

“The Battle of Two Natures”
(Galatians 5:16-18)

Introduction: There is a great deal of misunderstanding today about the relationship between the old and new natures which every believer possesses. Just how do they relate? Which of the two do we come into the world with? Or do we come with either? Do we gain one at the time of our conversion? Do we lose one at that time? How much of the one do we have, and how much of the other? Which is more powerful? Are there any other factors which need to be taken account of in this discussion? Is sinless perfection possible to the believer in this life? Must we continually suffer major defeat in our progress towards sanctification? Is sanctification an easy thing? What must I do to overcome my sin and to live in a way which is honoring to Christ? Have you ever asked yourself any of these questions? Surely if you are a Christian who is interested in living to the glory of God, you have. What then is the answer? To fully explain the answers to all of these questions would take the rest of our lifetime. There have been many fine books written on this subject, and there are those which are still being written. What I would like to do this evening is simply to lay out the landscape and let you take a panoramic view of the matter from this classic text of Scripture, to see that,

Victory over sin is possible in this world, but it will never be perfect.

I. First, we need to recognize that there is a battle going on within us which really hinders us from doing what the Lord would have us to do.

A. Ignorance is not bliss in this situation, for we are in the battle whether we like it or not. Paul writes in verse 17, “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another.”

1. Now why did Paul need to write this?

- a. It was because the Galatians, who had been set free from the covenant of works, were being tempted to return again to the works of the ceremonial Law for their salvation by the Judiazers.
- b. Paul writes in chapter 5:1-5, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be *justified by law*; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness.”
- c. These Jews even showed up at the Jerusalem council seeking to promote their heresy. They said, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses” (Acts 15:1, 5).
 - (i) But to do this would mean a return to a legal principle for salvation. It would mean a return to the works of the flesh to save them, the Pharisaical deviation from the truth.
 - (ii) Paul warns in 3:2-3, “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, are you now being perfected by the flesh?"

(iii) Here, we can already see the antithesis between the Spirit and the flesh. To admit that you cannot keep the righteous Law of God perfectly is a work of the Spirit. This is what He does in His first work of awakening a soul to its danger. It is in this way that a person may be able to see his or her need of Christ and of His Spirit.

(iv) To be tempted to think that you can do it on your own is purely a work of the flesh.

- d. Apparently, this debate also set them against one another, as debates of this nature inevitably will, for Paul warns them in verses 13-15, "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."
- e. Paul needed to write this because he wanted to alert the Galatians to the fact that they were in the middle of a spiritual struggle. Knowing that you are is half the battle.

2. But what exactly is the nature of this battle?

- a. It is the struggle between two opposing spiritual natures which reside within the soul of a Christian. It is the struggle between the sin and corruption that we have by virtue of our conception and birth into the fallen human race, and that new principle of grace which is introduced into our soul when the Spirit of God sovereignly unites us to Christ and begins to reside in us.
- b. Obviously, this cannot refer to the makeup of an unbeliever, for there is no struggle in him. The Spirit of God does not abide in him. All he desires is wickedness. He wants nothing to do with the righteousness of God. Paul tells us in Romans 8:7-8, "The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the Law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God."
- c. But the Spirit does abide in the Christian, and because He does, the possibility of obedience is there. Paul continues, "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him" (v. 9).
- d. With the Spirit comes a new inclination to serve and honor the Lord which you didn't previously have. And with this new inclination, also comes the battle, for the old inclinations are still there and are still fighting to exert themselves by reason of the corruption which is still present in your soul.
- e. Paul says, "The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another." They are antithetical.
- f. It is not as though nothing changed with regard to our old nature, when God introduced His grace. There was a decisive victory and ultimate subjugation which took place. It is the same kind of defeat that the devil suffered when his head was crushed by Christ on the cross. But even though his head was dealt a mortal wound, he is still very active and powerful, and he will be until he is finally cast into hell for

eternity. But so also will your corruption be.

- B. And what is the result of this? Paul writes, “You may not do the things that you please.”
1. This sounds quite a bit like Paul’s dilemma in Romans 7, doesn’t it?
 - a. Paul writes there, “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” (v. 15). Can you relate to this?
 - b. He writes, “For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish” (v. 19).
 - c. “For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members” (vv. 22-23).
 2. Now, this obviously cannot mean that we cannot do anything we want at all, as though we were still in bondage to sin. For if that were the case, the only difference between being regenerate or not would be a difference in desire levels. We would be ever desirous of serving and pleasing God, but locked into a prison body which would only do what is evil all day long. The apostle Paul says that we have been set free from sin (Rom. 6:7).
 3. But on the other hand there is a very real sense in which we cannot do what we really want to do as Christians.
 - a. Surely as Christ’s children what we want to do the most is to put to death all of our sin and to walk in perfect righteousness.
 - b. If we had a switch or a lever which we could throw to turn off the corruption once and for all, we would do it. But we don’t, and we cannot.
 - c. *The idea then is that we cannot do any perfect works, nor can we live a perfect life, because of the corruption which still clings to our souls. The desire is there, but there are also counter desires, unclean inclinations, which pollute even the best of our works.*
 - d. This is also the way Calvin saw it. He writes in his commentary on the Galatians, “Carnal men have no battle with depraved lusts, no proper desire to attain to the righteousness of God. Paul is addressing believers. *The things that you would* must mean, not our natural inclinations, but the holy affections which God bestows upon us by his grace. Paul therefore declares, that believers, so long as they are in this life, whatever may be the earnestness of their endeavours, do not obtain such a measure of success as to serve God in a perfect manner. The highest result does not correspond to their wishes and desires” (21:162).
 - e. As much then as the grace of God within us creates a desire for perfection, we are simply not capable of it, as long as we are in this world, with this indwelling corruption still clinging to our souls.

II. However, imperfect obedience and victory does not equal no obedience and victory. There is still much that the Christian can and must do in this battle. And here is where we need to see the hope which the Lord offers us.

- A. Paul writes, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.”

1. You may not be able to render to the Lord perfect obedience, but you can put to death the deeds of the flesh.
 - a. Again, Paul's more extended treatment of this subject is in his letter to the Romans.
 - b. In 8:12-13, he writes, "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." To live in accordance with the desires of our indwelling corruption will spell our destruction. But, if the Spirit of Christ dwells in us, if we are born again through the sovereign operation of God's Holy Spirit, and if we walk, which means "to live," according to the new inclination which He brings and put to death the deeds of the flesh, we will live forever with the Lord in glory.
 - c. What are the deeds of the flesh which must be put to death? Paul tells us in Galatians 5:19-21, "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."
 - d. To practice any of these sins means to forfeit the kingdom. Certainly it also means that if we do we are void of the Spirit of God. When the Lord reproached the men of Judah for their sin of dealing treacherously with their wives, by putting them away for unbiblical grounds, He said through Malachi, "But not one has done *so* who has a remnant of the Spirit" (2:15).
 - e. If the Spirit of God is present, He will not let us continue under the dominion of any sin. He will give us the victory which Christ obtained over it.
 - f. We therefore have no excuse for any sinful act which we commit. We can only blame ourselves. The Lord has indeed promised us that He will make a way of escape for us from all temptations (1 Cor. 10:13). He has even given us the desire to escape it by His Spirit who indwells us.

2. However, our obedience and victory, as I have said, will always be imperfect in this life.
 - a. Even though we might escape the actual doing of the deeds of the flesh, and sometimes we might not even escape them all together, we cannot in this life avoid them perfectly.
 - b. In every sin we avoid there will still be within us some measure of a desire for it, by reason of our indwelling corruption. We not only desire the good, but we still desire the evil. This does not give us the grounds to excuse ourselves for our evil, but only reason to be humbled in the presence of God for the evil which is still in our hearts.
 - c. The same will be true with regard to our good works. Even though there is a real love for God present in them, they are still imperfect. There is still the desire to take some of the credit. There is still the desire to benefit ourselves by them. None of even the very best of our works can pass the righteous judgment of God. John writes, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Job writes, "In truth I know that this is so, but how can a man be in the right before God? If one wished to dispute with Him, he could not answer Him once in a thousand *times*" (Job 9:2-3).

- d. Our *Confession of Faith* puts it in this way, “They who, in their obedience, attain to the greatest height which is possible in this life, are so far from being able to supererogate, and to do more than God requires, *as that they fall short of much which in the duty they are bound to do*” (WCF 16:4).
 - e. Our *Larger Catechism* asks the question, “Whence ariseth the imperfection of sanctification in believers?” And answers, “The imperfection of sanctification in believers ariseth from the remnants of sin abiding in every part of them, and the perpetual lustings of the flesh against the spirit; whereby they are often foiled with temptations, and fall into many sins, are hindered in all their spiritual services, *and their best works are imperfect and defiled in the sight of God*” (L.C. 78).
 - f. Therefore, the *Confession* states, “They are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment” (WCF 16.5).
 - g. How much imperfection is too much? Any at all. How much imperfection is there in our works? Do we miss the mark only by a little, or by a lot? I think it is by much. That missing the mark, by the way, is an indicator of how much corruption is still in our souls, as opposed to the grace which is there.
 - h. There are also other factors involved, such as how much the Lord restrains that corruption within us. If He was to remove all of His gracious restraint, we would see just how wicked we actually are.
- B. And this brings us to the last point. Paul writes, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.”
- 1. Again, this doesn't mean that we are not required by God to keep the Law.
 - a. Remember, the reason that the one in the flesh is hostile towards God is that he cannot submit to His Law. Paul wrote in Romans 8:6-8, “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; **for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.**”
 - b. And the reason the Lord sent His Son into the world was to cleanse us of our guilt of breaking of the Law, and to give us the ability to keep it by His Spirit. Again, he writes, “For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (8:3-4).
 - c. The Spirit is the Spirit of holiness. He works holiness in us by giving us a desire for it. This moves us from a position of being coerced by the Law, to wanting to keep it because we love it.
 - d. Edwards writes, “By their having this principle [the Spirit of Christ], so far as it prevails, they are above the need of the exaction of the law, and therefore are such as the law was not given for, and are not aimed at in the law, and there are not under the law (1 Tim. 1:9). They have a spirit of love and trust, that fulfills the thing that is aimed at by the law, as in the 14th and 16th verses of the context. They don't need the exaction of the law to drive 'em to their duty, for so far as they are led by the Spirit, they are of themselves naturally inclined to the same things that the law

requires, and derive strength from God according to his promises to fulfill them. The fruits of the Spirit are such as they, by the Spirit without the law, are inclined and enabled to, such as love, joy, peace, etc., are such as the law is not against; as in the 22nd and 23rd verses of the context, ‘against such there is no law’” (15:113-14).

- e. Not being under the Law, then, does not mean that it is no longer relevant for our lives.
2. What it does mean is that we are no longer under the Law as a system of works to be saved by, and are therefore no longer under its curse for breaking it.
 - a. Paul wrote earlier, “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO PERFORM THEM’” (Gal. 3:10).
 - b. But, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us-- for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE"- - in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13-14).
 - c. The result then is that our good works, though they be imperfect, are received as though perfect through the mediation of Christ. They are no longer condemned for being tainted with sin.
 - d. Calvin wrote, “In the way of the Lord believers are apt to stumble. But let them not be discouraged, because they are unable to satisfy the demands of the law. Let them listen to the consolatory declaration of the apostle, which is also found in other parts of his writings, (Rom. 6:14,) *you are not under the law*. Hence it follows, that the performances of their duties is not rejected on account of their present defects, but is accepted in the sight of God, as if it had been in every respect perfect and complete” (22:163-4).
 - e. Our *Confession* states it in this way, “Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in Him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unreprouable in God's sight; but that He, looking upon them in His Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections” (16.6).
 - f. And so, even though there is this warfare going on within us which keeps us from doing all that we would desire to do for Christ, yet there is power over the deeds of the flesh, there is growth in sanctification, and there is acceptance by God through the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - g. In the light of these blessings, let us then push forward with all of our might towards Christ-likeness. Let us use the means of grace for our growth in grace. And let us strive to put all of the remaining corruption in our souls to death. May the Lord grant us the willingness to do so. Amen.