

“Competition Between Spirit and Flesh”

Galatians 5: 16-26

Rev. Ed Hoekstra

Live by the Spirit! “Live by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh (verse 16).” Living by the Spirit is living in a way which acknowledges the comfort, guidance and counsel the spirit gives. The Holy Spirit gives in the way of love because love is the nature of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Paul, the author of Galatians, places verse 16 as a command. Paul desires that every Christian has the responsibility to love as Christ has loved us!

This Christian ethic of love (or grace – unconditional love) is necessary to live out true freedom in life. Furthermore, freedom is the basis of love. Put in other words: freedom is at the core of love. If you love someone, you want them to freely love you in return and not be coerced to do so. When one is truly loved, fear is diminished and they are free to be themselves. On the contrary, when one’s life is about gratifying one’s own desires, it is about one’s own satisfaction at the expense of others and not done in the context of love. Fear is then enhanced and freedom diminished.

That being said not all desires of the flesh are unholy. When the desires of the flesh are gratified in love, then they bring glory to God. For example, food is a natural desire of the flesh and to be enjoyed. However, we all know food can also be abused. One’s sexuality is a natural part of God’s creation and when expressed in a loving way will build love between two people and strengthen their lives. Our sexuality is a beautiful gift from God! However, when sex is not expressed in a loving way it does not build up people and relationships and can cause hurt.

¹⁸ ***But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.*** When one’s desires are focused in line with God’s love, then one is bringing healing to those they are in contact with. Of course there is no law against making the world a better place! Not only does this kind of living encourage love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, it gives hope to all! There is no law against these so one is free – they can be led by the Spirit as much as they want and the pleasure that evokes will never end! On the other hand, Paul is making the point that the pleasure one receives in participating in the works of the flesh are short lived, do not satisfy and must be controlled by law to minimize the damage.

What is the flesh? It was discussed in our Bible study group that the ‘flesh’ is that part of a person which focuses more on doing what they desire with a minimal regard of how one’s actions impact others. The flesh can be defined as human nature-the human condition – led by the compulsion of self-preservation. Remember, however, that our physical side has needs which can be met in a very positive and life giving way when done in the Spirit of God’s love.

¹⁹ ***Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, ^[a] drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*** Being led by the flesh can be viewed as normal. This kind of behaviour was prevalent among the Galatians Paul was addressing. Some thought their freedom in grace meant they could do whatever they pleased because they would eventually be forgiven. We all know that unbridled freedom when driving a car will lead to an accident. One must stay in their lanes and obey the laws of the road in order to freely move from place to place. In subtle and not so subtle ways today we are encouraged to live according to the flesh

through the environment we experience at work; what we see in the media and even in our families as a normal part of life. It is normal in the sense that one is not aware of another way, and this idea of living by the Spirit is so foreign and not viewed as realistic. As Christians we can so easily be absorbed by this cultural thinking. My point is that this idea of 'Life by the Spirit' can remain academic 'head knowledge' and not become our desire to live out.

'Life by the Spirit' brings lasting satisfaction. It goes somewhere because it is empowered by God through the Holy Spirit. Living by the Spirit means not limiting oneself to one's personal limited resources. In contrast to living by the flesh, living by the Spirit reminds us of God's presence empowering each one to bear fruit. Living by the Spirit empowers one's existence because it sharpens one's perspective on life as a free gift of grace rather than a place of scarce resources where one must compete against others to achieve 'the good life'.

What is the Kingdom of God? The Kingdom of God which is also referred to as 'The Kingdom of Heaven', is the Spiritual realm where God reigns as King, or one could say it is the fulfillment on earth of God's will. The Kingdom of God (heaven) phrase was used primarily by Jesus and found in the Gospels. The Kingdom of God is where Grace has the final word. The Kingdom of God is a place where no person is more valued than another. The Kingdom of God is a gift which God wants all to receive.

In Luke 17: 20-21 we read this account of Jesus: *"Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed;²¹ nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among^[b] you."* In the context of this scripture reading, the Pharisees asked Jesus when the Kingdom of God was coming. Jesus answered these teachers of the law that the Kingdom of God was not coming in the way they expect. The coming of the Kingdom would not be spectacular with a strong leader staking out his claim and chasing out the Roman occupiers. In another place in the Gospels (Matthew 13:33) Jesus teaches that the Kingdom will come silently and unseen like yeast in a batch of dough. Actually, the Kingdom of God has already started, right under the Pharisees noses! It is among them already in Jesus and in the hearts of his followers!

²² ***By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.*** The Kingdom of God is among you when the fruit of the Spirit are evident in yourself and others.

What is our motivation/desire for God's Kingdom? One's motivation rests in the fact that we belong to God. In belonging to God, we are assured that we are known and dearly loved by God. Remember Paul's command: *"Live by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh (v.16)."* This command is necessary for one to follow because it is not based on a competitive fear of not having enough, but rooted in God's love (grace) leading to freedom and 'The good life' God intends.

The Spirit creates unity not coercion. The Spirit forms us and shapes us according to desiring his way. The Spirit is much stronger than the flesh – there is no comparison! People of God – Let us live by the Spirit and be free in God's grace! Amen.