

THE WORKS OF THE FLESH

Galatians 5:19-21

Human nature apart from the influence and power of the grace of God is capable of all kinds of evil. Human nature has a native bias toward corruption and desire for that which is displeasing in the sight of God. Human nature is naturally at enmity with God. It will naturally pervert every good thing that God puts into the hand of man.

After setting forth the unceasing struggle between the flesh and the Spirit in the Christian man, Paul turns his attention to the works of the flesh. "Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these." While he speaks of the "fruit" of the Spirit, it is the "works" of the flesh. By the use of works he pin points the responsibility. The nature of the man involved is totally responsible for that which it produces. But the beautiful "fruit" that graces the Christian life are the products of another influence, another power.

It is sobering to realize the potential in you for all of this terrible list of things. You may want to protest that you are different, but you are really playing games with yourself. This is who you really are apart from God's help. You are flesh. And these are the kinds of things that unrestrained "flesh" does. All of the "works" were very evident in the pagan society in which those early Christians lived, just as they are becoming increasingly "manifest" in our society. These "works" can be listed in four categories. For our warning, let us consider them in some detail.

I. THE FLESH PRODUCES IMMORALITY.

The first four words in this list refer to immoral behavior: "Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness." While our Authorized Version begins with "adultery", the Greek text in the better manuscripts begins with the broader word "fornication." "Fornication would include adulterous behavior for it is the word that would include any illicit or unlawful sexual union. It would include all sexual involvement except that which is between two people who are committed to each other in the bonds of marriage. It would include pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, sex with a partner of the same gender, incest, and whatever else God has not sanctioned. Why do people commit immorality? It is a work of the flesh. Each of us have the capability, apart from the grace of God, for an unclean sexual involvement.

"Uncleanness" also refers to sexual impurity. "Lasciviousness" is a long word that might be translated "lewdness", or "shameless behavior". It refers to a person who has come to the place that they do not care what God or man thinks about their behaviour. They are without a sense of shame. It is expressed in an ultimate

way in the display of nudity, and shameless behaviour that characterizes some of the entertainment world in our day.

Does this mean then that if we are walking in the Spirit that we will be less interested in sex? Does this mean that the Spirit will put to death all sexual desire? Absolutely not! There is nothing unclean about sexual desire, or the right kind of sexual relationship. But the Holy Spirit will prevent the "flesh" from using selfishly and destructively the beautiful thing that God gave for the good of man and woman. This should also warn us that if we are going to bring about pure behaviour on the part of mankind, we must see that something takes place inside of man to change Him, and to give Him a power against the corruption that comes from within.

II. THE FLESH PRODUCES IDOLATRY.

Why does pagan man turn to idols in worship instead of the true and living God? Why will hundreds of people follow so blindly a deranged spiritual leader like Jones, the leader of the People's Temple that has been so much in the news this week? The answer is found in the nature of man, he is "flesh".

The works of the flesh include "idolatry, witchcraft." "Idolatry" means to give worship and service to an idol. In the world of the people of Galatia this was the common practice of the citizenry. They were daily seen in the pagan temples rendering sacrifices and involved in the worship of false gods. This in spite of the fact that the idol worship still left them with the same deep life needs unmet. It is the flesh that turns man to idolatry. That is, it is something deep within the nature of man. Man is just by nature, apart from the divine influence, bent toward the worship of the false.

"Witchcraft" goes with idolatry. Interestingly the word comes from the Greek word from which we get our word pharmacy. Drugs of different types were used in the practice of witchcraft then, as they are now. While it is true that "witchcraft" involves one with the demonic, it is interesting that Paul traces the root to this terrible thing to the nature of man, not to the devil.

Again, this is really a corruption of something in man that is good and beautiful. God created man with the capacity to worship, pray, and commune with God. Yet the flesh of man takes this wonderful God given capacity and turns it toward the worship of idols and the communion with evil spirits. And this is the nature that belongs to each of us apart from the grace and power of Jesus Christ our Lord.

III. THE FLESH PRODUCES ENMITY.

The longest list of "works" have to do with our attitudes and actions toward others. They are "hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies,

envyings, murders." The New International translates the list like this, "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy." "Hatred" can be translated also "enmities". The word is plural in the Greek to emphasize that they are continuous and numerous. It is that personal animosity toward others. Those attitudes of ill will that you experience and nurture toward other people come from the flesh.

"Variance" is better translated "discord" or "strife". Whenever the flesh is allowed to produce some "hatred" then strife will soon follow. All discord between men is a product of the flesh. "Emulations" is jealousy. Jealousy is such a cruel and evil thing when it is allowed in a life. Where does jealousy come from? It is produced by the flesh. It is a natural product of your flesh nature.

"Wrath" can be translated "fit of rage" for it refers to those outbursts of anger. It is that burst of emotion that causes a man to hit his wife, that causes the volleying forth of unkind words. Flesh does it. "Strife" is selfish ambition that puts you into blind competition with your fellowman. It is that which prevents you from delighting in his prosperity. It is that which causes you to try to take unfair advantage of him. "Seditions and heresies" is that which ends up in the divisions into parties. You will recall that Paul accused the church of Corinth of allowing the flesh to dominate. The evidence that he cited was the division that had taken place in the church. Everyone was identifying with a separate party. All such divisions of the body of Christ are the works of the flesh. The Holy Spirit unites, but the flesh divides.

"Envyings" is the last word in the Greek text. It is that desire for the things that belongs to another. While love seeks the good of the other, envy seeks the good thing that he has for self. The flesh is totally self-centered in its concerns. Do you have your enemy list? Is there a list of people that you cannot stand, you have marked them out of your life? Why do you have them on your list? Do you really want to know the truth? That list is a clear manifestation of the flesh, of the old sinful nature that is apart of us all. Bad human relations grow out of the dominance of the flesh in the life of a man.

IV. THE FLESH PRODUCES INTEMPERANCE.

The last two words are "drunkenness and revellings, and such like."

"Drunkenness" requires little exposition. We have nicer names for it in our day, and complicated explanations about why men do it, but the truth is that the nature of it has changed very little. There were those in the day of Paul whose lives were characterized by their attempts to escape the hard realities of life by means of wine and strong drink. Their lives came to be characterized by overindulgence in the things of strong drink. Why do men do this? The root is found in the nature of man.

This insight should serve as a warning to us all. There are some of you who look down upon the poor drunk, and you boast that you are different. That poor fellow could not handle his hard liquors, but you are different. While there are some obvious differences in men, the truth is that you too are capable of being mastered by strong drink. The man is a fool who ignores the truth about himself. Apart from the grace of God you are nothing more than flesh.

"Revellings" is drunken bouts, and orgies. In that day men would gather in their clubs or groups with nothing in mind but the indulgence of their thirst for drink, and at times sexual escapades. Such goes on in our community. Why do men get away from the eyes of the community and drink and indulge themselves. Why do they go away to conventions only to spend their time in indulging. It goes back to something that is in the nature of man. He is flesh.

Foul concludes the list by an indication that this list is not complete. He would have included many other expressions if he had been giving a complete list. Any thing that is of this nature surely belongs on the list.

Do you see your situation: that which is within you which struggles against the Holy Spirit is called flesh. It is by nature inclined toward immorality, idolatry, ill-will, and intemperance.

But this raises the question about those who are obviously as a pattern of life under the domination of the flesh. Immorality is characteristic of their life style. They are idolatrous. They are characterized by ill will, and they are intemperate. Can they be true believers on the Lord Jesus Christ? Paul's conviction is clear. "Of the which I tell you before, as I have told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." By the kingdom of God, the Apostle is referring to the final manifestation of the rule of God, the eternal kingdom. The truth is that they have no part in such a kingdom. They are still in their sins and under condemnation regardless of how vocal they may be in their professions. Those in whom the Spirit dwells may indeed know a struggle with the flesh, and be victimized by the flesh on occasion, but the Holy Spirit is going to be working in them to bring about victory and holiness.

CONCLUSION:

Are you knowing victory over the flesh? You must not yield one moment of your life to control of your old nature. It will bring about your shame and destruction. It is time for us to give attention to the wonderful provisions that the Lord has provided for us.