

The Works of the Flesh

Galatians 5:19-21

With Study Questions

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Galatians 5:19-21

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, ²¹envy, 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 (Galatians 5:19-21).

Here we have, what might appear to be, a startling turn of events. Paul, who despised the law when announced as necessary for justification, gives nothing less than a list of lawless deeds which, if one practices them, will exclude people from heaven.

One wonders where the line is drawn. We may comfort ourselves for having avoided committing murder, but what of anger, hatred, and selfish ambition? Are these not on our resumé of character traits? How do you know this list, at least at some level, doesn't belong to you? How do we discriminate between the kind of law-breaking Paul writes of here and the kind of law-breaking that all Christians do on a regular basis?

Let us be straightforward; Paul is addressing the type of person who does not have the inheritance of heaven. The ungodly behavior Paul writes of is evident, obvious, clear, or manifest. In other words, one needn't be a professor of ethics to be aware of the works of the flesh.

Let us briefly examine these works. We'll find that they loosely fall into four categories: 1) sexual sin; 2) the following of false gods; 3) discord and conflict; and, 4) intemperance.

Adultery/Fornication

Paul starts with sexual sin. Fornication, *porneia*, is a very general term that relates to any kind of sexual immorality. This could be heterosexual passions outside of marriage, any homosexual behavior, bestiality, incest, engagement in pornography, etc.

Uncleanness

"Uncleanness" is also used of sexual immorality. In the first chapter of Romans this is especially related to homosexuality, which, despite modern homosexual theism, is the natural result of the denial of the existence of God.

Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves (Romans 1:24).

Uncleanness has a very ceremonial ring to it. It had to do with touching things that were impure or dead.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead *men's* bones and all uncleanness (Matthew 23:27).

Apply this metaphor to a casual approach to promiscuity. Promiscuity can be framed as so natural and fun and exciting. Television sitcoms and commercials market promiscuity as harmless.

Years ago I saw a skit on *Saturday Night Live* where Gilda Radner made eye contact with a handsome stranger in an upscale New York bistro. The music played and the romance ensued. Fast forward to the next morning where she's stumbling out of some foreign apartment into a stinky taxi having been used and discarded; this was much closer to reality than dramatizing a "harmless fling."

Lewdness

To be lewd is to be unrestrained in moral attitudes and behaviors. It is listed in Ephesians 4:19 among the sins of the unregenerate who are "past feeling." The prominent idea is shameless conduct. We might call this an amoral person.

It is interesting, yet sad, how people who are amoral cannot see their own amoral character. They often think they have a standard. I was watching the television show *Politically Incorrect* one evening. The debate, as it often did, revolved around homosexuality. One of the homosexual men involved became incensed when during the debate he was compared to a prostitute. Of course, one must then ask what is morally repugnant about prostitution.

Idolatry

The list then moves to the worship of false gods. The word denotes the idea of serving an image. An idolater is a hireling. He is a slave to the image that is often constructed out of his own imagination. The enemy generally keeps people woefully ignorant of the genuine nature of their idol.

Few will admit, or even realize, that they bow before the system of empiricism, or rationalism, or humanism. Some may say "I am my own man," but will not wish to pursue to the necessary conclusions of such a statement, e.g. the limits of one's own intellect, will, power or outside influences in his life, etc. Idolatry is the necessary result of the rejection of Christ.

Sorcery

Isaiah records an awful judgment against sorcery.

But these two *things* shall come to you in a moment, in one day: The loss of children, and widowhood. They shall come upon you in their fullness because of the multitude of your sorceries, for the great abundance of your enchantments (Isaiah 47:8, 9).

A study of sorcery in the Scriptures will often involve the use of drugs, spells, incantations, and appeals to occult powers, with the provision of various charms, amulets (protective jewelry – perhaps a St. Christopher). All this professedly designed to keep the applicant or patient from the attention and power of demons, but actually to impress the applicant with the mysterious resources and powers of the sorcerer (who has his own motives).

The modern fascination with palm reading and radio talk-show hosts who speak with the dead are bad signs for a society. Trust in the power, providence and wisdom of God is supplanted by magic, fortune telling, and wishful thinking.

Hatred

Now we move to discord and conflict in Paul's list. It has become in vogue to declare a hatred of God. The utter folly of such a statement practically reveals a demonic influence – for to be hateful of God (assuming a proper understanding of God) is to be hateful of good and to love evil. This hatefulness is not so much a fire in the gut as it is a disposition of hostility or antagonism against a person, concept, etc. It is the idea of pitting oneself against someone or something. This is almost impossible to avoid in a church where the assertion of absolute truths are necessary. Let us keep in mind that Paul is writing this letter to churches.

Contentions

It would seem to necessarily follow that where there is hatred there is contention. Contentions usually involve debate and strife. Controversy and debate is not always bad; it is often very fruitful. When controversy goes awry it becomes contentious. You wish to win for winning's sake; you'd rather beat than bless. There is often the seeking of alliances for emotional and psychological pleasure, but instead it is called support. Human pride wins the day and the fruit becomes sour.

Jealousy – Zeal

When those who are contentious dominate the church, their victims are tempted to be jealous and to seek the same sort of prestige for themselves. This is an insidious enemy that often prevails in Christ's church. It produces an unhealthy desire to be recognized as a spiritual leader.

Outbursts of Wrath

Unfortunately a natural result of these contentions and jealousies are anger and wrath. How often churches are torn asunder by those who can't control their lust for power! The meetings can become quite ugly and revealing. By God's grace one might view their own outburst as God's sanctifying revelation of their own sin. Sadly we tend to blame others for our anger as if they have injected us with fresh evil that was not previously part of our inward nature.

Selfish Ambition

Of course the anger does not proceed from some outward source but is a result of, among other things, our own selfish ambition – self will. The contentious person who seeks to form alliances at the doughnut table because of their concern for the church and its members is often merely a person with an over-inflated view of their own importance.

Dissensions

Dissensions involve being torn asunder. The festering disease of sin that is allowed to thrive unchecked will eventually decimate the body. Division is often the healthy produce of God's word; dissension prevails when God's word is ignored and viewed in a secondary sense. Dissension happens when the two factions are no longer on a quest for the mind of Christ. It happens when one, or both, decide their own opinion is superior.

Heresies

Another consequence of ignoring God's word is the choosing of false doctrines. Churches that are governed by self-will, jealousy and selfish ambition will inevitably find themselves outside the pale of Christian orthodoxy. Of course the word "heresy" has come to be meaningless in today's anti-church culture. Heresy is determined by the private individual or pop theologian. Our particular culture has grown to be quite comfortable with the *Bible Answer Man's* assessment of what is acceptable and what is not.

We forget that Luther was (and still is) a heretic according to Rome. J. Gresham Machen was cast out of a liberal Presbyterian Church. The word "heresy" only has meaning when it is based upon the authority which proclaims it. I would consider it an honor to be declared a heretic by Rome. We have sadly lost all basis for heresy except some small denominations whose entire constituency is smaller than Willow Creek.

As an endnote, it is worth pondering that heresies are enumerated among the works of the flesh; that they are sinful acts and not mere errors.

Envy

Envy is quite similar to jealousy. The difference lies in that jealousy is the desire to have the same or same sort of thing someone else has, envy desires to deprive another of what he has.

Drunkenness and Revelries

We now move to intemperance. Drunkenness and revelries are simple concepts. This includes habitual intoxication, carousing, hanging out in the parking lot in the middle of the night, driving around with no place to go looking for trouble, etc. Hitting the parties. Getting drunk in front of the television every night. This person is wasting their own life and often ruins, or at least makes miserable, the lives of others.

And the Like

That this is not an exhaustive list can be found in the phrase, "and the like." There are no loopholes for those who can somehow find a way to escape the exact nature of the above sins.

Practice Such Things

Let us now get back to our original conundrum. If Paul has made it clear that man is saved by faith alone, how are we to understand that those who practice such things (which at some level includes us all) will not inherit the kingdom of God? This seemingly brings new meaning to the apostles' question, "who then can be saved?"

The answer is found in the word *practice*. This word is distinct from other words in the Bible that are used for improper actions. Some words denote an action, perhaps a sinful action, which is complete in itself or isolated. This word, *prasso*, denotes a habit. It is not isolated, but part of a process leading to accomplishment.

This is in no way to suggest some type of Christian perfectionism. It is to say, however, if one's life can be characterized by the wanton disregard for the law of God as we have just studied, this person should view their soul as in great peril.

Paul does not allow comfort for those who think they can sin with impunity from Monday to Saturday then give lip service to God on Sunday. Elsewhere Paul gives a similar list where justification and sanctification (the process of being made holy) are inextricably linked.

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites,¹⁰ nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were

justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

We now speak of the necessary fruit of justification. Where the Romish would hang justification out as a carrot of motivation in righteousness, leaving its child in slavery, the gospel, in all of its gracious splendor more successfully brings its passenger to the shores of righteous living. As Spurgeon taught,

The gospel denounces sin, ay, and kills it; it gives us the force with which we fight against it and overcome it!¹

And since I could not find better words myself to describe the power of God's Spirit who works in those who have been justified by faith, I use someone else's words. Nicely put by Hodge,

The Scriptures teach that the Spirit of God dwells in his people, not only collectively as the Church, but individually in every believer, so that of every Christian it may be said, he is a temple of the Holy Ghost. God is said to dwell wherever He permanently manifests his presence, whether as of old in the temple, or in the hearts of his people, in the Church, or in heaven. And as the Spirit dwells in believers, He there manifests His life-giving, controlling power, and is in them the principle, or source, or controlling influence which determines their inward and outward life. By the flesh, in the doctrinal portions of Scripture, is never, unless the word be limited by the context, meant merely our sensuous nature, but our fallen nature, i.e., our nature as it is in itself, apart from the Spirit of God. As our Lord says (John iii. 6), "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." These then are the principles which "are contrary the one to the other." No man can act independently of both. He must obey one or the other. He may sometimes obey the one, and sometimes the other; but one or the other must prevail. The Apostle says of believers that they have crucified the flesh with its affections and lusts. They have renounced the authority of the evil principle; they do not willingly, or of set purpose, or habitually yield to it. They struggle against it, and not only endeavour, but actually do crucify it, although it may die a long and painful death.²

¹ Spurgeon, C. H. 1998. *Spurgeon's Sermons: Volume 57* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Spurgeon's Sermons. Vol. 57. Ages Software: Albany, OR

² Hodge, C. 1997. *Systematic theology*. Originally published 1872. (Vol. 3, Page 224-225). Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA

Questions for Study

1. In what ways can sexual immorality be destructive (pages 1, 2)?
2. What does it mean to be lewd? How do we see this in our current culture (page 2)?
3. How are some people unwitting idolaters (page 2)?
4. Why would sorcery be an affront to God (pages 2, 3)?
5. Discuss the sins of strife (pages 3, 4).
6. Since people are saved by faith and not by works, how are we to understand how the people practicing such sins will not inherit the kingdom of heaven (pages 5, 6)?