One of the benefits of being at Trinity is the guest speakers I get to hear preach at chapel. Three weeks ago, I had the privilege of hearing a great sermon on discipleship by Dr. Minho Song. Dr. Song is the pastor of a thriving Korean church in Toronto. He was also one of the delegates at the Lausanne Missions Conference in Cape Town South Africa where 4,000 Evangelical Christian leaders gathered in late October from around the world to discuss the challenges facing the Church and its mission of world evangelization.

Pastor Song reported that the two most serious problems facing the Christian church are not external threats to the Church (like Islam or liberal governments), but rather two internal problems in the Church – syncretism and nominalism.

Syncretism is an attempt to blend two incompatible belief systems – namely Christian and non-Christian belief systems. While syncretism exists in North America and Europe it is more prominently a problem in South America and Africa. The major threat facing the North America church is nominalism. The word nominal literally means “in name only”. Nominal Christians are those who claim to be Christians, but show few signs of being a Christian in their actual lives.

The question has been asked before, “If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?” Or what if I put it another way: “If you were arrested for being a nominal Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

There is no doubt in my mind that America has been impacted by nominalism. Most people in this country claim to be Christians, but there is little evidence of Christianity in our culture. But Paul wasn’t writing to the culture at large and I’m not preaching to the culture at large this morning. Paul was writing to those in the churches of Galatia and I’m addressing a congregation of professing believers this morning. Are we nominal? Is nominalism affecting this church?

Our topic this morning is not nominalism. Our topic is the works of the flesh, or the acts of the sinful nature. But the topics are related, for even though most of us in this room would identify ourselves as Christians, we are faced with a critical question: is there evidence in our lives that we are in fact born again by the Spirit or is there evidence to the contrary?

The main evidence that we have been born again by the Spirit is called the fruit of the Spirit which Paul names in Galatians 5:22-23. Mike will deal with those verses next week. Evidence that our lives are controlled by our sinful nature is called the acts of the sinful nature, which Paul lists in verses 19-21. As you will notice in your bulletin, those are the main verses we will look at this morning. However, the main message Paul is trying to drive home for us is found in the broader context, which begins in verse 16 and ends in verse 26.
5:16-26  So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

If we were to focus simply on verses 19-21 this morning we may come away thinking that the message Paul is trying to drive home is, “don’t live like this.” But Paul is not merely calling his readers to avoid the 15 sins listed in these verses. In verse 16 he commands his readers to “live by the Spirit” and then promises them that if they do so they “will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

We all live with our sinful nature; therefore, we will continue to struggle with sin in this life, even some of the sins listed here. The power over sin and death, however, is not through our own will power. The power over sin and death is through the work of God, in Christ, that is available to us through the Holy Spirit. Christ died for our sins (1 Cor 15:3). He destroyed the power of sin and death (Heb 2:14). If we have placed our faith in Christ the Spirit makes us alive (Eph 2:5) and we belong to Christ and as verse 24 says, we have crucified (put to death) the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

It is the work of God, in Christ, that saves us, through the Holy Spirit. It is the work of God, in Christ, that sanctifies us, through the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in our struggle against the sinful nature, we are called to depend on the work of God in our lives. We are to live by the Spirit, or walk in the Spirit. If we do that, then God promises us that we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

And so, while I want to explain the acts of the sinful nature and show how serious the consequences are of living according to the sinful nature, we must not miss the fact that the main point is not avoidance of sin, but rather alignment with the Spirit. I’ve tried to express my sermon in a sentence: If we will align our lives with the Spirit, we will not follow through with the desires of our sinful nature.

I would like to organize our time this morning with two broad categories: evidence and a verdict. Paul lists evidence that would demonstrate someone is not walking in the Spirit (vv. 19-21b) and then he gives a verdict for those who demonstrate they are controlled by the sinful nature (v. 21c).
Evidence: The acts of the sinful nature demonstrate that someone is not walking in the Spirit. (19-21b)

Notice two things in verse 19. First, in verses 16-18 the text uses the phrase “desires of the sinful nature” (NIV). But the language changes in verse 19 to “acts of the sinful nature” (NIV). So the change is from an inner pull of the sinful nature to carrying out or indulging that inner pull of the sinful nature.

Secondly, the text says, “the acts of the sinful nature are obvious...” This means that it is obvious that someone who does these things does them out of the sinful nature, not out of the Spirit.¹

These two observations are important, for when verse 21 says, “those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” he is referring to those who carry out the sinful desires as a way of life, not merely those who have sinful desires, or those who sin, for that would refer to everyone.

When someone carries out the desires of the sinful nature, as a way of life, they demonstrate that they are not walking in the Spirit. If they were walking in the Spirit there would be evidence. Jesus said you will recognize a tree by its fruit (Matt. 7:16). The fruit indicates the root. If the root is bad, the fruit will be bad, if the root is good, the fruit will be good. Let us now look at the bad fruit that Paul lays out as evidence in verses 19-21b.

The acts of the sinful nature are divided into four categories here:

1. Sexual sins (19b). There are 3 sins listed here. Sexual immorality comes from the Greek word porneia which is where we get the word pornography. It could mean something as specific as fornication (consensual sex between two unmarried people), or it could be more general and include all sexual sin. I would say it’s more specific than lust, but not limited to fornication or adultery. This would include extramarital affairs, premarital sex, homosexual behavior, child abuse, and a whole host of other things.

Impurity: Impurity is an even more general term than porneia. It would include any unclean thought or action such as viewing pornography (both the explicit kind and the more soft forms that come in men’s magazines, lingerie catalogues and swimsuit issues), going to strip clubs, fantasizing in your mind about another man or women (from real life or in a romance novel), engaging in an emotional affair, engaging in inappropriate conversations in chat rooms, or sexual activities via phone or webcam, sexting, watching sexually charged movies, and a lot more that I don’t have time to list.

Debauchery: Debauchery (or sensuality) is when someone ceases to care what God or man thinks about their behavior or appearance. We live in a culture that has ceased to care. Sex is everywhere. It’s in most advertisements, it’s on every magazine rack, on most TV programs, and the culture seems to embrace it.

¹ Boice, James. The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Romans Through Galatians. 1976.
Sensuality has even crept into the church. I am sometimes baffled by the clothes I see on Christian women. If you dress sensually I can assure you that you are tempting someone to have impure thoughts about you. Now, I’m not saying that you are responsible for a man’s impure thoughts; I’m just saying you are doing your Christian brothers a disservice if you wear inappropriate clothing. I beg the women and youth in this church to have respect for your weak brothers in Christ, by wearing appropriate clothing. I’m not going to define what is inappropriate. Let me just say that if you think it is questionable, it’s probably inappropriate. If you think the line is here, it’s more likely back here.

Many of the sexual sins listed here are a real problem in the church at large and in this church. God has given us sex not only for procreation, but for our enjoyment. We have been given the freedom to enjoy sex, within the context of marriage. But when we abuse the freedoms we have in Christ we end up as slaves to sin. Christ has set us free, but in order to live in freedom we must walk in the Spirit and not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

If we carry out the desires of the sinful nature, as a way of life, that will serve as evidence we are not walking in the Spirit.

2. Religious sins (20a). There are 2 sins listed here.

Idolatry: Idolatry is anything we put in the place of God, who alone deserves our worship. I’ve always thought the best way to gauge an idol in my life is by assessing the amount of time and/or resources I spend on it. What do you spend an unjustified amount of your time doing or thinking about? That could be an idol. What do you spend an unjustified amount of money on? That could be an idol. What makes you the angriest? Is it when someone or something is threatening to take one of your idols from you? What makes you the happiest? That could be your idol. An idol could be something as conspicuous as your job or material possessions, or as inconspicuous as your right to be comfortable or “time with your family.” Anything we put in place of God is an idol. Most of us have some idol in our lives. Idolatry is the way we live with our idols. We are called to walk in the Spirit, not in the way of idolatry.

Witchcraft: Matt Chandler has called witchcraft an attempt to “be God”. The Greek work is actually pharmakeia which is where we get our word pharmacy. In the ancient world people who were involved in witchcraft or sorcery would concoct drugs to poison and kill people. One way sorcerers used drugs in the ancient world was for the purpose of aborting babies. While Paul was certainly not limiting his usage of the word “witchcraft” to abortion, he could have had it in mind.

3. Social sins (20-21a). There are 8 sins listed here.

I’m convinced that every one of these comes from a heart of selfishness, and a failure to love your neighbor as yourself (v. 14). James tells us that the thing that causes quarrels in the church is that our passions are at war; we aren’t getting our way and so we fight (Jas 4:1). It is important to note that these social sins are not only listed with sexual sins, religious sins, and drinking sins, they outnumber them. It is easy to call internet pornography a sin, but what about living a life marked by unreconciled relationships, animosity, or jealousy? Paul thinks social sins are just as

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2 Dabler, Judy. 2009.
much evidence that we are living our lives through the sinful nature as premarital sex is evidence. Let’s look at these social sins.

**Hatred:** Hatred (or enmity) is defined as hostility between individuals or communities. You don’t have to be around the church very long to see that there is enmity between people.

**Discord:** This is the logical conclusion of hatred, where enmity boils over into fighting.

**Jealousy:** Jealousy is not necessarily bad, after all God calls himself a jealous God. But when jealousy becomes selfish it is sinful – and that is what Paul has in mind here.

**Fits of rage:** The next word, which is translated fits of rage (or anger), could more generically be translated “passion”. Passion is also not necessarily bad, but when passion turns into rage it is obvious someone is working out of the sinful nature.

I am a very passionate person and I trust the Lord has used my passion at times to inspire other people to godly living. But my passion has a dark side as well when I become angry for the wrong reasons and break someone’s spirits. That’s the kind of passion Paul is talking about here.

**Selfish ambition:** Selfish ambition is a mercenary spirit. If someone is selfishly ambitious they are not interested in serving unless they get their due compensation or recognition. Any service or ministry that is not centered on serving God and other people is a form of selfish ambition.

**Dissensions and factions:** In this case, these most likely have to do with religious matters. We see this in our culture with the inordinate amounts of church splits. But we also see it in smaller things like worship style preferences. We are called to unity, not division.

**Envy:** Envy is similar to jealousy, but there is no positive side to envy. It is a grudging spirit that cannot bear to contemplate someone else’s success.

4. **Drinking sins (21b).** There are 2 sins listed here.

**Drunkenness:** There was a time when drinking was by and large taboo in Evangelical churches. Now responsible drinking has become acceptable in the Christian community for the most part. I personally think putting a blanket restriction on drinking is a form of legalism. I don’t think you can make a biblical argument that drinking in and of itself is a sin, though some would argue that drinking is simply unwise, because there is too much at stake. I’m not going to get into that discussion this morning (Mike touched on it some last week). What I want to point out is that there is often a pendulum swing. While I’m glad that we live in a time when a Christian can have a glass of wine with a meal without having to look over their shoulder, or enjoy a beer with a friend without a guilty conscience, I wonder if some have taken this liberty too far.

In my experience there are some people who drink simply to make a statement that they are cool, or a statement against legalism or their parents’ convictions. And in that case, you may not be

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4 Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text.* 1982.
5 Andrus, Mike. 2000.
guilty of drunkenness, but you may be guilty of rebellion. Others have taken their conviction that it is okay to drink to mean it is okay to drink a little too much from time to time.

I personally think we have been given the freedom to drink responsibly as Christians, some will disagree with me, and on that point we could have discussion. However, the Bible is very clear that drunkenness is a sin, and on that point there is no need for discussion.

Orgies: One of the reasons we are commanded to refrain from drunkenness is it leads to other things. The NIV and ESV translate the last word in this list as “orgies.” Orgies could certainly be an extreme conclusion to a night of drinking, but I think the word here simply means taking your drinking too far, in a general sense. Some translations translate the word as “carousing” which is really a life style of drinking, or what high school and college students might simply call partying. I think that is a better translation.

There are undoubtedly some here this morning that fight the desire for drunkenness and/or carousing. If we carry out the desires of the sinful nature, as a way of life, that will serve as evidence we are not walking in the Spirit.

Some of you may be thinking to yourself, “Whew, I passed the test; I’m not guilty of any of those sins.” Notice the last line of the sentence: “drunkenness, orgies, and the like” or “things like these” (ESV).

Paul didn’t intend this to be an exhaustive list. He is simply saying that it is obvious that “things like these” flow out of the sinful nature. If these things are a way of life for a person then they serve as evidence that that person is not walking in the Spirit, or evidence that a person is carrying out the desires of the sinful nature. And if the evidence in a person’s life indicates that they are not walking in the Spirit, Paul issues strong verdict. Look at the last sentence of verse 21; “I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Verdict: If we live our lives according to the desires of our sinful nature we have no right to claim eternal life. (21c)

Why does Paul give so strong of a warning here? He actually issued a similar warning to the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians 6. Let’s look at that and see if it helps us.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Notice Paul says, “That is what some of you were.” My guess is that in the Corinthian church, as well as the churches of Galatia, there were still traces of the old pagan ways of living rearing
their ugly head in the church. Just as there are signs of the secular and sinful culture present in our lives and in this church.

But the true church is not comprised of people who live like this; people who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. The reason why is found in verse 11. The Spirit of God not only saves people at conversion, the Spirit of God changes the lives of true believers. The Spirit washed the Corinthian believers, justified them, and also sanctified them. The Spirit who washed us, and justifies us, also sanctifies us. The acts of the sinful nature, as a way of life, make sense for those who are not born again, but not for those who have been washed, justified, and sanctified.

Paul says in Philippians 1:6, that “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” The same Spirit that saved us will in fact sanctify us. Those who have truly been born again by the Spirit are new creations and there will be evidence of a new life in them. That doesn’t mean that we won’t still sin, but it does mean that we will grow in Christ-likeness.

If there is no evidence of growth in Christ-likeness, but rather evidence that we are living our lives according to our sinful nature, then we have no right to claim we have eternal life. If your outside (the way that you live) shows that your inside (heart) is dominated by desires of the sinful nature, then even though you are inside the church you may in fact be outside of the kingdom of God.

I would like to put the discussion of eternal security aside for now and turn to Paul’s intention for writing these verses in Galatians 5. I’m guilty of many of these sins and this text has exposed my sin anew this week as I’m sure it has done for many of you. But Paul did not sound his warning to drive struggling Christians to despair or to make them question their salvation. Rather he wanted us to see the heinous character of sin and then to be led by the Spirit to repentance, and to live our lives in step with the Spirit. This list is not intended to make us feel guilty; it is intended to make us want Jesus. The church isn’t a place for people who have no sin; the church is comprised of people who have faith that Christ’s sinless life and perfect payment for our sins is enough to satisfy the wrath of God. The church is not comprised of people who are perfect, but people who are being transformed into the image of Christ.

We are not saved by works. We are saved by grace. It is the work of God in Christ, through the Spirit that saves us. It is the work of God, in Christ, through the Spirit, that sanctifies us. The only way to overcome the power of sin is through the work of Christ.

We are called to repent of our sin and believe on Jesus. Repentance involves turning from sin and turning toward Christ who alone can take away our sin and give us life. We all struggle with sin, so regardless of where you are at today, we all need to turn to Christ through the Spirit, whether for salvation for the first time, or for ongoing sanctification.

Remember the command in verse 16 is not to avoid sin; it is rather to walk in the Spirit. Only when we walk in the Spirit will we avoid sin. Notice also verse 25. “Since we live by the Spirit,

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let us keep in step with the Spirit.” What this means is that we are to live in accordance with who we are. We have life because God has made us alive by his Spirit. Therefore we are to live our life in step with his life giving Spirit.

You may be wondering how you can keep in closer step with the Spirit. Well the first step is you have to know how the Spirit walks. And the primary way to know the way the Spirit walks is to spend time in the Bible which the Spirit inspired.

I also want to encourage you to be active in prayer asking the Spirit to guide you, and to spend time in silence listening to the voice of God, but your prayer life needs to be complemented by the Word of God. The Bible is the objective Word of God if it is properly understood. The instances where “God told” someone to do something may be valid, but they must be validated by the Word of God. Reading the Bible, studying it, memorizing it, meditating on it, and hearing it preached are indispensible components of growing in Christ because we grow spiritual fruit as we walk in step with the Spirit. And feeding on the Word of God is one way to keep in step with the Spirit.

About this time last year we challenged you as a congregation to read through the Bible in one or two years. It has been a privilege to hear many reports about how that discipline has helped this congregation grow spiritually. When we put ourselves in step with the Spirit, God has the opportunity to work in our lives. I’ve asked Dean Maxwell to come and share with you about how Bible reading has been used in his life as a tool for God to change him.

Testimony:
Four years ago a friend, whom I love, gave me a gift, the MacArthur Daily Bible. This is a Bible set up to read through in a year. He also spoke to me of his daily devotions. Out of arrogance, I suppose, I felt I did not need that. I had no desire or motivation to be in God’s Word daily. The book sat on a shelf for 3 years. I picked it up from time to time and read a little. I “did my time” with God. About 18 months ago, I started to look at my life closely and I started to realize there was very little of eternal significance. Honestly, my marriage was weak, lacking leadership, my relationships were shallow and my relationship with God was lip service. I really viewed the Christian life in terms of salvation and once you were saved the rest was gravy. Salvation was God’s gift to me and everything else I did was my gift to Him.

In January, Josh challenged the members of this congregation to read through the Bible in one or two years, and having just completed the process, I relished the thought of other believers in our fellowship committing to the same goal. I made that commitment. This has been an amazing journey and I could not possibly convey the impact this has had on my life, my marriage, my family, my relationships, and God's kingdom. As I was reading through the Bible again, I started making connections. It started as a discipline and became a desire, a passion.
My wife started mentioning the changes she was seeing in me and I could only attribute it to the presence of God’s Word in my life. It’s not that what I was getting at church was bad, it just wasn’t enough. Would you consider eating once or twice a week? Mike recently used the illustration of a white dog and a black dog fighting to describe the conflict between our spiritual nature and our sinful nature. The dog that wins will be the dog that gets fed the most. I realize now, I wasn’t feeding the white dog. My decision was between good and bad. That’s easy. It should have been between doing what was good and doing what was better.

I really started to see how when I was not in God’s Word, the flesh was reigning. I attribute this change to God, not to myself. Jeremiah 9:23 says “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in His riches, but let him who glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows Me.”

I have more stories of God working in my life over the past 18 months than I had over the prior 18 years. For that, I would like to say thank you, Marc, for your gift, thank you, Josh, for your challenge, and I thank God for His Word.

I would like to share with you one quick story. I was doing a presentation at work last spring and had some information I had to retrieve from my e-mail and I saw a message from my wife and just opened it without thinking; attached was this picture. The audience read on the screen as I read on the computer the following message, “Leo and I were in the bedroom and he was looking at your Bible. He insisted that I help him into the rocking chair so he could read it like Daddy. Thanks for setting such a good example for our kids.” That day 30 managers got a glimpse into what I now desire my legacy to be. I hope you remember this picture when you are thinking about hitting the snooze in the morning. I do.

Communion: The Lord’s Table is a constant reminder against moralism and legalism. We don’t earn God’s favor by Bible reading. We don’t earn God’s favor by avoiding sin and trying to live good lives. Only one person has ever perfectly pleased God with his life and that person was Jesus Christ. But he didn’t stop at living a perfect life. He also gave up his life for our sins. Christ’s life and death are enough to take away our sins and please God. Christ’s resurrection gives us newness of life. We come to the Table in remembrance of what Christ has done for us, but we also come to be nourished through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord’s Supper is a chance for those who belong to Christ to celebrate the reality that although we still live with our sinful nature our sins have been washed away by the blood of Christ. If you believe that and have surrendered your life to Christ I invite you to partake with us. If you have not yet placed your faith and trust in Jesus Christ I would ask that you not partake of this meal with us, but invite you to take this time to reflect on the gospel – Christ died for your sins. If you believe that simple message and commit your life to Christ, the Spirit of God will save you this morning!
References


Dabler, Judy. Lectures, CM 6572 Pastoral Counseling for Marriage and Family, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Fall 2009.


