Session 2 · Flesh and Spirit at War

Galatians 5:16-18; Romans 8:5-14

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that "flesh" in Paul means the whole self bent away from God, not the body, and that the Christian life is a real interior war in which the Spirit gives real victory.

Catholic Touchstone. Baptism erases sin but leaves concupiscence, an inclination to sin left for us to wrestle with in the Christian life; it cannot harm those who do not consent but resist it by the grace of Christ (CCC 405, 1264).

What You Need to Know

Tonight's two paragraphs of Paul are the field map for the whole study. "Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16). Everything that follows in Galatians 5, the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, hangs from this one sentence.

Guard the key term. By sarx, flesh, Paul does not mean the body. The body is God's good creation, destined for resurrection. Several works of the flesh in next session's list are sins of the mind: enmity, jealousy, envy, party spirit. "Flesh" is the whole person, body and soul, insofar as it is turned in on itself and away from God. Getting this wrong lands people in a fake spirituality that despises the body; getting it right locates the battle in the whole person: disordered desire, mind, and will, with the will's cooperation with grace the decisive front.

Also guard against despair. Paul describes the war so vividly (Romans 7, Galatians 5:17) that some conclude stalemate is the Christian condition. Paul concludes the opposite: "if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live" (Romans 8:13). The war is real; so is the winning side.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

The two ways are as old as Eden and as explicit as Moses' farewell: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). Psalm 1 paints the same fork in the road: the man who walks in the counsel of the wicked, and the man planted like a tree by streams of water.

The Mosaic Law, by itself, did not impart the New Law's interior grace, though God truly gave grace to his people under the old covenant; the law was holy, but hearts of stone needed more than commands. Ezekiel's promise from last session (36:26-27) is precisely the promise of power to walk: "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes." Paul's "walk by the Spirit" resonates with Ezekiel's promise of the Spirit enabling obedience.

Voices of the Church

St. Augustine

Confessions, Book 8 (summary)

In the garden in Milan, on the edge of conversion, St. Augustine describes two wills fighting inside one man: the old will, carnal and habituated, and the new will, drawn to God, neither yet whole. He heard his old habits whispering behind him even as continence beckoned ahead.

His testimony matters because he refuses both lies at once: the war is not between a good soul and an evil body, and it is not unwinnable. Grace carried him across.

St. John Chrysostom

Commentary on Galatians, at 5:17 (summary)

Preaching on this very passage, St. John Chrysostom insists Paul does not accuse the body. If flesh meant body, the blame for sin would fall on God who made it. Flesh, he says, names the earthbound choice of the will, and the Spirit-led soul rises with the body in tow.

St. Catherine of Siena

The Dialogue, A Treatise of Prayer (CCEL ed., pp. 100-101), summary

St. Catherine returns constantly to what she calls the cell of self-knowledge: the soul that honestly knows both its own poverty and God's goodness within it neither despairs at the war nor grows proud in victory. Self-knowledge without God breeds despair; knowledge of God without self breeds presumption. The battle is fought between those two ditches.

Catechism Connection

CCC 405 teaches that baptism erases original sin but leaves human nature wounded and inclined to sin, an inclination called concupiscence.

CCC 1264 teaches that concupiscence remains in the baptized: in the words of Trent that it hands on, it is left for us to wrestle with, and it cannot harm those who do not consent but resist manfully by the grace of Jesus Christ.

CCC 2515-2516 locates the struggle Paul describes: the "flesh versus spirit" tension belongs to ordinary Christian experience and is not a sign that grace has failed.

Thread Watch

Threads in play

Vine. If anyone asks how the Spirit gives power to walk, answer briefly: by union with Christ, through prayer and the sacraments. Then add that Session 8 gives that answer a full night from Jesus' own words.

Darkness-to-light (plant next session). Tonight stays on the battlefield. The imagery of darkness arrives in Sessions 3 and 4.

Sealed guesses are collected and stored. Remind participants that their envelopes will remain sealed until Session 8, and answer any questions about the process.

Session Goals

1. Define sarx correctly from the text itself, not from a lecture.
2. Establish that the interior war is normal Christian experience, not evidence of failure.
3. Establish that the war is winnable by the Spirit, against both presumption and despair.
4. Connect walking by the Spirit to Ezekiel 36 through live discovery.

Time Note

Runs 75-85 minutes. If short, cut Build question 4 (Psalm 1 cross-check) and shorten the steelman to its first paragraph plus the press question.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit. You know the war inside us better than we know it ourselves. Give us honesty about the fight, hope in your power, and the will to walk where you lead. Amen.

Win · Opening Questions

1. Describe a tug-of-war you have felt inside yourself this month, small or large. Which side usually wins, and why?

2. When you hear that the spiritual life is a battle, does that image encourage you or exhaust you?

Build · Into the Text

Read Galatians 5:16-18 aloud twice, slowly. Then Romans 8:5-14.

1. Galatians 5:17 says the desires of the flesh and of the Spirit "are opposed to each other." Is Paul describing a war between soul and body? Test it: look ahead at the list in 5:19-21 and find works that are not merely bodily appetites.

> **ANSWER** · share after the discussion
>
> Enmity, strife, jealousy, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy: sins rooted in mind and will, not bodily appetite. So "flesh" cannot simply mean body. Paul means the whole self curved away from God. The body is good, made by God and destined for resurrection; the corruption is in the will's direction, and that is where the Spirit fights.

2. What exactly does Paul promise in 5:16? Notice the order of the sentence.

> **ANSWER** · share after the discussion
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> Walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Victory is stated as a consequence, not a precondition. He does not say clean yourself up and then the Spirit will accept you; he says walk by the Spirit and the flesh loses its grip. Grace leads, our cooperation follows.

> **Steelman · The war means stalemate**
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> State this at full strength before answering it. A thoughtful reader can argue: Paul himself cries "the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:19). Galatians 5:17 says the two forces prevent you from doing what you would. Honest Christians sin daily. Perhaps the sober conclusion is that the war simply is the Christian life, that real transformation waits for heaven, and that expecting victory now sets people up for pretending.
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> Press the group: what does Paul himself conclude one chapter after Romans 7? Send them to Romans 8:12-13 and let them read his answer aloud: we are not debtors to the flesh; by the Spirit we put its deeds to death and live. Romans 7 is not meant to be read without Romans 8. The struggle is normal; surrender to stalemate is not, and the Church has never taught that grace merely covers us without changing us.

Live Discovery

Send the group back to Ezekiel 36 (they found it last week) with one question: where does God promise not just a new heart but the power to walk? They should land on 36:27, "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes." Then ask what word Paul keeps using in Galatians 5 and Romans 8. Let someone else say it: walk.

3. Romans 8:9 says "you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the Spirit of God really dwells in you." Who is Paul talking to, and what does that tell a baptized person about their default position in this war?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He is writing to ordinary baptized Christians in Rome, not spiritual elites. The baptized start the battle in the Spirit; concupiscence remains as an enemy inside the walls, but it does not hold the throne. The Catechism says exactly this: the inclination is left for us to wrestle with, and it cannot harm those who do not consent but resist by the grace of Christ (CCC 1264).

4. Read Psalm 1. Where do you see tonight's two ways, and what image does the psalmist choose for the man on the right one?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The counsel of the wicked versus delight in the law of the Lord: the same fork Paul describes. And the image is a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season. File that image away; the whole third movement of this study grows out of it.

Dig Deeper · Concupiscence is not sin

The Council of Trent taught that concupiscence, the tinder of sin left after baptism, is not itself sin in the strict sense; it comes from sin and inclines to sin. Freely consenting to a disordered desire can become personal sin, whose gravity depends on the usual moral conditions: the act's object, knowledge, and freedom. This is why feeling the pull is no cause for shame and no excuse for surrender. Feeling the pull of temptation is not the same as choosing to sin.

Send · Closing Questions

1. Where in your week does the flesh most reliably ambush you? What would it look like to walk into that hour by the Spirit instead of into it alone?

2. Which ditch do you drift toward, presumption or despair, and what did tonight give you against it?

Live It This Week

- Name your most predictable daily skirmish and pray for the Spirit's help before it, not after.
- Read Romans 7:14 through 8:17 in one sitting, refusing to stop at the chapter break.

• When you fail this week, go to the Lord immediately rather than hiding for a day first. Speed of return is a Spirit-led habit.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you know our divided hearts. Send your Spirit into the war we cannot win alone. Make us honest about the flesh, confident in your grace, and quick to return when we fall. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

> **Galatians 5:16**
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> But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage read or discussed in this session, in order of appearance, with key leader background.

- Galatians 5:16-18
- Romans 8:5-14
- Galatians 5:19-21 (preview scan only)
- Romans 7:19
- Romans 8:12-13
- Ezekiel 36:26-27
- Psalm 1
- Deuteronomy 30:19 (leader background)