there were no corruption in our nature. The sparks will fall harmlessly if there is no tinder. Alas, our heart is our greatest enemy: this is the little home-born thief.

Lord, save me from that evil man, myself.

S Lewis Johnson explains the conflict this way reminding us that...

Ishmael and Isaac still struggle against one another, only now it is in the inner man of the believer (cf Gal 4:22, 23, 24, 25,26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, esp Gal 4:29)! That is why we ought to **walk in the Spirit**. As Paul puts it, “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other, so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” Instead of “ye cannot do,” the original text should be rendered ye may not do. The apostle is not denying that a believer can have success in the warfare with the

flesh. He is simply saying that the overcoming of the flesh does not rest in his own power. It rests in the power of God. But this verse does point to the fact that walking by the Spirit will not issue in subjection to the flesh.

([Galatians 5:13-26 Freedom in Christ](#))

This conflict is depicted in this quote of the soldier in Studdert Kennedy's poem

I'm a man and a man's mixture
Right down from his very birth;
For part of him comes from heaven,
And part of him comes from earth.

Martin Luther encourages believers to "not despair if you feel the flesh battling against the Spirit or if you cannot make it behave. For you to follow the guidance of the Spirit in all things without interference on the part of the flesh is impossible. You are doing all you can if you resist the flesh and do not fulfill its demands." ([Martin Luther's Commentary on Galatians](#))

Are in opposition (480) (**antikeimai** from **anti** = against, opposite + **keimai** = to be placed, to lie or be laid down) means literally to line up against or to lie opposite to, both ideas giving us a vivid picture of the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit.

The **present tense** emphasizes that this opposition is a continuing conflict with no truce in sight (until we reach glory!).

Toussaint comments that...

Some well meaning teachers on the spiritual life either intentionally or unintentionally leave the impression that Christians are living defeated lives if they experience conflict. It is implied that it is sinful to have any battles at all. Such teaching is not Scriptural. There will always be struggle; the sin nature never retires from doing battle until the Christian leaves his mortal body. No one need have a guilt complex because of this. This inner struggle is inevitable and continual.

The presence of conflict is not sinful; defeat is. God's child is never asked to live without battle, but he is commanded to be victorious in it. The resources of the Holy Spirit are available so that a God-pleasing life is possible for every believer. If the Christian does not walk by faith in Christ, then the battle is waged between the **old nature** and the **new**, and **defeat is the certain outcome**. When the Christian turns to Christ and looks to Him for strength, the Holy Spirit enters the struggle on behalf of the believer and victory is assured. In Galatians 5:16 Paul commands the believer to walk by means of the Spirit. This imperative is followed by "ou me" (Ed note: a double negative) with the subjunctive, which is an emphatic negation used here as a strong promise. The flesh and Spirit are so contrary to one another that a walk by the Spirit automatically excludes a fulfillment of the baser desires. Victory is available to every Christian.

Antikeimai means to be set over against, to be opposed or be in opposition and as noted below is often used as a "verbal noun" variously translated as opponent, enemy or adversary. Note that in the LXX (Zechariah 3:1), this verb is used to describe the opposition of the Adversary, Satan, and in the NT, is used to describe the opposition of Satan's man of lawlessness, the Antichrist (2 Thes 2:4)

A T Robertson writes that **antikeimai** conveys the picture that the flesh and the Spirit...

Are lined up in conflict, face to face (anti-), a spiritual duel (cf. Christ's temptations), with dative case of personal interest. ([Word Pictures in the New Testament](#))

Antikeimai is used 8 times in the NT...

Luke 13:17 And as He said this, all His **opponents** (verb used as a noun -present tense = were continually opponents) were being humiliated; and the entire multitude was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him.

Luke 21:15 for I will give you utterance and wisdom which none of your **opponents** (verb used as a noun -present tense = were continually opponents) will be able to resist or refute.

1 Corinthians 16:9 for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many **adversaries** (verb used as a noun -present tense = were continually adversaries).

Galatians 5:17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these **are in opposition** to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.

Philippians 1:28 (note) in no way alarmed by your **opponents** (verb used as a noun -present tense = were continually opponents)-- which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from

God.

2 Thessalonians 2:4 who **opposes** (present tense = continually opposes) and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

1 Timothy 1:10 and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else **is contrary to** (present tense = continually opposed to) sound teaching,

1 Timothy 5:14 Therefore, I want younger widows to get married, bear children, keep house, and give the **enemy** (verb used as a noun - present tense = the one who is continually set over against and thus an enemy) no occasion for reproach (**Comment: Antikeimai** does not speak of Satan here, but of any human being who sets himself against Christianity).

There are 11 uses in the Septuagint (LXX) (Ex 23:22 [2x]; 2Sa 8:10; Esther 8:11; 9:1; Job 13:25; Is 41:11; 45:16; 51:19; 66:6; Zech. 3:1). Below are some representative uses...

Isaiah 66:6 "A voice of uproar from the city, a voice from the temple, The voice of the LORD who is rendering recompense to His **enemies** (Hebrew = 'oyeb = enemy; Lxx = antikeimai).

Zechariah 3:1 Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the LORD, and Satan (Hebrew = satan) standing at his right hand to **accuse** (Hebrew = satan = act as an adversary, resist, oppose; Lxx = antikeimai = be opposed to) him.

One another (240) (**allelon** from **állos** = another) means each other and can speak of a mutuality or sharing of sentiments (in this case hostile sentiments) between two persons or groups of persons.

Wuest writes that the idea of **allelon** in this context is that...

there is a reciprocity on the part of the flesh and Spirit. Each reciprocates the antagonism which the one holds for the other. The translation is as follows:

For the flesh constantly has a strong desire to suppress the Spirit, and the Spirit constantly has a strong desire to suppress the flesh. And these are entrenched in an attitude of mutual opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you desire to do.

When the flesh presses hard upon the believer with its evil behests, the Holy Spirit is there to oppose the flesh and give the believer victory over it, in order that the believer will not obey the flesh, and thus sin. When the Holy Spirit places a course of conduct upon the heart of the believer, the flesh opposes the Spirit in an effort to prevent the believer from obeying the Spirit. The purpose of each is to prevent the believer from doing what the other moves him to do. The choice lies with the saint. He must develop the habit of keeping his eyes fixed on the Lord Jesus and his trust in the Holy Spirit. The more he says NO to sin, the easier it is to say NO, until it becomes a habit. The more he says YES to the Lord Jesus, the easier it is to say YES, until that becomes a habit.

The will of the believer is absolutely free from the compelling power of the evil nature. If he obeys the latter, it is because he chooses to do so. But the Holy Spirit has given the believer a new nature, the divine nature. And the sweet influences of that nature are constantly permeating the activities of the believer's will as the believer keeps himself yielded to the Spirit. In that way, the Spirit keeps on suppressing the activities of the evil nature and any control which it might attempt to exert over the saint. ([Galatians Commentary - Verse by Verse](#))

William MacDonald has an interesting thought on this conflict between the Spirit and the flesh noting that...

God could have removed the fleshly nature from believers at the time of their conversion, but He did not choose to do so. Why? He wanted to keep them continually reminded of their own weakness; to keep them continually dependent on Christ, their Priest and Advocate; and to cause them to praise unceasingly the One who saved such worms. Instead of removing the old nature, God gave us His own Holy Spirit to indwell us. God's Spirit and our flesh are perpetually at war, and will continue to be at war until we are taken home to heaven. The believer's part in the conflict is to yield to the Spirit. ([MacDonald, W & Farstad, A. Believer's Bible Commentary: Thomas Nelson](#))

C Norman Bartlett comments that in Galatians 5:16-18...

In these verses we have clearly depicted the struggle between the **old nature** and the **new nature** which is the common experience of Christians everywhere. And this conflict is a **war to the death**. There can be no

cessation of hostilities until we are called home to glory. A truce is out of the question. Appeasement policies are futile. We may as well recognize the situation at the outset...

Nothing is to be gained by denying or minimizing this mutual antagonism. **The acceptance of Christ into the heart will inevitably provoke a bitter and determined resistance on the part of the old sinful nature which hitherto has had everything its own way.**

Nor will the flesh be put to sleep by the fond delusion that it is dead and buried. It is imperative for our spiritual growth that we grasp the fact that the old nature is **not removed** or **reformed** at regeneration. Failure to understand this elementary fact frequently plunges the new convert into needless bewilderment and even despair of his standing before God when, after a peaceful period of triumph and fellowship with Jesus, he stumbles into the old sins and faults he fancied had been vanquished forever.

With older Christians this error often operates to effect quite different results. Persuaded that they cannot sin, adherents of the heresy of sinless perfection will deny that those practices are sinful which the Word of God plainly denounces as sinful. He who thinks he has reached perfection is the victim of an illusion indicating that he is desperately in need of a new pair of glasses to forestall threatening blindness. At the same time, we must not allow false claims to perfection on the part of some to make us unmindful of the true goal of perfection for all followers of the Lord Jesus.

We are to claim and win victories over the flesh in the power of the Holy Spirit. To forget that the old nature has no right to rule us will but increase its might to worst us in the battles of life.

Beware the peril of insensibility to the terribleness of sin. If my heart can feel comfortable under sin, my soul is critically ill. We are most hurt by sin when we are least hurt by it. Numbness may be recognized by the trained physician as the forerunner of paralysis or even death itself.

Turning to the brighter side of the picture, it holds gloriously true that the more we say **yes** to Jesus the easier will it be, until finally it becomes a fixed habit. (**Ed note:** Lord, let it be for myself and all the readers of this note. Amen)

Precious and weighty, then, is our responsibility for cultivating response-ability to Jesus ([C. Norman Bartlett: Galatians and You: Studies in the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians. 1948](#)) (Bolding and color added for emphasis).

The old flesh nature which has we all inherited from Adam when we were born continually fights against the new nature which we receive when we are born again. No amount of self-discipline, no set of man-made rules and regulations, can control the old flesh nature (see the futile attempts of [Jerome](#)). Only the Holy Spirit can enable us to "put to death" the old nature (Ro 8:13-note) and produce His supernatural fruit (Gal 5:22-note, Gal 5:23-note).

Martin Luther often used the anecdotal illustration of a believer named **Doctor Staupitz** who said...

"I have promised God a thousand times that I would become a better man, but I never kept my promise. From now on I am not going to make any more vows. Experience has taught me that I cannot keep them. Unless God is merciful to me for Christ's sake and grants unto me a blessed departure, I shall not be able to stand before Him."

Commenting on Staupitz' statement **Luther** wrote that...

His was a God-pleasing despair. No true believer trusts in his own righteousness, but says with David, "Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight shall no man living be justified." (Ps 143:2) Again, "If thou, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" (Ps 130:3)

No man is to despair of salvation just because he is aware of the lust of the flesh. Let him be aware of it so long as he does not yield to it. The passion of lust, wrath, and other vices may shake him, but they are not to get him down. Sin may assail him, but he is not to welcome it. Yes, the better Christian a man is, the more he will experience the heat of the conflict. This explains the many expressions of regret in the Psalms and in the entire Bible. Everybody is to determine his peculiar weakness and guard against it. Watch and wrestle in spirit (**Ed note:** I would add in "the Holy Spirit" - Ro 8:13-note) against your weakness. Even if you cannot completely overcome it, at least you ought to fight against it. ([Martin Luther's Commentary on Galatians](#)).

The unsaved person knows nothing of the believer's conflict. To be sure, non-believers often regret their sins because of guilt and especially because of painful consequences. However, non-believers who have only the fallen flesh and lack the Spirit do not have the internal spiritual war which is the experience of every believer. When an unbeliever commits sins, he is acting in a manner which

is consistent with his basic nature, for as Paul explained to the saints in Ephesus before salvation they had...

walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience... (and had) formerly lived in the lusts of (their) flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. (Ep 2:2, 3-see notes Ephesians 2:2; 2:3)

The point is that unbelievers have no real internal conflict beyond whatever conscience may remain in their sinful state (Ro 2:14, 15-note). Only in believers are the unredeemed flesh and the Spirit living in the redeemed new man in Christ, in opposition to one another. And because this spiritual dynamic exists, believers may not do the things that they please. As all believers are painfully aware, we do not always do what we wish to do for there are moments when the wishing is present but the doing is not. Sometimes, the Spirit halts what our flesh desires, but at other times the flesh overrides the will from the Spirit.

Ray Stedman warns us about the **devious nature of the flesh** explaining that

flesh is openly arrogant, overbearing, boastful, lustful, cynical, proud... But when it is driven by the Spirit into a corner it can assume a garb of righteousness and become pious, religious, scrupulous about morals, zealous in church work, indignant over wrongs, provokingly evangelical!... The righteousness of the **flesh** is always counterfeit righteousness. It is centered in self, and therefore it is always self-righteousness... The **flesh** can memorize Scripture. The **flesh** can teach Sunday school. The **flesh** can distribute tracts, give large gifts of money, give a stirring testimony, teach a Bible class, sing solos, or preach a sermon. It can even apologize (after a fashion), and repent (to some extent), or suffer (with a martyred air), but there is one thing that **flesh** will never do. It will do anything to survive, but one thing: **It will never give in it will never surrender, it will never change, it will never give up, never!** It is a slippery, elusive thing; and, when we back it into a corner, it simply takes on a different disguise and appears in a different form, but it is the same old, deadly, evil **flesh**. When driven into a corner it would rather wreck your life than give in. **Have you found this to be true?" (Ed note: And all God's people answered either "Amen!" or "Oh my!")** ([The Price of Survival](#); see also [The Death of the flesh](#)) (Bolding and color added for emphasis)

Believers need to be wary of defending the manifestations of the **flesh** and excusing them as part of their **personality** or **temperament**, rather than judging them for what they really are! To give way to the desires of the flesh is to give the devil an opportunity over us (see Ep 4:17, 18, 19-note, Ep 4:20, 21, 22-note, Ep 4:23, 24-note, Ep 4:25, 26, 27-note).

Pride is the root of all human evil, and pride is the basic characteristic of what the Bible calls the **flesh** that lusts against, wars against, the Spirit. The **flesh** is a principle that stands athwart God's purposes in human life and continually defies what God is trying to accomplish. Each of us has this struggle within us if we are Christians, and its basic characteristic is revealed here as pride. That is the number one identifying mark of the **flesh**. ([Ray Stedman](#))

In another message **Stedman** says that

If this pride -- the **flesh** -- is not your friend, but rather a subtle, crafty enemy as this book says, then the most important thing in your Christian life is to learn to recognize how he works, for you never can win the battle against him unless you know his tactics. There is no possibility of victory without this. Paul says,

"We are not ignorant of his devices," (2Corinthians 2:11b KJV)

We know how he works and we can thus call upon all the overpowering, conquering influence of Jesus Christ on our behalf...

The whole strategy of the flesh is to convince us that these attitudes which mark God at work in us are really not to our advantage, that we would get along much better without them, and that the opposite attitudes are the things that will really pay off for us. If we can be led to distrust and reject these godly attitudes we will thereby frustrate the work of the Holy Spirit in our life. ([Ray Stedman: The Struggle for Power](#)) (Bolding and color added for emphasis)

William Hendriksen gives an excellent summary of the spiritual conflict writing that...

(1) The **libertine** (Ed note: a person who is unrestrained by convention or morality) experiences no such struggle at all, for he follows his natural inclinations.

(2) The **legalist**, who is destined for grace and glory, having been reminded of his sinfulness by the law but for a while unwilling to accept grace, struggles and struggles but without achieving victory or experiencing the sense of certain, ultimate triumph. This condition lasts until grace finally breaks down all the barriers of

opposition (see note Philippians 3:7ff).

(3) 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. In full measure this victory will be his portion in the hereafter; hence,

(4) For the **redeemed-soul in glory** the battle is over. He wears the victor's wreath.

As to (3), therefore, the very wording of the text—note: “sets its desire against” and “are opposed to each other”—indicates the intensity of the lifelong tug of war. This shows that the Christian life means far more than stepping forward to register one's decision at a great revival meeting, after listening to a powerful, evangelical, and heart-warming message, and while one is under the influence of the singing of old familiar hymns by a massive choir. When, under such circumstances, the sudden change is genuine, it is wonderful, but it must be borne in mind that as a rule a sinner is not wholly saved all at once (“Presto!”). He does not leap into heaven in one prodigious bound. On the contrary, he has to work out his own salvation (Phil 2:12, 13 - see notes Php 2:12; 13). This takes time, struggle, intense effort and exertion. [Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. NT Commentary Set. Baker Book](#) (**Ed note:** Don't misunderstand what Hendriksen is saying here - he is not saying we are saved by nor sanctified by our own fleshly efforts, for even in the working out of our salvation, it is clearly the Spirit in us Who now gives us the desire [the "want to"] and the power to please God. Yes, we as believers have a part in this supernatural spiritual work, for we must be willing participants [God will not force us to walk in the Spirit], but it is ultimately work which is God initiated, God enabled and God glorifying!)

Warren Wiersbe writes that

the **Spirit** and the **flesh** (the old nature) are at war with each other. By “the flesh,” of course, Paul does not mean “the body.” The human body is not sinful; it is neutral. If the Holy Spirit controls the body, then we walk in the Spirit; but if the flesh controls the body, then we walk in the lusts (desires) of the flesh. The Spirit and the flesh have different appetites, and this is what creates the conflict...

Note that the Christian cannot simply will to overcome the flesh..

Paul is not denying that there is victory. He is simply pointing out that we cannot win this victory in our own strength and by our own will...

The solution is not to pit our will against the flesh, but to surrender our will to the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit writes God's Law on our hearts (He 10:14, 15, 16, 17-see notes He 10:14; 15; 16; 17; see also 2 Cor 3) so that we desire to obey Him in love. “I delight to do Thy will, O my God: yea, Thy Law is within my heart” (Ps 40:8). Being “led of the Spirit” and “walking in the Spirit” are the opposites of yielding to the desires of the flesh. ([Wiersbe, W: Bible Exposition Commentary. 1989. Victor](#)) (Bolding added for emphasis)

SO THAT YOU MAY NOT DO THE THINGS THAT YOU PLEASE: hina me a ean thelete (2PPAS) tauta poiete. (2PPAS)

Ps 119:4, 5, 6; 130:3; Matthew 5:6; Luke 22:33,46,54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61; Romans 7:15-23; Philippians 3:12, 13, 14, 15, 16; James 3:2; 1John 1:8, 9, 10)

It has been pointed out that this passage has been interpreted three ways.

(1) The **flesh** keeps you from doing the good you desire, the righteousness you desire to carry out.

(2) The **Spirit** keeps you from doing the evil you desire to do.

(3) The conflicting natures (**flesh** or **Spirit**) each hinders the desires of the other so that you are unable to do them.

Below are representative comments reflecting each view with highly respected expositors associated with each view. One should not let this difficulty distract us from Paul's main point, which is the fact that believers are involved in a very real spiritual struggle, and this struggle will not disappear while we are in these mortal bodies. As we have said several times in these notes, this spiritual struggle is to be expected for it is the **normal** Christian life ([see especially John Piper's comments below](#))

James Montgomery Boice favors the first view especially in view of the fact that the next verse presents a contrasting truth describing the victory which is attainable by the Spirit's power. Boice explains it this way...

In view of the parallel statements in Romans 7:15, 16 (see notes Romans 7:15; 16) (**Ed note:** [but see Toussaint's note](#)), probably the first should be preferred, especially since the next verse goes on to speak of the victory that can be attained by the Spirit's power. ([Gaebelein, F. Editor: Expositor's Bible Commentary 6-Volume New Testament. Zondervan Publishing](#))

Here is a translation that clearly favors **interpretation #1**...

"That is why you cannot run wild, doing as you please" (Cotton Patch)

John MacArthur also favors interpretation #1 (as does J Vernon McGee, KJV Bible Commentary, Chrysostom) writing that...

Every believer has the indwelling power of God's own Spirit to do battle with his own weak and sinful flesh, in order that he may not do the things that please his flesh. ([MacArthur, J. Galatians. Chicago: Moody Press](#))

Vine agrees with MacArthur writing that the phrase **may not do the things that you please** refers to...

the things toward which fallen man naturally turns, and which are enumerated in Gal 5:19 as **the works of the flesh**. This is the characteristic of Christian liberty as an experience; since the believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit it is no longer inevitable that he must yield to the evil motions of the flesh, he shall, if the condition of vv. 16 and 18 is fulfilled, enjoy happy liberty from all such bondage. And not only so, as he yields himself to the guidance and strengthening of the Spirit he is enabled to refuse "to do those things which are not fitting," Ro 1:28 (note), and to bear that "fruit" of which the apostle is shortly to speak. ([Vine, W. Collected writings of W. E. Vine. Nashville: Thomas Nelson](#))

Richison also agrees with interpretation #1 commenting that...

The Holy Spirit interferes with what the flesh would otherwise do in its evil lusts. When we operate on the principle of grace [God's provisions], we will not do the things we wish. The grace of the Holy Spirit will not allow us to invite evil into our souls. The best way to fight against sin is to walk in the Spirit.

Legalistic Galatians thought they could oppose sin by trying to live up to the law. By trying to gain God's approbation by the law, they failed to engage the grace of God provided by the Holy Spirit. Neither do believers operating under grace give license to sin. Life under grace is neither legalism nor license but a reigning principle that prohibits the sin capacity from doing what it otherwise would. ([Verse by Verse Commentary](#))

Guzik favors interpretation #2 (as do Luther, Calvin, Lightfoot, Bible Knowledge Commentary) writing that...

When the flesh is winning the inside battle, you do not do the things that you wish. You don't live the way you want to; you live under the flesh instead of under the Spirit. ([Commentary](#))

The **NLT** rendering clearly favors interpretation #2 (translations can have an interpretative bias)...

These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

Vincent on the other hand favors interpretation #3 (as do Jamieson, UBS Bible Handbook, Constable, Eadie) writing that...

The intent of each principle in opposing the other is to prevent man's doing what the other principle moves him to do.

The things which you will to do under the influence of either of the two contending principles. There is a mutual conflict of two powers. If one wills to do good, he is opposed by the flesh: if to do evil, by the Spirit. ([Word Studies in the New Testament](#))

Jamieson et al concur explaining that...

The Spirit strives against the flesh and its evil influence; the flesh against the Spirit and His good influence, so that neither the one nor the other can be fully carried out into action. ([Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D. A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory on the Old and New Testaments](#))

Arichea and **Nida** translate this clause in a way that favors interpretation #3...

For what we as human beings want to do is against what the Spirit of God wants us to do, and what the Spirit of God wants us to do is against what we as human beings want to do. ([The United Bible Societies' New Testament Handbook Series](#))

Levy writes that...

The sin nature blocks believers from doing good, while the Holy Spirit blocks them from doing evil in this ongoing warfare. (Levy, D. M. Guarding the Gospel of Grace: Contending for the Faith in the Face of Compromise. Bellmawr, New Jersey: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc)

Constable favors interpretation #3 writing...

We experience conflict whether we side with the Spirit against the flesh or with the flesh against the Spirit. The **things that you please** may be good or evil. It is impossible for us to remain neutral; we either follow one or the other. ([Galatians](#))

John Eadie favors interpretation #3 explaining that...

The phrase "**are in opposition to one another**" (*allelois antikeitai*) describes not only actual antagonism, but undecided result. It is true in the case of all who are born again, that the conflict ends in the victory of the spirit (Ed note: I favor the divine Spirit here); but the apostle here does not include the issue, he speaks only of the contest. So that the exegesis is preferable which includes both sides of the statement:

The spirit wrestles against your doing the things which ye would on the impulse of the flesh, and the flesh struggles against your doing the things which ye would on the impulse of the spirit.

In this case no inferred ethical notion is attached to thelete ("please" or "wish"), and the clause describes the nature of the contest between the flesh and the spirit. (Eadie)

So that ([2443](#)) (**hina**) expresses purpose or to the end that, here referring to the purpose of the two contending desires.

Do ([4160](#)) (**poieo**) means to accomplish. The **present tense** means to continually **do** those things that please self rather than pleasing God. The point is that while we are in these human bodies, there will continually be desires welling up from our fallen **flesh** nature to do what we want to do, rather than what God wants to do. Modern advertising has taken advantage of this spiritual principle - "Have it your way"... "You just go around once. Grab for all the gusto you can.", etc. The world system thus panders to and feeds our fallen **flesh** nature, and this is just as true for believers as for non-believers, for we both possess the evil **flesh** nature. To reiterate, the flesh is just as depraved in believers as it is in unbelievers and it will never get any better in this life. Don't be deceived in thinking it will improve or reform.

The things that you please - **A T Robertson** renders it "Whatever ye wish" (Ibid).

You please ([2309](#)) (**thelo**) means to will and implies volition and purpose and frequently a determination as in exercising one's will.

TDNT writes that **thelo**

also expresses resolve as free or weighed decision, sometimes with the idea of choice or preference, and religiously with the nuance of resolute willingness ([Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Eerdmans](#))

While there are clearly differences in the way this last clause of Galatians 5:17 is interpreted, the end point is the same - believers will experience a spiritual conflict, but they can experience victory because of the Holy Spirit. Conflict does not mean victory is not possible or attainable. Conflict is the "normal" Christian life. No conflict in fact raises the strong possibility that one is not even a true believer.

John Piper agrees with this assessment noting that...

The main thing to learn from this verse is that Christians experience a struggle within. If you said to yourself when I was describing the flesh, "Well, I have a lot of that still left in me," it does not necessarily mean you aren't a Christian. A Christian is not a person who experiences no bad desires. A Christian is a person who is at war with those desires by the power of the Spirit. Conflict in your soul is not all bad. Even though we long for the day when our flesh will be utterly defunct and only pure and loving desires will fill our hearts, yet there is something worse than the war within between flesh and Spirit—namely, no war within because the flesh controls the citadel and all the outposts. Praise God for the war within! Serenity in sin is death. The Spirit has landed to do battle with the flesh. So take heart if your soul feels like a battlefield at times. The sign of whether you are indwelt by the Spirit is not that you have no bad desires, but that you are at war with them!

But when you take Galatians 5:16 and 17 together the main point is not war, but victory for the Spirit. Galatians 5:16 says that when you walk by the Spirit, you will not let those bad desires come to maturity. When you walk

by the Spirit, you nip the desires of the flesh in the bud. New God-centered desires crowd out old man-centered desires. Galatians 5:16 promises victory over the desires of the flesh—not that there won't be a war, but that the winner of that war will be the Spirit. In fact, I think what Paul means in Gal 5:24-note, when he says the flesh has been crucified, is that the decisive battle has been fought and won by the Spirit. The Spirit has captured the capital and broken the back of the resistance movement. The flesh is as good as dead. Its doom is sure. But there are outlying pockets of resistance. The guerrillas of the flesh will not lay down their arms, and must be fought back daily. The only way to do it is by the Spirit, and that's what it means to walk by the Spirit—so live that he gives victory over the dwindling resistance movement of the flesh. So the first reason why we must walk by the Spirit is that when we do the flesh is conquered. (Read Dr Piper's entire message [The War Within: Flesh Vs. Spirit](#))

J Vernon McGee offers his insights on this verse noting that...

A transliteration of this verse will help convey the meaning: "For the flesh warreth against the Spirit, and the Spirit warreth against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" **that is, the things that the old nature wanted to do** (Ed note: thus McGee favors [interpretation #1](#) above) This is very important to see—the flesh wars against the Spirit, and the Spirit wars against the flesh.

A believer has a new nature. This is what our Lord said to Nicodemus when He said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). The believer still has that old nature of the flesh, and he won't get rid of it in this life. The idea that we can get rid of that old nature is a tragic mistake. John said,

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1John 1:8)

My friend, if the truth is not in you, then you must be a liar. That puts the "perfect" individual in the position of being a liar.

We have two natures—the old and the new. That is what Paul describes in the last part of Romans. He himself experienced the turmoil of two natures, and this has also been the experience of many believers. The flesh wars against the Spirit, and the Spirit wars against the flesh. Therefore, we cannot do the things that we would like to do. The new nature rebels against the old nature. They are contrary; they are at war with each other. Have you experienced this in your own life?

There is a song we sing entitled "Come Thou Fount" [play hymn](#) by Robert Robinson.

Come, Thou Fount of every blessing,
Tune my heart to sing Thy grace;
Streams of mercy, never ceasing,
Call for songs of loudest praise.

It is a wonderful hymn. In the last stanza are these words:

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;

After this song was written, someone looked at it and said, "That is not my experience—I'll change that." So in some hymnbooks we find these words:

Prone to worship, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to love the God I serve.

Which is true? Well, both are true. I have a nature that is prone to wander, prone to leave the God I love. There are times when this old nature of mine wants to wander away from the Lord! Have you had this experience? Also I have a new nature that is prone to worship the Lord. There are times when I am riding along alone in my car, and I just cry out to Him, "Oh, Lord, how wonderful You are! I love You and worship You." That is the expression of my new nature; my old nature never gets around to praising Him or loving Him. Every believer has an old and a new nature.

There are folk who say, "Well, I can't tell whether I am walking in the Spirit or not." Don't kid yourself about this. You can know. Paul has spelled it out here so that you cannot miss it. ([McGee, J. V.: Thru the Bible Commentary: Thomas Nelson](#)) (Or listen to Dr McGee's crusty but pithy comments on this [Mp3 of Galatians 5:17 - from Thru the Bible](#))

Believers are involved in a life long struggle between Spirit and the flesh: Gal 5:17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. ("flesh" in this context is not the body of flesh and blood which is itself "morally neutral". The problems is what's still resident in these bodies and which Paul often terms "flesh" in a moral sense which makes the point that you need to be very attentive to the **context** when doing "word studies" as the same word can have several different meanings. In the present context Paul uses "flesh" to describe what remains of the "**Old self (old man)**" (which every human being inherits from our father Adam - Ro 5:12-note) which still exists even after a person is saved [we can now say "no" to it]. **Flesh** relates to the moral and spiritual weakness and helplessness of human nature still clinging to redeemed souls. The **flesh** of Christians is their propensity to sin. Until then every believer has a redeemed self living in a mortal body that is dying and that creates great conflict. **Flesh** stands against the work of the Spirit in the believer's new heart. The unsaved person often regrets the sinful things he does because of guilt and/or painful consequences, but he has no spiritual warfare going on within him, because he has only a **fleshly nature** and is devoid of the Spirit. The sinful things he does, though often disappointing and disgusting to him, are nevertheless consistent with his basic nature [his "**Old self**"] as an enemy of God and a child of God's wrath. The "Old Self" or "Old Man" therefore has no real internal conflict beyond whatever conscience may remain in his sinful state. In the believer, the essential conflict is between the Old Covenant (Law) and the New Covenant which is manifest in reality as the struggle between the **flesh** and the Spirit. **Each of us is, in effect, a walking civil war.** The flesh continually wars against the Spirit within us.)

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Flesh lusts Against the Spirit Devotional by C H Spurgeon

In every believer's heart there is a constant struggle between the old nature and the new. The old nature is very active, and loses no opportunity of plying all the weapons of its deadly armoury against newborn grace; while on the other hand, the new nature is ever on the watch to resist and destroy its enemy. Grace within us will employ prayer, and faith, and hope, and love, to cast out the evil; it takes unto it the "whole armour of God," and wrestles earnestly. These two opposing natures will never cease to struggle so long as we are in this world. The battle of "Christian" with "Apollyon" lasted three hours, but the battle of Christian with himself lasted all the way from the Wicket Gate in the river Jordan. The enemy is so securely entrenched within us that he can never be driven out while we are in this body: but although we are closely beset, and often in sore conflict, we have an Almighty helper, even Jesus, the Captain of our salvation, who is ever with us, and who assures us that we shall eventually come off more than conquerors through him. With such assistance the new-born nature is more than a match for its foes. Are you fighting with the adversary to-day? Are Satan, the world, and the flesh, all against you? Be not discouraged nor dismayed. Fight on! For God himself is with you; Jehovah Nissi is your banner, and Jehovah Rophi is the healer of your wounds. Fear not, you shall overcome, for who can defeat Omnipotence? Fight on, "looking unto Jesus"; and though long and stern be the conflict, sweet will be the victory, and glorious the promised reward.

**From strength to strength go on;
Wrestle, and fight, and pray,
Tread all the powers of darkness down,
And win the well-fought day**

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Stanley Toussaint notes that...

A certain amount of confusion exists in the minds of many Christians concerning conflict in the spiritual life because they have equated Romans 7:13-24 with Galatians 5:16-23. Both of these passages obviously describe a conflict; however, it is important to see that the battles described are not the same. A failure to recognize this only leads to confusion and may even result in despairing frustration. It is the purpose of this article to mark out some of the distinctions between these two conflicts and then come to a few practical implications. (Toussaint, S.: Bibliotheca Sacra. Volume 123. Issue 492. Page 314. 1966)

To summarize Toussaint's arguments...

(1) The opponents are not identical -

Romans 7 - Conflict is between the old nature and the new man (assuming Romans 7 to be describing a Christian, a view that I agree with)

Galatians 5 - Conflict is primarily between the old nature and the Holy Spirit

(2) The description of the believer -

Romans 7 - The Christian attempts unsuccessfully to please God by living under law. The conflict of the believer takes place under law. The fault is not with the law, but with the Christian. Result is a life not pleasing to God.

Galatians 5 - The Christian has two alternatives - to live under or walk under law or grace. To walk under the law necessitates a walk by means of the flesh (cf Gal 3:2-3, 5, 4:29). To walk under (or in) grace is to walk by the Spirit. Result is a life pleasing to God.

(3) The outcome of the conflicts -

Romans 7 - Defeat is inevitable.

Galatians 5 - One may experience either defeat (under law, by the "strength" of the flesh, works of the flesh are the "fruit") or victory (under grace, by the Spirit, by faith, fruit of the Spirit).

(4) The nature of the conflict -

Romans 7 - Abnormal Christian experience

Galatians 5 - Normal Christian experience

Toussaint comments on points #3 and #4 above...

It is quite evident the battle in Galatians 5 is the normal experience of a believer, whether he is walking by means of the Spirit or by the flesh. If he walks by the Spirit, the flesh rises up to oppose the influence of the Third Person; if he walks under the control of the flesh, the Holy Spirit counteracts and attempts to bring the believer back under His sway. This conflict is portrayed as a usual one. This is not the case in the last half of Romans 7. The pitiful cry, "Who shall deliver me...?" and the constant failure to produce fruit for God prove the point. A Christian is not to be characterized by such defeat and lack of fruit...

Legalism only bears frustration, sham, and failure. The life that is pleasing to God is the one that is centered in Christ by faith. Law hypocritically may produce outward imitation, but the genuine fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22, 23 is found only in the grace method of living. It never results from law-works...

In Romans 7:13-24 there is no mention of faith and consequently there is no reference to the work of the Holy Spirit. Of course defeat is the consequence of such a situation. However, the case in Galatians 5 is different. The outcome is left to the believer. He must decide (Ed note: Even here God gives us the "want to" to decide for the Spirit as taught in Php 2:13- note). On the one hand, there is the force of the sin nature and, on the other hand, the power of the Holy Spirit. It is in the domain of each individual Christian to decide which is vanquished and which rules. He may walk by flesh under law or he may walk in the infinite power of the Holy Spirit by faith under grace.

To every Christian there are two alternatives. These passages clearly point out the fact the believer is called upon to be decisive and constant in drawing upon all of the resources of Christ in order to know God's victory in his day-by-day walk. This is the message of Romans 7:13-25 by implication and of Galatians 5:16-23 by direct declaration. ([Toussaint, S.: Bibliotheca Sacra. Volume 123. Issue 492. Page 314. 1966 - Annual \\$ required but give access to thousands of articles](#))

Ray Pritchard explains the struggle in **Galatians 5:17** this way...

Many Christians prefer not to hear this truth because they want a Christianity that proclaims "all victory all the time." They want a guarantee that all their problems will be solved if they will follow the right formula. But that is not realistic nor is it biblical. We are to fight the good fight of faith, putting on the whole armor of God, standing in the evil day, and enduring hardship as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. Verse 17 is abundantly clear in this regard. Two principles are at war within us. One is called "flesh." The other is called "the Spirit." These two principles are in constant, unrelenting, unremitting antagonism to each other. They are constantly at war with each other. The flesh is Paul's term for the depraved nature inside all of us by virtue of our physical descent from Adam. That depraved nature is hostile to God, selfish, and utterly evil. When we come to Christ, we become new creations by virtue of the Holy Spirit who comes to live within us. Even though the dominating power of the flesh is broken, the pull of evil remains with us. As one writer put it, evil desires arise from the flesh like smoke from a chimney. To say it another way, flesh is what we are by natural birth; the Spirit comes to us by our spiritual birth.

I draw several conclusions from this:

- a) Flesh and the Spirit are fundamentally opposite. They do not and cannot cooperate.
- b) The conflict between our flesh and the Spirit is continual and inevitable.
- c) That conflict produces conflicting desires in the believer...

As a lost person, you sin because that's your nature. As a Christian, you have a new nature that pulls you toward God while the flesh remains with you until you die. In one sense, Christians have conflicts the unsaved never know about. Our rewards are great but so are our struggles. We ought to praise God for the war within. The deadly feud between flesh and Spirit is one sign that we are the children of God.

Do you desire to be holy? Do you want to please the Lord? Is there a hunger in your heart to know Jesus and to love him? Do you desire to live a higher and better life even though you cannot seem to attain it?

If you answer yes, that is strong evidence you are born again. Despite your personal failings, do you truly want to do what God wants you to do? Then you may rest in the knowledge that you are a child of God. Your struggle with sin is proof of your divine heritage. If sin is a burden, at least it is a burden and not a joy. If you can swear and hate and steal and mock and lust and think all sorts of foul thoughts and speak harsh words, if you can do that and feel nothing, then you are truly without hope in the world...

No one escapes the conflict.

No one can avoid the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit.

No one gets a Christian life free from outward pressure and inward turmoil.

And there is no second blessing or spiritual experience that can magically propel you to a state where you no longer struggle with sin. That won't happen until we finally get to heaven. Between now and then, we walk the hard road to glory, fighting every day to stay on the right path.

It's crucial to remember that God allows the struggle as part of our ongoing spiritual growth. Strange as it may seem, we need to struggle because that's the only way we can grow in grace. Here are a few benefits to consider:

It reveals to us our inherent weakness.

It kills our pride and arrogance.

It humbles us again and again.

It forces us to cry out to God for help.

It reveals the uselessness of human effort apart from God's strength.

It teaches us to rely on the Lord alone.

It causes us to love the Savior Who delivers us from sin.

It leads us to a life of continual repentance.

It makes us more watchful against the encroachment of sin.

It makes us long for the rest of heaven.

It prods us to use all the means of divine grace.

It encourages us to develop habits of holiness.

It forces us to lean on our brothers and sisters to help us out.

It leads us to look for daily solutions instead of instant miracles.

[\(Galatians 5:16-18 Full Speed Ahead One Step at a Time: How You Can Walk in the Spirit\)](#) (Color added for emphasis)

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Why we still want to do the things we should not do...

Several years ago we had a pet raccoon we called Jason. For hours he would entertain us by wrestling with our dog, MacTavish, a kind and gentle Scottish terrier. Jason, on the other hand, was a kind of schizoid terror. One minute he would snuggle up on your lap like a perfect angel and the next he'd be engaged in the most fiendish antics. If unrestrained, he would breakfast on dove eggs, raid the garbage can, or tear up the flowerbed. Although he was a delightful pet, we became increasingly aware that his destructive actions were governed by his wild instincts. Jason would always have the nature of a raccoon, and we had to watch him closely no matter how tame he seemed to be.

Often when I observed Jason's behavior, I thought of the fallen, sinful nature that we as Christians retain even though we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Paul referred to this as the "flesh" in which "nothing good dwells" (Ro 7:18). It may be repressed and restrained, but it is always there. Unless we are daily controlled by the Lord, our old "self" will demonstrate its destructive, pleasure-seeking capacity in some way or another.

Although we are new creatures in Christ, we still possess a tendency to sin. But we need not be governed by it, for we are united to Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. By obeying God's Word and yielding to the Spirit, we can be victorious over the flesh—the "nature of the beast" within. —M. R. De Haan II ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

The secret of self-control is to give control of ourselves to God.

Galatians 5:18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (NASB: Lockman)

Greek: [ei de pneumati hagesthe](#), (2PPPI) [ouk este](#) (2PPAI) [hupo nomon](#).

Amplified: But if you are guided (led) by the [Holy] Spirit, you are not subject to the Law. ([Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))

KJV: But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

NLT: But when you are directed by the Holy Spirit, you are no longer subject to the law. ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

Phillips: But if you follow the leading of the Spirit, you stand clear of the Law ([Phillips: Touchstone](#))

Way: But if you definitely surrender yourselves to the Spirit's guidance, you are then not under the law, but on a higher plane."

Weymouth: But if the Spirit is leading you, you are not subject to Law.

Wuest: But if you are being led by the Spirit you are not under law. (Eerdmans)

Young's Literal: and if by the Spirit ye are led, ye are not under law.

BUT IF YOU ARE LED BY THE SPIRIT, YOU ARE NOT UNDER THE LAW: ei de pneumati hagesthe, (2PPPI) ouk este (2PPAI) hupo nomon:

- Gal 5:16,25; 4:6; Psalms 25:4,5,8,9; 143:8, 9, 10; Proverbs 8:20; Isaiah 48:16, 17, 18; Ezekiel 36:27; John 16:13; Romans 8:12,14; 2 Timothy 1:7; 1 John 2:20-27
- Gal 4:5; Romans 6:14,15
- Listen to J Vernon McGee's comments from Thru the Bible - [Galatians 5:18-21 - Mp3](#))

But (see term of contrast) - This introduces a thought which contrasts with the impotence of the will (which is the idea conveyed by Paul's statement that "*you may not do the things that you please* [the things that you will {that you desire} to do]"). The idea is **but**, in contrast, where "the Spirit" prevails, the outcome of the struggle is no longer in doubt. You can do that which you will, because it is the Spirit in you Who gives you the desire to do that will and energizes you to be able to follow through and be pleasing to your Father Who is in heaven.

If - Means that it is not in question but that it is true that the Holy Spirit leads believers in their spiritual walk -- If you give yourselves up to be led. How do you know if you are being led by the Spirit? Paul makes this easy to assess -- just "drop the plumbline" of Galatians 5:19-23 and it will be obvious who you are choosing to submit to... either the wishes of the fallen flesh or the wishes of the Spirit! Walking in the Spirit, being led by the Spirit is not a mysterious or mystical experience reserved for a few pietistic saints who

have "figured it all out", but is God's desire for all His precious children to experience practically in their daily lives. **Are you experiencing this wonderful freedom in Christ empowered by His Spirit? You can. It is God's will for your life. He desires for you to know the Truth about walking by the Spirit so that the Truth might set you free and you might be free indeed! All glory to God in the Highest!**

F B Meyer adds that...

It is always possible to go back and to fall under the tyrannous power of the evil self principle, the flesh, either in its more debased or refined form (**Ed note:** Remember that "Flesh" can put on a deceptive "religious" cloak which appears polished, polite and pious but is not in the least pleasing to God); but as long as we are **led by the Spirit**, live in the Spirit, and **walk in the Spirit**, He energizes against the flesh, keeping it in the place of death, and allowing the life of Christ to work freely.

In Christian ethics there must be, first, a definite willingness to surrender ourselves to His death.

Secondly, there must be a perpetual yielding to the indwelling grace and power of the Holy Spirit. He will deal with the self-life in the deep abysses of your nature.

When the antiseptic influence of carbolic acid is in the atmosphere it counteracts the microbes of disease, so that they cannot do as otherwise they would in infecting healthy bodies with disease. An eminent surgeon told me the other day that he was accustomed to boil his operating instruments in antiseptic mixture, that they might not carry microbes to the open wounds. Oh that those of us who are used as instruments by God would take heed!

When the baleful effect of the self-life is arrested, the fruit of the Spirit appears naturally and easily. Note the distinction between work, in which there is effort, and fruit, which swells so imperceptibly and silently on the branch-pressed out from within. Each of the aspects of the fruit is a variation of the first, which is **love**. **Joy** is love on wings; **peace**, love with the wings folded; **long-suffering**, love in the sick-room; **goodness**, love in business; **meekness**, love in society; **self-control**, love in the regimen of habit for the sake of others. (Adapted from Meyer, F. B. Our Daily Homily)

Are led by the Spirit - Most observers agree that this phrase is synonymous with **walk by the Spirit** (see note Galatians 5:16). In verse 16 Paul commands us to **walk**, and the **active voice** indicates we must each make a choice to carry out this command (empowered by grace, not law). Here in verse 18, **are led** is in the present tense which conveys the idea that we are continually being led by the Spirit. The passive voice (so called "Divine passive") indicates that this action is exerted on believers from a force outside themselves (another Source, here clearly the Spirit Who indwells every believer but is "outside" in the sense that He is a separate and distinct Entity). While led is in the passive voice, believers are not to be passive but must still willingly submit themselves to the Spirit's leading. Therefore, in practical terms, leading by the Spirit is a "passive/active" relationship. The Spirit takes the initiative, as is typical of God's grace (and our need - He always takes the initiative), but we must actively choose to stand with Him against the flesh and follow His direction.

In Romans Paul explains who those are who would be willing to continually give themselves up to **be led by the Spirit** writing...

For all who are **being** (present tense - continually, as a general habit of their life) **led** by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. (See note Romans 8:14) (Comment: It follows that if you are not ever led by the Spirit, you are not

Richison comments that...

Some teach that spirituality is a passive submission to the Spirit. No, it is a life of active faith in the power of the Spirit. The Christian life is a life of spiritual mortal combat. We combat our sin capacity by walking in the Spirit. This makes spiritual victory possible for we operate in the Spirit's power, not our own.

The more the believer says "no" to sin the easier it is to say "no." When it becomes a habit, we gain momentum in victory over sin. ([Verse by Verse Commentary](#)) (**Comment:** But in this process of working out our salvation, how do we say "no"? Is it not that even here, the Spirit gives us the desire and power to say "no" to the flesh? I would say that the more we say **"Yes"** to God, to Jesus, to the Spirit, to His Holy Word [learning how to "walk"... by the Spirit], the easier it becomes to say **"No"** to the flesh. We must never lose sight of our continual need to depend on the Spirit and surrender to His will as revealed in His Word. See Wayne Barber's [note below](#) and also John Piper's "Five Steps Toward Walking by the Spirit")

Richison concludes that...

The Christian lives by **intrinsic**, not extrinsic, power. He does not live by pulling on the bootstraps of self-effort

(Ed note: or by keeping rules). He lives under the power of the Holy Spirit when he walks in the Spirit. ([Verse by Verse Commentary](#))

John Piper explains being **led by the Spirit** by asking...

First, what is this **walking by the Spirit**? There are two other images in the context which shed light on the meaning of "**walk by the Spirit**." The first is in Gal 5:18 "If you are led by the Spirit you are not under law."

If Paul had said, "If you follow the Spirit you are not under law," it would have been true, but in using the **passive voice** ("If you are led") he emphasizes the Spirit's work, not ours. The Spirit is not a leader like the pace car in the "Daytona 500." He is a leader like a locomotive on a train. We do not follow in our strength. We are led by His power. So "**walk by the Spirit**" means stay hooked up to the divine source of power and go wherever He leads.

The second image of our walk in the Spirit is in Gal 5:22: The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, etc.

If our Christian walk is to be a walk of love and joy and peace, then "**walk by the Spirit**" must mean "**bear the fruit of the Spirit**." But again, the Spirit's work is emphasized, not ours. He bears the fruit. Perhaps Paul got this image from Jesus. You recall John 15:4, 5: "Abide in me, and I in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit."

So "**walk by the Spirit**" means "abide in the vine." Keep yourself securely united to the living Christ. Don't cut yourself off from the flow of the Spirit.

So in answer to our first question—What is this walking by the Spirit?—we answer: it is "being led by the Spirit" and it is "bearing the fruit of the Spirit." The work of the Spirit is emphasized, yet the command is for us to do something. Our wills are deeply involved. We **must want** to be coupled to the locomotive. We **must want** to abide in the vine.

S Lewis Johnson writes that...

The opening clause of this verse ("*if you are led by the Spirit*")... expresses an assumption, confirmed by other passages in the New Testament. All believers are **led of the Spirit**; it is their birthright (cf. Ro 8:14-note). They are, therefore, not under the Law, which spells defeat, bondage, and spiritual impotence. Hendriksen defines the leading of the Spirit in this way,

"It is that constant, effective, and beneficent influence which the Holy Spirit exercises within the hearts of God's children whereby they are being directed and enabled more and more to crush the power of indwelling sin and to walk in the way of God's commandments, freely and cheerfully."

It is more than simply being guided: it means that He becomes the controlling influence of the believer's life. Life by the Spirit is for Paul the **third way of life**, distinct from **life under the Law** and **life in license**.

"It is by no means a middle course between them," Burton says, "but a highway above them both, a life of freedom from statutes, of faith and love."

Success, then, in the Christian life is dependent upon the work of Christ, by which we are brought under the direction of the Holy Spirit Who indwells all believers, the constant working of the Spirit in the believer's life, and the response in faith of the believer (cf. Php 2:12; 13-notes Php 2:12; 13), a faith wrought also by God.

Those who are led of the Spirit love the Word of God (cf. Psalm 119:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11ff), learn to obey God's precepts with gladness of heart through grace (cf. John 13:34; John 14:15, John 14:21; John 15:10, etc.), and begin to see the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. ([Galatians 5:13-26 Life by the Spirit](#)) ([Listen to Dr Johnson's doctrinally rich Mp3 Message](#)) (Bolding added for emphasis)

Wayne Barber explains that this section of Galatians 5 "is the clearest picture of what Paul is trying to say in Romans 8:14. You say I want to put to death the deeds of body...Sin is controlling my life. How do I do it? You put yourself in the presence of God, the Spirit Who lives within you. You get into His Word. And you let Him rule and reign - you do whatever He says.

YES, LORD

not

YES, BUT...

Wayne tells about the little sign he had in his study "**YES, LORD**." And that settles it. It's yea, but...So the Lord speaks and He says

"Wayne...don't watch that program." And Wayne says "Yes, but..." Look out. Our answer needs to be "Yes" to the Spirit leading us. Just say "Yes" to what the Spirit of God says to your heart and you develop that SENSITIVITY as you walk with Him.

How Slow I Wake!
Sweet will of God! How slow I wake
To hear your quiet word
That tells my inner man to go,
Uproot, depart, to leave my ways.
But I arise. I stand to find
Your Perfect way. And ah,
My heart, long trembling, now is still.
Sweet Spirit, Guide, I go to do Your will.

Richison comments that...

Some teach that spirituality is a passive submission to the Spirit. No, it is a life of active faith in the power of the Spirit. The Christian life is a life of spiritual mortal combat. We combat our sin capacity by walking in the Spirit. This makes spiritual victory possible for we operate in the Spirit's power, not our own. The more the believer says "no" to sin the easier it is to say "no." When it becomes a habit, we gain momentum in victory over sin. ([Verse by Verse Commentary](#))

Comment: I would add that the more we say **Yes** to God, to Jesus, to the Spirit, to His Holy Word [learning how to "walk"... by the Spirit], the easier it becomes to say **No** to the flesh. We must not lose sight of our continual need to depend on the Lord and surrender to His will revealed in His Word. See also **John Piper's "Five Steps Toward Walking by the Spirit"**

Not under the Law - The Greek word for "**not**" is "**ou**" which is the stronger Greek negative (stronger than the other negative "me") indicating that there is absolutely no way you are under the law. What a blessed promise this is - but it is "conditional" in the sense that we must willingly, lovingly submit as an act of faith to the Spirit in order not to be subject to the law, the law being the "atmosphere" in which the fallen flesh flourishes. In Romans 7 Paul explained that the law (there he referred to the Mosaic law, but the principle applies to any law, rule or regulation which one chooses to place themselves under) writing...

For while we were in the flesh (NLT = "our old nature", NIV = "the sinful nature" - Paul is describing our condition when we were unbelievers - the only thing that controlled us was the sinful nature. There was no conflict like that which is seen in believers between the flesh and the Spirit), the sinful passions, which were *aroused* by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. **Comment:** Although Paul is describing the effect of the Law on an unbeliever, the law still has the same effect on our old nature, the flesh, and that effect is to stir it up and arouse it or as noted above provide the "atmosphere" in which it is activated and thrives. Beware of making rules or regulations in an attempt to "clean up" your old nature -- it simply will not work. Not now. Not ever. The flesh is incorrigible and is aroused when we begin to try to make ourselves pleasing to God by keeping rules, etc. We please God when we walk in His Spirit, led by His Spirit.) (See **note** Romans 7:5)

Remember that there are three ways to live - under the Law, without Law, by the Author of the Law.

Calvin distinguished between the **directing capacity** of the law and the **penalty** of the law. Its directing capacity remains, but grace frees us from the penalty.

Lewis comments in regard to the phrase **not under the law** that...

We might have expected Paul to say here, "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the **flesh**." But by saying, "you are not under the **law**," Paul is equating the Law with the flesh. The ordinances of the Law were works of the flesh - a religious system of self-effort seeking to attain self-righteousness. ([Galatians 5 13-23 Life by the Spirit...](#))

Vincent agrees writing that "We might have expected, from what precedes (that Paul would write) **under the flesh**. But the **law** and the **flesh** are in the same category. Circumcision was a requirement of the law, and was a work of the flesh. The ordinances of the law were ordinances of the flesh (He 9:10, 13-see **notes** He 9:10; 13); the law was weak through the flesh (Ro 8:3-note). See especially, Gal 3:1, 2, 3, 4, 5. In Php 3:3, 4, 5ff (notes) Paul explains his grounds for confidence in the flesh as his legal righteousness. The whole legal economy was an economy of the flesh as distinguished from the Spirit. ([Word Studies in the New Testament](#))

Spurgeon - The Spirit never brings the soul into bondage. The terrors and the fears that come of legal slavery are not the work of the Spirit of God. Where He works, holiness is delight and the service of God is a continual joy. Oh, that we may be thus led by the Spirit! **The law** is ever to you the blessed rule by which you judge your conduct, but it is not a law of condemnation to you, neither are you seeking salvation by it.

Recall the problem that had crept into the Galatian churches, as emphasized by Paul's rhetorical questions in chapter 3...

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit (thus he acknowledges that they are believers), are you now **being perfected** by the **flesh**? (Galatians 3:2, 3)

Comment: The Galatians like every believer had begun their Christian life by receiving the Spirit, but then they had begun resorting to the law to accomplish the spiritual life that only the Spirit was capable of fulfilling, for He is the only Source of power to love in a way that gives us true freedom and fulfills the whole law which keeps us from biting and devouring one another as Paul had warned in Galatians 5:13, 14, 15]. And so the reiteration of the believer's need to surrender to our Guide, the Spirit, Who alone can lead us into the freedom into which we have been called in Christ Jesus.

You are not under the law - Being led by the Spirit or operating under the law are mutually exclusive. It is one or the other, but never both. If a Christian operates by the law, he must operate by the flesh (Ro 7:8, 9, 10, 11 -see notes Ro 7:8; 9; 10; 11). In contrast, when you allow yourself to be led by the Spirit, you are not producing the works of the flesh which bring you under the law. You are not living your lives on the principle of legalism or law keeping (like making a list of "do's and don't's" - **Listen to Ray Stedman's excellent explanation of the subtle nature of legalism** - [click here to download the Mp3](#) - hint right click and select **Save Target As** and then you can listen on your Ipod). Most take **the law** as referring to the Jewish law but since the definite article is lacking others take **law** as a more general reference referring to any law whether Jewish or Gentile.

In Romans **Paul** wrote that

sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are **not under law** but **under grace** (see **note** Romans 6:14).

Richison emphasizes that "grace supersedes the Mosaic law for the law is a system of gaining God's favor by "operation bootstraps" (living the Christian life by self effort). There is a double antagonism in this section of Galatians: The Holy Spirit versus the flesh, and the Holy Spirit versus the law. The law is the outward conduct of men in an attempt to please God by human effort. The leading of the Spirit is the sphere where the Holy Spirit does His work in the life of the believer. The Galatians failed to live the Christian life because they depended on themselves rather than the Holy Spirit to live the Christian life.

Steve Zeisler adds that "The apostle is not here advocating a series of rules and checks by which we can ensure that our days will be filled with the Spirit of God. He is talking about an adventure, a living walk with a real Person, One Whom we speak with and listen to. As we walk we give that living Person, that Spirit, access to our lives. (See his entire sermon [Fight the Good Fight](#))

Ray Stedman answers the question of "**How can we recognize legalism?**" by explaining that...

We must first understand that since legality is basically false Christianity, then you can never recognize the false unless you understand the true. That is where I want to start. What is real Christianity? What is Christianity as the Scriptures set it forth -- true Spirit-filled living? Let me attempt a definition:

True Christianity is to manifest genuinely Christ-like behavior by dependence on the working of the Spirit of God within, motivated by a love for the glory and honor of God.

That is the genuine article. You will notice that it has three essential elements, and without all three it becomes legality. If it fails in even one point it is nothing but legality:

(1) First, there is an expected pattern of behavior. There is a law, if you like, a code, to which we are expected to conform.

Many Christians make the mistake of thinking that to be free from legalism you must become free from any law whatsoever. Nothing is further from the truth. The Scriptures never endorse that notion. I know that we sing,

Free from the Law, O happy condition

Jesus hath bled, and there is remission,

but what we are talking about is not freedom from the Law but freedom from the curse of the Law (Ed note: In other words, the law cannot condemn Christians because Christ has fully paid the penalty of the law). That is something quite different.

There always must be law. This is a law-governed universe because the law reflects the character of God. God Himself is reality. God is behind all things, and His character is the law which governs everything. Therefore Christians must always be related to law -- the law of the character of Christ, of the law of the Ten Commandments -- it is the same thing. The Ten Commandments simply describe the nature of God's character. So true Christianity isn't freedom from the existence of law. There is always a standard, always a code of conduct to be observed. That is essential. But be careful what the standard is! You can go wrong selecting the law. You can be legalistic in the standard you have set.

(2) The second necessary element is a sufficient and adequate power. That is absolutely essential to true Christianity. The whole glory of the gospel comes in right at this point. The good news is that God has given us a sufficient and adequate power, indwelling us, available to us at all times, so that we never have an excuse for not being what we ought to be. In the Spirit of Jesus Christ, indwelling us, we have what it takes -- a sufficient and adequate power.

(3) The third essential is a motive which moves us to action -- a powerful, compelling hunger for the glory of God, an urge that God be honored and glorified.

If I can put all the foregoing in another way, the true Christian life is fulfilling a law by means of a unique power because of an overwhelming desire.

It requires: An outward standard or code of behavior, an inward power which makes it possible to meet it, and a motive which drives us on to do so.

But it takes all three. You cannot manifest genuine Christianity without all three. If it fails at any one point it immediately becomes legality. The other two can be perfect and yet it still will be legality. You can go wrong at any one of three places. (It is recommended that you read Dr Stedman's entire messages on [Legalism](#)) or ([click here to download the Mp3](#) - hint right click and select **Save Target As** and then you can listen on your Ipod)

A similar truth about the believers freedom in Christ is presented in Romans 8 where Paul states that...

the law (principle) of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law (principle) of sin and of death (see **note** Romans 8:2)

In this Romans 8 passage Paul is telling us that even in the face of an unceasing internal spiritual war, victory is possible because of the presence of the Holy Spirit indwelling every believer and energizing our new inner man for victory over the sin and the flesh. Hallelujah! The **war** will continue, but victory can be ours in the individual **battles** that are being waged in our mind and heart daily and even moment by moment.

Wuest explains that...

The Galatians were still trying to live Christian lives, but they were going about it in the wrong way, with the result that they were failing. The entrance of these new factors (Ed note: laws, self effort) meant that the Spirit had no opportunity to minister to their spiritual lives. The mechanical set-up of spiritual machinery which God had installed, had become ineffective by reason of the monkey-wrench of self-dependence which the Galatians had thrown into it...

The Spirit and **the law** are here contrasted, and are shown to be methods of living a Christian life that are diametrically opposed to one another. **The law** is not only no safeguard against the flesh, but rather provokes it to more sin (Ed note: see preceding discussion on Ro 7:5-[note](#)). Therefore, the believer who would renounce the **flesh**, must renounce the law also. Thus, the **flesh** and the law are closely allied, whereas the **flesh** and the Spirit are diametrically opposed to one another.

Again, **the law** finds nothing to condemn in the life of the person who is **led by the Spirit**, for that person checks every wrong desire which is brought to him by the evil nature, and so he fulfills the law (**Ed note:** Thus Paul states that in regard to the "fruit of the Spirit" - "against such things there is no law" Gal 5:23-note). This is the blessed moral freedom of the person who is **led by the Spirit**. He is in such a condition of moral and spiritual life that the law has no power to censure, condemn, nor punish him. This is the true moral freedom from the law to which Paul refers (Ro 8:1; 8:2; 8:3; 8:4 see **notes** Ro 8:1; 8:2; 8:3; 8:4). ([Galatians Commentary - Verse by Verse](#))

Spurgeon notes that...

The Spirit never brings the soul into bondage, the terrors and the fears which come of legal slavery are not the work of the Spirit of God. Where He works, holiness is delight, and the service of God is a continual joy. Oh, that we may be thus **led of the Spirit!**

I like what **Martin Luther** wrote regarding our spiritual struggle...

When the flesh begins to cut up, the only remedy is to take the sword of the Spirit, the Word of salvation, and fight against the flesh. If you set the Word out of sight, you are helpless against the flesh. I know this to be a fact. I have been assailed by many violent passions, but as soon as I took hold of some Scripture passage, my temptations left me. Without the Word I could not have helped myself against the flesh. (**Ed note:** But be cautious even here because the "flesh" can memorize Scripture as Stedman alluded to in his insightful comments - [See Stedman's note](#))

Devotional by **C H Spurgeon** Led by the Spirit

We who look at his own character and position from a legal point of view, will not only despair when he comes to the end of his reckoning, but if he be a wise man he will despair at the beginning; for if we are to be judged on the footing of the law, there shall no flesh living be justified. How blessed to know that we dwell in the domains of grace and not of law! When thinking of my state before God the question is not, "Am I perfect in myself before the law?" but, "Am I perfect in Christ Jesus?" That is a very different matter. We need not enquire, "Am I without sin naturally?" but, "Have I been washed in the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness?" It is not "Am I in myself well pleasing to God?" but it is "Am I accepted in the Beloved?" The Christian views his evidences from the top of Sinai, and grows alarmed concerning his salvation; it were better far if he read his title by the light of Calvary. "Why," saith he, "my faith has unbelief in it, it is not able to save me." Suppose he had considered the object of his faith instead of his faith, then he would have said, "There is no failure in him, and therefore I am safe." He sighs over his hope: "Ah! my hope is marred and dimmed by an anxious carefulness about present things; how can I be accepted?" Had he regarded the ground of his hope, he would have seen that the promise of God standeth sure, and that whatever our doubts may be, the oath and promise never fail. Ah! believer, it is safer always for you to be led of the Spirit into gospel liberty than to wear legal fetters. Judge yourself at what Christ is rather than at what you are. Satan will try to mar your peace by reminding you of your sinfulness and imperfections: you can only meet his accusations by faithfully adhering to the gospel and refusing to wear the yoke of bondage.