

VICTORY OVER SIN – An Explanatory Footnote (Part-sixteen of a sixteen-part study)

Galatians 5:16-17 has become an important applicational factor in experiencing victory over sin, as well as helping us to gain a better understanding of Romans 6-8. Notice what Paul says there:

“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.”

I will attempt to explain the process laid out for us by Paul here, with the use of an analogy which portrays the role of the Spirit in its opposition to the flesh. There are three “entities” depicted in these two verses: the believer, the Holy Spirit and the flesh. The Christian is being given a command by Paul to “walk by the Spirit.” The verb “walk” is rendered in the present active imperative and references our daily conduct. The present tense indicates a continual, habitual action. The believer is fully capable of obeying this directive due to the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit at the moment of conversion. We are provided with a new nature, and a will that is free from any bondage to sin, fully desiring to live for Christ. As a result, we can now respond in a positive manner to the Holy Spirit’s control over our lives. As we submit to that control, we are empowered by the Spirit to live a life of obedience to God; which includes victory over sin. Or, as Paul states it at the end of v16 – **“and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.”**

Galatians 5:16 is rather straightforward. It is v17 that requires some additional explanation. Paul reveals to us that there exists a conflict within the believer between the Spirit and the flesh. They are in opposition to one another. But based on what Paul tells us in v16, this spiritual hostility doesn’t always spill over into the believer’s life. We can certainly feel tempted from within (James 1:13-15), but not in the constant state of spiritual warfare that is portrayed in v17. However, the contingency for steering clear of the desires of the flesh, involves walking by the Spirit. When we do, it’s as if He shields us from the flesh by fulfilling the role of a spiritual bodyguard. On the other hand, when we move out from under the Spirit’s control, consciously choosing to do our will and not God’s, then we expose ourselves and become vulnerable to the onslaughts of the sin nature.

Remember, the sin nature has not been eradicated or made permanently dormant. It is a defeated foe as a result of the redemptive work of our Savior. But in spite of its lack of authority in determining our behavior, it has become a sore-loser insurrectionist, who never ceases to look for an opportunity to bring us down. Or, as Paul writes at the end of v17 – **“so that you may not do the things that you please.”** Have you noticed how Paul so matter-of-factly records vv16-17? This is in stark contrast to his high level of frustration on display in Romans 7:14-25. Why? Galatians was written ten years PRIOR to Romans; with 7:14-25 serving as the candid expression of the apostle’s frustration over the sin nature’s endless and malicious presence in his life. Paul’s desire is to move on from it with his new identity in Christ. But he can’t, as sin continues to taint everything he thinks, says and does. I will close this footnote with a quote from a commentary on Romans, written by James Montgomery Boice, taken from volume two and page 762 –

“In other words, to say, ‘I have passed out of Romans 7 into Romans 8,’ is not the mark of a mature Christian but of an immature one. The mature Christian knows that he is always in Romans 7 apart from the Holy Spirit. Moreover, he knows that dependence on the Holy Spirit is not something that is attained once for all but is the result of a daily struggle and a constantly renewed commitment. What is sanctification? Is it an awareness of how good we are becoming? Or is it a growing sense of how sinful we really are, so that we will constantly turn to and depend upon Jesus Christ? If we are mature in Christ, we know it is the latter.”