

Galatians 5:13-26 – DHT

For you were invited to freedom, brothers; not freedom as a pretext to the flesh, but rather [freedom] to serve one another through love. For the entire Law is fulfilled in this one word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself; however, if you bite and devour one another, take heed, or you might be consumed by one another. Now I say: Walk by the Spirit and you will not bring-to-completion the desire of the flesh. For the flesh covets what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit [covets what] is against the flesh, for they are in opposition to one another so that you will not do those things you might wish to do; however, if you are brought along by the Spirit, then you are not under the Law.

Now the works of the flesh are evident; they are: sexual-immorality, uncleanness, sensuality, idolatry, witchcraft, hostility, quarrelling, furious-zeal, fierce-temper, selfish-ambition, dissensions, factions, jealousy, drunkenness, rioting, and things like these. I warn you of these, as I have warned before, that those who do these will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control; there is no law against such things. Now those of Jesus Christ have crucified the flesh with its sufferings and desires. If we live by the Spirit, then we also should stoically-follow the Spirit. We should not become boastful, provoking [or] envying one another.

My Breakthrough

My academic pursuits require me to write two major projects arguing something original about Bible interpretation or theology. I think I have a good one for my master’s thesis, but the idea of figuring out a second one for my eventual PhD dissertation is daunting. As I was digging into the tenth commandment, I had one of those “stop everything” moments. I stumbled upon something I had never seen or heard before. I thought I was on the verge of a breakthrough, and immediately I was tempted to *take* it for my own selfish, academic purposes.

The tenth commandment has been relegated to simply “do not covet.” However, this is an oversimplification, because in light of my potential breakthrough discovery, coveting *can* be good; in fact, *even God covets*. The word for covet, attraction, or desire is *chamad*. As I studied this Hebrew word and the corresponding Greek word *epithumeo*, it became clear that desire is not in and of itself sinful; but *what* or *how* we desire can be sinful.

To help frame this, though, some definitions may be in order. In a recent seminar on theological-sexuality, I defined *attraction* as the recognition of the God-created-good in another person or thing, and *lust* as the covetousness of that good. As we will see shortly, *lust* goes beyond merely recognizing someone or something’s created goodness to *take* it. While it is true the Bible uses the same word for attraction or desire and covetousness, this distinction between *attraction* and *lust* ultimately gets at the two types of desire in the Bible: good Godly desire and misdirected sinful desire.

Desire in the HB and NT

Desire is spoken of positively throughout the Bible with an interesting caveat. In 2 Chron. 20:25, the plunder of war due to the victors is described as *chamad*, “precious” in the ESV. Psalm 19:10 describes God’s statutes and rules as more *chamad*, more “desirable” than gold. Psalm 68:15-16 says that God *chamad*, he “desired” one mountain over the others as the place of his eternal dwelling. Prov. 21:20 advises that those who are wise have *chamad*, “precious” treasures *in their own home*. In Song 2:3, the Eve-figure takes great *chamad*, great “delight” in sitting in the shade of her husband’s protection. Daniel is thrice called a man *chamad*, a man “treasured” by God (9:23; 10:11; 10:19). Jesus tells us the prophets “longed” to see what the disciples saw with their own eyes (Matt. 13:17) and that there would come a day when the disciples would “desire” to see the Son of Man who was no longer with them (Luke 17:22). And in Luke 22:15, we are told that Jesus “desired” to eat the Passover before he suffered. Thus, *a person who desires what rightfully belongs to them desires in a good Godly way*.

Desire is also spoken of negatively throughout the Bible, also with an interesting caveat. In Deut. 7:25, Moses commands the people to burn the idols of the nations, and not to *chamad*, not to “covet” the silver and gold the idols were made with, otherwise they might *take* the silver and gold into their house and thus share in the idolatry. In Josh. 7:20-21, the spy admitted to Joshua that he sinned against God by *chamad*, by “coveting” the silver and gold from the spoils of Shinar and *taking* it. Isaiah twice condemns those who *chamad chamad*, those who “desire” “precious” idols instead of the LORD (1:29; 44:9). Micah 2:1-2 calls those who *chamad*, those who “covet” fields in order to *seize* them wicked. The prodigal son “longed” for the food of the pigs (Luke 15:16) and the poor man “desired” the food of the rich man (Luke 16:21)—the food both of them “coveted” belonged to someone or something else. And James writes that we allow

“covetousness” to control us so that we can *take* what we want ourselves instead of asking God for what we want (4:1-3). Thus, *a person who desires to take what rightfully belongs to someone else desires in a misdirected sinful way.*

There are good Godly desires and there are misdirected sinful desires, and there at least appears to be a consistent pattern in differentiating Godly desire from sinful desire. A person who desires what rightfully belongs to them desires in a good Godly way, and a person who desires to take what rightfully belongs to someone else desires in a misdirected sinful way. So you could perhaps understand my excitement at this discovery. Never before have I heard this; nowhere have I seen this distinction argued by any of the scholars I have consulted on this subject. So I went back to the tenth commandment, convinced there must be some indication—some clue!—deep in the etymology of a word or two that could link the tenth commandment to what seems to be a clear pattern in the rest of Scripture.

And so here is the tenth commandment: *You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. And you shall not desire your neighbor’s house, his field, his male or female servant, his ox, his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.*

What I thought and was hoping was an unfounded, breakthrough discovery deep in the intricacies of a Hebrew word was actually just right there clear as day. The real breakthrough was discovering I have misunderstood the tenth commandment as simply, “Do not covet.” Now in my defense, Paul quotes the tenth commandment in this simplified way. But the commandment is *not just* “Do not covet.” To properly understand the tenth commandment, we must remember the second half is just as if not more important than the first half. It is not *that* we desire but *what* or *how* we desire. And the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions end the exact same way, removing any wiggle-room for self-deceptive ignorance: do not covet *anything* that *belongs* to your *neighbor*.

Coveting and Desire in Genesis 2-3

Now before we get to our Galatians passage, there is one significant difference between the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions of this commandment. In Exodus, *chamad* is used twice but the Deuteronomy version uses *chamad* once and then *avah* the second time. *Avah* is another word for desire. Even if their meanings overlap, the ESV is right to use two different English

words in Deut. 5. These two Hebrew words for desire are both used in the Eden narrative with our primary word *chamad* for “covet” appearing both *before* and *after* the entrance of sin.

In Gen. 2, starting in verse 8, *the LORD God planted a garden in Eden...and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is chamad—desirable in appearance and tov—good for food. The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil were in the middle of the garden.* God gave a special place to his special people and made it in such a way that they would desire it; they would recognize the God-created-goodness of it. The serpent enters the scene to inaugurate his administration of deception and devouring. And after being tempted by the serpent, in Gen. 3:6, Eve saw the tree was *tov*—good for food; but then she saw that the tree was *avah*—delightful in appearance—it was created to be *chamad* in appearance, but to Eve it became *avah* in appearance, and Eve also saw that the tree was *chamad*—desirable for *obtaining* wisdom, so she *took* the forbidden fruit and gave some to her passive husband. Eve’s desire was misdirected in two different ways. Instead of recognizing the God-created-goodness in what God had given her, she directed that desire to what God had withheld from her. She also had a new desire for what God had given to her; a desire that did not fulfill the intended purpose of God’s gift. Both desires were misdirected and both misdirections are prohibited in the tenth commandment. These two misdirections often go together; the combination of these two creates resentment for, rather than contentment with, what God has given to us. What should have been Eve’s positive response to the abundance God gave to her shifted to a negative response to what she could get from God, and so she *took* it.

Having misdirected desires toward the gifts that God has given to us also misdirects our approach to God. Gen. 3 goes on and describes the LORD God going on his evening stroll in the garden and Adam and Eve *fleeing* from his presence to attempt to flee from judgment (cf. Rev. 9:6). But after confronting them, they both pass blame, they both take personal responsibility, the LORD curses the serpent and the ground, and then *the LORD God said behold, [they have] become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, we must banish this special people from this special place otherwise [they] will reach out [their] hands and also take and eat from the tree of life.* To reiterate yet again, misdirected sinful desire involves the *taking* of what rightfully belongs to someone else, in the case of Eden, *taking* the wisdom that belongs to God.

Galatians 5:13-26 – The Elastic Pull of the Flesh and Spirit

Our passage this morning, and its counterpart in Romans 7, depicts the cosmic showdown that takes place in the life of every believer from the moment of their conversion until the moment they enter the presence of Jesus Christ for all eternity. This cosmic showdown is the elastic pull of the old self and the new self. These two passages are the source of intense debate throughout the ages particularly in the fields of theological-anthropology and philosophy.

The 13th century Roman-Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas used these verses to argue that reason is superior to passion. He writes in *Summa Theologica*, “The passions of the soul, insofar as they are contrary to the order of reason, incline us to sin; but insofar as they are controlled by reason, they pertain to virtue.”¹ Aquinas finds the root of desires of the flesh in the body; if we just let our minds run things then we will be able to control the passions of our bodies.² To Aquinas, reason and logic are synonymous with walking by the Spirit.

Well this interpretation did not cut it for one 19th century Danish-Lutheran theologian who rejected Aquinas’s false dichotomy between the mind and body. In his famous work, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, Soren Kierkegaard finds *both* the mind and the body as potential sources for what he frequently calls “double-mindedness.” *Both* the mind and body are prone to deception and temptation from outside as well as inside the individual; both mind and body are counted as the flesh.³ Kierke gets close to what I think Paul is communicating in Galatians 5. Where he gets off-track is when he breaks from Martin Luther to argue that the flesh and the spirit are essentially two halves of one converted person.

While he was closer than Aquinas to Galatians 5, one of the premier 20th century voices in the field of theological-anthropology, a Dutch-Calvinist theologian named Anthony Hoekema, yet found fault in Kierke’s theory of two sub-parts making up the whole converted person. His reasoning was that if a whole converted person is made up of half-flesh and half-spirit, then to walk in the Spirit is to still live a sub-human life; the conflict described in our passage is resolved then by living by the flesh. This is clearly problematic for interpreting our passage correctly and understanding what it means to be embodied and converted. Instead, Hoekema argues that Galatians 5 describes a cosmic showdown between two whole selves that exist in each individual

¹ Quote appears in Anthony Hoekema, “The Struggle Between Old and New Natures in the Converted Man.”

² I’m borrowing categories from the model of Francis Schaeffer, appearing in Nancy Pearcey *Love Thy Body*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018.

³ Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, Feather Trail Press, 2009

believer. If you remember doing a Venn diagram in school, Hoekema would identify the nature of the converted individual in that middle area. These two whole selves are in conflict with one another yet co-exist in the converted individual.

This reality creates tension in the Christian life. “The converted man is a bundle of contradictions. He hates and yet he loves God’s law. He wills and yet he does not will the good. He despises and yet he commits evil. He is at one and the same time a Pharisee and a publican, a Simon and a Peter, a sinner and yet a saint.” Galatians 5 “clearly depicts the unremitting struggle in the heart of the believer between impulses which come from his old nature and those which come ultimately from” his new nature in Christ.⁴

Galatians 5 teaches us there is a tension between the two selves in the life of the believer. The old self still has a strong pull in the life of the believer. The unbeliever has *only* this one pull; a pull that ultimately leads to maximize momentary pleasure and minimize momentary suffering, which certainly defines our contemporary culture and yet also seems to define every crooked generation. But this is not the only pull in the life of a *believer*. The believer is also pulled by new self; by the Spirit.

There is a popular illustration of the cosmic showdown between flesh and spirit in the life of a believer with two fists bumping into each other; illustrating the tension. But Galatians 5 seems to illustrate this tension in the opposite direction. With the fist illustration, it can be easy to let the flesh and spirit battle it out “over there” while I sit comfortably “over here.” Or if I move close to the tension to actually feel it, then it’s only a few aspects of life most convenient to expose to the tension or the few aspects where wiggling into a position of compromise just isn’t an option. The tension is mostly seen or abstractly known but not necessarily felt in *all* aspects of life.

Rather than two fists pushing against each other, Galatians 5 illustrates the tension as two pulls, the pull of the flesh and the pull of the Spirit. So if we were going to fill in the rest of that Venn diagram, these two mutually exclusive pulls in the life of a believer are contrasted three times in our passage.

First, the pull of the Spirit is marked by willingly setting aside one’s freedom for the sake of loving their neighbor. Meanwhile, the pull of the flesh is marked by using one’s freedom as a pretext to devour their neighbor—or in other words, acting like the serpent from Eden—like the

⁴ Hoekema article

devil and his minions—is what it means to walk according to the flesh. To walk with the Spirit means to love your neighbor; to walk by the flesh is to desire and take what rightfully belongs to your neighbor.

Second, that Greek word for covet is used to show that the Spirit *covets* what is opposed to the flesh and the flesh *covets* what is opposed to the Spirit. Rather than bumping fists, the cosmic showdown between flesh and spirit rather pull the converted individual in complete opposite directions, creating tension in every aspect of life. NT scholar John Barclay describes Gal. 5:17d as the most complicated clause in Galatians and among the most complicated verses in the whole NT.⁵ The whole verse says: *For the flesh covets what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit [covets what] is against the flesh, for they are in opposition to one another so that you will not do those things you might wish to do.* Are the things we might wish to do the things of the Spirit or of the flesh? Knowing this is a highly complex verse with different views argued by those whose intellects surpass my own, I humbly put forth the view I find most compelling, that there is an intentional ambiguity. As the converted individual is being pulled in two different directions, when we walk with the Spirit—when we want to do the things of the Spirit, it is the tension of the pull of the flesh that prevents us from doing what we want to do in that moment. And when we give in and want to do the things of the flesh, it is the tension of the pull of the spirit that prevents us from doing what we want to do in that moment—or to borrow from Romans 7 what the sin that dwells in us wants to do. Rather than bumping fists, the Spirit and Flesh pull the converted individual in *complete opposite directions*, causing tension in *all* aspects of life with every movement toward either end.

Third, is the contrast between the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. This list is similar to the other vice lists in Scripture in that these behaviors keep unrepentant people out of the Kingdom of God. Now the ESV says “those who *do* such things.” The grammar to this suggests a present tense and yet ongoing habitual practice. Notice, however, that it does not say “those who have *ever done* such things.” Paul says in our passage that this is not the first time he has said this. One of those other times is in 1 Cor. 6:9-11 where he says: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually-immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who have sex with men, nor pederasts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of

⁵ Citation appears in Jan Lambrecht, “The Right Things You Want to Do: A Note on Galatians 5:17d.”

God. And such *were* some of you. *But you were* washed, you *were* sanctified, you *were* justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ *and by the Spirit.*” Those in Christ have been cleansed by the Spirit and forgiven of past practice of these behaviors. Thanks be to God!

Now, the Greek word for fruit is singular, not plural. These are not the *fruits* of the Spirit, but the *fruit* of the Spirit. These are not things for us to measure ourselves by to determine which ones we can improve upon ourselves as if I alone could actually do such a thing. No, these are not the fruit of me; these are the fruit of the Spirit living in me. The OT background to the fruit of the Spirit comes from Isaiah 32, where the prophet writes about the coming day of the Lord. In Isaiah, the fruit of the Spirit are the result of the Spirit being poured out on those who call on the name of the Lord; those who call on the name of Jesus for their salvation.

And so love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are not things we take into our own hands or seek to improve upon. They are not sub-aspects of a Spirit-filled life. Rather, those who believe in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ are commanded to walk by the Spirit through laying aside our freedom for the sake of our neighbor and suffering through the tension of the flesh and world from walking by the Spirit; the pull from the broad way affirmed by the crowds who devour, and provoke. Our passage has three contrasts but the contrasts are all describing what it means to walk by the Spirit, and walking by the Spirit will result in the *Spirit* producing these fruit in your life over the course of time.

Gospel Presentation

Temptation towards the works of the flesh is strong. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it like this: There is only one stronger reality to be set against the exclusive reality of desire and of Satan: the image and the presence of the Crucified [Christ]. Against this power the power of desire breaks up into nothingness; for here it is conquered. Here the flesh has received its right and its reward, namely death. Here I realize that the lust of the flesh is nothing else than the anguish of the flesh in the face of death. Because Christ is the death of the flesh, and because this Christ is within me, the dying flesh rears itself up against Christ... In the temptation of the flesh I share in the death of Jesus in the flesh. So the temptation of the flesh which draws me into the death of the flesh, drives me into the death of Christ, who died in the flesh... Only the death of Christ rescues me from the temptation of the flesh.

Therefore, the Bible teaches us in times of temptation in the flesh to *flee*: “Flee fornication” (1 Cor. 6.18) – “from idolatry” (1 Cor. 10.14) – “youthful lusts (II Tim. 2.22) – “the lust of the world (II Pet. 1.4). There is no resistance to Satan other than flight. Every struggle against lust in one’s own strength is doomed to failure. Flee—that can indeed only mean, Flee to that place where you find protection and help, flee to the Crucified [Christ].⁶

No matter how hard you try to follow the plethora of self-help and improvement books on even the Christian market, the Fruit of the Spirit cannot and will not manifest in you if the Spirit has not yet been poured out on you. The Scriptures are clear that all who put their faith in the person and finished work of Jesus by calling on his name as their Lord will receive the Spirit.

Jesus was born; he became flesh and dwelt among humanity; he redeemed that which he took upon himself. He took upon himself a human nature to redeem humanity. He lived a life of perfect obedience, which means the sacrifice of his death could actually be vicarious. Jesus suffered and endured through all types of temptation, yet without sin; Jesus lived the life we fail to live; he took the full weight of God’s wrath reserved for every sinner upon himself; he died in our place the death our sins deserve and he was raised as a victorious, conquering king so that all sinners who believe by faith in his resurrection will be forgiven of their sins. His death and resurrection means his people are given the promise that in the age to come they too will be raised into everlasting life. His death and resurrection means his people are given a new heart, meaning they long for and desire what God longs for and desires. And his death and resurrection means his people are given the Holy Spirit who dwells in them right now, empowering them to repent—empowering them to *flee* from sin and instead turn toward God; to take off the old self and to put on the new self.

Are you one of his people? Do you believe in the person and finished work of Jesus Christ? Has the Spirit been poured out onto you? Are you walking by the Spirit? Do you feel the pull of the flesh as you walk in step with the Spirit? Has the Spirit produced fruit in your life? If the answer is no, then I invite you right now to put your faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for today is a day of salvation, and if you do, then he will come into your heart and transform your heart to most highly desire to love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Let’s pray.

⁶ Bonhoeffer, 117-118.