

# The Contrast between the Spiritual Conflict in Romans 7 and Galatians 5

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**A** CERTAIN amount of confusion exists in the minds of many Christians concerning conflict in the spiritual life because they have equated Romans 7:13-24 with Galatians 5:16-23. Both of these passages obviously describe a conflict; however, it is important to see that the battles described are not the same. A failure to recognize this only leads to confusion and may even result in despairing frustration. It is the purpose of this article to mark out some of the distinctions between these two conflicts and then come to a few practical implications.

## THE CONTRASTS

*The opponents of the sin nature.* Too often believers conclude that the Holy Spirit and the regenerated ego (more familiarly known as the new nature) are one and the same. A careful examination of the Scriptures shows they are not. A case in point is Colossians 3:10, "And [you] have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him." This passage clearly distinguishes the new man from the Holy Spirit, the new man's Creator. Every Christian is born again and possesses the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9), but this does not mean that the new nature and the Holy Spirit are one.

Here is a key to the understanding of Romans 7 and Galatians 5. In Romans 7<sup>1</sup> the new nature is emphasized as the opponent of the old nature, and in Galatians 5 the stress falls on the Holy Spirit. Bible teachers accurately make a large point of the fact there is no reference to the Holy Spirit in Romans 7. That the new nature is doing battle with the old is plainly evident from Romans 7:22-23: "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind. . . ." In a word, the conflict in Romans 7 is between the sin nature and the reborn ego. This is not the case in Galatians 5 where the old nature and the Holy Spirit<sup>2</sup> are portrayed as doing battle. Here Paul clearly says the Spirit and the flesh<sup>3</sup> are contrary to one another (Gal. 5:17).

The first contrast then is between the opponents of the flesh.

*The place of the believer.* The second crucial contrast involves Paul's description of the believer as living under law or grace. In Romans 7 the Christian is attempting to live a God-pleasing life under the Mosaic system, whereas there are two alternatives for him in Galatians 5—to live under law or grace.

The apostle begins the seventh chapter of Romans by pointing out the believer's liberation from the Mosaic legal system (Romans 7:1-6).<sup>4</sup> The remainder of the chapter is a defense of the Old Testament law as being holy, just, and good. This apology for the law is necessary because Paul describes Christians as being dead to sin in Romans 6:2 and

<sup>1</sup> In this article it is assumed that Romans 7 is describing the experience of a Christian. The logical progression in the argument of the book and the earlier verses of chapter seven support this conclusion.

<sup>2</sup> In Galatians 5:16 some may dispute the identification of πνευματι with the Holy Spirit by saying it refers to the believer's spirit. However, the Holy Spirit seems to be in view. Paul quite often uses the anarthrous noun to refer to the Third Person (cf. Rom. 8:5, 13; I Cor. 2:4, 13; Gal. 3:5; 5:5, 18, 25; Eph. 2:18; 3:5, etc.). The word *Spirit* is properly capitalized in the AV.

<sup>3</sup> σάρξ is often used in Pauline literature of the sinful disposition within man and/or of its dwelling place (Rom. 7:18, 25; 8:5-8, 12-13; Gal. 5:13, 19, 24; Eph. 2:3; Col. 2:18).

<sup>4</sup> That the entire Mosaic system including the Ten Commandments is in view is evident by taking cognizance of Paul's reference to the tenth commandment in Romans 7:7. The tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written are referred to in II Corinthians 3:7-11 as part of a system which is passing away.

dead to law in 7:4. It would appear logical, therefore, to conclude that the law is sinful. Paul answers this charge emphatically and carefully. His final point in this refutation is the inability of a Christian to live a successful spiritual life under law (Rom. 7:14-25). The child of God, in his inner nature, desires to obey the Mosaic commandments, but his sin nature immediately thwarts his noble intentions. The fault lies not with the law but with the Christian. It is important then to see that the conflict of the believer in Romans 7 takes place under law.

The picture is completely changed in Galatians 5. In this entire epistle two alternatives are set before Paul's Christian readers. Either they may walk under law or under grace. These same two choices are open in Galatians 5:16-23. A walk under law necessitates a walk by means of the flesh (cf. Gal. 3:2-3; 4:23). At the same time a life lived in the grace system automatically involves faith and the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal. 3:2-3, 5; 4:29). It is for this reason that the contrast here is between the flesh and the Spirit; they are the two driving forces in each of the two systems of law and grace.

In Romans 7 the child of God is portrayed under the legal system attempting to please God in his own strength. The Galatian epistle offers the Christian the alternatives of law or grace, and these are in view in Galatians 5:16-23.

*The outcome of the conflicts.* A third critical distinction between Romans 7 and Galatians 5 is seen in the result of the battles. In Romans 7 defeat is inevitable, but in Galatians 5 there may be defeat or victory. Of course the whole matter is closely linked with the believer's living under law or grace. In fact, this is what Paul is driving home in Romans 7—there can be no spiritual victory under law. In other words, Romans 7:13-24 portrays more than a conflict; it describes the abject misery and failure of a Christian who attempts to please God under the Mosaic system. He is doomed to defeat.

In the Galatians passage victory is available, if God's child walks by means of the Spirit by faith in the Lord Jesus. On the other hand, he will know the same defeat of Romans 7 if he walks in the strength of the flesh. Instead of a life pleasing to God there will be the works of the flesh.

*The viewpoint of the conflict.* It is quite evident the battle

in Galatians 5 is the normal experience of a believer, whether he is walking by means of the Spirit or by the flesh. If he walks by the Spirit, the flesh rises up to oppose the influence of the Third Person; if he walks under the control of the flesh, the Holy Spirit counteracts and attempts to bring the believer back under His sway. This conflict is portrayed as a usual one. This is not the case in the last half of Romans 7. The pitiful cry, "Who shall deliver me . . . ?" and the constant failure to produce fruit for God prove the point. A Christian is not to be characterized by such defeat and lack of fruit.

There are then four contrasts that must be seen between Romans 7 and Galatians 5 in order to distinguish properly the conflicts—the opponents of the sin nature are different; the believer is only under law in the one, and under law or grace in the other; the results of the conflict are different; and the conflict in Romans 7 is abnormal, whereas it is usual in Galatians 5.

#### SOME PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

*The inevitability of defeat under law.* It is clear from both passages that a Christian cannot live a life pleasing to God under law. In Romans 7 defeat is the result and in Galatians 5 the works of the flesh are produced. Legalism only bears frustration, sham, and failure. The life that is pleasing to God is the one that is centered in Christ by faith. Law hypocritically may produce outward imitation, but the genuine fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22-23 is found only in the grace method of living. It never results from law-works.

*The inevitability of conflict for all believers.* The present tense in the verbs in Galatians 5:17 bears clear testimony to this fact. Some well meaning teachers on the spiritual life either intentionally or unintentionally leave the impression that Christians are living defeated lives if they experience conflict. It is implied that it is sinful to have any battles at all. Such teaching is not Scriptural. There will always be struggle; the sin nature never retires from doing battle until the Christian leaves his mortal body. No one need have a guilt complex because of this. This inner struggle is inevitable and continual.

*The availability of victory.* The presence of conflict is not

sinful; defeat is. God's child is never asked to live without battle, but he is commanded to be victorious in it. The resources of the Holy Spirit are available so that a God-pleasing life is possible for every believer. If the Christian does not walk by faith in Christ, then the battle is waged between the old nature and the new, and defeat is the certain outcome. When the Christian turns to Christ and looks to Him for strength, the Holy Spirit enters the struggle on behalf of the believer and victory is assured. In Galatians 5:16 Paul commands the believer to walk by means of the Spirit. This imperative is followed by οὐ μὴ with the subjunctive, which is an emphatic negation used here as a strong promise. The flesh and Spirit are so contrary to one another that a walk by the Spirit automatically excludes a fulfillment of the baser desires. Victory is available to every Christian.

*The responsibility of the believer.* In Romans 7:13-24 there is no mention of faith and consequently there is no reference to the work of the Holy Spirit. Of course defeat is the consequence of such a situation. However, the case in Galatians 5 is different. The outcome is left to the believer. He must decide. On the one hand, there is the force of the sin nature and, on the other hand, the power of the Holy Spirit. It is in the domain of each individual Christian to decide which is vanquished and which rules. He may walk by flesh under law or he may walk in the infinite power of the Holy Spirit by faith under grace.

To every Christian there are two alternatives. These passages clearly point out the fact the believer is called upon to be decisive and constant in drawing upon all of the resources of Christ in order to know God's victory in his day-by-day walk. This is the message of Romans 7:13-25 by implication and of Galatians 5:16-23 by direct declaration.



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