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# 2. The Battle of the Spirit and the Flesh

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Free media and discipleship resources for pastors, leaders, and growing disciples.

## 2. The Battle of the Spirit and the Flesh

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This Bible study lesson is based on Chapter 3 of *The Abiding Room*, a book by Kevin Seacat.

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“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Galatians 5:16-17 NIV).

Did you know you’re in an ongoing, daily, spiritual battle? As Galatians 5:16-17 tells us, not only are the Spirit and the flesh opposites, but they’re also opponents, engaged in a battle for our hearts. Essentially, there is a spiritual civil war raging inside of us—a major battle for everything God wants you to become.

As followers of Jesus, moment by moment, we are all choosing to either have our chocolate syrup “stirred up” and be empowered by the Spirit or be impaired by the flesh. When our hearts are led by the Spirit, our lives exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, and we look like Jesus to others. But when we are living in our flesh, we look a lot like the world. Is it any wonder Satan will do everything he can to keep us from walking in the Spirit?

This internal battle between the indwelling Holy Spirit and your flesh is going on every minute of every day. Although the battle never ends in this life, you can consistently win the daily fight. It helps to know the enemy and understand what is at stake. In this chapter, we’ll examine this internal conflict to set the stage for the upcoming chapters that describe the many blessings available to you when you win this fight.

### **Evidence of the Spiritual Battle—the Flesh**

“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, **strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy**, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21 NIV).

When you read some of the terms used by the apostle Paul describing the flesh in his letter to the Galatian church, perhaps you can say they don't describe your experience. But look again at the bolded words in the middle of the verses. Do some of those actions describe your life? Your family? Have you heard of churches experiencing strife (conflict or bitter disagreement) over fundamental issues? How about jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, or envy in the church?

The flesh is destructive to relationships of all kinds. Unfortunately, works of the flesh are far too common among followers of Jesus. They existed in Paul's day, 2,000 years ago, and they still exist today. Notice how Paul describes the reality of living in the flesh—it is highly visible to others. He says, “the works of the flesh are evident” (verse 19). If it's true that a large majority of believers today spend the bulk of each day living in the flesh rather than living in the Spirit, it not only creates difficulties in our lives, but it is “evident” to the outside, watching world too.

## **Evidence of the Spiritual Battle—the Holy Spirit**

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23 NIV).

After explaining the works of the flesh, Paul contrasts them with the fruit of the Spirit. The evidence that you are living in the Spirit is that the fruit of the Spirit is exhibited in your life. Before you received Jesus as your Savior, you always operated in your flesh—never in the Spirit. Because you didn't have the indwelling Holy Spirit, you had no choice to live otherwise. But when you received Jesus as your Savior, you also received the Holy Spirit. And that means you no longer must live by your flesh. You can choose to live every moment by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## **Nothing Good in the Flesh**

In contrasting the Spirit and the flesh, Jesus says, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh counts for nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (John 6:63 NIV). Again, the apostle Paul said, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out” (Romans 7:18 NIV).

In both verses, we see a link between the two words “flesh” and “nothing.” These verses do not say there are “some things wrong with the flesh” or there are “some things good in the flesh.” They do not say the flesh is “imperfect” (that could imply

there is something of merit or value that can be coaxed out of the flesh). Rather, the Bible clearly says there is nothing good in our flesh. Nothing. Our flesh is not 90 percent good; it's not 50 percent good; it's not even 20 percent good. It is 0 percent good.

Our flesh is completely flawed and depraved. It is what Jesus paid the price for on the cross by his death. Our flesh cannot be improved into something good because there is nothing good in our flesh in the first place. When we're living in the flesh, we want to get our way. But when we're walking in union with the Holy Spirit, we are servant-hearted. Maybe it's no coincidence that "flesh" spelled backward with the 'h' removed is "self." Our flesh wants what it wants when it wants it. It operates to please self, or what has been called the unholy trinity—Me, Myself, and I.

## **How Do You Know if You Are Walking in the Spirit?**

How do you know if you're being led by the Spirit at any given moment? Well, let me ask you this: How do you know an orange tree is an orange tree? By its fruit, of course. And that's how you know if you are living in the Spirit or the flesh. If a personal spiritual examination reveals the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control—you can be confident you are living in the Spirit. But if the examination reveals the deeds of the flesh, you're living in the flesh.

Jesus described it this way: "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit" (Matthew 12:33 NIV). And He said it's impossible for us to bear good fruit when we're operating in the bad tree of the flesh: "Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" (Matthew 7:17-18 NIV).

If we're producing bad fruit, we need to get to the root of the problem—we're operating in the flesh. Trying and striving to produce good spiritual fruit from a bad, fleshly root simply will not work. Why? Because there's nothing good in the flesh, so nothing good can come out of the flesh. Self-effort cannot rectify the situation because self cannot overcome the flesh.

The bad fruit produced by the flesh is not merely bad behavior that needs correction; it's the external evidence of an internal heart problem. It's not the behavior that needs to be addressed; it's the heart itself. That's the cause of the

problem. The heart operating in the flesh rather than by the power of the Holy Spirit does not need a topical salve. It needs internal heart surgery. By God's grace, however, when we are letting Jesus live out His life in and through us by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can resemble good trees bearing good fruit.

## **Consequences of Living in the Flesh**

Living in the flesh leads to sin, and sin has consequences. This impacts our lives in the following three areas:

1. **Our relationship with God.** Our holy God cannot look upon sin and be pleased. "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:7-8 NIV). We experience the impact of sin in our relationship with God through what the Bible calls "grieving" the Holy Spirit. "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption" (Ephesians 4:30 NIV).

The Holy Spirit is a person, and since He is God, He is holy. Sin grieves the person of the Holy Spirit and hinders us from experiencing the fullness of our relationship with God. When we sin and feel an ache in our hearts, that is the Holy Spirit convicting us of sin. When the Holy Spirit is grieved by our sin, He then notifies us so we can correct our course. He lovingly directs us to confess, repent, and quickly turn back to and connect with Jesus.

Our quick obedience to His prompting lessens the chance of a lengthy, internal agony as a result of the sin and its consequences. When we choose to live in our flesh and not in the Spirit, we wander in the spiritual desert. We live fleshly, Level II lives, rather than Spirit-filled, Level III lives. It is important, however, to remember and have confidence in our eternal security as depicted by the one-way Repent/Believe arrow that shows us moving out of Level I living into Level II. That way, when we sin and experience the grieving of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we know it is the Spirit convicting us. He is giving us a godly sorrow meant to lead us to repentance and restore the fullness of our relationship with Jesus.

2. **Our relationships with others.** The flesh produces enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy between people. As we saw in chapter 1, the apostle Paul was unable to preach about the deeper things of God

to the Corinthian church because of their fleshly living. He had to first address the problems between the members in their church.

If it is true, and I believe it is, that today a minority of Christians are walking in the Spirit at any given time, then most followers of Jesus are operating in the flesh most of the time. As a result, too much time is spent on conflict resolution within churches instead of focusing on impacting people outside of the church. The consequences are extremely detrimental within churches, and they lessen the positive impact they should be having upon a needy, hurting, and lost world. Christians living fleshly lives was a significant problem in the church in Paul's day and continues to be a problem today.

3. **The peace within us.** When we walk in harmony with the Holy Spirit, we experience joy and peace. But when we walk in the flesh, that joy and peace are lost as we grieve the Spirit. Fortunately, God has absolutely no intention of leaving us there. He is always at work to draw us and welcome us back into intimate fellowship with Him.

## **God's Grace Abounds**

When we operate in the flesh, it does not mean God can't use us for His purposes. Thankfully, God is gracious and patient with us, and He can work through us even when we are not being led by the Holy Spirit at any moment.

God is able to work through us even when we are living in the flesh. It's not that we're useless to God when we're in the flesh; it's that we're less useful to Him.

## **The Harmonious Spirit-Led Church**

"And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:44-47 NIV).

This description of the church just after Pentecost paints a desirable picture of what a church led by the Holy Spirit looks like. The people were harmoniously meeting together in both the temple and each other's homes and showing great generosity

toward each other. Many unbelievers were taking notice of the church as they saw the unity of its people and as the Holy Spirit opened their eyes to the good news of salvation through Jesus.

## **An Encouraging Reminder**

As a follower of Jesus, you are God's masterpiece. You are His best creation because He made you in His very image. You are His child whom He loves unconditionally. And as your heavenly Father, He wants the best for you. That means He wants to teach you to consistently walk in His Spirit.

Regardless of whether you are led by the Spirit or the flesh at any particular moment, it has absolutely no impact on God's infinite and eternal love for you. Even when you live in the flesh, He loves you just the same as when you're living in the Spirit. No amount of fleshly living will ever separate you from God's infinite love for you, His beloved child. But when you learn to consistently live by the power of the Holy Spirit, God can do things through you you've never imagined! "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you" (Jeremiah 31:3 NIV).

## **Test Your Heart**

Take some time to ask God for help in knowing your heart. Pray this timeless and heartfelt prayer from King David's heart: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23-24 NIV).

Every word of this passage has a piercing insight. God knows your heart no matter where you are physically, emotionally, or spiritually, and He rejoices when you come to Him with this request. He longs to answer this prayer in order to draw you nearer to Him.

**ABIDING TRUTH:** An internal battle between the indwelling Holy Spirit and your flesh goes on every minute of every day, but you can consistently win the daily fight as you choose to walk in the Spirit.

## **Reflection Question**

Ask yourself how you could change one thing in your life you feel causes you to live in the flesh. This could be a habit, a relationship, or even a specific situation that stands outside of God's will for you. Once identified, make a plan for combating it, and then share this plan with someone you trust, asking them to pray for you.