

Session 3 • The Works of the Flesh

Galatians 5:19-21, 24; Genesis 4:1-7

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that Paul's list of the works of the flesh is a diagnosis of the unrescued heart, that his warning about inheriting the kingdom is meant seriously, and that these works are dealt with by crucifixion, not management.

Catholic Touchstone. The Catechism cites this very list as Scripture's own catalogue of sins, contrasting the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit (CCC 1852). These are sins that can seriously damage our life with God and with one another, though not every listed work carries the same gravity; mortal sin requires grave matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent (CCC 1857), and feeling a temptation is not the same as freely choosing to act on it. The Church reads Paul's "shall not inherit" warning as a warning about real, losable communion with God (CCC 1861).

What You Need to Know

Paul says the works of the flesh are "plain" (5:19): manifest, evident, needing no subtle diagnosis. His fifteen named works fall roughly into four clusters: the misuse of the body (fornication, impurity, licentiousness), the misuse of worship (idolatry, sorcery), the wrecking of community (enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy), and the misuse of appetite (drunkenness, carousing). Then "and the like": the list is diagnostic, not exhaustive.

Notice where the bulk of the list sits: eight of fifteen works are community-wrecking sins. We instinctively rank the body sins worst; Paul spends most of his ink on the sins that tear a parish apart. Let the group discover that proportion themselves.

Do not sand down verse 21. "Those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" is written to baptized Christians. Paul is not describing people who once slipped; his participle is often read as describing those practicing such things, a settled way of walking. But do not let that soften the warning: mortal sin does not require a habit. One act of grave matter, committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent, kills the life of grace in the soul (CCC 1857), which is why the Church calls it mortal and never stops offering the remedy of repentance and confession. (Leader note: anyone conscious of mortal sin ordinarily receives sacramental absolution before receiving Holy Communion; CCC 1457 gives the rule and its narrow exception.)

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Scripture's first fratricide comes with a warning attached. Before Cain kills his brother, the Lord tells him: "sin is crouching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). Sin is pictured as a beast at the threshold: real, hungry, and resistible. Cain's tragedy is not that the beast was too strong; it is that he opened the door.

Israel's prophets repeat the pattern with the whole nation: idolatry, bloodshed, and faction are never treated as private lifestyle choices but as covenant treason with consequences. Paul stands squarely in that prophetic line when he warns about the kingdom.

Voices of the Church

St. Gregory the Great

Moralia in Job XXXI.45 (87-88) (summary)

St. Gregory pictures the great vices as commanders, each leading an army of smaller sins into the soul. Pride marches first, and each captain that gains entry opens the gate for its troops: anger brings quarrels, envy brings slander, gluttony brings dullness.

His military image explains why Paul's works come in clusters. Sins hunt in packs, and wisdom fights the captains, not just the foot soldiers.

St. Augustine

City of God 14.28 (summary)

St. Augustine teaches that two loves built two cities: love of self unto contempt of God, and love of God unto contempt of self. His two loves give us a lens for Paul's list: read each work and ask which love is wearing the uniform.

St. Thomas Aquinas

Summa Theologiae I-II, q. 84 (summary)

St. Thomas explains the tradition of the capital sins: certain sins are called capital not because they are always the gravest but because they are heads, sources from which other sins flow as means to their end. Vainglory begets disobedience and boasting; avarice begets fraud and restlessness. The practical application is ours to draw: diagnose the head sin, and the campaign against its troops becomes possible.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1852 quotes Galatians 5:19-21 directly as Scripture's own catalogue of sins, noting the works of the flesh are contrary to the fruit of the Spirit.

CCC 1861 teaches that mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom: it results in the loss of charity and, unrepented, exclusion from the kingdom. Paul's warning is neither rhetoric nor scare tactic.

CCC 1866 hands on the traditional list of seven capital sins as the heads from which others spring, the same insight St. Gregory and St. Thomas develop above.

Thread Watch

Threads in play

Darkness-to-light (planted tonight). In the Send section, participants hear Ephesians 5:8a quoted without its second half: "once you were darkness." Stop there. The rest of the verse belongs to next session; if anyone completes it from memory, congratulate them and promise them the whole passage next week.

Vine. Verse 24 (crucifying the flesh) may prompt someone to ask what positive thing replaces the crucified flesh. Perfect. Tell them the answer occupies Sessions 5 through 8.

Session Goals

1. Have the group sort the fifteen works into clusters and notice the weight Paul gives community-wrecking sins.
2. Read Genesis 4:7 by live discovery and connect the crouching beast to resistible temptation.
3. Take the "shall not inherit" warning seriously without despair: name mortal sin and its remedy.
4. Plant the darkness thread with the half-quoted Ephesians 5:8.

Time Note

Runs 80-90 minutes. If short, cut the Dig Deeper on the capital sins and give the Gregory voice content in one sentence when it arises naturally.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, light of hearts. Give us tonight the courage to look at sin without flinching and without despair, knowing that where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. Amen.

Win · Opening Questions

1. Why do you think we find it easier to spot other people's besetting sins than our own?
2. What is a habit, harmless or not, that you only noticed you had when someone else pointed it out?

Build · Into the Text

Read Galatians 5:19-21 aloud. Give the group three minutes with pen and paper to sort the fifteen works into whatever groupings they see before any discussion.

1. What clusters did you find? Count how many works belong to each. What surprises you about the proportions?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

A common sorting: body (fornication, impurity, licentiousness), worship (idolatry, sorcery), community (enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy), appetite (drunkenness, carousing). The surprise is the middle: eight of fifteen are sins that wreck relationships and communities, a proportion that suggests how seriously Paul takes the sins pious people excuse in themselves while condemning the others.

2. "And the like" (5:21). What does that phrase tell us about Paul's list, and how could we recognize another action that belongs to the same pattern?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The phrase tells us the list is representative, not complete: the flesh invents faster than any catalogue, and nothing escapes by being unnamed. We recognize kin actions by the pattern, and Paul's open list says the problem is not fifteen behaviors but one heart-direction with endless expressions. The flesh cannot be managed by inventory; it must be crucified (5:24).

Live Discovery

Send the group to Genesis 4, the story of Cain, with one hunt: find the verse where God describes sin as an animal, before the murder is committed. They should land on 4:7. Read it aloud and sit with the three claims packed into it: sin crouches, sin desires you, you must master it.

3. What does Genesis 4:7 teach about temptation that both excuse-making and despair get wrong?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Against excuse-making: the beast is at your door and its desire is for you; temptation is personal

and the door is yours to open or hold. Against despair: "you must master it" is spoken as a live possibility, and what God commands, God gives grace to do. Cain was not doomed; he consented. With the Spirit within us (Session 2), the mastery God asked of Cain is more possible for us, not less.

Steelman · Lists do not matter if faith saves

At full strength: a serious Protestant friend might say Paul cannot mean that behaviors decide our inheritance, because two chapters earlier he insists we are justified by faith and not by works of the law (Galatians 2:16). Reading 5:21 as a real threat to believers, they argue, would make Paul contradict himself. So the warning must describe unbelievers, or be a wake-up call that no true believer will finally ignore.

Press the group: read 5:21 again and ask who Paul says he is warning, and when. "I warn you, as I warned you before": the baptized Galatian churches, twice. Then name what Paul actually rejects in chapter 2: justification by observance of the Law apart from grace in Christ. He is not opposing the moral life; the Law prohibits fornication and envy too, and Paul reasserts that morality here with a warning attached. The Catholic reading holds both texts without surgery: we are saved by grace through faith, and we cannot earn the grace of initial justification. In Baptism, God forgives our sins and renews us inwardly, giving us faith, hope, and charity (CCC 1989-1993, 2010). Saving faith is not separated from love: Paul himself speaks of faith working through love in Galatians 5:6. And mortal sin, grave matter chosen with full knowledge and deliberate consent, kills that life of grace, which is exactly why Paul warns people he considers brothers. Warnings are grace too.

4. Galatians 5:24: "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." What does Paul's image of crucifying the flesh tell us about how seriously sin must be rejected, and what helps us actually do it?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

It tells us sin is to be rejected completely: crucifixion is not a treatment plan but an execution, a death begun sacramentally in baptism (Romans 6:3-6) and ratified daily in choices. Crucifying the flesh means rejecting sin, not despising or injuring the body God made. And note who does it: those who belong to Christ. Prayer, self-discipline, and the sacraments are how that belonging does its work in us.

Dig Deeper · The capital sins as field guide

The Church's seven capital sins (pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, sloth; CCC 1866) overlap Paul's list without duplicating it. They are diagnostic heads: find which captain commands your most frequent falls, and you have found where to post the guard. A good examination of conscience does exactly this.

Send · Closing Questions

1. Without naming it aloud unless you wish, which single work or captain sin most has your number? What would treating it as a crouching beast, rather than a personality trait, change?
2. Paul warned people he loved. Is there a warning you have been softening for someone because you feared their reaction, or softening for yourself?

Live It This Week

- Make a ten-minute examination of conscience this week using the four clusters from tonight.
- Examine your conscience honestly. If you are aware of mortal sin, turn back to God now and seek sacramental Confession as soon as possible; do not wait for a pattern to develop. Regular Confession helps when our sins are venial too.
- Memorize Genesis 4:7 alongside the memory verse and pray it at the door of your most familiar temptation.

Closing Prayer

Father, you warned Cain in mercy before he sinned, and you warn us in mercy still. Give us grace to master the beast at the door, to crucify what cannot be tamed, and to run to your mercy when we fall. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

Galatians 5:24

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Leader Reference Card

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

- Galatians 5:19-21
- Galatians 5:24
- Genesis 4:1-7
- Galatians 2:16 (steelman)
- Galatians 5:6 (steelman)
- Romans 6:3-6 (leader background)
- Romans 5:20 (opening prayer allusion)
- Ephesians 5:8a (thread plant, first half only)