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Galatians 5:13-21
Tenth Message
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THE FUTILITY OF THE FLESH

We have come to a key passage in the New Testament. So important is this text from the book of Galatians we will take two messages to cover it.

As we approach this passage I am reminded of an incident from C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. In the fourth book, *Prince Caspian*, Lucy finally is reunited with Aslan, the lion which symbolizes Christ:

As she again gazed into his large wise face, he said, "Welcome, child."

"Aslan," said Lucy, "you're bigger."

"That is because you are older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."¹

I pray that as a result of these studies in Galatians your view of God is becoming larger; and that you are sensing to a greater degree the assurance of his love and the power of his grace in your daily life.

One reason we don't experience these blessings is that we are too self-sufficient. We don't realize that we don't have what it takes to become godlike. As someone has said, we are perilously adequate. David Roper put it this way, "We go our way believing in ourselves, our own power and personality, relying on our own strength and show. But our self-confidence is our stumbling block. We are so good at what we do, we are no good at all."² In terms of eternal significance, unaided humanity is useless.

Our text will show that only God can make us godlike. We know what it means to be good. We agree that qualities like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are well worth pursuing. The question is not what is good but, how can we be good?

Our passage begins in 5:13 with the word "For." Paul has been very upset with the Judaizers who were laying the law on new believers in Galatia, frustrating God's work in their lives. Christians are called to be free! That is Paul's message throughout this book. We are free from the penalty of sin, free from the guilty conscience that comes from living under the law, and free from the domination and power of sin. We are free to fail without being disapproved by God. Even when we sin, God will still love us. But we must not use that freedom to sin as an excuse to sin.

Paul begins by giving insight into the nature of true freedom.

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. (Galatians 5:13-15 NASB)

The word translated "opportunity" is used in military contexts for a base of operations, i.e. a place from which an offensive is launched. Paul is speaking about using freedom as a pretext. Freedom in Christ is not to be used as an excuse for self-indulgence. Although there is freedom to sin in terms of God's acceptance and love, as John Stott writes, "Christian freedom is freedom *from* sin, not freedom *to* sin."³ Freedom to do whatever our flesh desires is not freedom at all; that is slavery. Real freedom is the power to do what we were created for. When some people talk about a "free life" they are really talking about bondage to their own desires, to which they continually give in simply because they can't control them.

True freedom, according to Paul, is defined by service, not selfishness. In our old life we used people and loved things, but now we are free to love people and use things. We are not free to abuse, hurt and manipulate people but to love them. Instead of serving ourselves we have been set free from all the old inclinations that made us center on ourselves, to care about others.

Paul goes on to say that when we understand what it means to love others, then we are fulfilling the law. The whole law can be summed up in a single commandment: if you love your neighbor you won't covet his wife, or you won't lie to him. All of the commandments are summed up in love, because that is the character of God. The love of God is behind all the laws in the Old Testament, all of which are summed up in that one commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

So Paul's exhortation is that we have been set free from our past, from slavery to selfishness, in order to love and serve and give ourselves to others. If we use that freedom to exploit people, if we go around taking chunks out of them, then we will end up destroying one another. Because of God's unconditional love for us we are free to focus on others and their needs.

But how do we do that, when by nature and inclination we love ourselves first? Paul tells us how, in verses 16-18:

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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. (5:16-18)

Notice that Paul is talking about two elements, the flesh and the Spirit, that are in conflict with one another. The NIV translates that word "flesh" as "sinful nature." I think flesh is a better translation. Here it is mentioned five times, and "Spirit" seven. Paul is not referring to some part of us that is sinful, a sinful nature, but our entire humanity.

What is the flesh? Is it our skin, or our bodies? Is it some part of us that is evil? Paul uses the term to refer to our essential humanity. David Roper defines the flesh in this way, "It is what we are, what others have made of us, and what we have made of ourselves apart from the grace of God."⁴ I find that definition helpful. We enter this world with certain genetic inclinations. Some have better genes than others, but no one has perfect genes. Some of those genes show up in physical afflictions, or certain phobias, obsessions and various inclinations toward habitual behavior.

It's easy for some to fall into certain habits. You may have been born with an inclination toward having a bad temper, or being depressed. All of these are part of our fallen humanity. We enter this world twisted and distorted. That is what theologians mean when they talk about original sin. They are not saying we sin in original ways. Original sin means that we are sinful in our origins. We come into the world with a proclivity for wrongdoing. We're like a baseball with a spin on it: sooner or later we break, and the break is down and out.

And we are dependent on people who are fleshly as well. They have bents, too. They do things that are harmful to us. Some of you were abused as children, either physically or sexually abused. Others were victimized by relatives, teachers, coaches, or bosses. People cause tremendous hurt and damage by their behavior.

We not only have these inherited tendencies, we do terrible things to ourselves as well. We abuse our bodies with drugs; we get up early and go to bed late and damage our health. The flesh is what we are because of our genetic structure, our heredity, what we ourselves and others have done to us. It is our essential humanity, everything we are apart from the grace of God.

But we also have inside of us a hunger for something more, what Pascal called a "God-shaped vacuum" that only God can fill. When we finally realize how much we need God because of our self-centeredness; when we understand that he sent his own Son to die in our

place; and when we ask Jesus to be our Lord and Savior, then the Spirit of Christ comes to dwell inside us. That is when we are regenerated: we are born again from above. God himself indwells our basic sinful humanity.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul describes this as a "treasure inside an earthen vessel." This sets off the conflict between the Spirit of God and our fundamental humanity. Look at how Paul puts it 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, so that you may not do the things that you please." That struggle will go on for as long as we live in these bodies. There will always be conflict, hurt and pain and struggle.

I cringe when preachers say that God promises that Christians will be financially successful; that every sin will be eradicated from their bodies in this life; that if they learn certain principles they will know the secret to living the spiritual life successfully. God doesn't promise those things. The Christian life is a fight, a civil war. We are engaged in a cosmic struggle. If we thought that becoming a Christian was going to make life easier, we may discover, at least in the initial stages, that it becomes harder, because that conflict suddenly becomes very real.

Listen to what Paul says:

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. (5:19-21)

This is what happens when we try harder. The deeds of the flesh are evident, says Paul. This list has three divisions: sexual, religious, and relational sins. The first group, sexual sins: *immorality, impurity, sensuality*. Immorality, the word from which we get our word fornication, is a broad term that refers to any sexual activity outside of marriage. Impurity originally referred to something that was physically dirty, but the word later developed ethical overtones; it means defiled, filthy. Sensuality has the idea of contempt for any standard of decency. It describes people who no longer care what others think, but flaunt their illicit sexual acts.

The second division involves religious sins: *idolatry and sorcery*. Idolatry is the worship of creation rather than the Creator. The word pharmaceutical is derived from sorcery. Originally it had medical connotations, but then it became associated with occultism and witchcraft. So drugs and witchcraft, tampering with the powers of evil, became mingled, as they often do today.

The third group involves social or relational sins. Paul lists examples of the breakdown in personal relationships. I won't comment on every one of these, be-

cause most of these words are self-explanatory. This is a reminder of why there is no peace in our world. There are *enmities*: meanness and a spirit of intolerance, an unforgiving and hostile attitude toward others. As a result there is *strife* (quarreling), *jealousy*, *outbursts of anger* (fits of rage), *disputes*, *dissensions*, *factions*, *envying*—an attitude of “us versus them.” This is a description of the prejudice, sexism and elitism that characterize our world today.

Paul ends the list with two characteristics which demonstrate how our depravity turns God’s good gifts of pleasure into wickedness: drunkenness, and carousings. Drunkenness is a sin. The Bible teaches moderation with respect to alcohol. “Carousings” refers to orgies (NIV).

The apostle adds a word of warning: “which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (5:21b). Paul is not saying that people who lapse into these things will void their relationship with God; he is referring to those who practice them. The NIV translates the verb in verse 21 as “live,” but “practice” is a better word. The apostle is saying that if we justify any of these behaviors; if we defend or encourage them; if we commit adultery and justify it; if we continue to refuse to repent over our sin, there is a good chance that we have never been regenerated.

He is not saying that we may lose our salvation, but that we are not Christian. When the Spirit of God inhabits our flesh he will not let us get away with defending and justifying these things. All of us have committed at least one of these ten sins and have felt miserable because of it. We hunger and thirst after righteousness, and that is the mark of regeneration. If we go on protecting this kind of behavior and are unwilling to deal with it, however, then we may not have come to Christ at all.

What an apt description of the flesh! It never changes, even when we become religious. That is why nothing external can help with this problem. Rules don’t work. They can’t change us; they only make matters worse.

Reading books and attending conferences, which are often nothing more than self-help methods to deodorize our flesh, won’t help, either. The problem lies deep within us. In our determination to right some wrong we may read the Bible more, or pray, or go to church more regularly, but as good as these activities are they can’t change us. They can only draw us closer to the One who can.

At times God uses severe measures to teach us this truth. He wears down our noble resolve through the frustrations of life. He allows our cherished projects to flounder. The wheels fall off our cleverly contrived programs; our dreams go belly up. He does this so that we can learn that most precious of all his premises: that we can’t! All of this happens so that we might learn true confidence in dependence. When “can-do” can’t, God tells us that he can, and therefore we can. Our strength, our ability to be God’s men and women, to be what he has called us to be, flow from our relationship with him and our dependence on him. It takes God to make us godlike in the world.

An honest and humble admission of the hopeless evil of our flesh is the beginning of fruitfulness. Many of us struggle because we have too high an opinion of ourselves. But we will never cry for deliverance unless we first see our wretchedness. Before we can know the fertility of the Spirit we must be convinced of the futility of the flesh. When we come to the place, as Paul did in Romans 7, when he cried out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” then we are ready for an even greater cry, a cry of victory: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” We will look at that victory in our next study.

1. C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, “The Chronicles of Narnia” (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 124.
2. David Roper, *A Burden Shared* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1992), 16.
3. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1968), 149.
4. David Roper, *How God Makes Us Good* (sermon preached at Cole Community Church, Boise, ID, March 10th, 1991).

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