

“Battle Between the Flesh and the Spirit”

Dallas Willard at Calvin College [1:02:23]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p-ZQVNU_Xc&list=LLHJmBk0sg4WoTB38asmaiqQ&t=0s&index=2

Scribe’s Comments - The session was transcribed from the audio in good-faith effort but it is not verbatim. The [brackets] & bold disclose the scribe’s commentary and cross-references other Dallas Willard teachings.

—> Start of Teaching

The battle between the flesh and the spirit - Misunderstandings of this prove to be a great hinderance in the spiritual life.

[The Goal “Breaking the Patterns of Desire”]

Galatians 5, Romans 7, Ephesians 4

To indicate the impossibility of not sinning - The idea is that the flesh generates a kind of bondage. We have a culture which is set up for the reoccurring, disastrous failures that afflict individual lives and occasionally get out into the newspapers. That is not the greatest problem. The greatest problem is the perpetual defeat many ordinary Christians suffer from, often in the privacy of their homes and in other parts of their life they are trying to keep private.

One of the terrible effects is that it eliminates transparency. I think transparency is one of the most important things for us to achieve inner walk with the Lord. That’s why darkness is used to describe those that are away from God. If you have something to hide, darkness is very useful.

“Victory over Sin” [“Free...not burdened by the yoke of slavery” Gal. 5:1]

We have a great pretense we are not like the Bible says. (Romans 1)

We have rights to do many things that are disastrously wrong.

We need to understand this for our health in living the spiritual life victoriously.

Understanding the Battle Between the Flesh vs. Spirit [4:50]

Galatians 5:14-25

v. 14 - “Whole law summed up - love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.”

DESIRE is the problem. The flesh works by DESIRE.

The “Spirit” is the Holy Spirit. The primary conflict is not between the Holy Spirit and the flesh but the human spirit and the flesh. When it is setup as a contest merely between the flesh and the spirit, the flesh always wins.

The human spirit is meant to align itself with the Holy Spirit. When that is not there, then we carry out the desires of the flesh.

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v. 17 - Flesh sets its DESIRE against the spirit. The primary conflict where there is nothing but defeat is not between the Holy Spirit and the flesh but the human spirit and the flesh.

This is the “lock on” of the normal human. “You may not” is not probability but the “may” of permissibility.

v. 18 - *“But if you are led by the Spirit (Holy) you are not under the law.”*

v. 19-20 - The “list” of the flesh

v. 21 - *“Kingdom of God”* is not going to heaven when you die.

The Kingdom of God is here. What he is saying is, *“If you engage these kinds of things you will not be able to receive the interaction with the Kingdom of God.”*

Where that stuff is, you will not interact with the Kingdom of God. If you want to live in terms of the Kingdom of God, live in terms of the Spirit not in terms of the flesh. See Romans 1, 7; Ephesians 4 - is “life as usual”.

* Soap Operas - If it wasn’t for this, there won’t be Soap Operas. Mostly what we call news and drama - ordinary human life.

It’s an old problem not a new problem. In praise of Paul - He was a great intellect. That does not detract from his spirituality.

“In Paul, for the first time since Aristotle, Greek thought made a real step forward.” Sir William Ramsey. Paul, in bringing the teachings of Jesus, brought great Greek philosophical thought in Plato & Aristotle forward.

* Aristotle, book 7, *Nicomachean Ethics*

“Incontinence”* - incapacity to carry out what you will, wish, would like (We’ve made it something more specific today.)

[* Inability to control what you don’t want to happen]

It illuminates the mistake in Greek thought and civilization they never overcame - thinking the problem is an intellectual one and the way you solve it is education. That is a temptation we fall under that today. If you say there is a problem, nearly everyone thinks education solves the problem. That would not be bad depending upon the education. The one you get may help some but will not help the problem.

—> The problem is not intellectual but a set of the WILL to have its way.

It is SELF-WILL driven by DESIRE that is the problem.

* Teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, crime - basis is SELF-WILL.

We have a general culture that suborns** the educational system and says, “That’s the good life!”

[** (def). “Bribe or induce (someone) to commit an unlawful act.”

This is a profound concept. We have “suborned” Education to bribe it to do what it does not, can not and should not do - teach people how to live well.]

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This is where the teaching of Paul comes in. He knows if you have a people that are set to have their way and fulfill their desires, you are going to have all those things he mentions as the deeds of the flesh. Building on that and all that goes into a Christian civilization - you get a teaching of morality which lasted well into the 20th Century.

* Rotary motto - *“Service above self”*

* Business - *“We care.”* Go to the Business School - aim is make money.
Business is God’s arrangement for loving neighbors.

Rotary was motivated by the Christian imperative of love. That was the step Paul brought forth in to Greek philosophy in civilization. Love was no part of the classical ethic. There was much good in it but love was no part of it.

What Flesh & Spirit are

[18:50]

Flesh - is not meat. It is used in the Scripture as a reference to the natural powers of the human being, sometimes in animal life. The powers of the unaided human being.

* Hagar & Sarah (Galatians 4:21-31)

* Putting the weight of righteousness on circumcision.

Realize you don’t need God’s help to be circumcised.

“Circumcision of the heart” in the New Testament

* Abraham the father of the faith.

- Hagar - no special help from God. Waiting on God had run out.

- Sarah’s child - “a son of promise” a result of God’s action.

God made a promise and God kept the promise.

Isaac is a son of more than the flesh. He is a son of God’s action.

The Will - That is a very lovely picture of the will. The will waivers between doing what the will dictates and what God wants. The flesh is natural tendencies of the self expressing itself in DESIRE. The spirit is the will in the human being. The will has to deliberate not on what it wants but but what is best. The will not to do just what we want but to compare what is best. A DESIRE for what is best, for what is good will naturally lead us back to God in many ways of what is good and the ability to do it.

The Law

[23:20]

Flesh can not keep the law. God gives the law as an expression of what is good. On it’s own, the will can not handled the desires of the flesh over against the law.

The law says, *“Do what is good.”*

The flesh says, *“I want to do this.”*

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That’s the nature of the flesh. The WILL does not operate just by DESIRE. That’s a surprise to many people, especially in our culture. When it [the will] considers DESIRE, it also considers other desires - it considers alternatives.

“I would like this but probably there is something better.”

Or it is already considering the law of God when desire pops up in his head and says, *“Let’s do this.”* It is the nature of DESIRE to drive simply towards it’s object.

DESIRE - *“I’ve got to have a donut.”* Will - *“You don’t have to have a donut. You just want a donut. You don’t have to. There is something better.”*

* “I should have had a V-8” commercial

Paul is torn between them. *I know the Law is good, the law is spiritual.* (Romans 7) It directs us toward what is good, what is better, what is best.

Love vs. DESIRE [Key paragraph]

[25:40]

[\[“Disappearance of Moral Knowledge” Video#2 7:20-9:45 “Desire vs. Will”\]](#)

The human will is different from unrestrained flesh. It considers alternatives. The will is our God given ability by which we have an interest of what is better or what is best. It takes a broad view of possibilities. Not just of one DESIRE and it’s object, but of other desires and goods. That is where choice comes in. Choice involves deliberation between alternatives with a view to what is best. The conflict between the flesh and the human spirit is the conflict of DESIRE - what I want and the will for what is best. It is a conflict between DESIRE and love because love always goes for what is good, what is best. Love is good will to its object.

When I’m contemplating what I shall do, what comes before me is the good of everyone involved. It’s important to have in your mind what love is.

Love (def.) - Will to good for the object.

* Love a plant - you take care of it. To love something is to take care

* Love chocolate cake - you don’t love it, you want to eat it.

We have a real problem distinguishing between DESIRE & love.

Love is directed toward the good. The will is seeking not only what is DESIRE, but what is good, what is better, what is best.

Watch how people want something then when they get to know it better they don’t choose it. Why? They say there are other considerations. Sometimes it’s simply how much it costs.

* Credit Cards - Get you to disregard how much things cost.

* Money - not actual cash

The Law - Expression of how God does things. It is good and right.

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If all there is is the Law and human spirit, flesh will defeat it every time.

The reason people get into the mess they get in is because DESIRE defeats what is good. DESIRE itself is not bad. It is good. It is God’s creation.

Flesh (“sarx”) is not human nature, it is only a part of human nature.

Flesh is a good thing. It has to be ordered under God. When it is ordered under God, the goodness that is in it allows us to enjoy God’s creations.

Human DESIRE - natural expressions of human abilities. [32:00]

The “World” - the social organization of the flesh.

- Ephesians 2:1-3 - World, Flesh and the Devil [[Inverted trinity](#)]

The “world” means the social, historical organization of human DESIRE.

v. 2 - “the course of this world” (NASB)

“the prince of the power (“kingdom” NIV) of the air” is moving in people who are caught up in that system. *“The spirit that is now working in the children (“sons” - NASB) of disobedience.”*

“Children” is the nature of people. Children have the nature of the parent.

“Children of wrath” have the nature of wrath.

* James & John - “Sons of Thunder.” “Call down fire from heaven?”

The WILL presents the GOOD but it can not do it on its own. It has to turn to the Holy Spirit, then the Holy Spirit brings the direction, the light and the energy to do what it can not do on its own.

Romans 8:1-2 - *“Walk not after to the flesh, but after to the Spirit.”*

“Who shall deliver me?” (Romans 7)

“The law of the Spirit has set me from the law of sin and death.”

“The Law, weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own son.”

“He condemned sin in he flesh.” He showed it up for what it was.

Jesus came with normal human desires and lived in a world that was organized around human desires. Living, dying and rising there, He showed sin to be the fraud that it is. That the righteousness of the law shall be fulfilled in us who walk not in the flesh but after the Spirit.

“after the Spirit” - after “kata” - I like *“in terms of...”*

(Prepositions and adverbs are hard to make sense of.)

Fleshly minded is death. Spiritually minded is life and peace.

All of that passage of Romans builds out of that context.

v. 14 - *“Through the Spirit, mortify the deeds of the flesh then you will really live.”*

You don’t mortify the deeds of the flesh through the flesh. That has been the perpetual failure of the church to understand that. We think, *“We don’t worry about circumcision anymore.”* You know, all the Pharisees aren’t dead. It is a useful exercise to think of all the forms of circumcision that we

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still practice. It's a real good exercise to make a list of them. Think of the the things that amount to very little that we make such a fuss over and determine who's in and who's out by looking at these.

You can not mortify the deeds of the flesh by the flesh. You have to bring in the Spirit of God. When you do that, you have a lot help. Christ moves in. The human spirit or will is brought to life now because it is rooted in God where it is supposed to be. As that happens a new power takes over - the capacity to regard DESIRE with some indifference.

"So I didn't get what I want. So what."

"Well, but what I want is very righteous."

You can take care of that but the issue is not, *"I didn't get what I want."* You can stand for what is right without standing in the flesh. That's a great freedom that comes to us.

The basic nature of sin is to trust oneself and one's own abilities.

[40:00] People in our culture are so caught up in DESIRE, many of them no longer know they have a will. They think their desires are the same thing as their will. That is really important for folks to understand. They do have a will and it's not the same as their desires. If you don't understand then you are lost because you have no place to stand against your desires and your DESIRE swill ruin you. They are chaos. They conflict with one another.

* James 4 - *"Where do wars and conflicts come? From your pleasures, your desires."* Basically SELF-WILL driven by DESIRE.

If you want to get out of conflict, you stop trying to get what you want. Live together with disagreements on the basis of love. **The Church** can be a primary place where we learn to do all the things Jesus said out of love if we don't run away when there is trouble.

The works of the flesh are the natural and inevitable outcome of making human DESIRE supreme in life. [41:35]

Galatians 5 list starts with sexual immorality. When we turn away from God, we naturally turn to our own bodies. That is why sex and violence are so big in all cultures. You have that available to you. It's exciting, it's dramatic. You feel like you are really alive, at least for a little while when you engage in them. It's so attractive to people because they lack good feeling and they go for bad feeling.

We are meant to live a dramatic life full of good feeling. We do that if we are caught up in the drama of redemption and creative work under God. When we lose that we go dead so we keep pounding the things that makes us feel good.

* Porn hold on our culture. Porn is not the problem. The Problem is giving into DESIRE as the form of life. *"I feel alive when I go back to it."*

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Internet’s Power for Seduction - It generates a sense of intimacy, partly a derivative from a distance where you don’t have to deal with a person, you deal with a fantasy.

Why does it have such a grip? Because of the deadness of soul and the people who are trapped inside it.

* Gangs - Realize you are dealing with dead souls who have to feel. They do things that are incredible because they are dominated by feeling.

[44:15] Paul’s insights are incredibly profound. You have to think of him as among other things as one of the greatest social scientists who ever lived. If you understand what I am telling you about DESIRE and see how it works in human life, you’ll say, “This guy was really on to something.”

He observed human life. He observed what gripped and moved people. He observed how people who come to life in the Spirit of God in the new birth and the growth of that as they experience more and more that is wonderful and good. Then he can talk about

“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.”

He is not talking about singing choruses. He is talking about deep profound currents of joy that come with love and peace. They are not feelings they are dispositions. Joy is a sense of pervasive well being. That’s why it’s not inconsistent with suffering. You can be sorrowful yet always rejoicing.

Why? Because he is caught up in something glorious and wonderful!

He is enjoying the “Beatitude” - the blessedness that is in order.

He knows that, he is living that.

Spiritual Disciplines

[46:30]

—> Ways we break the grip of patterns of DESIRE over our lives.

We don’t do this on our own. We are talking about people who are alive in the Spirit and have become disciples of Jesus. Spiritual disciplines are for disciples of Jesus who are alive in the Kingdom of God, not necessarily your ordinary church person. In our culture, you can be a Christian without being a disciple. You’re probably going to be just as bored as other people. You may come to church for excitement. You may judge a church service or a preacher as to whether or not they excite you.

* What Paul called, “*Itching ears*”. **II Timothy 4:3**

You can have a whole Christian society of itching ears. The preacher and the worship leader are supposed to scratch their ears.

Disciples are people who have become apprentices for Jesus and they are even that way when they come to church. They are that way in full life.

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Spiritual Disciplines are not the answer to everything.

If you come to new life in the Kingdom of God and a disciple of Jesus, you can use spiritual disciplines to break the power of patterns of DESIRE.

You have to understand that the fundamental disciplines of the Spirit are essentially disciplines of abstinence not disciplines of engagement. Abstinence like solitude, silence, fasting.

~ **Fasting** is fundamental to spiritual disciplines. Fasting is one of the rudimentary ways we can begin to take control of our desires. The old saints all understood that if you fasted well, that would affect your desires in every respect. Fasting is a practice you engage in to learn how to remain strong and sweet when you don't get what you want.

* “The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.”

A person who is accustomed to fasting will be in the same mood when they are hungry as when they are well fed. Fasting teaches you alignment with the Kingdom of God because when you are fasting you are actually feasting on God. Fasting is feasting.

When you learn to fast you will not be hungry when you fast. Why? When you fast you are affirming the reality of God's world and you are receiving the substance of the Word of God directly into your person.

You have to learn it. It's true of all disciplines. You want to practice them to the point to where you don't pay much attention to whether you are practicing them or not. You want to establish solitude and silence in your soul.

The disciplines break the patterns of DESIRE, open the door way of the Spirit, strengthen the will and direction towards what is good and that resolves the failing conflict of the flesh and the spirit.

~ ~ ~ **End of Teaching Session** ~ ~ ~

—> **Q & A (next page)**

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~ ~ ~ Q & A

[51:40]

Q - {Inaudible}

A - [52:50] This is what Paul called will worship. Very simply, a spiritual discipline does not give rise to pride. Asceticism is an enduring form of self will. It always shows up in people who are trying to make it something of their own. This has slipped into Christian practices.

* Not looking upon a woman to lust by not looking on a woman.

Not seen a mother or sister for 35 years. Oh, I’ve only gone 20 years.

* Disciplines are like medicine. The point is to get where you don’t need them if possible.

Disciplines do not generate righteousness. Disciplines are wisdom not righteousness. They are not laws. They are practices you follow to help break the patterns of DESIRE that dominate human life. We have to address these fundamental issues. One reason people don’t grow is because we don’t address this. Desire is not be eliminated but it has to be ordered.

Q - [Inaudible]

A - [55:10] - Natural abilities in what you see in things like music or sports where you have people with special talents can be surrendered to the Spirit of God. They can be good things. The mark of the presence of the Spirit in our lives is always the incommensurability with our talents and our efforts. You see someone who does not look like much, talk like much, but they have tremendous spiritual results - that is the Spirit.

This is a deep and important topic in my understanding, which may be wrong. Because I think when you start looking for your gifts, you are often apt to be misled by your talents. The work of the Spirit in our life is not primarily manifested in terms of gifts, it is primarily manifested in the fruit. Then gifts come in the fellowship of believers as we minister to one another. There is very little correlation between natural talents and the spirituality of the person. There could be great use of natural talents if the person is not living the life of the flesh but the life of the Spirit.

Q - [Inaudible]

A - [57:25] What changes is you now have a new life working you. Life is the capacity for self-initiated, self-directed, self-sustained power. When a goldfish is dead, it does not have any of those. When you are “born from above” (it is not “born again” in John 3) a new life enters you. The first expression of the new life is the realization that Jesus is actually the Master.

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I Corinthians 12:3 *“Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.”*

That’s **regeneration**. Now the new birth is the door but not the house.

John 3 - Life from the Kingdom of God not about forgiveness of sins. It is about new life. Regeneration, like a new life, naturally develops. What it develops is the natural progression of the whole life from the life from above. You are leading a life with God - the “With God” life. That’s what it means to grow in grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Q - [Individual or Community?] {Inaudible}

A - [1:00:35] I would not distinguish those two dimensions. That is a “fals abstraction.” What I am trying to talk about requires both dimensions. If you are going to renew your mind, you’re going to have to do some serious work but you’re not going to do that in disconnection with your community.

Spiritual growth is not an individualistic, isolated kind of thing because it is primarily a growth in love. Where you have love you have to have community. That’s the nature of the Trinity - a community of love.

Watch the meetings as occasions to grow in love if they facilitate growth in love of God in all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. We probably only know that if we just perform in public but if we have time in growth in study, worship, solitude and silence ourselves.

~ ~ ~ **End 1:02:23** ~ ~ ~