

What is the nature of the Christian's battle against sin?

Lesson 9

Put yourself at home alone one evening watching a movie on TV. It takes only a moment for you to realize that this is not a show for a Christian to be watching. You are immediately aware that this movie's goal is to stir you to sexual lust. You know you shouldn't be watching it, but you're hooked. What do you do?

Option a:

You think of your reputation. What if somebody caught me watching this? I'd better turn it off. I don't want to, but I don't dare take a chance. So you lower the blinds, lock the doors and with a guilty feeling sit through the movie. Before getting into bed you quote I John 1:9 and ask God to forgive you.

Option b:

You're sitting there absorbed in the movie when the thought hits you, "God is watching me. I'm sure I don't want his heavy hand on me. He can be pretty tough." So reluctantly you turn the switch off, taking one last, longing look.

Option c:

Although absorbed in the movie you begin to say to yourself, "What would Jesus do if Jesus were here? I am most certainly disappointing Jesus by watching this thing. I don't have to yield to this thing. By the power of the Holy Spirit, I will reject what I am doing." And by sheer will power you walk to the set and shut it off.

Which, if any of these options is the victory the Gospel offers? Keep these options in mind as you work through this lesson. Be diligent in this study—it is not easy. As you read, ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart to the glorious power of the Gospel against indwelling sin.

Studying

Read Galatians 5.16-25

Take a separate piece of paper and write out your answer to the questions:

1. a) What are these two "natures" in every Christian, according to Paul?
b) What is the main way they influence us?
c) Which nature does the Christian truly "want" and why? Vs.16-18
2. Notice what is opposed to the Spirit in v. 16 and what is opposed to the Spirit in v.18. What does this tell us about how the "sinful nature" or "flesh" actually operates?
3. Break the "works" of the flesh into categories. What do you learn about the human heart from the list? About yourself? Vs.19-21.

Reading

Read the following article making your annotations in the margin.

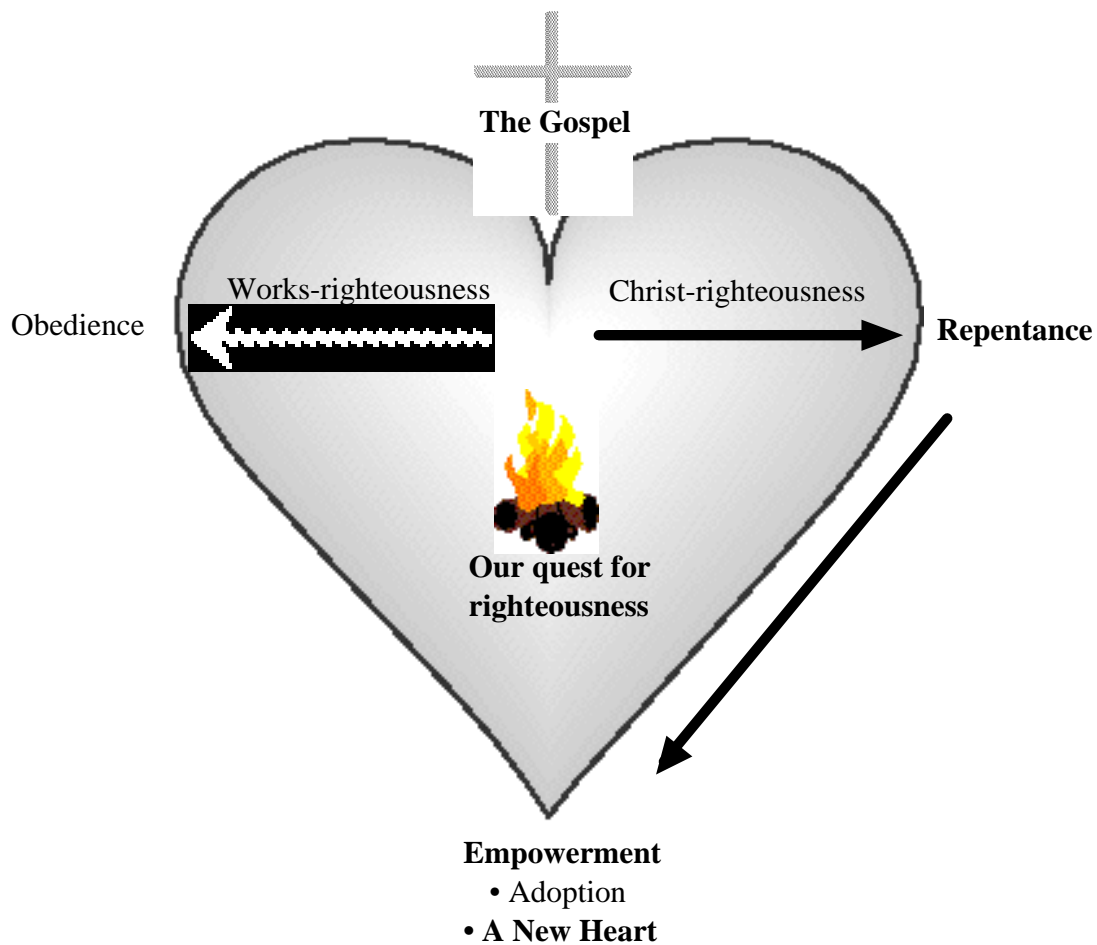
Empowerment

The Battle Within

By Paul Thompson

What is the difference between the struggle of a saved and an unsaved person with sin? Some say the difference is inward peace. The Christian is someone who has moved beyond the sweat and grime of battle and has been transported into blissful serenity. If a new Christian has this expectation, he will be sadly disappointed and may be tempted to think his new life is a fraud. So I say it clearly and loudly: the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is not the difference between war and peace. It's the difference between hope and despair. Both the unsaved and the saved are in a fierce battle, but the Christian has a resource that guarantees victory. To understand this difference is understand the gospel, so it's extremely important that we examine these two battles.

What is the battle for the non-Christian? There is within every person, saved or unsaved, a duality of good and evil. An unsaved person is not totally bad. Created in the image of a holy God, fallen



man has within him a desire for goodness, a virtuous self. He admires virtue and endeavors to be moral and upright. Paul as an unsaved, religious Pharisee says of himself, “as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:6). Paul’s whole goal as a religious man was to do good and thus earn points with God. The good the unsaved does, however, must never obscure the fact that there is an evil self lurking deep within his heart. Each person has both a virtuous self that moves toward good, and a wicked self that is more evil than he could ever imagine.

What we get from modern psychology, television shows and movies is a different picture. The popular view presents, on one extreme, a few very spiritual giants. These are people so kind, so wonderful, so virtuous, so spiritual that they excel above all else in goodness. These are the celebrated saints, our Mother Teresa’s—the kinds of people who somehow overcame evil and have become goodwill ambassadors to the world. On the other extreme, there are a few very evil people. These are the genocidal maniacs, the psychopaths, the serial killers, rapists, arsonists and terrorists. In the middle you have some who may have a tendency to be bad because they have been abused or oppressed, and then you have the great majority who are basically good. Popular culture says that man is at core good unless in some way or another badness has been provoked and planted within him.

In contrast, the Biblical picture of man is incredibly dark. Although the virtuous self is capable of great moral feats, a wicked self lurks within the shadows of his heart. The Bible uses the term “desperately wicked” to describe man’s heart. Within every human being is the capacity for great good, but also an evil that is deceitful and riddled with selfishness.

How does this evil work? All through Paul’s writings you have the word translated “lust” in most Bibles. Modern translations use the word “desires” (Gal. 5:16; Eph. 2:3, 4:19; I Peter 2:11; I Jn.2:16; James 1:14). Whatever word is used, it is the key to understanding our deepest motivations. The actual term Paul used, “epiphemia”, like many Greek words is composed of two parts, the preposition “epi,” which means “over” and “phemia,” which means “desire”.

Let me quote verses 16 and 17 of Galatians 5, so you can read it for yourself. *“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.”*

We have a problem with meanings here because the old word “lust” usually connotes sex, but the word Paul uses is much broader than sex. And the word “desire” is far too weak. Some versions use the idea of “sinful desires,” which also is misleading because it makes all these desires to be bad. An “over-desire” is quite simply a very strong, compulsive urge. It can be a desire for something evil, but it can just as easily be a desire for something good. The point is that this over-desire is an enslaving, dominating, persistent, driving energy. It says to you, “I have to have this or I can’t live.” Many of our “over-desires” are very normal every day desires like love, children, achievement and security that have become excessive and controlling.

These over-desires, says Paul, create the energy that is at the root of all our motivation. Sin functions in the heart to distort and twist. It takes something good and latches on to it making it obsessive. When Scriptures speak of covetousness, it refers to this grasping tendency and labels it idolatry. That is why Paul, when he realized the covetous nature of his heart, was so devastated (Rom. 7:14). Even his climb toward morality had become for him an idol. This was the motive behind his anger at the early Christians. What they were saying about grace was destroying the whole premise of his consuming drive to be good.

The battle for the unsaved person is hopeless because he struggles constantly between two equally combating powers—the conscientious wanting to be good self, and the covetous-doing evil self. Both of these selves are equally the person and both have power over his life. Try as he may, he cannot free himself from them. This hopelessness is further complicated by the standard of good he tries to live by. The law judges all the good he does and it is never good enough. He is trying reach something unattainable. The law and its impossible demands are always dogging his every move. And most hopeless of all, he has only his will power to help him conquer. The unsaved person is in a battle he cannot possibly win.

The battle within the Christian rages, but it is markedly different. Galatians 5:16 is written to Christians and there is in these verses overwhelming good news. The first breath of hope comes in the opening line, “live by the Spirit.” As you read the verse you note the contrast Paul makes between Spirit and flesh. “Flesh” is the word the New Testament uses to refer to the sin-desiring, covetous aspect of our being. The Christian, says Paul, has the Spirit or we might say, a renewed heart enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Paul never says that becoming a Christian does away with the flesh. The flesh is very much with us. But for the Christian the battle front has changed; it is no longer between two competing natures—it is now between the old flesh and a whole new being created by the Holy Spirit.

There is more good news, easily overlooked, in verse 17. At the very end of the verse as he writes about the battle between flesh and Spirit, Paul says, “they are in conflict with each other so that you do not do what you want.” A Christian has a whole new want! A radical change has taken place in his being. The battle rages just the same and it is intense, but with a huge difference. The Christian has a new desire!

Like the unsaved, the Christian has two selves, but his virtuous self has been made alive by the Spirit so that his dominant want is to please God. His evil self has become a husk. The evil self is no longer a part of the real person, it has lost its power and becomes a vestigial remain. Now it’s not two warring natures, but a new nature with the husk of the old.

So, in the old warfare you have two selves who are equally you. Two equally combating powers—the conscientious, wanting good self and the covetous-doing evil self. But in the Christian warfare you have only one self, the true-you born of the Spirit, which is warring against the evil remains of your past, what the Bible calls the flesh.

But that is not all, there is more good news. As a Christian, something happens in your relationship to the law. The law in the unsaved person aggravates the problem. Moral education only tortures the person. The conscientious self submits to the law and the covetous self hates the law. When you become a Christian, the Gospel comes to you and changes your attitude toward the law. Before you were a Christian, the law was a necessary evil but now the law has become the way to please God. It can no longer condemn you because Jesus paid its penalty, and now you are free to obey the law and make it a guide for your life.

Reflecting

In your small group, discuss the result of your study of the scripture lesson, your reading, and interact with the following questions.

1. Get into the text of Galatians 5.16-25 by discussing together the questions asked above.
 2. Discuss together the differences described in the article between the battle against sin for the unsaved and for the saved. Why is the battle against sin for the unsaved hopeless? What makes the battle for the Christian filled with hope?
 3. What do you think it means in verses 24-25 when Paul speaks of “crucifying the flesh?”
 4. Review the case study at the beginning of the lesson and discuss the options given. Label each option and show the merits and objections to each one. In the light of Paul’s teaching in this passage what would you consider the gospel option?
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Applying

Optional – to do this project will entail an extra week

The Fruits of the Spirit project:

Project No. 9

Read through these definitions of the fruit of the Spirit seeking to understand each one, both negatively and positively. There may be some differences in the translation of these words from the Greek language, so look carefully at the definitions.

1. **Love:** Serving another person for their good and intrinsic value. *Opposite:* self-protection. *Counterfeit:* Attraction to a person for what he does for you.
2. **Joy:** Delight in God for the sheer beauty and worth of who he is. *Opposite:* hopelessness or despair. *Counterfeit:* Elation that comes with blessings based on circumstances.
3. **Peace:** Confidence and rest in the wisdom and sovereignty of God. *Opposite:* Anxiety. *Counterfeit:* Indifference, apathy.
4. **Patience:** Ability to take trouble without falling apart. *Opposite:* Resentment toward God. *Counterfeit:* Cynicism, self-righteousness.

5. **Kindness:** Practical generosity, sharing. *Opposite:* Envy. You are unable to rejoice in another's joy. *Counterfeit:* Manipulative good deeds.

6. **Goodness** (integrity): Honesty, transparency. *Opposite:* Phoniness, hypocrisy. *Counterfeit:* Truth without love, "telling it like it is" to get it off your chest.

7. **Faithfulness:** Loyalty, courage. *Opposite:* Opportunist, "fair weather friend". *Counterfeit:* Love without truth. You are agreeable when you should instead confront.

8. **Gentleness:** Self-forgetfulness. *Opposite:* Superiority, self-absorption. *Counterfeit:* Inferiority, self-consciousness.

9. **Self-control:** Ability to choose the urgent over the important. *Opposite:* A driven, impulsive, uncontrolled person. *Counterfeit:* Willpower through pride or through pure grit.

Private analysis and in your discussion group:

- As you study these "fruit," which one or two have you been growing in lately?
- Which of these "fruit" strikes you as a startling need in your life? You see a need to grow in this area.
- Discuss together the question: how do you grow in the "fruit of the Spirit?"