

(5:17). Another result of the conflict is that we do things which appear to others to be contradictory, with the Spirit leading us at one time to do one thing and our own sinful nature drawing us towards doing something else on other occasions. In this case, it would be arrogant of any of us to say that we are always consistent in what we do, because we will quickly complain about inconsistency when we see it in others, as they will do when they see it in us! If we think we are not subject to this problem, then we have probably lost touch with worldly, let alone heavenly reality!

Paul expands on this conundrum in Romans, but here, his conclusion is simple, we can respond to the Spirit and intend to live by the Spirit, but our sinful human nature prevents us from being as wholly immersed in the things of God as we would like. Sin has been conquered and its power removed, but it still colours our lives as long as we live. That is the reality of life.

Application

Paul's thoughts in this text begin with the glory of freedom which comes from salvation through Christ. They continue with a warning that freedom can trigger sinful reactions within the human soul, and they appeal to the Christian to live according to the supreme command of Christ and the moral law to 'love your neighbour as yourself'. They also condemn 'in-fighting' within the church, contrast the Spirit of God with 'the desires of the sinful nature', they identify the conflict within each Christian soul from which we cannot be free whilst we still live on earth, and they conclude by commending Christians to be 'led by the Spirit! This is an extraordinarily condensed passage of Scripture, and there are a number of ways in which these issues can be applied, as you will find out if you read some of the many commentaries written about this passage.

There is here, however, an underlying tension which explains a great deal. On the one hand, Paul's teaching about the things of the Spirit are always inspirational and he is never shy in proclaiming the nature of salvation and the transformation brought to the human soul by the Spirit. On the other hand, Paul wants us to see something of the 'other side of the coin'. He explains forthrightly that as people saved by grace, we all face with the reality of living in a sinful world that continues to affect us and hold us back. The perfection of grace and the full application of our faith is not automatic; we must fight evil within and without.

It is essential to our walk with Christ that we strike a spiritual balance between declaring the awesome wonder of what Christ has done for us with offering a realistic assessment of our own worldly limitations as God's people. Those who appear to claim they are 'good' because they are saved can damage the reputation of the church and the credibility of the Gospel, because others will not necessarily see evidence of what is claimed. Those who show humility and give the glory to God for what they do instead of draw attention on themselves offer a more powerful testimony. Too many regard what says here as theologically awkward; but if we can identify with him in how he presents the conflicts that take place within the Christian soul, then we will discover that this is not mere theology, but truth.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In what ways do you believe that you have been set free through being a Christian?
2. Does this passage of Scripture describe, even slightly, any of the conflicts and problems which are found in your church?
3. Why does the Spirit fight our human nature? Why is it impossible for us to do those things we want to do as Christians?

Discipleship

There are some challenging parts to this text, and each of them could consume us for a long time if we were to intend to follow through how they might change our lives. The radical service of others which is shown in Jesus' own life is certainly what the Lord calls some of His people to emulate, and the spiritual quest of submission to the Holy Spirit is another. Ask the Lord to show you whether this text has any particular message for you which is essential for your life. Do not merely read it and say; 'Oh yes, that describes me all right!'

Final Prayer

All praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ, for this day You have given us. Help us approach each day with the same vigour and enthusiasm needed to live our lives to the full, and may all around us see that we love the life that You have given us to lead. Through Jesus Christ we pray; AMEN

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I thank You for the peace I have in Your presence;
 Lord Jesus, I receive the joy You have placed in my heart;
 Lord Jesus, I offer myself in the service of Your Gospel;
 Lord Jesus, I give all I am and everything I own to You;
 Lord Jesus, I ask You to hear these prayers; AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Christian Hope

Many people place their hopes for the future in politics, in elections, in security of work or on-going health. It may be right, sometimes, to hope for the good things of this world, but the Christian hope is for the salvation of God and eternal life, and this marks us out from other people. Pray that we might be reawakened to the hope of Glory which is ours in Christ!

Meditation

When we are tired, Lord God, our confidence slips,
 Strength fades away, sapping our spiritual reserves.
 Too quickly, we question the promises You have given,
 Trying to find an answer to brief but passing problems
 That have hijacked us along the way we thought You led.
 In truth, we wandered in frailty away from Your guidance
 Not realising that in faithfulness, You would never let us go.

Hold us firmly, do not let us fall;
 Show us the way when we cannot see;
 Deal with us carefully, protect our fragility;
 Calm our nerves when we are touched by fear;
 And speak directly to us when we need swift advice.

For this is where faith is tested and discipleship counts;
 When in distress, we trust our all, our lives, into Your hands.
 Your love is greater than the enemies we meet upon the way.

Bible Study - Galatians 5:13-18

¹³ You were called for freedom, my friends, but do not let your freedom become an opportunity for your sinful nature; rather, serve one another by means of love. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ¹⁵ But if you continue to bite and devour one another, be careful that you are not destroyed by one another.

¹⁶ So I now say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not fulfil the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature wants what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit wants what is contrary to sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, preventing you from doing what you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Review

Most of Paul's letter to the Galatians has, until this point, concentrated on addressing problems created by the teaching of Jewish sympathisers within the different churches of Galatia. In this passage, however, Paul stands back from the oppressive problems of the Galatian churches and instead offers some of the most powerful and memorable advice Paul ever gave within his letters. In this passage, Paul summarises the laws of God and urges Christian people to live according to the direction of the Spirit and stand against the 'sinful nature'. In tomorrow's text we will read about the famous 'works of the flesh' and the 'fruit of the Spirit', which summarise Paul's teaching about Christian living.

Earlier in his letter to the Galatians, Paul had written down everything he wanted to say about the problem of Christians trying to live like Jews, so towards the end, he moved on to give this general advice before concluding the letter. As Paul wrote, however, it is likely that he had one other concern. Some Christians had become tired of the rules and regulations of even the early church and had taken as a motto 'freedom in Christ'. They believed they could do as they pleased because the love of Christ was able to deliver them from all sin; this may seem strange to us, but the more we think about it, this attitude is not far short of what many Christians believe to this day. It is shown in those who think that they can live as they please because they can always come back to God, say 'sorry', and receive forgiveness again if things go wrong! In this passage, Paul was horrified by such an attitude, as he is in other letters where he refutes such attitudes (e.g. Romans 3,6).

We do not know much about what was happening in the Galatian churches, but this scenario would certainly explain the letter's change in emphasis, as we can now see. The words; 'do not let your freedom become an opportunity for your sinful nature' (5:13) speak directly to those who thought they could do what they liked once they were free from the Jewish Law and covered by the 'grace of God'. However, once we take this passage out of the context of ancient times, it speaks to us even now about our attitude towards others. Here in this passage, Paul's concern is to get people to stop thinking about any personal advantage that may be gained from the Gospel message and encourage people to think of doing God's will. Those who are saved should act out of love for one another (5:14), and such life is a privilege not a burden. Factional fighting amongst Christians is a sign of sin and godlessness amongst those who should know better, as Paul should hardly have to say (5:15).

The last paragraph of our reading urges God's people to be conscious of their walk with God by the Spirit, to the point of being conscious of the sinful nature and rejecting it (5:16f.). Paul spells it out; the work of the Spirit within us is totally different from the human nature, and the Christian is one who knows the difference (5:17); would that this was true today!

All this helps us to understand why Paul then launched into one of the most important passages he ever wrote (see tomorrow), contrasting 'the Spirit' with 'human nature' (otherwise called 'flesh'). True faith, he says, shows itself not through obeying laws (as the Jews argued) or by doing what we want (as other factions in the church argued), but about being obedient to the Spirit of God. As Paul talks more and more about the difference between human nature and 'the Spirit' in the rest of Galatians, it is as if he has at last found the one teaching that can rise above the pettiness and division that was tearing the young churches of Galatia apart. What he said helped the early churches stay together as God's people and maintain their witness to faith in Christ Jesus, and it can do the same for us today.

Going Deeper

There is no shortage of information to be found and additional comment to be made on this passage. Crucial themes to the Gospel are to be found everywhere; freedom, service, love, the Spirit, and the path of Christian life; and the more books you read about this passage, the more you will find! When Paul speaks as powerfully as this about the nature of the human soul and the meaning of salvation, then the problem is where to begin, and also when to stop!

Freedom and Christian love

Paul's strident words which explained that the Jewish Law was not applicable to Gentile Christians must have felt like an immense relief to all who read them; particularly if they had endured a torrid time of argument in the church. Paul's words were authoritative, backed up not only with good scriptural argument but also the moral authority of the leaders of the Jerusalem church and the Apostles themselves (see Acts 15). 'You were called for freedom', said Paul (5:13), and most would have rejoiced to hear it said.

However, as Paul knew full well, all theological comment has a way of not being quite what it seems, and the word 'freedom' stirs the human heart like no other. 'Freedom' has never been a good word for describing what God has done for us in Christ, and Paul generally used the word to describe part of the consequence of Christ's work for the human soul rather than the work itself. When describing the work of Christ, Paul uses words like 'salvation', 'deliverance', 'righteousness', and 'justification'. These words sometimes seem to us to be deep and perhaps impenetrable at times, but all of them can be traced through the Bible and can lead us to a wealth of understanding about our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Importantly, they may all be said to give rise to some degree of 'freedom'. For example, one who is saved is set free from sin, one who is delivered is liberated from bondage, one who is made 'righteous'

before God is released from the power of evil, and one who is 'justified' has the freedom of being at peace with God. What Paul did in Galatians was to explain that all this freedom was not liberty 'for' self, but liberty 'from' self. To be free in Christ meant being free to live like Christ by loving others and serving them (5:14). Christ Himself demonstrated that loving others was the only way to both please God and be fulfilled as a human being.

The trouble is, says Paul in this passage, that the idea of 'freedom' by itself tempts our 'sinful nature' (5:13). At this point, I had better explain that I have used the words 'human nature' to translate what many other Bible translations refer to as 'the flesh'. Many generations of Christians have become used to the way that Paul contrasts 'the Spirit' with 'the flesh' in many of his letters, and this is an important part of Paul's teaching. However, few people understand what a preacher might mean by 'the flesh' because it is not common to normal speech, and if we use the words 'human nature' instead (which is an accurate translation of the Greek), we will more quickly understand what Paul says.

The message in the first paragraph of this passage is then quite clear; we are indeed set free in Christ, but that freedom is not a license to do what we want, for example to 'bite and devour one another' (5:15) as the inevitable consequence of selfishness. Such things are the result of human nature taking over where the Spirit of God should be allowed to rule; true freedom comes from God, it is a spiritual gift not a human right.

The Spirit and human nature

Paul then gives a series of carefully worded pieces of advice, contrasting the 'Spirit' and the 'human nature'. The first of these is 'walk by the Spirit, and you will not fulfil the desires of the human nature.' (5:16) This is plain, memorable teaching which reveals rather than hides God's truth as all the best teaching does. If our focus, our concentration, is on the things of the Spirit, then our natural desires will not take hold of us. Before saying a little more about this, it is worth noting that when Paul wrote, he wrote a 'double negative' when saying '... you will not fulfil ...'. In English, two negatives tend to cancel each other out, but in Greek, this form of speech makes a strong emphasis. We could almost translate this sentence 'walk by the Spirit and you will most certainly not fulfil the desires of the sinful nature!'

What Paul was emphasising was a fact of life which we all experience, which is that what fills our minds tends to powerfully influence the things we do. For example, if our minds are full of thoughts about our own needs and wants (the 'sinful nature'), then our actions will reflect selfishness. Indeed, we can even do things in church and for others, but if our inward aims are to please ourselves, then what we do will almost certainly appear to others to be selfish rather than spiritual. We can hardly deny this to be true, because we often make such disapproving judgements about each other! As Paul says; 'for the sinful nature wants what is contrary to the Spirit ...'

The Spirit of God presents us with a fundamental challenge; us or God? Which is it going to be, what is going to fill our minds and our thoughts, and what will motivate our actions? There is no mid-way path whereby we can be motivated by our own feelings and yet do the things of God. To imagine this is to dispense with the services of God's Spirit; many try to do it, but the result is not Christian faith. Again, this is exactly what Paul means by saying about the Spirit and sinful human nature; '... they are in conflict with each other' (5:17), and a Christian is one who freely yields their own human nature and accepts the things of the Spirit.

One further comment by Paul is interesting. He says that the Spirit and sinful nature are not just in conflict with each other, but this conflict is 'preventing you from doing what you want to do'. By this, Paul could mean that when the Spirit comes into our lives and, with our permission, fights against the sinful human nature which we have yielded to Christ, then quite logically, we do not then do things which are a result of our own desires because we have handed over control to the Spirit. However, we have good reason to think that Paul was meaning something far more complex than this. The reason is found in Romans 7:14-25, which is an expanded form of the same argument and is one of the most impenetrable parts of all Paul's teaching! It is not straightforward, but the simplest way of explaining his point is to say that because we are all still living in the world and subject to sinful desires, we are never able to hand ourselves over to the Spirit with the purest of motives as we might wish. Then, because our own sinful nature is in conflict with the Spirit (who we have also asked to take control of our lives) that very conflict shows itself in several ways. One of these is the obvious consequence of indecision which can easily prevent us from doing what is right, or doing 'what we want to do'