

“A Broader Calling than Being Agin’ Wicked Wiles”

Galatians 5:1, 13–25

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

June 29, 2025

There is a scene in the Disney film “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” in which two dwarfs are talking about who Snow White is because one of them has not met her yet. Having heard a comment praising her, Grumpy says, “Angel, ha! She's a female! And all females is poison! They're full of wicked wiles!” Bashful replies, “What are wicked wiles?” to which Grumpy says, “I don't know, but I'm agin' 'em.”

The line fits Grumpy’s character, but it also describes the way many people view Christian faith, and to be honest, it does seem to fit the faith outlook of some who are defined by a spirit of against-ness. As the old southern ditty says, “Don’t drink, smoke, or chew, or go with those who do.” Don’t, don’t, don’t... we may not know what it is or why it is considered categorically bad, but we’re agin’ it.

The irony, of course, or to be more precise, one irony, is that those who have a history of being against certain things that can be unhealthy or destructive inevitably are not against other things that are clearly evil, at least not in their daily lives, things like racism, infidelity, dishonesty, greed, excessive pride. And this inconsistency, this hypocrisy, is what critics of our faith detest most. It is a detriment to Christian witness.

But the bigger issue here is that Christian faith is about much more than what we are against. We are certainly against things that are destructive, unhealthy, or unjust, but we are also for many good things, and in the end, our faith is about more than dos and don’ts, it’s about things like grace and love. Our reading today from Galatians underscores all of this. It names some things to oppose and some to embrace while underscoring the centrality of grace and love.

The very beginning of the text asserts that we are against slavery in any form. “For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul says, “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” The initial

concern here is with spiritual freedom, that we live not as slaves to the law, as in the ancient tradition of commandments presumed to come from God, but as those who have been set free from this form of bondage by the grace of God revealed in Christ.

But over time the church has become equally opposed to human slavery, the defining sin of this nation which has enduring consequences to this day. And we, as in Baptists especially, are opposed to political oppression or tyranny as well. As someone has said, freedom from bishops and freedom from kings are heads and tails of the same coin. Many in this land who sought freedom from the crown also sought freedom from a state church. It's why there is language prohibiting any establishment of religion in the First Amendment to our constitution.

And yet, freedom of any kind is not easily obtained nor is it perpetually secure. This is why Paul says, "Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." It is possible to give up our freedom in Christ. Human slaves once freed have sometimes been taken back as slaves, and there are vestiges of slavery in some employment practices. And threats to our political freedom arise in every generation, certainly this one. If we want to take a stand against something as Christians, slavery is a good place to start.

But the text goes on to say that we should not gratify the desires of the flesh which are opposed to what the Spirit desires. On the surface, this may seem to draw a clear line between the physical and the spiritual, calling us to be against the former and for the latter. Many Christians have assumed this over the years. In Gospel era hymns, there are many references to the physical, to the flesh, and to pleasures, and all of them are negative. But all of this is based on misunderstanding.

The contrast is not between the physical and the spiritual, both of which are creations of God, but between God's ways and the ways opposed to God's design. This is what the designations "spirit" and "flesh" imply. Some of the desires to avoid Paul names explicitly are physical, but many are not.

Several physical things to avoid include sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery. Sexuality is not bad or sinful, but in Judeo-Christian tradition, the separation of physical pleasure from other

dimensions of human experience — emotional, psychological, and spiritual — limits the experience and demeans the people involved. While some glorify unrestricted expressions of physical connection, the biblical ideal is of a genuinely caring relationship in which two people are intimately connected on every level of human experience.

Several other physical things involve the abuse of substances — drunkenness, carousing, and similar things. While some glorify a lifestyle of escapism, the biblical ideal is moderation. The point is not to avoid all celebration or label others as miscreants. I had a music colleague in another setting who, when he was playing the piano at a wedding reception, always got a glass of wine or champagne, whether he was going to have any or not. He wanted to make clear the fact that he was not holding his nose in judgment at anyone else.

This is not the point of moderation. The point is to avoid the physical, emotional, and relational devastation that addiction involves. If we have any doubt, we need only read a book like Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* which was co-winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2023. The novel documents social stratification in Appalachia, the indignities of rural poverty, and the devastating effects of addiction, especially opioid addiction. Demon is born into all these realities, watches young people around him suffer and die, and somehow endures, but it is difficult to see anything glamorous about this life.

Yet while Paul names some physical desires to avoid, he also names some spiritual ones like idolatry and sorcery. Few of us are tempted to dwell in magic. Some people think anyone who reads Harry Potter books is in danger of being tempted in this way, but if you read the books, you realize they are about human relationships and the struggle between good and evil. The magic involved is mostly playful.

We don't need to worry much about sorcery, and we may think the same about idolatry, we aren't tempted to bow down and worship physical idols. But idolatry is placing anything before God, treating anything or anyone, even wonderful things and people, as worthy of our highest devotion. This includes a spouse or parent, the nation in which we live, the Bible, even our image of God. They may all be wonderful, they may point us to God in some way, but they are not God.

Paul names physical and spiritual desires to avoid, both of which come under the heading of desires of the flesh, and he names one other set of things we are called to be against, and it is the biggest group of all. These things to avoid are relational — strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy. They all concern the human capacity for hostile division. We will always have differences of opinion, and even Jesus feels anger. What we are called to avoid is holding on to anger, refusing to forgive and reconcile, ending relationships because of differences. Paul says doing these things is not part of God's realm.

Writing in the commentary *Feasting on the Word* (Year C, Volume 3, p. 189), Baptist pastor Carol E. Holtz-Martin tells a story about a time a member of her congregation carelessly hurt the feelings of another member. This could have planted the seed of a rift that could never be healed, but the next Sunday she saw the member who had given offense waiting anxiously on the front steps of the church, his choir robe billowing in the morning breeze. When the person offended showed up, he held out his hands to her with words of apology. She forgave him with a brief, warm hug, and they remain friends to this day.

The pastor says she tells this story partly because it is so beautiful but also because it is so rare. We know our calling to love one another and practice forgiveness but often hold on to anger, envy, and strife, and thus deepen divisions. This is the state of our national life right now, and this is how many churches proceed. Paul counsels us to avoid such attitudes and behaviors which are of the flesh, not the Spirit.

But while the reading from Galatians and our faith as a whole call us to be against certain things, they also call us to be for other things. “By contrast,” Paul writes, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”

I always chuckle at this last line. Paul is talking about biblical law. Scripture never prohibits any of these attitudes and actions. But I also think of law in a more general sense. Some people in charge these days might try to make a law against these qualities because they don't exhibit any of them! They provide a stark contrast to love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But Paul says, “Pursue them, this is what our faith is all about!”

We wonder at times what we can do to make a difference in a world controlled by wealth and power without benefit of conscience, a world where meanness is prevalent and honesty is scarce. What can we do? We can pursue love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, in simple ways, trusting that in God’s grace, and with the help of others, we will make a difference.

In the recent issue of the AARP magazine, there is an interesting article about Mom Proms. I realize I risk dating myself by referencing this magazine, though our son Ian, who is thirty-two, is a member of AARP. They dropped the age limit some time ago...

Anyway, the mother of a Michigan Mom, who is a teacher, was cleaning out a closet and found her prom dress. She wore it out and went dancing with eleven friends, and people stopped to take pictures. So, she decided to host a dance and raised \$800 for a homeless shelter. One thing led to another, and she ended up starting a national movement where women host Mom Proms.

You need a license to hold one, though it doesn’t cost anything, but there are requirements. These are for women only. Women carry heavy loads, they need time to enjoy each other’s company. And some money has to be raised to support a charity of the organizer’s choosing. To date, one thousand Mom Proms have been hosted worldwide, and \$7 million dollars has been raised for charity.

These are simple events that got started accidentally, but they express love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We can do something like this. There is no law against such things. In the process, we participate in God’s realm.

The reading from Galatians ends with a reference to crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires and being guided by the Spirit. This sounds extreme, like Jesus’ words in the reading from Luke about letting the dead bury their own dead, but all Paul is saying is to resist unhealthy and unjust things and pursue the good and sacred with all we have. That’s a broader calling than being agin’ wicked wiles, that’s our calling.