

KEENER THOUGHTS

APRIL, 2011

SHORT BIBLE PHRASES OF GREAT IMPORTANCE # 5 IN SERIES

SO THAT YE CANNOT DO THE THINGS THAT YE WOULD

This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that **ye cannot do the things that ye would**. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law. (Gal. 5:16-18)

In the March Keener Thoughts I asked the question: "Does that mean we cannot do the good we will to do, or that we cannot do the evil we might do?" The answer I gave was this. "It applies to each of these as certainly as to the other." In this month's article I want to discuss how, and to what extent, this inability applies to each of these categories of activity.

Before regeneration, there may be influences, such as family and cultural tradition that, to some extent, restrain and influence us to good, but essentially we are slaves to sin. Law is always there, not as a guide that can effectively guide us into righteousness, for it cannot do that, but it stands as our accuser and prosecutor. This is established in Gal 3:21b, "*for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law.*" Law's effect is altogether, and always, to state guilt and condemnation. That is what it means to be under the law, that is to say, as slaves, in bondage under a slave master. The law is not an evil, abusive slave master but a righteous one.

God's law is just and holy and good, but we are by virtue of our birth sold under sin, therefore by that very virtue of the law's holiness, it accuses, convicts and condemns us. But after regeneration, the Spirit of Christ dwells in us, and our whole

relationship to the law changes. The Holy Spirit within us promotes in our hearts the very things the Holy law demands. (Gal. 5:22-23) But while the law demands righteousness of us, it can never motivate our hearts in the direction of that righteousness, nor can the law give us the ability to obey it. Our flesh is still the slave of sin, so we are left with a lifelong conflict, of a dual nature, each lusting against the other. While some honest theologians deny this, claiming that the regenerate are altogether in the spirit, and not at all inhibited by the flesh, I believe Paul insists upon what I have just stated. In our flesh there is the incurable appetite for sin, but in the Spirit, (the inward man) there is a delight in God's holy law, which never is, nor indeed can be in the natural man. Thus, we begin to understand the limited inability to do evil, because of the Spirit within us, and the limited inability to do good, because we are not yet delivered from the body of this death. (Ro. 7:22-25) *For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.*

I can honestly say I do not want to be guilty of any improper anger, any jealousy, pride, selfishness, impatience, arrogance, failure in loving others, etc. But when I behold those things in others, I am embarrassed to involuntarily realize that they are in me also. I am, no doubt, in some ways a fool, but not fool enough to be blind to, or ignorant of, these fleshly things in myself. I often wake up at night, having dreamed of, or thinking of, a Scripture or biblical issue, concerning which I am not satisfied with my depth of understanding. Lying there in the dark, I frequently purpose that I will get up in the morning and study the context more carefully, or read some good commentary on the issue. I feel that I must know more clearly what the inspired writer, through the Holy Spirit, is revealing to us. But when the morning comes, I find many things, yes fleshly interests, that lure me away from that study, and monopolize my time, and I go to bed as ignorant as I was the night before; and that unnecessarily.

Knowing that is true, how can I possibly claim that I am not in some sense in the flesh, as well as in the Spirit? If you have a formula by which you are able to deliver yourself from such failures, help me out. Now I hear someone say, "Oh I just set me a goal of hours I will pray or chapters I will read, or visits I will make, and that gives me the victory." No my friend, I have already lived there! That only builds a sanctimonious wall to protect us from the conviction of the Spirit. It helps us put a spiritual label on our fleshly ambition, and blinds us to our persistent neglect of God, and justifies our jealousy, pride, selfishness, impatience, arrogance, failure in loving others, etc. If those good activities delivered us from fleshliness, the energetic Paul would never have needed to confess. *"But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.* I must join Him in saying, *"Oh wretched man that I am!"*

Now, having lamented the defeats we suffer because of the flesh, Let me employ a few words to rejoice over the victories we have, because of the Spirit of Christ that dwells in us. I mentioned the fact that this restraint of flesh and Spirit is not only from good, but is also from evil. That is to say, there are evil things that I would do, were I left to my natural self, but cannot do, because the Spirit of Christ dwells in me, lusting against the flesh, and refusing me, sometimes the will, and at other times the opportunity, to do the evil that I would. At least, some of us are aware of the principle of what is often called prevenient grace. That is that grace of God which prevents us from doing evil things that we might be tempted to do. Many, many times in scripture, we see where even heathen were restrained by God, such as in the case of Abimelech in Gen 20:6. *And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.* How much more beautiful is this restraining grace, when it restrains us as Christians from doing foolish things that would negatively affect the rest of our lives. I can recall many times during my ministry when God has done this for me, and even many times before I even realized my call to the ministry.

Looking back over forty three years of pastorate, and seven years of full time

evangelism, I know more than ever that God's divine restraint and motivation has been my only source of survival. When I felt, and answered, the call to the ministry in 1958, I knew nothing, and I knew that I knew nothing. Through more than fifty years of trying to serve God, I thought I was just stumbling along, with God's word (perhaps His holy law) before me. The blessings of those years have been more than I even could have expected. However, today I am sure it did not come by my merely following divine instructions. I feel sure it was, and even now, perhaps more than ever, is the Spirit of Christ within me, both restraining and constraining me. Thus I do not the evil that I might, and I do some good that I neither would nor could, without the very person of Christ dwelling in me. What incredible grace that this could be true!

--FLK