

CHAPTER 5

CHOICES: NOT POWER SOURCES

Many in the church see the Christian life as an inner skirmish—a power struggle between the sin nature and the Spirit. Often likened to a control room for electric power, the believer is conflicted as to which switch he will flip in order to send the current. Above one master switch the sign reads, “power of sin.” Above the other, “power of the Spirit.” The Christian stands with a hand on each lever. By lifting one or the other, the believer lives either in fellowship with Christ or aligned with the world. Does this sound familiar? Unfortunately that is the picture most believers have of the Christian life.

Perception Doesn’t Make It So

A power-switch life is perpetuated in two ways. *First*, it is the usual way that salvation from sin is taught in the Church. As discussed in previous chapters referencing Romans 5–6, salvation from sin is typically understood in three ways: (1) salvation from the penalty of sin, (2) salvation from the power of sin, and (3) salvation from the presence of sin. Remembering that these classifications are only theological distinctions, the second of the three “*Ps*,” *power of sin*, lacks biblical

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support. Sin has *no* power; rather sin is a result of wrong thoughts and bad choices. Likewise, the propensity to sin in each one of us is also *not* a power. Therefore the power-of-sin designation is inaccurate. To keep the three “Ps,” *practice of sin* is the preferred term and represents the intent in Romans 5–8 where Paul addressed Christian living.

Second, the power-switch depiction is furthered by importing “resurrection power” from Romans 1:4 into Romans 5–8 (see chapter 3). The result is an assumed battle between a “power to sin” and a “power to live.” The assumed “power to sin” clashes with the alleged “power of the Spirit” for supremacy, based on Acts 1:8. While chapters 3–4 in this book invalidated sin as a power, chapter 9 explains that the promise of power in Acts 1:8, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” refers *only* to “power” for the Eleven’s specific ministry of establishing the Church. Acts 1:8 does not refer to “power” for Christian living, rather the text concerns empowerment for ministry and service. Notice: while it is true that spiritual gifts for ministry or service are an empowering ability from God, there is no “special empowerment” for Christian living.

Let’s Get Real

In the Christian life there is no switch to unleash power from the Spirit. The idea of “getting plugged into the power of the Spirit” to live is biblically unsupportable. Only by embracing an accurate understanding of what the Scripture teaches can Christians experience an authentic walk with God.

Walking is a process, the ability to move in a specific direction. There is no distinction between the Christian’s ability from that of a non-Christian. In fact, ability is assumed in every biblical passage that references “walking” in the Christian life. The central issue in each “walking” text (e.g., darkness or light, flesh or Spirit, etc.) concerns choices that are available to the Christian. Rather than involving two different sources of power, the Christian walk concerns two choices: either choosing to walk “with respect to the flesh” away from God or choosing to walk “with respect to the Spirit” increasingly toward God. The choice of direction will make all the difference.

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Taking Hold of Reality

All the resources to live the Christian life are available to each believer. The issue is *how* we access those resources and *what* is their potential. Romans 8:1-14 along with Galatians 5:16-24 give us the answer.

These two texts present three parallel truths that are central to the Christian life. In each there are two options with two ways of living, depending on the choices the Christian makes.¹ Each choice is a package deal and comes with a consequence. Obedience leads to an enriched walk with Christ (life, which is abundant through fellowship with Christ). On the other hand, disobedience results in a forfeiture of fellowship, a death experience.

Two Ways of Walking

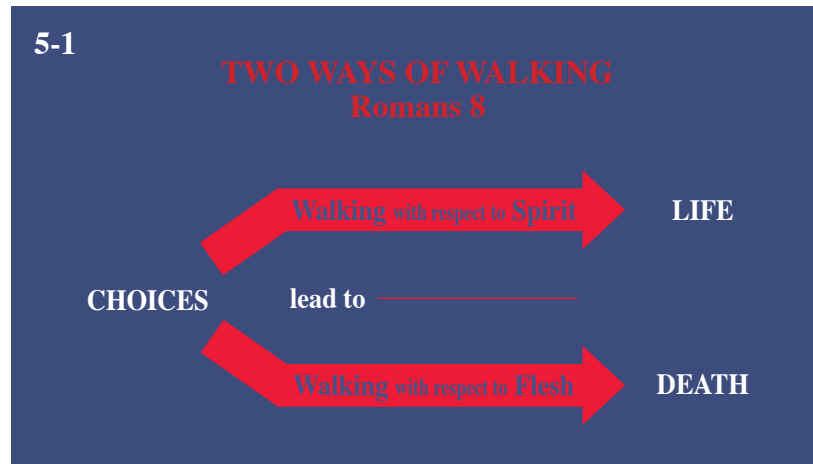
The last chapter addressed the importance of both the definitions of words and their use in a particular context. This chapter focuses on the importance of understanding the construction of thought when words are combined in phrases and sentences. The words themselves and the relationship between words matter because that is how thought is communicated; certainly of major importance when discussing God's Word. If we do not properly understand the Word, we misconstrue God's original meaning and cannot experience the Christian life as He intended.

Romans 8:4

Romans 8:4: "who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" teaches that the Christian can walk either "according to the flesh," according to the believer's propensity to sin, or "according to the Spirit" (see chart 5-1). There is no question that born-again believers can actually behave in two different ways. The question is "*how* are these two, flesh or Spirit, accessed and *what* is the potential in each regarding the Christian's walk?"

The answer to the question is colored by the usual translation of Romans 8:4. Walking "according to the flesh"² is typically understood

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to mean that the Christian can “walk according to *the power of the flesh/sin.*” Likewise, walking “according to the Spirit”³ is taken to mean that the believer in Christ can also “walk according to *the power of the Spirit.*” This translation of the verse is based on an assumed power of sin, which in turn requires a counter power for the believer to walk obediently. The alleged power of the Spirit is necessary for godly behavior.⁴ As previously discussed, sin has no power and there is no “special empowerment” for living the Christian life. Both concepts are scripturally unwarranted.

An alternative translation provides a better explanation when contextual considerations are taken into account. Walking “with respect to the flesh” or “with respect to the Spirit” captures the intent of the text.⁵ Verse 4 concerns the “manner in which one behaves,”⁶ referring to “‘those who walk flesh-wise,’ and ‘those who walk Spirit-wise,’ that is, with a fleshly or with a spiritual orientation.”⁷ The word *orientation* brings to life the context of Romans 8, prompting two ideas. First, the *association* between objects, like an architect determining the position of a building on a parcel of land. Second, the *familiarity* between objects, like a new student visiting his chosen college campus for an orientation week.

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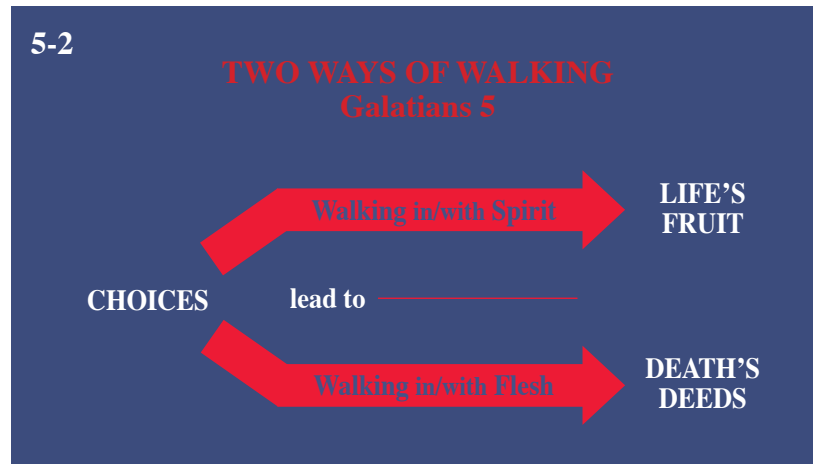
The Christian's continual association and familiarity with sin can lead to spiritual death or loss of fellowship (vv 6, 13). On the other hand, developing an association and familiarity with spiritual things is a process of growth bringing about enriched living (vv 6, 13). The primary resource of the Spirit for Christian growth is God's communication to us through His Word. The Word of God is "God breathed," through men by the Spirit (2 Tim 3:16a; 2 Pet 1:21), and is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16b). It is profitable because His Word prepares and equips the believer for every situation (3:17). "The entire Bible came from God in order to show us how to live."⁸ Nevertheless, believers must increasingly sync their thoughts with God's thoughts, aligning their actions with behavior that pleases God. Familiarity with God results only from increasing exposure to His Word.

In the Christian life, exposure to sin or the Spirit varies daily, hourly, or even momentarily. For this very reason Paul wrote, "present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God" (Rom 6:13b). On the other hand, the Christian should "not go on presenting the members of [his] body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness" (6:13a). Rather than placing oneself at the disposal of sin, the believer should choose to make himself available to the Spirit, choosing to walk "with respect to the Word and the Spirit." In so doing, the believer is "led by the Spirit" (8:14).⁹

Galatians 5:16

In the parallel text, Galatians 5:16: "walk by [in/with] the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" also presents the two choices that face each Christian. While the verse does not state that believers should not "walk by [in/with] the flesh," it is implied (see chart 5-2). In fact, the "deeds of the flesh," which include immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, and carousing (vv 19-21a), are contrasted with the "fruit of the Spirit," being manifested by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (vv 22-23a).¹⁰ These two lists contrast the consequences of

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two contradictory ways of walking: the deeds of the flesh and spiritual deadness or the fruit of the Spirit and abundant living.

Again translation impacts the meaning of a phrase. The usual understanding of a Christian's "walk by the Spirit"¹¹ is that he is living life "by *the power of the Spirit*," referring to the Spirit as the antidote for the power of sin. The Spirit is assumed to be the *cause* of one's walk.¹² As in Romans 8, an alternative translation, in this case "walk *in or with the Spirit*,"¹³ captures the intent of Galatians 5:16. With this understanding, "in the Spirit" points to "walking in the realm of the Spirit" while "with the Spirit" conveys "walking in association with the Spirit." A special empowerment of the Spirit for Christian living is *not* the emphasis in Galatians. Not only is the term *power* not used in the how-to-live section of Galatians (4:21–6:18), but also the term is only used once in this entire book, the earliest letter written by Paul. That single use of power in 3:5 concerns the manifestations of the Spirit's working through gifts for service and ministry in the early church, not empowerment for living the Christian life.¹⁴ In addition, "walking in or with the Spirit" (5:16) corresponds to "walking with respect to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4). The equivalencies of these two phrases are supported from Romans 8:12-13 below. Consequently, the idea of power as the

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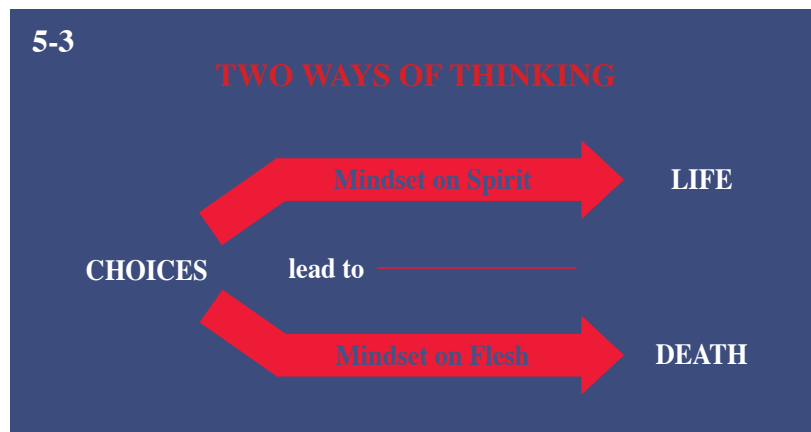
cause for walking whether obediently or disobediently is not found in the context of both Romans 6–8 and Galatians 5.

Two Ways of Thinking

Christians can live in or out of fellowship with God. With the indwelling Spirit, how is it that a believer would choose the “dark side”? Romans 8:5-8 provides the answer.

5 For those who are according to the flesh *set their minds on the things of the flesh*, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. **6** For the *mind set on the flesh* is death, but the *mind set on the Spirit* is life and peace, **7** because the *mind set on the flesh* is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able *to do so*, **8** and those who are in the flesh cannot please God (italics added).

The walking path for the Christian is determined by his “mind-set”¹⁵ (see chart 5-3). Whatever the believer focuses on is lived out in his choices and actions. It is a matter of “orientation,” living with a “fleshly” or a “spiritual” orientation.¹⁶ Notice that the point of reference corresponds to walking “with respect to” the flesh or “with respect to” the Spirit, addressed in the prior verses. To live fleshly is to walk in



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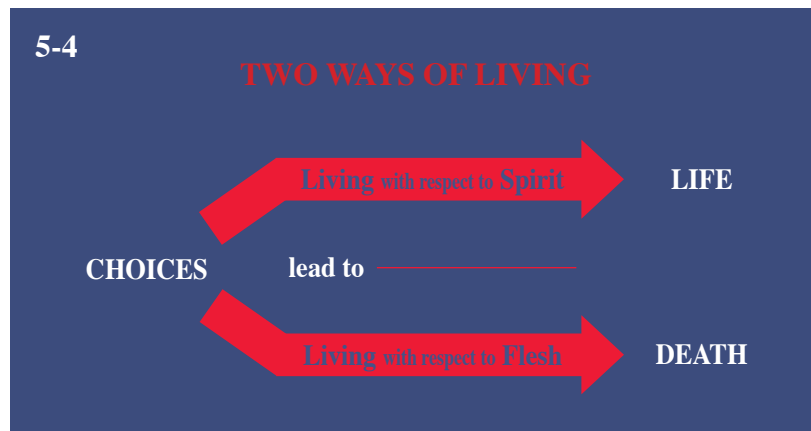
hostility to God. On the other hand, it pleases God as the Christian lives obediently to His Word. The consequences of either life or death are a present reality for the believer.

Two Ways of Living

In Romans 6, Paul stated that the Christian, being dead to sin, is not obligated to his fleshly desires (vv 7, 11, 18, 22). Nevertheless, the inclination to sin can be set in motion (v 6) and Paul again points out the two ways the Christian can live in his daily experience (see chart 5-4).

12 So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, *to live* according to the flesh — 13 or if *you are living* according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, *you will live* (Rom 8:12-13, italics added).

Experiencing a temporal death is the consequence of living “with respect to the flesh,” while abundant life is the result of living “by [in/with] the Spirit.” Comparing Romans 8:4, which used the prepositional phrase “with respect to the flesh,” and Galatians 5:16, which used the word form translated “by [in/with] the Spirit,” Paul here confirms that



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both expressions are equivalent and interchangeable. In fact, “living” and “walking” are likewise synonymous expressions. Notice that living in or with the Spirit involves “putting to death the deeds of the body” (Rom 8:13), which corresponds to “do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness” (6:13a). Quit doing what is displeasing to God. Rather, “present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God” (6:13b). Christian living is the result of decisions based on one of two mindsets. One leads to the experience of temporal death, the other to abundant living.

Unless you have a prior agenda, the special empowerment of the Spirit to live the Christian life is *not* found in Romans 5–8. Really living is comprised of choices as you walk with respect to the Spirit through the Word.

Supporting Texts

Making decisions aligned with God’s Word is the subject of numerous texts throughout the New Testament, particularly in the “put off/put on” texts (Col 3:8-14; Eph 4:22-25; Rom 13:12-14).

Colossians 3:8-14

In Colossians 3:8-14, Paul taught what right living looked like in light of the believer’s position in Christ. In verses 1-2, Paul tells his readers to “set your minds on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.” Sounds like an echo of Romans 6 and 8. The appeal was for a spiritual mindset, rather than an earthly one. Remember that mindsets impact choices and actions.

Paul discusses how that is worked out in Colossians 3:8-14. He provides a list of six behaviors that Christians are to steer clear of: anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive speech, and do not lie (vv 8-9a). This conduct that should be avoided is representative, not an exhaustive list of the don’ts in the life of the believer. He commands them to “put off” this type of conduct. On the other hand, Paul commands those to whom he wrote to “put on” behavior that reflected a walk with Christ. Again he provided a selection of nine illustrative actions and attitudes: heart

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of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with one another, forgiving each other, forgiving, and love (vv 12b-14a).

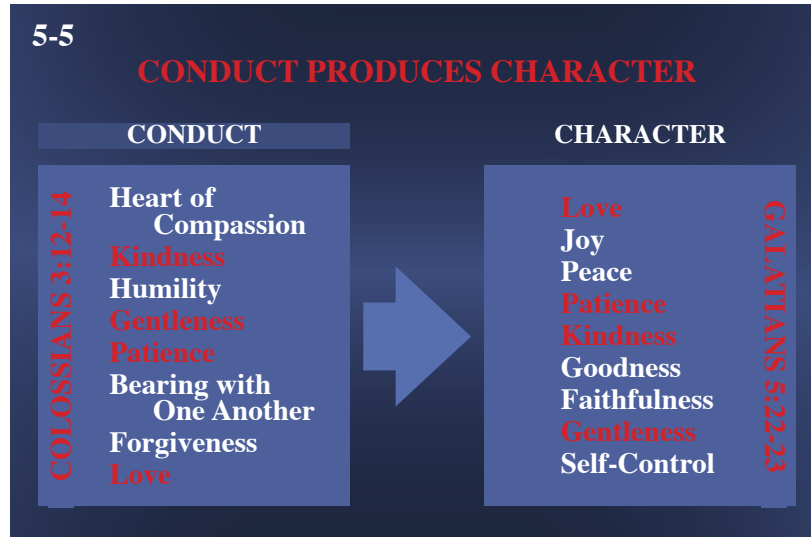
Prior to conversion a person had only one choice—to live according to his own conscience (Rom 2:14-15). Following salvation, the Christian has the ability to choose between pleasing God and pleasing self. Paul set forth the basis for the believer's new options in Colossians 3:9b-10. "*You laid aside* [put off] the old self...and *have put on* the new self." Strait from Romans 6:6. The old person you were before regeneration was crucified with Christ. That person is gone. Rather the believer is now a new person. Yet, the propensity to sin remains. While the believer "might walk in newness of life" (v 4), it is his choice whether he "puts on" the dos or "puts off" the don'ts. Commands are not suggestions; rather they are to be obeyed. However, commands can be dismissed and ignored rather than heeded. Those are the two alternatives set before Christians then and today.

It is interesting when you direct your attention to a comparison between the lists in Colossians 3 and the lists in Galatians 5. While Colossians 3 concerned "dos" and "don'ts" for which the Christian is responsible, Galatians 5 referred to the "fruit of the Spirit" and the "deeds of the flesh" which are evident by the believer's walk, with respect to the Spirit or with respect to the flesh. Notice in chart 5-5 that four of the items (love, patience, kindness, and gentleness) that should be a visual evidence of Christian character (Gal 5) are, in fact, conduct that the Christian is commanded to "put on" (Col 3). These two representative lists with synonymous terminology indicate that it is the "fruit of choices" or conduct that produce the "fruit of the Spirit" or character. The "victorious" Christian life is not guaranteed or spontaneously produced by the Spirit,¹⁷ rather it is intentionally and purposefully lived by choices that are pleasing to God. Your decisions lead to conduct that becomes character.

Ephesians 4:22-25 and Romans 13:12-14

Paul also addresses the same "put-on/put-off" theme in Ephesians 4:22-25 and Romans 13:12-14. In each case, Christian behavior is based on the new position in Christ. Conduct "should" give evidence to this new status. Nevertheless, a new position does

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not necessarily equate with good choices. This is exactly why Paul commands them to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh” (Rom 13:14). Echoing, “walk with respect to the Spirit and not with respect to the flesh” (Rom 8 and Gal 5), the believer is to harmonize his choices and actions with respect to God’s Word as guided and influenced with respect to the Spirit.

Supplement **Behavior, the Product of Choices**

In Galatians 5:19-23 Paul discussed the distinct outcomes from different decisions.

Now the *deeds of the flesh* are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have

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forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (vv 19-21, italics added).

But the *fruit of the Spirit* is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law (vv 22-23, italics added).

Each of these two lists describes the behavior of those who walk either according to the flesh (vv 19-21) or the Spirit (vv 22-23). Much has been made of both lists. They have been dissected, subdivided, and classified in multiple ways. However, the lists are a representative sampling of the behavior of those who walk in one manner or the other. Those who walk in the sphere of the flesh reveal one lifestyle while those who walk in the sphere of the Spirit demonstrate a different lifestyle. These contradictory ways of living correspond to the possible, and yes, contradictory choices the believer can make.

Four items are of interest. *First*, some have made much of the comparison between “deeds” (v. 19) that are in the plural form, while “fruit” (v 22) is singular. In the singular, fruit supposedly indicates that the believer will manifest all the character traits of the Spirit simultaneously, at least to some extent. However, more likely this is the use of a collective noun in a singular form to indicate a group or unit. Therefore a distinction based on the singular-versus-plural form is questionable.

Second, some indicate the different words used (“deeds” and “fruit”) spotlight the means by which both are accomplished. Character traits produced by the Spirit are compared to the deeds of the flesh. Fruit (*karpōs*) is assumed to be produced by the Spirit’s power through the believer, while deeds (*ergon*) are the behavior resulting from one’s own abilities apart from God. The distinction is between deeds or works that men do and fruit that God produces. However, “fruit” and “deed” can be used

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interchangeably. When addressing repentance, Luke used these two words—“bear *fruits* (*karpos*) in keeping with repentance” (Luke 3:8) compared to “performing *deeds* (*ergon*) appropriate to repentance” (Acts 26:20). A distinction based merely on the use of “deeds” and “fruit” lacks support.

Third, the context of Galatians 5:16-26 concerns two influences that are in competition for the believer, influences that ultimately affect one’s behavior. Walking and living *according to the flesh* or *according to the Spirit* is also addressed in Romans 8:4-5 and 8:12-13. To walk by the flesh concerns the believer’s decision to allow his capacity to sin to influence his behavior. Paul’s concern is that believers choose not to be governed by the flesh: “Do not turn our freedom into an opportunity for the flesh” (Gal 5:13). On the other hand, to walk by the Spirit concerns the believer allowing the Spirit to influence his behavior. Believers have been given freedom in Christ (Rom 6:1-10), but believers are free to choose to be slaves to righteousness or to sin (Rom 6:11-23). Freedom came with a cost on Christ’s part: once free we can choose to be influenced either by the flesh or by the Spirit. This then is the conflict each believer faces—the Choice! Paul explains the dilemma, “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another” (Gal 5:17). Rather than addressing a “spontaneous quality of life” produced by the Spirit and based on the “passivity” of the believer, these texts concern the active involvement of the believer in choosing and living obediently or disobediently.

The representative lists of behavior are the *fourth* item of interest. In particular four of the nine virtues in the fruit-of-the-Spirit list (love, patience, kindness, and gentleness) are identical to four of the eight virtues believers are commanded to “put on” in Colossians 3:12-

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14. Believers are commanded to “put on” a way of life and live in a godly manner and “put off” another lifestyle, living according to the flesh. The point of Colossians 3 is behavior because the believer now has a new position in Christ. The believer’s new position should lead to godly living. When Colossians 3 and Galatians 5 are placed side by side, it is evident that the believer’s fruit of choices (Col 3) is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5). Of course, if you hold the view that the Spirit empowers the believer to live, producing godly behavior, then the fruit of the Spirit would of necessity be understood as the Spirit’s spontaneous work. The Spirit’s conduct demonstrated and the Spirit’s fruit revealed. This concept, however, lacks biblical support and imposes an interpretive agenda. Rather, the passages in Galatians and Romans address believers actually choosing to obey or disobey God’s Word. The result of disobedience shows up as deeds of the flesh, while obedience manifests the fruit of the Spirit.¹⁸

Potential Not Power

Christians must decide if they are going to “put off” certain behavior and “put on” conduct and attitudes that conform to God’s Word. This is the essence of following Christ in discipleship. It is certainly Paul’s appeal in Romans 8. Have a mindset that matches with the Word as the Spirit leads so that the believer’s walk reflects the Spirit’s way of thinking. Rather than experiencing a living death, a loss of fellowship, companionship with Christ and enriched living will be the result.

The context of each passage above cries out for the Christian to choose wisely and respond appropriately. Choice, not empowerment by the Spirit, is the central issue in the Christian’s walk.