

DON'T INDULGE THE OLD NATURE

5 ¹³You were called for freedom, brothers, only do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the sinful nature [to express itself]; rather, serve one another with love—¹⁴for the whole law is fulfilled in one commandment, [namely] this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵But if you bite and devour each other, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another. ¹⁶Now I tell you, walk by the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the lust of the sinful nature. ¹⁷The sinful nature lusts for what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is contrary to the sinful nature, for they are in conflict with one another; consequently, you cannot do the things you desire. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. ¹⁹Now the works of the sinful nature are well known, [such as]: sexual immorality, moral impurity, debauchery, ²⁰idolatry, witchcraft, hatreds, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, orgies, and other such things. I warn you [again], just as I [previously] warned you, that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, integrity, ²³meekness, self-control. Against such things [as these] there is no law. ²⁴Now those who belong to Christ have crucified the sinful nature along with its passions and lusts. (Gal. 5:13-24)

Note: Throughout this passage the phrase translated, “*the sinful nature*,” is literally, “*the flesh*” (σαρξ). The contrast is between the Spirit, (the Holy Spirit reproducing the character of God in the Christian and causing him to live in accordance with the life of the kingdom of God,) and the flesh, (representing the lifestyle and desires of this present world that are under the dominion of sin and are at enmity against God.)

Introduction

Margaret Zelk was a very fascinating woman. She was born in 1876 at Leeuwarden in the Netherlands. She married an officer of the Dutch colonial army and accompanied him to the Dutch East Indies.

While her husband was stationed in the East Indies, Margaret learned the exotic oriental dances of that strange and mysterious place. Eventually, Margaret divorced her husband, sailed back to Europe, and with the stage name of Mata Hari, became famous as an exotic dancer.

When World War I broke out, Margaret became a secret agent for the German government. She was eventually caught and brought to trial. In July of 1917 she was convicted of being a spy and sentenced to death. Her sentence was carried out three months later. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 14, p. 1050)

Now suppose that at her trial, this glamorous and exotic woman had claimed freedom of speech as her defense: in passing on to the Germans the military secrets of the Allies she was merely exercising her freedom of speech. If she had offered such a defense the courts would have informed her that such was an intolerable

misuse and abuse of her freedom. She may not use her freedom to assist the enemies of her nation in their efforts to conquer her homeland and destroy the very culture that has given her her freedom. No. Aiding and abetting the enemy, working in opposition to one's homeland, is not an acceptable use of one's freedom.

The Apostle Paul is addressing a similar type of misuse of spiritual freedom here in Galatians 5:13-24, "*brothers ... do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the sinful nature to express itself.*" In other words, do not use this freedom to indulge the sinful nature. Literally, he writes, "*do not allow the freedom to become a stronghold for the old sinful nature*"—a base of operations from which it can assault and drive back the life of godliness.

We as Christians must never view our spiritual freedom as a license that gives the old nature permission to fulfill its sinful desires. Because the old sinful nature is in opposition to the life of God, we may not indulge that old nature.

I. Don't Indulge the Old Nature, ...Because It is Contrary to the Holy Spirit (5:19-23,13-15)

In verses 15-19 Paul presents a partial list of "*the works of the sinful nature;*" that is to say, the actions and attitudes naturally produced by men in their state of sin. Note Matthew 15:19-20a, where the Lord Jesus addresses the source of sinful conduct, tracing it back to the heart of unregenerated man: "*out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.*"²⁰*These are what make a man 'unclean.'*" Let us consider more closely those attitudes and actions the Apostle Paul identifies as "*the works of the sinful nature.*"

"*Sexual immorality*"—included here are all types of sexual relationships outside the bonds of marriage. This was hardly considered a vice in the pagan world, but all such immoral activity is strongly reprovved by the Word of God, note Ephesians 5:3-7,

But fornication, indeed, all moral impurity, or covetousness, should not even be mentioned among you, as is proper for saints. ⁴Nor [should there be any] indecent behavior or foolish talk or vulgarity, such things are not appropriate; but rather, [let there be] the giving of thanks. ⁵Of this you can be certain, no immoral or impure person nor any greedy man—who is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷Therefore do not be a participant with them in their sins.
(Eph. 5:3-7)

"*Moral impurity*"—any form of moral uncleanness or impurity; unnatural and perverted forms of sexual conduct. Scripture indicates that when immorality becomes a way of life it is accompanied by a degeneration into perversity, note Jude 7, "*Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to*

sexual immorality and perversion.” When he speaks of “*perversion,*” from its connection with Sodom and Gomorrah, it is clear that Jude is referring to homosexuality.

“*Debauchery*”—wantonness; the casting off of all moral restraints; the abandonment and loss of moral self-control, note 1 Peter 4:3-4,

You have spent enough time in the past doing what the Gentiles choose to do: living for debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and detestable idolatry. ⁴[Engaged] in such [a lifestyle], they think that it is strange for you not to plunge with them into the same flood of dissolute living. (1 Pet. 4:3-4)

“*Idolatry*”—the worship of false gods and the images used to represent such gods. The term “idolatry” does not occur in pagan literature because they do not make a distinction between the true God and the false gods of the world. In contrast to the view of the world, note Romans 1:25, “*They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*” In 1 Corinthians 10:20 the Apostle Paul informs us of the spiritual powers present within the idolatries of the world: “*the sacrifices of the Gentiles are being offered to demons, not to God; and I do not want you to have communion with demons.*”

“*Witchcraft*”—tapping into the unholy supernatural (the occult,) usually with the malicious intent of cursing one’s enemies or seeking to know the future for one’s own personal benefit.

“*Hatreds*”—all forms and varieties of hatred and malice, note 1 John 3:11-12a, “*This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ¹²Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother.*”

“*Discord*”—contention, antagonism; either in the form of burning coals concealed under a bed of superficial congeniality, or as a blazing fire of open hostility.

“*Jealousy*”—an intense attitude of ill will directed against someone not because of any wrong they have done, but simply because of who they are or what they possess.

“*Fits of rage*”—uncontrolled outbursts of anger; volcanic explosions of hatred spewing out of the depths of the heart.

“*Selfish ambition*”—self-seeking, self-ambition; the total commitment of one’s self to one’s own personal interests and ambitions, without regard for one’s neighbor and his well-being; the willingness to do anything, to use anyone, to achieve one’s own goals and get one’s own way.

“Dissensions”—disunity; often perpetrated by means of gossip or slander and stemming from such motives as vengeance, jealousy, self-ambition or maliciousness. Consider the LORD’s attitude toward all such sinful impulses and activities,

There are six things that Jehovah hates; indeed, seven things that are detestable to him: ¹⁷haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, ^{18a} heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are swift in running to mischief, ^{19a} false witness who utters lies, and a man who sows discord among brothers.
(Prov. 6:16-19)

“Factions”—groups that are antagonistic towards each other and isolated from one another; many times factions become the formal result of a divisive spirit.

“Envy”—all sinful and life dominating desires to possess the things God has granted to someone else and to which we have no right.

“Drunkenness”—the failure to exercise self-control and, consequently, allowing one’s self to come under the control of intoxicating drink and its accompanying evils: immorality, vulgarity, profanity, violence, blasphemy, and hostility.

“Orgies”—carousings; wild and unrestrained partying that has no respect for the boundaries of decency and morality; the search for immoral encounters, oftentimes stimulated by intoxication.

In contrast to *“the works of the sinful nature,”* in verses 22-23 the apostle presents *“the fruit of the Spirit.”* That is to say, the attitudes and attributes produced by the Holy Spirit as He works in the life of the Christian. Let us now give more careful consideration to those holy and God-pleasing attributes.

“Love”—the giving of one’s self for another, regardless of personal cost, motivated by goodwill and a genuine concern for the well-being of the other person, note Ephesians 5:1-2a, *“become imitators of God, as beloved children, ²and walk in love, just as Christ also loved us and gave himself up for us.”*

“Joy”—the experience of being in the blessed presence of God; not meeting God as Judge, but knowing Him as Savior, Father, and Friend; and having one’s life permeated by this sense of blessing, note Psalm 21:1,3,6, which speaks of the blessing enjoyed by Christ, and that He shares with all those who belong to Him:

O Jehovah, the king rejoices in your strength; and in your salvation, how greatly he rejoices ... ³You welcome him with rich blessings, and place a crown of pure gold on his head ... ⁶You have made him most blessed forever, you make him glad with joy in your presence. (Psl. 21:1,3,6)

“Peace”—resting in the protective presence of God; possessing the assurance of divine pardon and acquittal on the Judgment Day; possessing the assurance of God’s sustaining, delivering presence throughout this life, and having one’s life governed by this blessed relationship with God.

“Patience”—the ability to endure under trial and the ability to maintain a conciliatory spirit in the face of a hostile spirit.

“Kindness”—treating others with gentleness, compassion, tenderness, and dignity, note Ephesians 4:31-32,

Get rid of all bitterness and rage and anger and clamor and slander, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other just as God by Christ forgave you. (Eph. 4:31-32)

“Goodness”—exhibiting the qualities of honesty, fairness, purity, and wholesomeness in one’s personal life and especially in one’s dealings with others. Consider the Apostle Paul’s testimony of how he conducted himself while ministering to the Thessalonians, *“You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed”* (1 Thess. 2:10.)

“Integrity”—dependability, honesty and commitment to our word in our dealings with others, faithfulness to our vows.

“Meekness”—a humble, teachable, cooperative spirit; as opposed to a proud, defiant, self-willed spirit, note James 3:17, *“the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”*

“Self-control”—the ability to bring one’s passions and conduct under the authority and the will of God, as opposed to unleashing them for sinful expression.

These two distinct lists of attitudes, attributes, and conduct represent two distinct orientations of heart and life that are mutually exclusive and contrary to one another: the life of sinfulness and the life of godliness. These two distinct lists of attitudes, attributes, and conduct are derived from two distinct origins: the sinful human heart and nature on the one hand, and the Holy Spirit of God on the other, and they finally result in two distinct outcomes. Concerning *“the works of the sinful nature,”* the Apostle Paul writes, *“I warn you [again], just as I [previously] warned you, that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God”* (vs. 21b.) But with regard to *“the fruit of the Spirit,”* he writes, *“Against such things [as these] there is no law”* (vs. 23b.) Indeed, these things are the fulfillment of the law.

Let us not indulge the old sinful nature, because it is completely contrary to the Holy Spirit and the life of God.

II. Don't Indulge the Old Nature, ...Because It has been Crucified (5:24)

In verse 24 the apostle announces the victory over the sinful nature: *“those who belong to Christ have crucified the sinful nature along with its passions and lusts.”*

Victory is presented here as an accomplished fact: the sinful nature was crucified (past tense.) It is a victory that is comprehensive and total: the sinful nature, together with “its passions and lusts,” has been crucified. It is victory that was secured in one moment in time: the sinful nature was crucified (the Greek aorist tense of the verb, “to crucify,” indicates an event that happened in a moment of history; this was not a process that was finally accomplished over a period of time.) It is victory that was won by Christ at the cross of Calvary. When the Lord Jesus cried out, *“It is finished”* (Jn. 19:30,) the victory over the devil, the world and the flesh was won forever. It is victory that belongs to the Christian because of his relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ: when one puts his faith in Jesus he becomes spiritually united to Christ, becoming joined to Christ in His death and resurrection, note Galatians 2:20, *“I have been crucified with Christ: it is no longer I who live, but Christ living in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”*

The truth of this verse must cause us as Christians, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, to view our relationship to our old sinful nature in a radically new and different way. We must no longer view ourselves as being a helpless victim of the sinful nature who must inevitably yield to its demands. We must recognize that we now share in the victory of the Lord Jesus that He has won over the sinful nature.

By way of illustration: To the man who is outside of Christ and has no part in Christ's victory won at Calvary, the sinful nature may be viewed as a big “grizzly bear” that pounces upon him, overwhelming him and to whom he willingly and culpably yields. But to the Christian, the one who belongs to Christ and shares in His victory, the sinful nature may be viewed as having become a big “grizzly bear rug.” Consequently, the Christian must not crawl under that “rug” and cry out in self-excusing despair that he is a helpless victim who cannot help but be dominated by the big “grizzly bear” of the old sinful nature. Now, whenever the big “grizzly bear” of the old sinful nature attacks him, the Christian must remember the victory won by Christ and trust Him to apply that victory in this present conflict with the sinful nature, yielding himself to the Holy Spirit.

Let us not indulge the old nature, because, by virtue of our relationship to Jesus Christ, our old nature has been crucified.

III. Don't Indulge the Old Nature, ...Rather, Combat It by the Holy Spirit (5:16-18)

According to verse 13, the sinful nature desires to establish itself in the Christian's life; the apostle writes, "*do not allow this freedom to become an opportunity [literally, a stronghold] for the sinful nature*"—i.e.; a base of operations from which it can assault and drive back the life of godliness.

The old sinful nature wickedly seeks to take Christian freedom and pervert it into a base of operations from which to carry out its evil activities. It does so by seeking to convince us that freedom from the just demand of the law (namely, punishment for our sins) also includes freedom from the righteous demand of the law (namely, a life that complies with God's righteousness.) But as a corrective to this perverse contention, note Romans 8:3b-4,

God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, ⁴in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:3b-4)

According to verse 16 the sinful nature desires to fulfill its lust in the Christian's life; Paul exhorts us to "*walk by the Spirit,*" so that we "*will not fulfill the lust of the sinful nature.*" The old sinful nature desires to have its impulses and passions indulged and have those sinful actions become habitual practices that form into an ungodly lifestyle that will eventually meet its just reward of punishment. This is the insight into the intentions of the sinful nature provided by the Apostle James:

... each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. ¹⁵Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (Jas. 1:14-15)

According to verse 17, the sinful nature desires to "sabotage" God's will for the Christian's life:

The sinful nature lusts for what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is contrary to the sinful nature, for they are in conflict with one another; consequently, you cannot do the things you desire. (Gal. 5:17)

The sinful nature is hostile against the Spirit of God and all He desires to do in the Christian's life: "*the sinful nature lusts for what is contrary to the Spirit.*" That old nature stands in opposition to all that the Spirit of God is and does; the two are mutually exclusive in their whole orientation: it is the mutual antagonism of holiness and sinfulness (vs. 17b.) The old nature desires to prevent the Christian from doing the will of God (vs. 17c.)

According to verse 16 the way of victory is to *“walk by the Spirit.”* The Christian must yield to the Holy Spirit’s will and direction. Through the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, the LORD describes the Holy Spirit’s guidance in these terms: *“when you turn aside to the right or to the left, with your ears you will hear a voice behind you saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it’”* (Isa. 30:21.) By the grace of God, we must heed the Spirit’s call and submit to His guidance. The Christian must rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit to successfully combat the sinful nature; as the LORD informs us through the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, *“Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, declares Jehovah of hosts”* (Zech. 4:6b.) The Apostle Paul gives the following warning and promise: *“if you live according to the sinful nature, you must die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live”* (Rom. 8:13.)

It may seem strange that the sinful nature—which, with regard to the Christian, has been crucified—still carries out a campaign against the Christian. But Scripture teaches that although we as believers have been crucified with Christ and have received a new heart from God, nevertheless, the remnants of our old sinful nature still cling to us in this present life and must be combated by the person and power of the Holy Spirit. By way of illustration: Whereas formerly we had a “cancerous heart” that spread its poison to every part of the body, now we have had a “heart transplant,” having received a new heart from God. But we must still combat the cancer of the old sinful nature that resides within our body.

Let us not indulge the old nature, on the contrary, let us combat the remnants of that sinful nature by means of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

Because the old sinful nature is in opposition to the life of God, we may not indulge that nature and its desires. On the contrary, we as Christians must rejoice in the victory of Christ and rely upon the Holy Spirit to increasingly apply that victory to every aspect of our daily lives.