

True Freedom: Life in a Warzone

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Date: 21 November 2021

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[0 : 00] Well, one of my favorite books is Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. And it's more than a horror story because what it is is a fascinating study of the human condition.

Dr. Jekyll recognizes that he is an incongruous compound of good and evil. He recognizes there are two natures. And so by means of a potion, what Dr. Jekyll does is he separates out these two natures.

One is Jekyll and one is Hyde. The good and respectable Jekyll then uses the potion to transform himself into the evil Hyde and then back again.

And as Hyde, he performs all kinds of immoral and evil acts, including murder. But as time goes on, Hyde becomes even more powerful and Hyde becomes harder to control until eventually the evil side of his personality so dominates him that Jekyll becomes Hyde without the potion.

The evil nature, in a sense, overpowers the good nature within. And if you haven't read the story, spoiler alert here. Here's what happens. Jekyll eventually can't control himself and his transformations anymore.

[1 : 22] So what happens is he ends up killing himself. The evil nature overpowers the good one. And it really is a profound short book because Robert Louis Stevenson essentially paints a picture of the conflict that exists inside every human heart.

All of us are aware that we have this divided self. There are two natures fighting within us, the good against the evil. And so Jekyll's struggle against Hyde really helpfully illustrates the conflict that the Apostle Paul describes here in Galatians chapter 5 from verse 16 through to 26.

26. It's a conflict, you notice, between the spirit and the flesh. Or the flesh, the sinful nature, the spirit and the flesh. And it's a fight within our lives.

So there's a sense in which our lives are like a war zone. They're like a battlefield. But unlike Stevenson's inner war between Jekyll and Hyde, where self-destruction is the tragic end result, Paul's commentary here on this fight points us to a better result, where the spirit, rather than the flesh, is the victor.

The spirit wins and defeats the flesh. Because in Galatians, remember, Paul is not talking about humanity in general here. He is addressing Christians.

[2 : 50] And so he's talking about Christian believers. Even though every single one of us, whether we call ourselves a Christian or not, can relate to this conflict within us.

We want to do good things, but we don't do them. And we do evil instead. And so what Paul is describing here is the conflict that exists within every Christian believer.

And what he shows us is how the spirit and the flesh are locked in deadly conflict, in battle with one another, in a fight, in a sense, to control your life and mine.

And so this is a struggle that every Christian knows and experiences every day of our lives. And so what Paul does here is he paints a picture of the acts of the flesh, of the sinful nature, and then he shows us a picture of the fruit of the spirit.

So there's two ways to live. And the question we need to ask is, well, will I be led by the spirit or will I be controlled by the flesh, by my sinful nature?

[4 : 05] So let's look at this under three headings this afternoon. First of all, there are the fighters. Secondly, their profiles. And then thirdly, the strategy. The fighters, their profiles, and the strategy.

So first of all, the fighters, verse 16 to 18. The contenders in this fight are the spirit versus the flesh. And so if you're joining us for the first time today, then what we've seen in past weeks is how Paul writes to the Galatian Christians to tell them that they have been set free by Jesus Christ.

And so he's saying, don't lose your freedom through legalistic religious observance. You can lose your freedom by thinking you need to rely on these rules in order to be a proper Christian. But on the other hand, he also says, don't abuse your freedom through licentious sinful behavior. In other words, don't think that you're free by doing whatever you want to do.

Because our freedom is never a license to do what we want. And that's why he now goes on to speak about our sinful nature, which he calls flesh.

[5 : 16] So verse 16 says, So I say, live by the spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Flesh essentially describes what we are by nature.

That corrupted part of our humanity with all of its sinful desires, because we are all natural born sinners. So if you've got children, you know they don't have to learn how to do wrong.

It is natural. It comes by nature because it's who we are as human beings. And our sinful nature doesn't just disappear when we become a Christian.

And so becoming a Christian doesn't mean that we will never struggle with sin in our lives. We will. And the reason is, as Paul says here, our lives are like a war zone.

They are a battlefield where the spirit is in conflict with the flesh or our sinful nature. And that's why Paul commands us here to live by the spirit and not to give in to our sinful desires.

[6 : 20] So he says in verse 17, For the flesh desires what is contrary to the spirit, and the spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other so that you're not able to do whatever you want.

He's describing the inner conflict raging within every Christian. The spirit and the flesh are fighting for control of our lives.

And so it's a bit like two mixed martial arts fighters who are fighting to see who can overpower the other and gain the advantage. And so practically what this looks like is that sometimes we want to do something, and it's a good thing to do and a right thing to do, but we actually don't do it.

We do the wrong thing instead. We do what we don't want to do. And so before someone becomes a Christian, we're ruled by the flesh.

We're ruled by our sinful nature. We're under this dominion held captive by our sinful nature. But when we become a Christian, then God's spirit comes to dwell in our hearts.

[7 : 31] And when the spirit dwells in our hearts and in our lives, we receive this new nature where the Holy Spirit works in us to transform us into what we should be.

But as the spirit rolls out this process, there's nothing short of a civil war going on, going on in our minds, going on in our hearts, going on in our behavior.

Martin Luther, the German reformer, captured this well when he said, *Simo*, it's in Latin, *simo justus et peccator*. So *simo*, where we get our words simultaneously, meaning at the same time, *justus*, justice, righteous, *peccator*, sinner.

Luther's saying that at one and the same time, we are righteous and sinner. Righteous and sinner at the same time, simultaneously. And so at the same time, we are pulled in two different directions. We're pulled by the spirit to live according to the spirit. And we're also pulled by our flesh, by our sinful nature, to live according to our sinful nature. That's the war. That's the battle.

[8 : 41] And that's why Paul says here, we're not just to live by the spirit, verse 16. He also says we're to be led by the spirit in verse 18. But if you're led by the spirit, you're not under the law.

What he's talking about here is the active work of God, the Holy Spirit, in our hearts and lives to lead us to live God's way.

So his presence in our lives means we've got this new desire in us that wants to obey God, that wants to please God instead of wanting to please ourselves.

And this doesn't mean that we'll always manage, but it is what we want to do. And so we're not just fighting, therefore, in our own strength, with our own power.

God's spirit is fighting for us and with us. And so we should actually be encouraged if it feels hard to follow Jesus.

[9 : 42] If you're a Christian and it feels hard to follow Jesus, be encouraged. If you aren't a Christian, do recognize and realize that it will be tough following Jesus.

And here's why. It's tough because there's a fight of opposing forces going on in our bodies, inside us. It's like the Jekyll and Hyde divided self.

Whenever I counsel people who are new Christian believers, this always seems to come up. They say, so I know God's spirit lives in me, but I just can't stop sinning.

I keep on sinning, doing things I know I shouldn't do, and I feel bad and I feel guilty. Well, here's the reason. It's because the spirit works to convince us of our sin and to convict us of our sin.

And his dwelling in us means that we now want to please God. That's why we feel guilty when we don't please God. And so the good news is that the balance of power is with the spirit, not the flesh.

[10:50] The spirit has the advantage in this battle. And so with the spirit, if you look at it in terms of a boxing match, with the spirit, we should be gaining more points each round as the fight goes on.

And that's really an indication that victory for God's people is the end result. But not yet. Not yet.

And so that's the two fighters. Let's then look at their profiles. You know, when you watch a boxing match on TV or UFC, whatever it is, you get the fighters' names and then you get their profiles, their age, their weight, their date of birth, and so on and so on.

And so Paul here gives, in essence, two different profiles in this fight. So if we're going to live by the spirit, we need to know what we're fighting against.

And so that's why Paul profiles the acts of the flesh, first of all, verse 19 to 21. And then he contrasts this with the fruit of the spirit, verse 22 and 23.

[11:52] And so fighting out of the blue corner, we have got the acts of the flesh, 19 to 21. Let me just read those verses. The acts of the flesh are obvious.

Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

Okay, so these are the actions that flow from our sinful nature. So these are the things that we gravitate towards. Paul says they're obvious, and we know they're obvious because every culture there has ever been has been characterized by this vice list, if you like.

And it's not an exhaustive list, but let's just quickly mention each. So first of all, there is sexual immorality. Now the word that Paul uses here is the word pornea, which really refers to all sexual activity that is outside the context of one man and one woman in marriage.

So everything else comes under this term he uses for sexual immorality. It's a junk drawer term, if you like, for sexual sin of any kind.

[13:16] Then he goes on. He mentions impurity. Similar, but referring to unnatural sexual practices or relationships. Then there's debauchery.

Again, referring to behavior that shows no restraint or care or shame. The kind of hedonism that has no regard for anyone or anything. So the first three refer to sexual sin.

The next two are about idolatry. So there's idolatry. And idolatry means the worship of other gods. So money, power, family can all be idols when they become more important to us than the one true and living God.

Then there's witchcraft, referring to the occult or sorcery. Basically, the worship of anything that is evil. And then Paul goes on and he uses eight words about how we relate to other people.

So there's hatred. And that speaks of hostility towards others, whether it be racial or social or political or religious. It's basically the attitude that can't stand someone else for whatever reason.

[14:27] Then discord. And that's the attitude that is deliberately contentious and stirs things up. That always wants to pick a fight. Then jealousy.

Jealousy is the wrong kind of zeal. Fits of rage. These are uncontrolled, rage-filled outbursts. The anger that just impulsively lashes out with no restraint.

Then selfish ambition. That's the selfishness that wants to get a step ahead of everybody else.

Dissensions. Being divisive.

Factions. Dividing into cliques. Envy. It's that grudging spirit that can't stand to see somebody else prosper more than you.

And so those eight words describe how we relate to other people. And then the last two words describe self-indulgence. So there's drunkenness. In Glasgow, it's described as steaming or wasted, as well as a lot of other words that we won't say.

[15:29] Orgies, referring to every kind of excessive, indulgent behavior. And then Paul ends this massive list by saying and the like.

And so just in case we're tempted to think, well, maybe there's something on that list. Or there's something that isn't on that list that's okay. Well, it isn't. As Paul says and the like, he's catching everything.

Because what he's saying is this kind of lifestyle, these acts of the flesh, this gratifying of our sinful desires, this kind of lifestyle keeps a person apart and away from God.

And there's a portrait of this lifestyle seen in our culture today when we look and we see the world around us. And yet we can also see the source of all of this in our own hearts, can't we?

Where following our sinful desires does result in this kind of behavior. And so Paul warns us where we'll end up if we indulge our sinful desires.

[16 : 40] Or rather, where we won't end up. So he says in verse 21, I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

So he's saying living this kind of life disqualifies us from the kingdom of God. Now, some might be wondering, well, does this mean that we end up in hell if we do some of this stuff on this list?

Well, the reality is that we all deserve to go to hell. All of our sin, whatever it is, is an offense to a holy, perfect, righteous, just God.

And so all sin must be punished. And that's why we should never treat our sin too lightly as if it doesn't matter. But when Paul speaks here of those who live like this, he's talking about those who make this kind of behavior their lifestyle.

In other words, people who deliberately choose to live this way. And so he's not talking about those who don't want to live like this, but who sometimes fail and do commit some of these acts.

[17 : 58] Because remember, there is forgiveness for every sin. And so we should never be left hopeless if we're struggling with some of these issues in our own lives.

But what he is saying is we won't inherit the kingdom of God if we deliberately pursue the kind of lifestyle that he's got here in verse 19 to 21.

Because it will be a sign that we don't have the spirit dwelling in our hearts. If there's no desire to keep in step with the spirit and live the way the spirit wants, Paul says, then you won't inherit the kingdom of God.

So he's talking about those who want to behave in the ways described here. Not those who have the spirit and who want to fight against the kind of sin that's described here.

So before we move on, it may be that some who do profess to be a Christian do feel that you're losing the fight in some of these areas.

[19 : 05] Then, well, we must pay attention to the warning that Paul gives us here. We can't continue to indulge in our sinful nature by living this way. And yet we should be encouraged, shouldn't we?

If we're aware that there's a problem. It's a far greater problem if we don't know that there is a problem with our sin. It would be far worse if we weren't concerned at all about sin in our lives. But the fact that we are disturbed by our sin surely shows us that the spirit is at work. Convincing us of the sin and convicting us of it.

And his desire, the spirit's desire, is that we wouldn't give in. And his role is to help us. Okay, so that's the blue corner. The act of the flesh fighting out of the red corner is the fruit of the spirit. That's there in verse 22 and 23. And notice that in contrast to the act of the flesh, the fruit, the word fruit is singular. And so it's an agricultural word.

[20 : 11] And it speaks of natural and inevitable growth. And so the list of nine virtues that are described here describe the natural growth that we should see in the lives of those who have the spirit of God.

So let's briefly mention each. We'll read first, verse 22 and 23. But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Against such things there is no law. So let's just look at each briefly. Love. The spirit produces love in our lives. Love for God, obviously.

But also this kind of self-sacrificing love for other people. Joy. Joy is delight in God for who he is and for what God has done.

But joy is not a response to something that happens to us. Joy is an attitude. It's a posture, irrespective of what happens to us or the circumstances we find ourselves in.

[21 : 21] And there's peace. We can have peace with God, but we can also know peace amidst the turbulence of life. We are trusting in God. We are trusting in God frees us from our anxiety and our fear.

Forbearance or patience has the ability to endure even when things are difficult in our lives. It's a refusal to give up or to give in, but rather to steadfastly keep going.

Kindness. Kindness is more than being nice. It's not less than being nice, but it's more than being nice. It's a willingness to want to practically serve other people.

Goodness is closely related to kindness. It's about being a person of integrity, of uprightness, where what you see is what you get. Faithfulness means being loyal, means being completely reliable, means being true to your word.

Kindness is the humility that comes from not feeling the need to assert ourselves over other people. Self-control.

[22 : 27] Self-control is that increasing ability to restrain our sinful desires and passions. That means resisting the temptation to lose control, whether in what we say or in what we do.

And Paul says, against such things there is no law. He means there's no law against them because this fruit, when it's displayed in our lives, is actually a fulfillment of God's law.

It's the lifestyle of those who have the Spirit of God within. And that's why it's fruit in the singular, because all of these beautiful virtues belong together.

It's not like shopping in Morrisons across the road, where you pick the fruit that you want, and you leave the fruit that you don't want. Like, well, I'll have love, and I want joy, and some peace would be nice.

But I've got no time for patience, and I don't really want gentleness. Or I'm working on kindness right now, and goodness is a priority at the moment.

[23 : 34] But hopefully I'll get around to faithfulness and self-control in a few years' time. I'll focus on them then. Now, what Paul's saying here, and what he means is, the work of the Spirit is to produce growth in all of these areas, with increasing measure, because fruit grows, doesn't it?

There's an inevitable growth in fruit. And so, you can tell the person who lives by the Spirit, and who is led by the Spirit, how can you tell?

Not necessarily by the gifts of the Spirit, but by the fruit of the Spirit in their lives. It's not spiritual gifts that indicate Christlikeness.

It is spiritual fruit that reveals how Christlike we really are. So, just like an apple tree produces apples, so a Christian, somebody who follows Jesus, will display this kind of fruit with increasing measure in their lives.

And you can tell, can't you? You can see it when it's there. So, how is this going to happen? Well, Paul outlines the strategy here. So, first of all, we've got the fighters, the Spirit versus the flesh.

[24 : 47] Then we've got the profiles. And then thirdly, we've got the strategy, verse 24 to 26. So, it is a fight. So, in any fight, there's got to be a strategy, isn't there?

And his strategy here is a two-part strategy. But it's a two-part strategy that is focused on attack or offense, as our American brothers and sisters would say.

There's defense and there's offense. So, this is the offense part. This is the attack. But Paul's saying it's an attack that is only possible because we belong to Jesus Christ.

Verse 24, those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. So, when we belong to Jesus Christ, the flesh has been crucified.

So, we're moving towards victory, but we're not there yet. And that's why we feel this inner conflict, in our passions, and in our desires.

[25 : 49] But Paul clearly doesn't imply that we're to be passive in this fight, as if we're to sit there in a big, comfy, lazy boy chair, just waiting for the growth to come.

Paul says we've got to be active. And that's why the first part of his strategy is crucify the flesh. So, in other words, we've got to be active in killing our old sinful nature.

So, earlier in Galatians 2, verse 20, Paul said, I have been crucified with Christ. So, our sinful nature was nailed to the cross when we turned from our sin and trusted in Jesus.

So, through Jesus' death, the penalty for our sin has been paid for. So, we are now free from condemnation. But here, in Galatians 5, 24, Paul is talking about what Christ has done, being worked out in our lives on a daily basis.

So, he's saying, in essence, that we're to be like executioners, who must continue to crucify our sinful nature. Our sinful nature has been crucified, but we must keep that nature on the cross, must keep it dead, not resuscitate it and bring it back to life again.

[27 : 11] Now, theologians call this mortifying the flesh. Mortifying is not a word we use often today, but mortify basically means put to death. And so, John Owen, a Puritan, wrote a book called The Mortification of Sin.

And he said, always be killing sin or it will be killing you. And so, every day, what Paul is saying here is that we have an obligation to make sure our sinful nature, with its passions and with its desires, remains crucified.

So, if it continues to rear its ugly head in our lives, he says, punch it in the face and knock it down again. Let it, don't let it come off the cross. Keep it on the cross.

And yet, the problem is that we so easily give into the flesh. We give into our sinful nature and our sinful desires and our evil passions.

And so, rather than let them wither as we grow and mature as a Christian, or rather than choke them, what we can do instead is begin to accommodate them in our lives, to give them a place or a home, to have them be accepted.

[28 : 23] And so, what we need to do is stop them at the motivational level, which is in our hearts. Because before all of these behaviors, sinful behaviors that Paul mentions, before they are behaviors, the source and the root is within our hearts.

And so, the choking and the throttling and the killing needs to take place there. So, before there's ever any sinful behavior, there's sinful desire conceived in our hearts.

But now that we belong to Christ, who has crucified our sinful nature, who was crucified for our sin, Paul's point is, don't let your sinful nature get a grip in your life.

It's a bit like declaring war, then going out to fight in battle, and in the thick of the battle, then deciding it's time to go back to the negotiating table again, and let's see if we can work out a different kind of deal.

Because if we're supposed to fight against sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, and orgies, and the like, if we're in a fight against them, Paul's saying, don't try and live in harmony with them.

[29 : 51] You can't have both. And so we need this no-surrender attitude, because if the sinful nature has been crucified, we must make sure it remains crucified, so that it eventually expires.

And we're not supposed to resuscitate in any way. But we don't just need to crucify the flesh, because his two-pronged attack here is also to keep in step with the Spirit.

Verse 25. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. So our life should be marching to the drumbeat of the Spirit.

Paul doesn't just say, live by the Spirit, but keep in step with the Spirit. And apparently, this is a military expression, where the sense is to follow on, or to walk in line.

So just like soldiers follow the command of their sergeant, and they line up behind him, and they walk in line to march forward, so we're to keep in step with the Spirit, as we actively follow his lead.

[31 : 00] And that's how to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. We can't just sit back, watching and waiting for the fruit to grow.

So how does the fruit grow? Well, let's try and illustrate. Let's use a couple of dogs to help us illustrate, because dogs are really useful sources of illustration to teach us Christian truth.

So here's an old man, and the old man has two dogs, black dog and a white dog, and he made money out of these dogs by organizing dog fights. So every weekend, he would arrange a dog fight, and he would take bets on which dog would win.

One week, the black dog would win, another week, the white dog would win, and so on. But the old man always won, and he always walked away with a nice, tiny sum of money.

And so how did he do it? Well, what he would do is that through the week, he would starve one dog, and he would feed the other. And the dog that he fed would always be the dog that won, and the dog he starved would be the dog that lost.

[32 : 08] And so in this fight that Paul talks of here, this inner war that goes inside, goes on inside every Christian, these two natures, the spiritual nature and the sinful nature, that struggle for mastery over us in this fight, the dominant one will be the one that we feed.

So if we feed on God's spirit-inspired word every day, the Bible, then we will nourish ourselves on what is good. If we are people who pray continually, if we are people who come to church and enjoy fellowship with other Christians, if we gather together around the Lord's table to remember what Jesus has done for us, all of these means of grace, if you like, will be the things that will feed us and will nourish us and will help us cultivate the fruit of the spirit that will overpower the acts of the flesh.

Because if we feed on the values of our culture, we will just be like a mirror that reflects our culture. Our lives will be no different. We will ape the values of the culture around us.

So the question is, well, how are we going to live? By the spirit or by our sinful desires? Without Jesus Christ, our sinful desires will destroy us, just like Hyde was destroyed in Robert Louis Stevenson's story.

And so let's never underestimate how dangerous the fight is. But let's do all that we can to resist being overpowered by our sinful nature.

[33 : 50] And let's cultivate the fruit of the spirit every day. The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Let's make sure that every day all of these things, all of these virtues, this fruit of the spirit is growing.

It's growing in our lives. It's growing to the extent that those around us can see and know that we follow Jesus. Let's be a church where these virtues are observable to all the people in our community so that they look on us and they see this kind of behavior is different.

I don't see people showing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self, anywhere in the world. I only see it in that church with those people who say they follow Jesus. There must be something about those Christians. There must be something about that Jesus if his people produce these kinds of lives that are so beautiful and make such a difference to the world we live in.