

Sin and the Believer

1) Paul said that I am “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11, ESV). Does this mean I will no longer be tempted?

A) No—being dead to sin does not mean that you will no longer be tempted. Adam and Eve were sinless, and both of them were tempted (Gen 3:12–13; 1 Tim 2:14). Jesus was sinless, and He was also tempted (cf. Matt 4:1–11; 26:37–44; Heb 2:18; 4:15). This shows that the ability to be tempted is an innate characteristic of being human—it is not the result of having sinned, nor is it a sign of a lack of consecration.

B) Being “dead to sin” means that your relationship to sin has been severed—sin no longer has mastery over you (Rom 6:6–7). When you were a sinner, sin reigned over you and you were under its control. As a believer, the only control sin has in your life is the control that you allow it to have (Rom 6:12–14).

C) God permits Satan to tempt believers so they will learn to resist him (James 4:7). Each temptation is a test of our faith—it gives us the opportunity to demonstrate our love for God and to build the spiritual muscle of endurance (Rom 5:3–4). Temptation is a part of the process by which we are being conformed to the image of Christ (Rom 8:28–29).

2) Paul said that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24, ESV). Does this mean I will no longer experience the pull of the flesh?

A) No—the death of the flesh¹ does not mean that you will no longer experience its pull. Peter said, “Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Pet 2:11, ESV). Paul said, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom 13:14, ESV). This shows that the flesh, though crucified, can still pull a believer toward self-centered living.

B) The crucifixion of the flesh means that your relationship to the flesh has been severed—the flesh no longer has mastery over you (Gal 5:16; Rom 8:13). When you were

¹ The word “flesh,” when used in its ethical/moral sense (e.g., Gal 5:16–24, Rom 8:5–9), refers to that aspect of our being which comes to all men through Adam’s fall, has mastery over the sinner, and produces many evil works (Rom 7:14–15; Gal 5:19–21). When we are born again, the flesh is crucified and its controlling power over us is broken (Gal 5:24). It will, at times, pull us toward self-centered living (Rom 13:14; 1 Pet 2:11), but as long as we are walking by the Spirit, we will not “carry out the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16, 18; Eph 5:18).

a sinner, you walked² according to the flesh (Gal 5:19–21) and you were a “flesh-minder” (someone whose mind is focused on the flesh and its desires, and joins in with the flesh in acting on those desires; cf. Rom 8:5–8).

C) Paul said in Romans 8:1–14 that a believer is no longer characterized by the flesh. Instead, they: a) walk according to the Spirit, b) are a “Spirit-minder” (someone whose mind is focused on the Spirit and His desires, and resists the desires of the flesh), c) are spiritually alive and have peace with God, d) are putting to death the deeds of the body, and e) are not in the flesh. As a believer, the only control the flesh has in your life is the control you allow it to have (Rom 8:12–13).

D) Believers are called to action—they are commanded to live out in practice (imperative/action) what is true of them in Christ (indicative/state). Paul said that we are “dead to sin” (state), and commanded us to “not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires” (action). Paul said that we “have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (state), and commanded us to be walking “by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (action). Thus the life of a believer is characterized by resisting temptation and saying “no” to the flesh.

3) Some people say the conflict described in Galatians 5:17 means that believers are unable to gain true victory over the flesh. Is that true?

A) Galatians 5:17 must be interpreted in light of the previous verse. Consider the following expanded translation of verse 16: “But I say, be walking in the Spirit and you will not ever (lit. “no never”) fulfill the desire of the flesh.” Paul uses a double negative to make his denial as emphatic as possible. His point is that as long as a believer is presently, actively walking by the Spirit, they will not fulfill the desire of the flesh.

B) Now let’s examine verse 17. Note that it begins with the word “for,” indicating that Paul is continuing the thought of the previous verse and is about to give further explanation:

(1) “For the flesh desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” (5:17a, LEB). The flesh desires things that are “against” or contrary to what the Spirit desires, and the Spirit desires things that are contrary to what the flesh desires. Doing the one necessarily means not doing the other.

(2) “for these are in opposition to one another” (5:17b, LEB). The flesh and the Spirit are opposed to each other—both want to frustrate the desires of the other.

² The word “walk” (*peripateo*) occurs frequently in Paul’s letters in the sense of “live” or “conduct yourself” (cf. Rom 6:4; 8:4; 13:13; 14:15; 1 Cor 3:3; 7:17; 2 Cor 4:2; 5:7; 10:2, 3; 12:18; Eph 2:2, 10; 4:17; 5:2, 15; Phil 3:17, 18; Col 2:6; 3:7; 4:5; 2 Thess 1:12; 4:1, 12). Thus “walking in the flesh” means living in accordance with and submitting to the flesh. Note Paul’s indicative (state) vs. active (conduct) language in Galatians 5:25.

(3) “so that you may not be doing whatever things you may be desiring” (5:17c). While you were living in the flesh, the flesh was working to keep any desire of the Spirit from being accomplished in your life. Now that you are walking by the Spirit, the Spirit is working to keep any desire of the flesh from being accomplished in your life. Your responsibility is to be yielding to the desires of the Spirit—if you do, “you will not fulfill the desire of the flesh” (5:16).

C) Instead of painting a discouraging picture of the believer locked in a losing battle with the flesh, Galatians 5:17 proclaims a liberating truth—the Christian that is presently, actively walking by the Spirit will not fulfill the desires of the flesh because the Spirit is working to keep any fleshly desire from being accomplished. What a wonderful truth—every believer can enjoy a life free from the willful indulgence of the flesh!

4) Some people point to Paul’s personal testimony in Romans 7:14–25 as evidence that believers are unable to gain true victory over sin. Is that true?

A) Romans 7:14–25 is widely believed to be Paul’s personal testimony of the losing battle between the flesh and the Spirit. One reason for this understanding is the connection people make between Galatians 5:17 and Romans 7. They misunderstand what Galatians 5:17 is saying (they think it’s saying that the flesh prevents us from doing what the Spirit wants us to do), and they import that thought into Romans 7 (thus Paul’s cry of despair comes from a losing battle with his flesh). I have stated what I believe to be the correct understanding of Galatians 5:17 above. Let’s consider the following reasons why Galatians and Romans are different:

(1) The conflict is different. In Galatians 5:17 the conflict is between the flesh and the Spirit. The conflict in Romans 7:14–25 is between the flesh and Paul’s mind (cf. Rom 7:23–24)—the Spirit is not mentioned anywhere in the passage. The struggle Paul testified to was the conflict that raged between his mind (which was enlightened by the law and wanted to obey) and his flesh (which resisted his attempts to please God).

(2) The spiritual state of the individuals is different. In Romans 7:14–25, Paul speaks of himself as: “fleshly” (v. 14), “sold into slavery to sin” (v. 14), having “sin that lives in me” (v. 17), “captive to the law of sin” (v. 23), and “serving the law of sin” (v.25). This characterization indicates that Paul was referring to his past life as a devout but unregenerate Pharisee who wanted to obey God’s law. Galatians 5:17 is referring to a believer: “brethren” (v. 13), “those who belong to Jesus Christ” (v. 24), “[we] live by the Spirit” (v. 25).

(3) The solution is different. The answer to the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit in Galatians 5:17 is for the believer to be presently, actively walking by

the Spirit. The answer to Paul's struggle between his mind and his flesh was for him to be "set free" (v. 24) "through Jesus Christ our Lord" (v. 25; also Rom 8:1-2).

B) If Paul wasn't testifying about the losing battle in his life between the flesh and the Spirit, then what was he talking about? Remember—Paul was born a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin. He was circumcised on the eighth day in obedience to the Law, and was a member of the sect called the Pharisees. The Pharisees were renowned for their zealous observance, not only of the Mosaic Law, but of the tradition of the elders as well.

C) What do you think happened when the devoutly religious but still unregenerate Paul tried to live a life that was holy and separated from sin? Exactly what is described in Romans 7:14-25! His mind, which was enlightened by God's word, recognized what was good and desired to obey, but his flesh, which still had mastery over him, repeatedly thwarted his attempts to live a life free from sin. "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24, ESV).³ Paul gives the answer to his plea for help in Romans 8:2—"For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."

D) Romans, along with Paul's other letters, must be read through the lens of Paul's personal background and experience with the Law as a unregenerate Jew. This is a unique perspective, quite different from the Gentiles who grew up living out the works of the flesh, and only learning about the Law after being saved. Paul grew up reading the Law and wanting to follow it as an obedient Jew. But just as growing up in the church doesn't give you the ability to live a Christian life, so being a Pharisee didn't give the Paul the ability to live a holy life apart from Jesus' saving grace.