

Galatians 5: 19-21 – “The Works of the Flesh”, Message # 40 in the series – “Christ has Set us Free”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on July 16th, 2023, in the Afternoon Worship Service.

I have been trying to teach you, as we go through these verses, that the walk of a Christian is not a legal walk, but a loving walk. You love the Lord Jesus for His having fulfilled all of the commandments of the law on your behalf. You are thankful that God has justified you freely through His blood and righteousness. And now that you are justified by His grace, you are learning to keep all of God’s moral commandments from a thankful heart. You should know that you will not be condemned where you fall short, because of what He has done for you.

However, the question that we want to consider more carefully here at this time, is this: Does a Christian, just as much as an unbeliever, need to be warned against practicing the works of the flesh? And the answer to that question is – “Yes”. So what I want to do in this message is, 1st of all – To set forth what should be evident to every Christian about the works of the flesh. And then 2nd – What may not be evident to you as a Christian, about the purpose of the law.

1st of all – What is evident to the true Christian about the works of the flesh.

Verse 19 – “Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” We see here from these verses that a true Christian knows and accepts God’s definition of sin in all of its particulars. We have 17 particulars of the works of the flesh which are given to us here. Each one of these particulars falls under one, or more, of the 10 commandments of God’s holy law.

What sin is, is made evident by means of a person’s hearing the law which is found in the 10 commandments. It is by the knowledge of God’s holy law that a sinner comes under conviction of their sins. This knowledge comes by the Spirit’s specifically convicting that person of their sins. Not just hearing about what sin is in some general sense. And therefore, it is by the Spirit’s working in relation to the preaching of the gospel, that a person comes to see their need of trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ for their salvation.

Turn with me over to Romans 3: 19 – “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.” “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” So, we see here that it is by the law that the knowledge of sin comes to be evident to both unbelievers and believers. The unbeliever may, and indeed they will, attempt to throw off this conviction of sin, which comes by the law.

But the person who God intends to save will know an effectual work of the Spirit, in their heart, fully convincing them of their sin. You will notice who it is who is under the condemnation of the law of God. It is “all the world” that is guilty before God, of breaking the commandments of His holy law. Not just the Jews, but also the Gentiles. Although the Jews were given God’s holy law on Mt. Sinai, the commandments of the law were known from the beginning of the world; having been made known to Adam through what was written on his heart in his creation. He lost his original righteousness in the Fall. (And what was that original righteousness but the law written on his heart?)

But that law of his original righteous still exists in every man’s conscience, even though it is marred by sin, and it still works to convict unbelievers of their sin. Look at Romans 2, verse 12-16. “For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by

nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.”

This is why it says in our text that the works of the flesh are evident. They are evident and generally known to men everywhere, but they have been made more clear through the formal giving of the law to Moses, and to the nation of Israel on Mt. Sinai. The 10 commandments are the 10 major categories of sin as defined by God. All that is listed in the verses that we are studying, these are either the reiteration of a major category, or they are subcategories. The law was given in this way so that all men might know more particularly what each major sin consists of.

The first sin listed here is the 7th commandment of God’s holy law. Adultery is the sin of being unfaithful to your wife sexually. But under that major category, fornication, uncleanness, and lewdness are more particularly defined aspects of sin which fall under that commandment: “You shall not commit adultery.” Fornication is having sex with a member of the opposite sex before marriage; not seeing or believing that you should be married before you can righteously and lovingly give yourself to that one particular person that you are interested in.

But here in the verses that we are studying we find that uncleanness and lewdness are also mentioned together with adultery and fornication. This is because the spirituality of God’s law extends to our heart and our thoughts. Unclean thoughts are the sinful imaginations and sexual desires which are cultivated by a person in their heart and mind so that adultery or fornication becomes a reality there. It is thought about with sinful delight and pleasure. Lewdness is also mentioned. Lewdness is the deliberate and more public display of the sexual members of the body by a person’s not covering themselves enough, in a good way; a way that would hide their nakedness.

These works of the flesh are mentioned here as acts which are evident to all men in a general sense, in regard to their conscience; fallen as it is. But for the Christian, it is evident that they are the works which are to be repented of, and to be put away from us. And afterwards we should avoid engaging in them. The flesh is that principle or law; the Old Man, that old nature which is selfishly sinful and earthly-minded. Look at Romans 7: 18 – “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.”

So the flesh within the heart and mind of the believer, still has many selfish and sensual desires and thoughts of sin. Sin no longer has dominion, but it will try to come back to take control of the Christian’s thinking and actions. An unbeliever is a person who is walking according to flesh. They are dominated by the flesh. They either do not know the specific commandments of God’s law, or they do not care to keep them. If they do know them; they will not be able to keep them consistently, or from the right motives. That is, out of love to God or to man, and with God’s glory in mind.

The true Christian loves God’s law, and they realize that they cannot keep it perfectly. The Christian knows, or they should know, that they need Christ’s grace through the Spirit at every point, to keep God’s commandments in a way which will please Him. But here in these verses, the Apostle Paul, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit thought, that it was important for every Christian to know the categories and sub-categories of sin in order to repent of sin and put it to death. Idolatry, mentioned next in the list, relates to the 1st commandment of the 10 commandments; “You shall have no other gods before Me.”

Sorcery, or witchcraft, relates to the 2nd commandment, “You shall not make any graven image or likeness of God”, which is saying that God must be worshiped in the way that He proscribes. Hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, and the rest of those things listed here, all relate primarily to the second table of the law; commandments 5-10 of the 10 commandments.

These sins are said to be evident. And so they are, but they must be preached against, and pointed out to people, whose hearts and minds are dull of hearing. This includes babyish or careless Christians. A Christian has a daily responsibility to by the Spirit's power, to put to death the deeds of the flesh. Romans 8: 12-14 – "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors – not the flesh, to live according to the flesh." "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God."

Now 2nd – We want to see, what might not be evident to the true Christian, about the purpose of the law.

Our text in verse 19 says that the works of the flesh are evident. And they most certainly are in relation to the law's great purpose, which is to convict sinners of their particular sins. Turn with me over to 1st Timothy 1: 8. "But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust."

What we must always remember about the law is that it is good if one uses it lawfully. The unlawful use of the law is preaching that somehow a person can be justified by keeping the commandments of God. This cannot possibly be, or salvation would be by works; a debt which God would owe to us for our obedience to His commandments. But Adam once and for all failed that test in the garden of Eden and was driven out of it. Ever since then, salvation has been on the basis of the grace of God which comes through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The gospel of grace came to men of old in the form of a promise concerning the Christ who was to come. And it also comes to us now in the form of a promise in relation to the Christ who has fulfilled the law. Having fulfilled the law, Christ suffered and died for our sins, and has been raised from the dead. Therefore, since grace, God's favor and blessing, comes through Jesus Christ, then the law should never be seen by us as having been made for a righteous man. That is, either to justify him, or even to sanctify him in the ultimate sense.

This is what may not be evident to the true Christian when they go about to pursue righteousness. Their flesh will attempt to hinder their making progress in righteousness and holiness at many points. This is because the flesh opposes the work of the Spirit in His bringing about a sincere obedience to the commands of God. The flesh attempts to draw us away to selfishness and sin in many ways. The law, even when it is spoken to us with power does not have the power in itself to bring about a sincere obedience. It can show us what obedience is. It can instruct on what righteousness is. But it can only condemn us when we fall short.

The law will actually tend to exasperate our obedience to God, if we rely on our own wisdom and our own strength to do what is pleasing to God. We will be foiled in our attempts to become righteous and glorify God, when we go about to obey the law in our own strength. Turn with me over to 1st Corinthians 15: 56. "The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law." "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." The strength of sin, it says here, is the law. This means that the sinful tendencies of our fleshly nature, are aroused to act against keeping God's commandments when we hear of the expectation of God through His commandments.

We may sometimes say: "Why should I do this in the way that God commands me?" "Why can't I do it in my own way?" The fleshly part of us, by hearing the commandments of God, only responds with a greater strength to rebel against God and His commandments more and more, because we are convinced by the strength of our own mind that we can do all that we will do,

without God's having to impart grace to our hearts. In going about our obedience in this way, we find that we will end up doing all things to our own glory rather than to Christ's glory.

The person who is being influenced by their own fleshly mindset, sees the commandments of God as something which restricts their own independent thought and self-determination. And therefore a problem arises in the heart and mind of the believer who is trying to keep God's law in their own fleshly wisdom and strength. Look over at Romans chapter 7, verses 7-14 with me. "What shall we say then?" "Is the law sin?" "Certainly not!" "On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law." "For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.'" "But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire."

"For apart from the law sin was dead." "I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." "And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death." "For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me." That is – Paul's self-righteousness and self-justification were killed. "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good." "Has then what is good (that is, the law) become death to me?" "Certainly not!" "But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful." "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin."

This is the good purpose of the law. It makes sin appear to us as being exceedingly sinful. The sense in which a believer is carnal, is that they still have the flesh. They still have within them the remains of their Old nature; their Old Man. In this sense they still in a form of bondage all their days until in death they are freed. At death, all that is fleshly in the spirit of the Christian will be purged away. And they will become "the spirit of a just man made perfect," as it says in Hebrews 12: 23.

But thankfully, there is this greater sense in which the believer has been freed through the Spirit's working, in accordance with the grace of Christ. The Spirit causes the Christian to understand that God has ordained this battle between his flesh and the Spirit. God has ordained this battle, so that we will learn to overcome the flesh, even while we are in this body. And so, during our pilgrimage through this world, the Spirit will be teaching us, over and over, that we cannot practice sin. Rather we must learn by His power to put it to death. The Spirit will help us to learn to repent where we need to. And He will teach us to clothe ourselves with Christ, and seek for grace at every point in our experience, to do God's will.

Remember Colossians 3: 5 and 6 – "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." "Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience." This passage is saying the very same thing as our text in Galatians 5: 21. If a person practices sin and will not deal with it, by repentance and mortification, by the power of the Spirit, they will not inherit the kingdom of God." And so, each of us as believers needs to confess, to repent of all of our sins, and learn to put them to death. Yes, and we will also desire to forsake our own particular sins as we find them in our hearts and in our actions. We will do this so that we will have greater communion with God. All this is only done through Jesus Christ, and by the power of His Spirit.

Postscript – For those who would like to read more on this subject I would highly recommend John Owen's work – "Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers", Volume 6 of His *Works*, and also Thomas Manton's *Sermons on Romans 8: 13*, Volume 12 of his *Works*, p. 54-72.