

Fight The Good Fight

by Steve Zeisler

One of the first things I did when I came to Christ was read the New Testament. Someone had given me a copy of a modern English paraphrase of the New Testament-- a largely unfamiliar book to me-- and I was so excited I began to read it immediately.

There were two points of recognition for me in the New Testament. At various places in the gospels, a story, a parable or a saying of Jesus which I had heard as a child in Sunday School came back to me. The second point of recognition was verse 15 of Romans 7. I remember being gripped by what that verse said. I felt I understood what the apostle meant when he said, 'For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.' I recognized within myself the same conflict: I wanted to do what was right, I longed to act in a righteous manner both in my behavior and in my thinking, yet I realized that I failed with distressing regularity. I did not really understand the rest of Romans or much of the rest of the Bible-- after 20 years I am still in the process of learning to understand it-- yet I immediately recognized the conflict, the predicament that sensitive human beings are constantly faced with: they often want to do what is right, yet they find themselves consistently failing to do so.

Non-- Christians, even people who don't believe in the existence of God, find that the biblical description of the human predicament resonates with truth. The Bible tells us more clearly and more helpfully than any other source what is wrong with us, why we are in the mess we are in, why the same problems occur over and over again. The Scriptures declare that man is the crown of creation. We are imprinted with the image of God. Further, despite the Fall, that image has not been done away with. We retain a broken form of the image of God. We are not wholly wicked: rather, what we are is wholly flawed, wholly twisted. We carry with us wherever we go a tendency to decay and perversion so that everything we touch eventually disintegrates. The best ideas, the loveliest people, the strongest hopes all rise for a moment, but they are always dragged back down again. The human race never gives in totally to despair, but we are endlessly disappointed: we can never quite attain the heights we aspire to. This principle of rebellion within us that causes us to ruin all we contact is termed 'the flesh' in Scripture.

In our study in the book of Galatians we have seen that the early chapters deal mainly with our relationship with the law of God. The law is holy and righteous and good; it is an expression of the character of God himself. The law was given to us to humiliate us, to break us so that we would cry out for mercy and thus come to know God. But, because of the flesh within us, humanity has taken the law of God and used it as a staging ground for pride. Mankind has said to God, 'We can do what you demand of us without any help from you.' As a result, the perfect law of God became perverted by the pride, by the flesh of man. Rather than correcting the evil of man, the law instead became a system that masked human evil, a system that enslaved us so that we are inhibited and self-destructive. In other words, the law is good, but the flesh attaches itself to the law and ruins it. That is Paul's argument in Galatians. That argument reaches a crescendo in chapter 5 of the book, in the words of the first verse of that chapter:

It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.

Having been perverted by the flesh, the law has ruined lives by creating a false religion. 'It was for freedom that Christ set us free,' is the apostle's call.

Now we come to the revolting development of verse 13 of chapter 5:

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

Freedom, he is saying, is the option to fleshly religion (man's pride trying to keep the law of God). Here we learn that the flesh can ruin freedom too. Not only the law, therefore, but freedom also can be ruined by our rebel nature, so that if we try to carry out the call to freedom in the flesh we end up with a kind of license that degrades us and destroys relationships. You will not have to think very long to come up with examples of freedom misused. Some of the most violent people in history have called themselves 'freedom fighters.' Man, in the name of freedom, is capable of all kinds of debauchery. We may think we are living in freedom, but what we are doing is degrading ourselves. Thus Paul says that not only the law but the call to freedom can become destructive if we do not recognize the power and the activity of the flesh, of our rebel nature.

Galatians 5:13-24:

For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh but through love serve one another. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envyings, drunkenness, carousings, and things like these [as if that list was not long enough], of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

The essential declaration of this paragraph is verse 17: 'The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh.' Before you became a Christian you may have been told that by coming to Christ your life would be made easy, your prosperity would be guaranteed. That's a lie. The Christian life is filled with conflict.

More frequently taught is the notion that a second blessing: joining a particular organization, attending a Bible School, speaking in tongues, marrying a Christian, etc. will catapult an ordinary Christian onto spiritual 'easy street.' That too is a lie. The Christian life is filled with conflict. Admittedly it is a different kind of conflict than we experienced before we became Christians, but it is foolish to imagine that we can somehow become free of conflict.

The truth of the matter, as Paul declares in verse 17, is that you cannot do what you want: 'For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.'

The conflict goes on within you, so that you are not free to do whatever you want. Before he sinned, Adam was free to do whatever he wanted. Imagine what it must have been like to awaken every morning and, with one minor prohibition, to be free to do anything that pleased you; that whatever you longed to do, the very desires that arose from deep within your heart, were always good; that the things you were attracted to were the very things that God found attractive. That was true of Adam. He never once had to check an impulse. He did not have to be hard on himself. He did not have to evaluate constantly. He did not need brothers and sisters around him to help him judge his motives. He was free to do whatever he wished.

But Paul says we are not. We cannot proceed on automatic pilot. We cannot assume that whatever occurs to us to do is proper. There is a conflict going on inside us. We must be willing to judge our thoughts, to ask ourselves hard questions, to obey when we do not feel like obeying, to be called to account by other people. 'I buffet my body and make it my slave,' Paul declares in 1 Corinthians. 'I don't trust my body. I don't assume that my body is going to take me where I ought to go, so I am hard on it because I want to be a man who follows the Spirit of God.' 'I take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,' he says in 2 Corinthians. He does not assume his mind is going to work righteously all the time. His thoughts need to be captured. We

must be willing to think what is right, to evaluate and not assume we can carry on with whatever occurs to us.

Three phrases gather up the wisdom of this passage about living with that conflict. The first of these phrases is in verse 13: 'Serve one another through love'; the second is in verse 16: 'Walk by the Spirit'; while the third is in verse 19: 'The deeds of the flesh are evident.' There is a great deal of exciting truth here, more than we have time to comment on. Let us see what examining these three phrases does for us.

'Serve one another through love.' That is, do not let your freedom become another staging ground for the flesh so that everything is ruined. As an alternative to that, serve one another through love. Most Christians here are familiar with, or at least have heard of, the Greek word 'agape.' 'Agape': the great love of Christ, the love commanded to Christians. What stands out about this term is that it describes selfless love. As we demonstrate agape love we increasingly realize, 'It does not matter whether an action does me good or not. I'm not going to measure the effects on my reputation. Neither the cost nor benefit to myself concern me.' That, the apostle declares, is the way to keep freedom from being fleshly: by committing ourselves to serve one another in 'agape' love.

Jesus said that at the judgment day many will say to him, 'Lord, when did we see you naked and clothe you, when in prison and visit you?.' He will respond, 'When you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.' Acts of love carried out without the expectation of blessing_ not highlighted by self- interest, but long forgotten- are received by the Lord as acts of love for him.

Love includes both motives and actions. In I Corinthians 13, the great apostolic poem about love. Paul says, 'If I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love it profits me nothing.' However great an act of service I do if it is done with selfish motives, if it is done for applause or the praise of men, it profits me nothing. If I deliver my body to be burned, if I become a martyr for Christ but in doing so deliberately parade my righteousness before God or men, it profits me nothing. Service through love is what Paul is advocating here. We must stop thinking of ourselves and proceed to lay down our lives for others. That is the alternative to letting our freedom become captive of the flesh.

Verse 15 talks about what happens if we let freedom be taken over by the flesh: 'You bite and devour one another, take care lest you become consumed by one another.' This is an angry demanding of rights: 'My freedom deserves the best treatment, whatever it costs you, however much it hurts you, however consuming it is to the Christian community.' But freedom that serves through love is exactly the opposite in its results.

The second phrase given by Paul which will help us get through the conflict is the simple call in verse 16: 'I say walk by the Spirit.' (He means the same thing in verse 18, 'If you are led by the Spirit.') He is not referring here to the high moments of our Christian life or to emotionally charged circumstances: taking communion in a candle lit room, praying for hours over some critical decision, etc. He is not talking about serious Bible study, about evangelistic enterprises, about the times when we are quite obviously interested in and concerned with the things of God. He is referring to our walk, the everyday

experience of putting one foot in front of the other, the morning to night, inhale-exhale, normal process of living life. 'Walk by the Spirit' is the command. Don't bypass today's seemingly mundane circumstances. Take time to listen to the Lord in today's business. Be willing to judge the double standards that are so frequently ours, where we expect others to live under stricter standards than we ask of ourselves. Allow the Lord to have access to the tone of voice you use when you speak to people: judge the little prejudices you have carried around with you all of your life. That is what this command is referring to: all of these ordinary things, the daily course of events. 'Walk by the Spirit,' so that when momentous occasions come, or great difficulties arise, when our walk leads us into the 'valley of the shadow of death,' even, then we are ready to face whatever comes. The choices we make all along to walk in this way have prepared us for the worst the flesh can do to win us to its desire.

Once I worked in a ministry to High School students. I got to know one young man in that ministry and I spent a lot of time with him. We had meals together, we went places together. I listened to him, he listened to me; I cared about the things that he cared about. After some months we attended a Christian camp together, and one evening we heard a powerful gospel message delivered. With tears in his eyes, my friend came to me and I

invited him to receive Christ. That was a dramatic moment, but it was preceded by a long walk, by a lot of seemingly insignificant things such as ice cream, ball games, and long conversations. All of these were used by the Spirit of God to prepare him for the important day when my young friend would come to Christ. Here in this verse, the wisdom of Scripture charges us to be serious at all times about the conflict we are involved in. Let the Spirit of God have access to all our life and every situation in life, day in, day out.

To make sure we don't lose focus, Paul says in verse 18 that if we are led by the Spirit in this daily walk we are not under law. The apostle is not here advocating (contrary to everything he has already written) 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.

The third phrase we will consider is Paul's insistence, beginning in verse 19, that 'the deeds of the flesh are evident.' They are very plain, in other words. That is also true of the 'fruit of the Spirit.' The flesh brings us temptations in such attractive guise that it's often difficult to know when we are being tempted to turn our freedom into fleshly indulgence. The flesh disguises its temptations magnificently, but the results are always the same: sin always pays its servants, and the wages of sin is always death. If we are willing to be honest about what is happening to us, if we are willing to look at ourselves as we really are, then we will either see that the flesh is producing its deeds -- strife, enmity, immorality, sorcery, drunkenness -- or we will see that the Spirit of God is truly producing his fruit in our lives and there is more love, more real joy, greater peace and more self-control than ever before.

In the well-known story of the emperor's new clothes, a foolish emperor is tricked by wily tailors who claim to have made him a suit so beautiful, raiment so glorious that it is absolutely astonishing to behold. When the king looks in the mirror, however, he cannot see these new clothes. In fact, it seems to him that he is in his underwear. But he doesn't admit that because the tailors keep praising his beautiful new clothes. In a big parade everybody in the crowd reacts the same way: they assume there is a problem with them. Finally, one little boy says, 'The emperor has no clothes.' The bubble is burst, to the embarrassment of the king. The crowd breaks into laughter.

The point that Paul is making here is if we are willing to be honest, if we are willing to look at things as they really are and not hide behind clever tricks, then when we are in the flesh it will be quite obvious to us. Likewise, if the Spirit is bearing his fruit that too will be obvious; it will not be hard to discover. The difficulty is in being honest, in being willing to examine ourselves. The deeds of the flesh, Paul declares, are evident.

I once played in a football game following a torrential downpour. It was a mud bowl. The light was bad. The rain was falling. By the end of the game it was absolutely impossible to tell who was on our team and who was not, because of the mud. When we called plays we didn't know whether we were running into our opponents or into our own team. But in this conflict that Paul is talking about the apostle says that you can always tell what's going on if you are willing to be honest. The jerseys always are clearly distinguishable. The difficulty for us is in being willing to be honest. People are forever excusing sin by saying, 'It's modern, it's scholarly, it's advanced, it's different.' A whole litany can be recited as to why a particular activity ought to be put in a 'right' category. But Christian honesty must agree that immorality is not changed by being named something else. I may offer all kinds of justification for why I am doing what I am doing, but if at the end of the process I am filled with anger and envy, that is the flesh. 'The deeds of the flesh are evident.'

The Christian life is inevitably filled with conflict. It is wrong to be told otherwise. If you know people who are continually surprised by their failure to be able to do what they want, then take them to this passage and help them see that conflict is unavoidable.

There is an exciting end to this section, though. Verse 24 contains a great announcement. 'Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.' What Paul is saying, finally, is, 'Despite the reality of the conflict, despite the fact that every day the flesh wants to overthrow us while the Spirit woos us to follow him-- and we need to be disciplined and thorough in following him-- despite all that the fight is not fair. The outcome has been determined already. If you truly belong to Christ you cannot lose this fight. If you belong to Christ Jesus, "the flesh has been crucified with its passions and desires." ' The

great, powerful hooks by which the flesh holds us-- the strong passions, the ownership it once exerted over us-- has been crucified. We are no longer, essentially, in the inner man, fleshly. We are new creatures in Christ. Our destiny is not an open question.

Our destiny is to be with the Lord. If we belong to him, the magnificent sacrifice of Jesus Christ is ours as well. The flesh has been crucified; the war has been won. But it is still a fight, a fight that is going to last all our lives because, although the flesh has been crucified, it has not been eradicated; and it will not be eradicated until we are given new bodies, new histories to begin.

So the fight remains. We are called on to take this conflict seriously: to learn to follow the Spirit, to serve one another through love, to lay down our lives for love's sake for each other, to walk by the Spirit day in and day out in the little things as well as the big things, to be ruthless in our estimations of what is happening. Is the flesh producing its death or is the Spirit producing its fruit? Having said all that, we live with confidence. The victory over evil was accomplished on the cross. The Lord died for us and he was raised again to life, and those who belong to Jesus have crucified the flesh. We are now free to fight the good fight, to get on about the business of living with the conflict, not foolishly, but filled with hope, in serious and wise concern for each other.

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