The Flesh and the Spirit—Lifestyles That Make Or Break a Marriage
(Galatians 5:16–26)

We are horrified by the terrible devastation wrought by hurricanes, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. However, another disaster of perhaps equal proportions has been devastating communities for decades: the breakdown of the home.

Perhaps 40 percent of all first marriages in the US end in divorce, with disastrous consequences. Many couples remain together but are unhappy. Some are only going through the motions of family life, perhaps for the sake of their children. Neither partner in the marriage gets any joy out of their relationship.

Can anything fix this problem? The crisis seems to be beyond man’s ability to solve. What is needed is divine intervention.

That, in fact, is the thesis of this study on the home. If we want to have happy, successful homes, we need help from above—specifically, the help of the Holy Spirit. Our text is Galatians 5:16–26:

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.

Our basic premise can be stated as follows: If the people in the home—father, mother, and children—are governed by the Holy Spirit so that they bear the fruit of the Spirit, then the home will be pleasing to the family and to God.

What do we mean by referring to a “successful” home? For our purposes, we will define a successful home as meeting four criteria. (1) The home pleases God. (2) The husband and the wife stay married to one another as long as they are both alive, and no divorce occurs. (3) It is a happy home, in which each family member finds happiness, contentment, and self-fulfillment. (Some couples avoid divorce, but their marriages are torn by strife. According to our definition, their homes are not really successful.) (4) Christianity radiates from the home.

This fourfold definition makes the lessons in this series applicable to everyone’s home. Some homes are already broken, either by divorce or by death. Other homes consist of only one person living alone. In such cases, suggestions about how to avoid divorce and how to be happy with a marriage partner are, at least for the moment, irrelevant. However, suggestions about how the home can please God and become a center for the spreading of Christianity are never irrelevant. Whether one is single, newly married, divorced, married with grown children who are living away from home, or single because his or her mate has died, his or her home should be an instrument through which Christ blesses the world.

These studies will emphasize how our homes
can meet the four criteria listed. Success is possible if the members of a home will bear the fruit of the Spirit spoken of in 5:22, 23.

Before we begin to discuss and apply the various characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit to the home, we should reread the text and ask how it applies to each of us individually. This passage presents two lifestyles—living by the flesh and living by the Spirit. The choice between these two lifestyles can make or break a marriage.

WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

The Context

In the Book of Galatians, Paul refuted false teachers who had come into the churches of Galatia teaching that Gentile Christians had to keep the Law—specifically, by submitting to circumcision—in order to be Christians.

In refuting that false doctrine, Paul argued that the Galatians had been set free from the Law. They were now free in Christ (5:1)! However, Paul perceived that some of his readers might think that, since they were free from the Law, they could live as they wanted and were under no restrictions at all. Paul wanted them to know that their liberty was not freedom without restraint. They were not to let their liberty become a license to sin (5:13); instead, they were to bind themselves by the law of love (5:14).

The Command

How are we to be bound by the law of love? According to Paul’s commands, the Christians of Galatia needed to “walk [or live] by the Spirit” and not “carry out the desire of the flesh” (5:16).

The Conflict

The two expressions “the Spirit” and “the flesh” represent conflicting principles. They contradict each other and are always at war within a person. Paul referred to this “civil war within” in Romans 7:23: “But I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.”

We must understand two facts about this civil war. (1) It continues to challenge Christians. We should not expect to be free of temptation just because we have become Christians. Still, as Christians, we are better off than non-Christians because we have aid in living the Christian life. This help comes from the Holy Spirit. (2) Even though the principles—flesh versus the spirit—are always present, one tends to take precedence in an individual’s life. There may be degrees of influence, but one will definitely be more prominent. Therefore, it is possible to know whether we are living by the flesh or by the Spirit!

The Contrast

What are the signs which make that possible? Paul answered that by contrasting the lifestyle of the flesh and the lifestyle of the Spirit.

There is a contrast in number. It may be significant that the lifestyle of the flesh is characterized by “deeds” (plural) of the flesh (Galatians 5:19), whereas the lifestyle of the Spirit is characterized by the “fruit” (singular) of the Spirit. The nine spiritual characteristics listed by Paul are not “fruits” of the Spirit, but are different aspects of the “fruit” of the Spirit. Perhaps Paul wanted to emphasize the totality of the package. He may have been saying that every Christian needs all of these virtues in his life, and that one who lacks any of them falls short of bearing the fruit of the Spirit.

There is a contrast in the origins of the two lifestyles. Where does the lifestyle of the flesh originate? With the flesh! In other words, this lifestyle begins with us! We must accept full responsibility for the works of the flesh.

Where does the lifestyle of the Spirit originate? With the Holy Spirit! This lifestyle has a heavenly origin.

How does the Holy Spirit bear this fruit? He does not bear fruit in our lives miraculously. The age of miracles (such as were performed in
New Testament times) is over. Rather, the Holy Spirit bears fruit in our lives in two ways. First, He dwells in us and helps us to grow spiritually as we submit to God’s will. Second, He bears fruit in our lives by influencing us through the Word of God which He inspired. There is no conflict between these two ideas. As we read and seek to obey the Word of God, we are influenced more and more by the Holy Spirit—and we grow spiritually. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit within us strengthens and encourages us and providentially enables us to grow even more. As we continue to grow spiritually, we turn to the Holy Spirit-inspired Word more and more and, by obeying it, continue to grow spiritually. We see, then, that the influence of the Word enables the indwelling Spirit to strengthen us, and the indwelling Spirit encourages us to turn constantly to God’s Word.

Perhaps the most important truth to notice, though, is that the Holy Spirit does not bear this fruit without our cooperation. We are not altogether passive in bearing fruit. Paul commanded us to “walk by the Spirit” (5:16, 25). We must do the walking! The Spirit indeed bears the fruit, but He bears it in our lives as we allow Him to influence us.

There is a contrast in the characteristics of the two lifestyles. Paul first described the fleshly lifestyle (5:19–21). The works of the flesh can be summarized under five headings: (1) sins of sensuality, (2) sins of false religion, (3) sins of temperament, (4) sins of division, and (5) sins of intemperance.

**Sins of sensuality:**
- NASB—immorality, impurity, sensuality.
- NIV—sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery.
- KJV—adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness.
- RSV—immorality, impurity, licentiousness.

**Sins of false religion:**
- NASB—idolatry, sorcery.
- NIV—idolatry, witchcraft.
- KJV—idolatry, witchcraft.
- RSV—idolatry, sorcery.

**Sins of temperament:**
- NASB—enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger.
- NIV—hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage.
- KJV—hatred, variance, emulations, wrath.
- RSV—enmity, strife, jealousy, anger.

**Sins of division:**
- NASB—disputes, dissensions, factions, envying.
- NIV—selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy.
- KJV—strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders.
- RSV—selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy.

**Sins of intemperance:**
- NASB—drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.
- NIV—drunkenness, orgies, and the like.
- KJV—drunkenness, revellings, and such like.
- RSV—drunkenness, carousing, and the like.

Whom was Paul describing? The worldly person! Before we conclude that such a list could never describe us or anyone we know, let us think about these characteristics. People sometimes make statements like the following:

**About drunkenness**—“I don’t drink that much. I do get drunk every now and then, but not very often.”

**About selfishness, disputes, or envy**—“I don’t always insist on my own way, but I will not let anyone take unfair advantage of me! I want what I deserve!”; “I didn’t cause this strife; she started it!”

**About hatred, jealousy, or anger**—“When he did that to me, I told him exactly what I thought! He will never do that to me again!”; “Why do those people have to be around? I can’t tolerate them!”

**About false religion**—“I don’t need to go to church; I have my own approach to religion. As long as a person lives right, he
or she will go to heaven.”

_About fornication or adultery_—“You shouldn’t be promiscuous, but it’s okay to be intimate with someone outside of marriage if you’re really in love”; “What’s wrong with pornography? It doesn’t hurt anyone.”

When we hear words like these—or when we say them—that is evidence of fleshly living. The attitudes revealed in such statements are really the characteristics of the average worldly person (“man of the world”). We all must struggle to avoid developing such characteristics.

In contrast, the characteristics of the lifestyle of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (5:22, 23). Just as the works of the flesh characterize the worldly person, so the fruit of the Spirit reflects the nature of one who is under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The Christian, as he bears this fruit, is loving and joyful, peaceful and longsuffering, gentle and good, faithful and meek, and self-controlled.

_There is also a contrast in the consequences of the two lifestyles._ Those who practice the works of the flesh “will not inherit the kingdom of God” (5:21). Paul was talking about the eternal phase of the kingdom (see 2 Peter 1:11); in other words, those who follow this lifestyle without repenting cannot go to heaven! By implication, therefore, those who live according to the Spirit will enjoy that eternal kingdom. Paul said that “there is no law” against the “fruit of the Spirit.” He meant that no penalty has ever been set for those who bear this fruit; no punishment is necessary for those who do these things. The lifestyles we choose will determine where we spend eternity!

**HOW DOES THE TEXT APPLY TO THE HOME?**

The text can be applied to the home by using it to emphasize the importance of the character of the people in the home. What makes a Christian home? Christians—that is, people who have become Christians, who truly have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. The most successful homes are made up of those who live as Christians should, allowing the Holy Spirit to bear fruit in their lives.

We should not be Christians in name only, but in our lifestyles as well. Paul made that point in 5:25: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” Do we live by the Spirit? Yes, for the Spirit made us alive! We are Christians because of what the Holy Spirit has done. Let us, then, walk by the Spirit. If we are Christians, let us act like it!

How will our bearing the fruit of the Spirit, or failing to bear it, affect our homes? We said as we began our study that the lifestyles of the flesh and of the Spirit can either make or break a marriage. They can break a marriage apart if either the husband or the wife commits adultery, is jealous, is given to drunkenness, is selfish, or is guilty of other works of the flesh. On the other hand, the fruit of the Spirit can make a marriage strong: If the husband’s lifestyle is characterized by the fruit of the Spirit instead of works of the flesh, the marriage will probably endure. If the wife’s lifestyle reflects the fruit of the Spirit, the marriage will probably last.

The key to a successful marriage or a happy home is _us_. Each of us should ask, “What lifestyle have I adopted?”

**CONCLUSION**

My wife Sharlotte and I attended a marriage seminar conducted by Paul Faulkner and Carl Brecheen. I was impressed by the fact that the very first lesson in that seminar had the theme that a couple needs to be growing spiritually in order to stay married. A number of Scriptures were discussed—for example, 2 Peter 1:5–7, which lists seven Christian graces: moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.

As I recall, the speaker said, in effect, “If we become people like this, then we will get along well in our marriages.” I appreciated that thought and agree wholeheartedly. The way to have a successful home is, above all, for each person in that home to live as a Christian, faithfully serving the Lord in the best way he or she can.

Problems may arise in a marriage and need to be worked out, or a home may be subjected to stresses that keep it from being happy for a
period of time. Expert advice may be needed to help overcome those stresses on some occasions. Circumstances in our lives are uncertain, but one truth is sure: A good starting point for a happy home is for each of us to let the Spirit into our lives and let Him bear His fruit!  

Coy Roper