

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Inside-Out: The Flesh versus The Spirit

by Dan Trygg

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 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. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law... ²⁴ Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” Galatians 5:16-18,24-25

“For the inability of the Law, in which it was weak through the flesh, God condemned the sin in the flesh, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, ⁴ in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who are according to the flesh they think the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For the thinking of the flesh is death, but the thinking of the Spirit is life and peace, ⁷ because the thinking of the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, this one is not of Him. ¹⁰ If Christ is in you, on the one hand the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also make alive your mortal bodies through His indwelling Spirit. ¹² So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- ¹³ for if you are living according to the flesh, you are about to die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the practices of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are children of God.” Romans 8:3-14

“Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, in order to know the things freely given to us by God. ¹³ We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, spiritual ones co-judging spiritual things. ¹⁴ But a natural person does not welcome the things of the Spirit of God, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to know it since it is spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual person, however, discerns all things... 3:1 ...I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as babies in Christ. ² I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were not yet able to receive it. In fact, you are still not able, ³ because you are still fleshly. For since there is envy and strife among you, are you not fleshly and living like ordinary people?” 1 Corinthians 2:12-15; 3:1-3

Our “Inside-Out” study has taken us through a number of word pictures that describe the fundamental change God has worked within us, when we came to trust in Christ. We are under a New Covenant, written upon new hearts by the Holy Spirit. We have been radically transformed to become a “good tree” in Christ, one that will produce good fruit by our new inner spiritual DNA. In Christ, we are a new creation, ...old things have passed off to the side, new things have come, ...things that were not there before, dramatically new and superior things. We have been born from above to become new selves. We are now able to put aside our old selves and live according to that new person we are, ...one already created in righteousness and devotion to God. This new life is like God placed light within a clay jar. It is to shine out from within us. External difficulties and trials assail our “outer person”, but this actually creates a backdrop where the radiance of God’s life within us, ...our “inner person”..., can be more clearly revealed. All of these word pictures emphasize a radical change that God has introduced within us. **We are to live by this inner life, and it will produce very different results in our attitudes, thoughts and actions. People will see God at work in us.**

Today we look at another of these contrasting word picture couplets. Paul describes the Christian life in terms of **living by the flesh, or living by the Spirit**. The Greek word for “flesh” is *sarx*. It occurs 147 times in the NT. It can mean different things in the varying contexts in which it occurs. **It can just refer to our physical bodies**, physical lives, or physical descent (Lk. 24:39; Jn. 1:14; Act 2:36; Rom. 1:3; 2:28; 4:1; 9:3,5,8; 1 Cor. 15:50; Gal. 1:16; Gal. 2:20; 4:13; Phil. 1:22,24; Col. 1:22; 2:11; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 2:14; 5:7; 1 Pet. 1:24; 3:18,21; 4:2; 1 Jn. 4:2; 2 Jn. 1:7; Rev. 19:18,21). **It can also refer to natural desires and physical pleasures related to our physical bodies**, which can lead us to excess and sinful behavior (Rom. 7:5; Eph. 2:3; 2 Pet. 2:10,18; 1 Jn. 2:16; Jude 1:7,8; Gal. 6:8). Then, **many times it refers to human self-effort** or self-discernment or self-discipline, which come up short (Matt. 26:41; Jn. 8:15; 2 Cor. 1:17; 10:2; Rom. 6:19; 7:10; Gal. 3:3). **It appears that sin exists within our physical bodies and weakens our ability and resolve to do what is right** (Mk. 14:38; Rom. 7:18,25). **It is not our physical bodies themselves that are evil**. Rather, the limitations and appetites of our bodies can work against the leadings and promptings of the Spirit. In that way, then **a fleshly orientation is set against the desires of the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit will be resisted by fleshly inertia and fear of discomfort**. People who are “confident in their flesh”, ...people who *think* they can walk in righteousness on their own strength are self-deceived. We are to put *no* confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3:3). Our self-ability is compromised already.

Note, here, the parallel between the outer person and the inner person we discussed in our last lesson. Here, the outer person is more clearly defined as “the flesh”, or a fleshly orientation and way of thinking. Interestingly, there is another reference to the “inner person” in Romans 7:22,23. It mentions that, while Paul delighted in the law

of God in his “inner person”, he found another principle at work “in the members of his body”. It was the principle of sin which was “in my members”. In the same way, **it is not our flesh that is evil, ...it is that there is the brokenness and imbalance of sin at work within our fleshly bodies.** Thanks be to God for the inner life of His Spirit within us!

The three passages above develop the contrast of a life oriented by the flesh versus a life led by the Spirit. There is more in these three passages that is insightful and applicable to this inner conflict than anywhere else in the scriptures. First, we see that Paul commands us to “walk-about by the Spirit”, but he adds a corresponding reality to that command. **If we walk by the Spirit, we will not carry-out the strong-desires of the flesh.** The word for “carry-out” here is *teleō*, which means “bring to completion, fulfill, bring to the end-point”. We may still feel the pulls and desires of the flesh, but if we walk in the Spirit, we will “nip it in the bud”. It won’t come to fruition. Why? Because the Spirit is opposed to the flesh, ...and the flesh is opposed to the Spirit. That is an important insight. So is the next statement: “...so that you may not do the things you please.” **The Christian life is not one of ease, ...not even in being led by the Spirit. There will be conflict, ...struggle, ...discomfort, ...resistance.** It is part of the deal. But, **the truth is that the flesh has already been crucified with Christ. Its power has been broken, ...and so has its passions and desires.** It is going to pass away, ...even as it has been displaced in the core of our being by the Holy Spirit. We must learn to disregard them in order to follow the Spirit. **Our life is from the Spirit, ...so let us walk by the Spirit!**

In Romans 8, we see that the Law was powerless to help us, because we were powerless to follow it. It was weak or powerless in the flesh, because sin was in our flesh. Christ condemned sin in the flesh, and **we who trust Jesus are now no longer of the flesh, but we are now of the Spirit. But Paul tells us that it is still possible for us to live according to the flesh, ...or we can learn to live according to the Spirit.** People who continue to live *according to the flesh* think the things of the flesh, which leads to death, ...estrangement and isolation from the life of God. Why? Because fleshly thinking is hostile toward God, ...it *will not* yield to Him, and *cannot* please Him. If they are resistant to Him, He can’t give them the life and fulfillment that comes from intimacy with Him. By contrast, **those who desire to live according to the Spirit, think the things of the Spirit. They focus on, learn about, watch for and are attentive to the Spirit and the things of the Spirit. This brings life and peace.** Notice what verse 10 says: If Christ is in you, on the one hand the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is *life* because of the righteousness of Christ! **And the Spirit will give you life!** This is repeated two more times in the next couple of verses. The indwelling Spirit will give life to our mortal (dying) bodies. If we are living according to the flesh, we will experience death. But, if we embrace the cross in practical decisions in our life, ...if we put to death the practices of the body (flesh)..., we will live! **The children of God are made evident by their choices to follow the Spirit.**

The final passage, from 1 Corinthians, describes three kinds of people: there are spiritual people, natural people, and fleshly people. The context is all about learning to receive and discern the things that the Spirit desires to reveal to us. **Spiritual people are ones who are attuned to the Spirit and have learned to welcome and understand the leading of the Spirit.** Notice that this discernment is not gained just by instruction by teachers. These insights are taught by the Spirit Himself. The skill of discernment is modeled and developed as believers learn to share and piece together insights with others in community. The last phrase of 1 Corinthians 2:13 literally says, “with spiritual-ones co-judging spiritual-things”. It refers to sharing and comparing together with others to come up with a clearer discernment. This process is not only a learning laboratory for spiritual insights, it is also a safeguard for sound discernment, since there are others involved. But the key here, for our purposes, is that these are people who are engaged at pursuing and focusing on things being revealed to them by the Spirit. We saw, in Romans 8, that those who want to live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit, ...literally, they think the things of the Spirit. That is precisely what the group of God-seekers are doing in 1 Corinthians 2:13. They are thinking the things of the Spirit, ...comparing thoughts and insights, along with new awarenesses and revelations they might receive..., in order to gain a fuller understanding. These are Spiritually-minded people.

By contrast a natural person does not welcome or accept the things of the Spirit of God. To such a person, it is foolishness, irrational, nonsensical. The word for “natural” here is “soulish”. The word for “soul” also means “conscious mind, self, or natural-life”. This person is using only their natural, unspiritual mental ability. They are not *of the Spirit of God*, so they cannot really tune in to the things of God. So, they cannot understand why the Christians do what they do, ...or why they think what they think..., because the ones who are following the Spirit are receiving insight and direction from the Spirit that these unbelievers are not privy to.

There is a third group, however. These are believers, but they are oriented to the flesh, instead of the Spirit. They are “fleshly” or “carnal”. **They do have some spiritual awareness, discernment and interest, but it is very limited and immature. Why? Because they are thinking the things of the flesh.** They are thinking and living according to the desires of their flesh. It is possible to be a believer, but to not grow in the Spirit, because you are choosing to live for fleshly desires and according to a fleshly mind. **Their orientation is evidenced by the fruit of their lives.** They are producing “works of the flesh” (cf. Gal. 5:19,20), and are living as “mere humans”, ...a very sub-standard Christian life.