

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 23 July 2017. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

The Christian's War with the Flesh

Galatians 5:16-21

It has been 72 years since the terrible war here in Europe came to an end; and it has been 28 years since the Berlin Wall fell, and the so-called "Cold War" ended. In the decades that have unfolded since these events, we Western Europeans have almost developed amnesia about the reality of warfare. We receive continual, shocking images of the warfare that has been going on in Syria; yet, war still doesn't seem real to us. To most of us, war is something that is happening *over there* somewhere, but not here.

Well, I am here this morning to talk about *another* kind of war, which is raging *right here*, on our soil, at this very moment. It is fierce; and it is continual. Every born-again Christian is engaged in this war every single day, whether he's prepared for it or not. This war cannot be seen with human eyes; and for this reason, many Christians are almost oblivious to it. *Doctrinally*, Christians are aware of its existence; but too many Christians almost have the notion that this war is happening somewhere "out there," but not in their own lives. Yet, this war *is* just as real, and just as personal, as the ISIS conflict is to the Syrians.

Who, exactly, is the enemy in this war? Is it Satan? Well, in this war, the Christian *is* certainly fighting against that old arch-enemy of God, named Satan. Paul said that "***we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places***" (Ephesians 6:12). Without question, Satan is an extremely powerful foe, who is far more intelligent than we. Yet, as powerful as Satan is, and as skilled as he is in tempting people to sin, he is not the Christian's biggest enemy. The biggest and deadliest enemy that you are fighting against, Christian, is your own sinful flesh! That is what we will be talking about this morning. The title of this message is ***The Christian's War with the Flesh***.

Read Galatians 5:16-21.

I. The Christian's defence in the battle (v. 16)

In every war, a soldier must be equipped with defensive *and* offensive armament. Likewise, Christians must, every day, put on the "armour of God" (the helmet of salvation, breastplate of righteousness, shield of faith, girdle of truth, shoes of witnessing, sword of the Spirit, and prayer) (Ephesians 6:10-18). Now, the thought of being engaged in constant warfare may seem daunting. However, you can take courage, Christian. *God Himself* is your weaponry against sin and Satan! Let's look at the promises that God made to some saints of old.

Read Exodus 14:13-14, 21-28.

As the children of Israel saw Pharaoh's army behind them, and the Red Sea in front of them, they thought that they were dead meat. But God told the Israelites, "***Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD...the LORD shall fight for you.***" Of course, this promise applied to the *physical* battle that God was about to wage against the Egyptian army; but the same is true in spiritual warfare. *We* are just as helpless in our battle against our flesh, and against Satan, as the children of Israel were against the army of Egypt. Yet, God fights for us!

The Lord said to Abraham, “***Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward***” (Genesis 15:1). Agur, the son of Jakeh wrote, “***Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in Him***” (Proverbs 30:5). King David wrote, “***I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust. Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence. He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler***” (Psalm 91:2-4). Christian, you were saved from the *penalty* of sin when you trusted Christ to save you; but as you now live your daily Christian life, He saves you from the *power* of sin. You need God for your **justification**; but you also need Him for your **sanctification** (your daily setting apart from sin). He is able to deliver you out of temptations.

Read 2 Peter 2:9.

God Himself is the one who delivers the godly from temptations. The only condition on *your* part, Christian, is that you humbly cry out to God for that deliverance, claim His promises, and then *trust and believe* that He will keep His promise, and deliver you. This is what Paul calls “***walking in the Spirit.***” Let’s read that verse again. **(Read Galatians 5:16.)** Those of us who have been born again have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us. He is our defence against temptations as we walk through this sin-blighted world. Christian, if you be not praying and asking God for deliverance, then you will fall flat on your face. You are defeated already, before the battle even begins, because you are relying on your own strength!

Every day, and every hour, you need to call out to your Saviour and say, “Lord, I cannot overcome this temptation on my own. I am powerless without you. I need you. Help me to overcome this sinful desire.” When a temptation suddenly arises, don’t wait until your next scheduled prayer time to cry out to Him. Say, “Lord, I need your help *right now*. Please help me to overcome this sin!” And as you pray for deliverance, don’t keep that sin in the “back pocket” of your mind, with the secret hope of pulling it out again in the future, and toying with it. Ask God to help you put that desire to death *continually*, and to keep it *out* of your back pocket. James said, “***A double minded man is unstable in all his ways***” (James 1:8). Don’t be “double minded” (literally, “double-souled”): turn to God continually, with all your soul!

The problem with many Christians is that they expect the lust of the flesh to go away. I’ve got news for you: *it’s not going to go away!* As long as you are in this mortal body, you will always battle temptations. Most of the time, it is a struggle (at least for a little while) for a new Christian to overcome that pull toward old, destructive habits. Even when the desire for old sinful habits (such as drinking or smoking) finally do fade away, there is always a myriad more temptations that you must contend with every day of your life. Cry to the Lord for help, and trust His promises of deliverance. Keep praying and trusting. Keep walking in the Spirit.

II. The seriousness of the Christian’s battle (v. 17)

(Read verse 17 again.) The Bible makes it clear that we are all sinners by nature, and by choice. We naturally sin against God, and go our own way. Now, there is something that God has put within every single person: and that is a conscience—an inborn awareness of right and wrong. However, there is a problem with the conscience: namely, the conscience can very quickly become warped, twisted, and seared as a person becomes indoctrinated with false, demonic teaching, and as he hardens his heart in sin.

Read 1 Timothy 4:1-2.

Remember the old maxim of the “Jiminy Cricket” character from Pinocchio—“Always let your conscience be your guide”? I hate to break this to you; but old Jiminy Cricket’s philosophy was wrong! The problem with being guided merely by your conscience is this: as a man becomes more hardened in his sin, *his conscience bothers him less and less*. He finds more ways to justify his sin. Eventually, he not only isn’t bothered by his sin, but he doesn’t even think of his sin as “sin” anymore. In fact, as a person’s conscience becomes increasingly numbed and perverted, he begins to call evil “good,” and to call good “evil” (**Isaiah 5:20**).

The natural man (the lost, unsaved man) lives and breathes sin, and rarely feels guilty. And even when he feels regret over the consequences of his sinful choices, he still does not *repent* (have a true turning of mind from sin and self to Christ). Esau was such a man. Even though he had every opportunity to place his faith in God of his father Isaac, he chose to be a fornicator, and a profane man (**Hebrews 12:16**). Though he regretted his choices, the Bible says that there came point when he *couldn’t* repent, even though he sought it with tears.

Yet, there is an amazing phenomenon that happens when a person is confronted with the Word of God. When an unsaved person is confronted with God’s Word, he begins to be convicted by the Holy Spirit: and for the first time, he begins to see his sin for what it really is. *If* he will begin to yield to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, he will begin to understand that he is condemned because of his sin, and on his way to hell. Yet, this awakening to the reality of sin and judgment does not *guarantee* that sinner will respond to the Gospel. He still has the choice of whether to repent and believe on Christ. A lost person can come to understand the Gospel, yet still reject it: and eventually, the Holy Spirit will stop convicting him of his sin.

On the other hand, those who *do* yield to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and receive Christ as Saviour, suddenly have a consciousness of sin that they never had before. After you are saved, the indwelling Spirit of God gives you this consciousness of sin; and He *will do* His job. Every day, your flesh will wage all-out war against the Spirit of God; and the Spirit will war against your flesh. The Spirit *will* to convict you of your sin. Now, you can ignore the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and go ahead and do what your flesh wants you to do; but as long as you do, you will be as miserable as a wounded soldier on a battlefield.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. *As long as you are walking in the Spirit*, Christian, the things that your flesh wants you to do, you *cannot* do. While you are walking in the Spirit, the very desire to sin begins to fade, and you are filled with holy, godly desires, which the Holy Spirit puts in your heart. For the Christian, the question is not “*Can* I yield to the Spirit?”; rather, the question is, “*Will* I yield to the Spirit?” Will you allow Him to control you? Will you allow Him to show you your sin, and then ask Him for deliverance from that sin? If you won’t, you will be defeated in your daily battle; and Satan will laugh as another weak Christian lies wounded on the battle field. Walk in the Spirit, Christian!

III. **The Christian’s Commander in the battle (v. 18)**

(Read verse 18 again.) Who is the Christian’s Leader in the battle against the flesh? It is the same one who *empowers* the Christian for the battle. It is, in fact, the one who fights the battle *for* believers. **It is the Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit is our Advocate and Guide.

Read Romans 8:9-14.

According to Paul, those who are led of the Spirit are *sons of God*. In other words, the mark of a son of God is the fact that the Holy Spirit dwells within that person. The Spirit of God

takes up permanent residence in each believer at the moment he believes on Jesus Christ for salvation; and He leads and guides believers through life. Now, in stark contrast, those who are “under the law” (those who are trusting in their own good works to save them) are *not* led by the Spirit, because they don’t even *have* God’s Spirit dwelling within them. As Paul said, **“they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are in the Spirit the things of the Spirit...But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you.”** Those who are trusting in their keeping of the Law for salvation are “in the flesh”; therefore, they continually *walk* after the flesh. Walking in the Spirit is something they have never experienced, because they have never become sons of God.

I would like to pose an extremely important question: Which of these two kinds of people are *you*? Are you one of those who are **“led of the Spirit”**? Or are you **“under the law”**? If you be **“led of the Spirit,”** that means that you are a sinner who has been saved by the grace of God. It means that there was a time in your life when you chose to trust *only* in Jesus Christ to save you: and you now have the Spirit of God dwelling within you, to lead you and guide you.

On the other hand, if you be **“under the law,”** that means that you are still in the natural state in which you were born—the state of separation from God. You have a *knowledge* of right and wrong, which comes from your conscience; and you may sometimes make right moral and ethical choices. But making right choices doesn’t make you saved. No good deed you may do can erase even one of your sins. By trusting in your own righteousness, you are rejecting Jesus Christ, who is the *only Way of salvation*. This means that you are still under the curse of the Law: and God’s wrath is still abiding upon you. You may admit that you are a sinner; but you don’t really believe that your sin is bad enough to send you to hell. You think that your goodness can offset your badness. My friend, this simply is not what the Bible says! God’s Word says that **“the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23).**

If I have just described you, please don’t be angry with me for telling you the truth. I plead with you to call upon the name of Jesus Christ, and put your complete trust in Him for salvation. All this talk about fighting the flesh through the power of the Holy Spirit is irrelevant to you, because you do not even *have* the Holy Spirit. You must be saved! If you will truly repent and believe in the risen Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit will come to dwell within you; and He will help you to live the way God intends you to live.

IV. The enemy’s way of life (vv. 19-21)

In a war, the fighting (at least, for the common man) is usually about maintaining a certain way of life. Down through the ages, people have been willing to fight horrific wars to maintain the economic or religious way of life that they know.

Well, in **verses 19-21**, God gives us a description of *our* enemy’s way of life. Now, I just want you to know, Christian, that this “enemy” that I’m talking about isn’t someone else “out there.” I’m talking about the enemy in *here*. I’m talking about the enemy *within you*. I’m talking about your old, sinful flesh. Paul says that your flesh is at enmity with the Spirit of God. Your flesh is not capable of producing anything good or pleasing to God. Before we look at this description of our enemy’s way of life here in **Galatians 5**, let’s take a moment to remind ourselves of how powerful, and how utterly pervasive, our internal enemy is.

Read Matthew 15:17-20.

Read Romans 7:15-25.

If you have put your faith in Christ, you are saved from the *penalty* of sin (which is hell). The *power* of sin has also been broken. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, you *can* overcome sin. **But**, you must never forget that the old sinful flesh *is* still there; and there is absolutely *nothing* good in that old flesh. It cannot be improved, tamed, or reformed in any way. Your old nature is still just as wicked as it was before you were saved. Although you have a *new* nature, which the Holy Spirit has imparted to you, that old, fleshly nature wants to be in control. If you be not daily walking in the Spirit, you will succumb to the enemy's lifestyle. Let's see what the enemy's lifestyle is. **(Read verses 19-21 again.)**

The first work of the flesh which Paul mentions is **“adultery.”** You know, more and more, the world doesn't see anything wrong with adultery. Many people view adultery as a “private issue,” which isn't anyone's business. But it *is* someone's business. It's *God's* business. God hates adultery—whether it be mental lust, or an actual physical affair. **(See Matthew 5:27-28.)** A Christian who falls into such a sin cannot lose his salvation, because Christ is keeping his soul; however, there *will* be earthly judgment and chastisement when you allow your heart to drift from the marriage bed!

Read Hebrews 13:4.

The next work of the flesh that Paul mentions is **“fornication”** (sexual activity *before* marriage). The world sees even less wrong with this sin than they do with adultery. The world says, “So *what* if you sleep together, and live together without being married?” The world sees nothing wrong with this sin; but God hates it! God says that **“whoremongers”** (“fornicators”) God will judge. Christians who fall into this sin *can* expect chastisement.

The next sins that are listed is **“uncleanness”** and **“lasciviousness.”** “Uncleanness” means moral impurity of all kinds; and “lasciviousness” means wantonness and lust. These sins are not merely outward, but *inward*. How can a Christian fight impure, lascivious thoughts? Well, first of all, we need to pray and ask for God's help; but we also need to stop feeding our flesh with the filth of the world, and fill our minds instead with the things of God. Paul wrote, **“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things”** (Philippians 4:8).

The next work of the flesh is **“idolatry.”** Now, idolatry is not merely bowing down to a stone statue. Idolatry is elevating anything above God, and worshipping it in your heart (such as money, pleasure, or even family). Speaking of family, the Bible says in **1 Timothy 2:14** that Adam was not deceived by Satan's lie to Eve. He knew that he was being lied to by God's enemy. Yet, he ate the fruit. Why? Because his wife had already decided to disobey God; and Adam decided to love and follow his wife, instead of to love and follow God! He made an idol of his wife, and balked at God. For this reason, God compares stubbornness to idolatry. In fact, in that same Scripture (which we are about to look at), God compares rebellion to **“witchcraft”** (the next sin in Paul's list). Let's look at this Scripture.

Read 1 Samuel 15:22-23.

Witchcraft is a heinous sin. It is complete, utter rebellion against God. In witch's covens, the members purposely break every commandment of God that they can possibly break. Yet, as

horrible as witchcraft is, God sees *all* rebellion against Him in the same light as witchcraft! When God tells you to do something, and you choose to do your own thing anyway, God looks at your rebellion in the same way that He looks at idolatry and witchcraft!

The next “works of the flesh” are very inter-related to each other. **“Hatred,” “variance,” “emulations,” “wrath,” “strife,” “seditions,” “heresies,” “envyings,” and “murders”** are like peas from the same pod. “Now, wait a minute!” many would cry. “How can you put hatred in the same category with murder?” Well...Jesus did! (See **Matthew 5:21-22.**) How about **“variance”**? What is that? Basically, it means “quarrelling,” or “contention.” For those who pride themselves that they have never committed a “really bad” sin such as adultery, how about this one? Have you ever quarrelled? God puts it right alongside murder, because it stems from the same root of hatred! How about **“emulations”**? This means “jealousies.” Jealousy (in the *wrong* sense) is coveting something that belongs to someone else; and it is much the same thing as **“envyings.”** It, too, is in the same pod with “hatred,” “variations,” and “murder.” In **James 4:1-2**, James wrote these words to *Christians*: **“From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.”** Was James saying that Christians were *actually* killing each other? No. However, there *was* hatred, coveting, and fighting in the churches to which James was writing; and in God’s sight, these things are just like murder!

Of course, **“wrath”** (explosive anger) is often present along with these sins, as well, because it springs from the same root of hatred. Likewise, **“strife,” “seditions,”** and **“heresies”** are the product of hatred. These words are slightly different in nuance, but all very similar. **“Strife”** means “dividing into factions.” Now, Paul is not talking about separating yourself from sin and error. As Christians, we *must* “strive” for the truth—which means that you must split away from those who teach error. The **“strife”** of which Paul is speaking is faction, or division, which is based upon pride and sinful passions. Now, **“sedition”** means “disunion”; and **“heresies”** basically means the same thing as “strife” and “sedition,” as well. “Heresies” means “divisive parties.” Now, we usually think of “heresy” as meaning “false doctrine”: and there is nothing wrong with using the word in that sense. A “heresy” can be a party that splits off from a New Testament church in order to follow a false doctrine. (Hence, the false teaching *itself* is called “heresy.”) But “heresy” can also mean a party, or faction, which is based upon petty quarrels, and cliques, and personality worship. Can this sort of thing happen in churches? It surely can! The church of Corinth *really* had a problem with this one.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-4.

Now, there are two more works of the flesh: **“drunkenness”** and **“revellings.”** What need I say about “drunkenness”? God commands us in **Proverbs 23:31** not even to *look* on the wine when it “moveth itself aright” (in other words, when it has turned from fresh grape juice into an intoxicating drink). God commands us not to drink alcohol *at all*. Now, that doesn’t sit well with the world out there. They *like* drunkenness and **“revellings”** (in other words, carousal and riot). When you, as a Christian, refuse to participate in drinking and carousing, you can expect that they will look at you as a wacko—and even as evil. You can expect to be evil spoken of.

Read 1 Peter 3:14-16 / 4:1-4.

All these things are lusts of the flesh; and Paul says that they who do these things **“shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”** (Read **Galatians 5:21** again.) Now, what did Paul mean

when he said that **“they that do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God”**? One thing is for sure: it does *not* mean that if you have ever committed any of these sins, you can’t get into heaven! God delights in *saving* fornicators, adulterers, idolaters, and even murderers, from their sins. The members of the church of Corinth had committed all these sins: yet, God told them that they were “washed, sanctified, and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus” (**1 Corinthians 6:11**). No matter how far you have fallen into sin, God can save you!

So, what *does* Paul mean when he says that they who do these things will not inherit the kingdom of God? Well, he certainly couldn’t mean that your entrance into heaven depends on how *much*, or how *well* you have abstained from these sins. For example, a person might say, “Well, I’ve drunk wine before, but I’m not an alcoholic.” Well, where’s the line between “drinking a little,” and “drinking too much”? Does God have a breathalyser to determine who has drunken too much alcohol to be able to get into heaven? What if you’ve been guilty of hatred or quarrelling? How deeply must you hate someone, or how many quarrels must you have, in order to fall short of God’s grace? The Bible gives us no answer to such questions, because God says that *all* sin is worthy of death! (**See Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23.**)

According to this list of sins of the flesh, every single one of us *should* be barred from heaven, because we have been guilty of most or all of these sins. That is why getting into heaven depends entirely upon the grace of God. Salvation is a free gift, which must be received by repentance and faith in Christ alone. When Paul says that they who **“do”** these things will not inherit the kingdom of God, he is saying that for the unsaved, these lusts of the flesh **are a way of life**. The word “do” is in the present progressive tense. In other words, it means that those who “are doing” these things continually are people who have never been saved.

For a child of God, on the other hand, these sins are *not* a way of life. A true child of God *can* stumble into these sins; but he cannot continually live in them. God will not *let* him live in them. True children of God have the God-given desire to abstain from these things; and as they walk in the Spirit, they overcome these lustful passions. As you grow in grace, the works of the flesh are replaced with the godly works that God intends for you to have.

Conclusion: Whether or not you are prepared for it, Christian, you are in a warfare every day. The lust of the flesh is always trying to take control of your life. In your own strength, you are powerless against it. If you try to fight against sin in your own strength, you are trying to fight your flesh...*with your flesh!* It’s like trying to fight fire with fire. It doesn’t work! You need *water* to put out a fire; and the Holy Spirit is that “water.” Are you walking in the Spirit? **Perhaps you are in continual bondage to the sins of the flesh, because you have never truly been born again.** If so, stop clinging to your own way, and to your own righteousness, and place your complete trust in the one who died and rose again for you!