

How to Say No to a Stubborn Habit

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The Book of Galatians Series

Galatians 5:16-26

This evening [morning] I want to talk about an issue that has become a billion-dollar growth industry in this country. It is something that is written about in countless self-help books, a subject that is the basis of numerous seminars. It occupies an army of therapists, both Christian and secular. I want to talk about an issue that probably causes you more frustration than almost anything else in your life – and that is how to say “no” to a stubborn habit.

Last week I began this discussion on living free as a Christian. And I want to continue to discuss that issue this morning. Let me repeat some of the remarks I made last week because some of you weren't here and others of you have probably forgotten. Last week we talked about freedom. I said that freedom has become the slogan, the banner, under which virtually every progressive movement has marched, in the last 40 years. Freedom was the banner under which national liberation movements marched as country after country around the world in the 50's, 60's and 70's liberated themselves from colonial domination.

Freedom was the battle cry of the Civil Rights Movement as minorities in this country sought the opportunity to live life free from limits imposed because of race or ethnicity. Minorities in this country said, “We are tired of having our futures determined by our race or our kids denied opportunities to go to the best schools because of their race, or jobs being closed out because of race. We want to be free to be judged in Martin Luther King's words, ‘not by the color of our skin, but the content of our character.’”

Women, also then, began to march under the banner of liberation. We saw the women's liberation movement come into prominence in the 60's and 70's. And then freedom became the watchword of those who advocated abortion rights. They called it reproductive freedom.

Freedom was also picked up by the gay community and we saw the birth of the Gay Rights in the 70's.

But I believe there is no greater freedom that a person can experience than the freedom of the will, the freedom to choose consistently with what you want to choose. And there is no greater slavery, no greater bondage, than being unable to choose what you will to choose. The great slavery is not economic or political or racial or gender-based. The greatest slavery, the greatest bondage is internal bondage, the inability to stop doing something that you want to stop doing. You realize something is harmful, some habit is destructive, and something that you are given to is robbing you of peace or health or happiness in your family or relationships. You clearly see that the path that you are on is destructive and you want to change, but you find that you cannot change, that you are hooked. That the rut that you are in has been rutted out so many times by the power of habit that you keep traveling down the same path, caught between what you know is right to do and what you continually find yourself doing.

The apostle Paul, in the passage that we are going to look at today, describes this terrible tug of war that happens internally, not in the politically realm, this tug of war that is not occurring in the economic realm, but the tug of war that happens inside Christian believers when he says, "So I say live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature [literally, "you will not gratify the desires of the flesh"] for the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit to what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other so that you do not do what you want."

Now, this is the problem. As a result of this tug of war, you find yourself not doing what you want to do. Again, I say to you there is no greater bondage than this – continually feeling pressed upon by the Holy Spirit regarding what is right. Knowing without a doubt that what you are doing is harmful, or destructive, or just simply wrong and immoral and yet continuing to do it.

I don't need to describe all of the various hang-ups and habits that we have. Your particular form of slavery may be different than the person sitting to your right or left. But it is no less discouraging to you. For you it may be a raging temper or a continual sexual indulgence outside the will of God, or an eating disorder, or a drinking problem, or profound envy and competitiveness, or the avoidance of men or certain men or the avoidance of women or certain women. You find you just can't deal with them. Or cigarettes, or bitterness, or overspending or whatever other areas you find yourself being stuck in.

Now, self-destructive, harmful or even immoral habits are bad enough and would on their own cause us great frustration. The great trouble is that bad habits never remain alone. Bad habits are like the flu. You don't just get a stuffy nose. Bad habits bring with them other profound areas of slavery and bondage. One of the other sources of slavery and bondage that normally accompanies any addictive or habitual pattern in a person's life is the feeling of hopelessness. See it would be bad enough to deal with a terrible temper or a drinking problem or a sexual problem. Other problems and other forms of slavery like slavery always compound them to hopelessness. I have never personally struggled with a habit repeatedly or fallen back repeatedly into the same cycle of sin without having this overwhelming feeling of hopelessness as I just wallow around in remorse and guilt and shame. I think to myself, "It is hopeless. I am helpless. I am never going to change. It is always going to be this way."

I have talked with people who at their low moments have with complete honesty said, "Rich, Christianity just doesn't work for me. I am hopeless. I have been this way for 20 or 40 years and I am never going to change. I can't be the kind of Christian mother or wife or husband or father that I should be." And as a result of these feelings of hopelessness, a person comes to the conclusion that nothing is ever going to change. Maybe Christianity, maybe God, maybe some principles work for other people, but it doesn't work for me. That is a second area of slavery along with hopelessness that people find themselves stuck in. This feeling like maybe I am just different. I am so significantly broken as result of my past or my own screwed up wiring or my inability to believe. I am so significantly different than other people here at the church or other good Christians that I can't break this habit. Other people might be able to live responsibly, other people might be able to live free, other people who are probably a lot more disciplined than me, a lot more committed than me, a lot more full of faith than me,

they can pull off this Christian life and can be liberated from bad habits, but I can't because I am just weak.

Have you ever had any of those feelings? Hopelessness? The sense that you are uniquely defective and that is why you can't live the Christian life with liberty and joy?

And of course, as I told you last week, we are not the only ones on the playing field. There is another team. And so it is not enough for the enemy to tackle us. Once we are down, the whole other team piles on with guilt and shame. Look at you, you big hypocrite. You call yourself a Christian. You can't even overcome this particular problem in your life. You are no Christian. Oh, maybe you will get to heaven by the skin of your teeth, sneaking in the back door, but you might as well stop going to church. In fact, Rich probably doesn't want to see you. Penny Meyer, the Women's Pastor, would be very disappointed in you. If they really knew what you were like, they would hate you.

And so the bombardment of self-accusatory thoughts, the pile on of guilt and shame, despair sneaks up on us. See the enemy never just tackles us. He wants to make sure we stay down. Have you ever seen a football pile up where a guy is tackled and then 21 other huge guys on the team leap on? I have heard on the bottom of those piles, guys are biting and scratching and clawing and cursing, gouging each other in the eyes. They are punching each other through their facemasks. That is what the enemy does to each one of you when you are stuck in a habit that you can't say no to.

Well, today we are going to continue to explore Paul's message of freedom. We are going to see some of the very practical things the apostle Paul says to the person who is not only stuck in a habit, but under the pile up of hopelessness and feel different and guilt and shame. I have called today's message very simply, "How to Say No To a Stubborn Habit." Let's pray.

We are going to be looking at Galatians 5:16-26.

"So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other."

Now in saying "no" to a stubborn habit, we need to remember the context of Galatians 5:16 and following. What is the message that Paul has tried to drum into our brains over and over again? It is a message of grace – that God loves us and accepts us as we are, not as we should be. That God loves us beyond worthiness or unworthiness, beyond my faithfulness or unfaithfulness. He loves you when you are doing well and he loves you when you are doing poorly. He loves you without limits, without boundaries, without ifs ands or buts. He loves you relentlessly no matter what. That is Paul's message of grace no matter what, God loves you. He accepts you.

Do you understand what we have been learning through this whole book of Galatians? That it is not a matter of what you must do or should do or ought to do in order to earn God's love for you. God loves you period.

Now freedom from stubborn habits, I believe, begins with continually clearing up our view of God and understanding our relationship to Almighty God. See there is a reason why the apostle Paul always starts with a clear understanding of God and his grace and then our relationship to God before he discusses with us our behavior. See, Paul understands, and you will see this pattern over and over again, you see it here in this book of Galatians, he talks about our beliefs before he talks about our behavior, he talks about what God has done before he talks about what we should do. You see that same pattern in the book of Romans. He takes eleven chapters to lay the gospel out for us before he says, "Therefore, in light of what I just said, this is how you should live." We see the same pattern in the book of Colossians. He spends three chapters telling us who we are in Christ and what Christ has done, explaining to us the grace of God before he says, "Therefore, this is how you should behave." He does the same thing in the book of Ephesians. Three chapters, getting our position nailed down in Christ, before he tells us how we should live. Paul understands that the starting point in defeating a stubborn habit is getting a clear view of God.

We immediately want to say, "But we want to do something. Give me something practical, Rich."

Paul says that there is nothing more practical than getting in touch with the unconditional acceptance and grace of God. See, until you get a handle on God's grace and love for you, and this is a continual thing – remember this is always fought over. We get it and then we don't get it. It is like a picket fence. It is there and then it is not there. That is the way our view is of the grace of God. But if you don't begin here, then when you fall, you are quickly going to believe that God views you as a dirty rotten, guilty sinner who needs to shape up. That God is sick and tired of dealing with someone like you. That he has just about had all he can of your stupid antics. See, the bondage to hopelessness and this overwhelming guilt that you feel regarding your sin has to deal with how you view God your Father. And I think the safest bet in the world is that someone who is stuck in a stubborn habit, someone who feels like a slave and they can not do what they want to do, inevitably has a defective view of God – inevitably. They think of God relating to them the way their own earthly fathers related to them. What is the matter with you, you are a loser. Can't you do anything right? They think of their relationship with God as being more like an employee working for a very disapproving employer, someone who never says "thank you" someone who never says "good job."

The reason why you are stuck where you are stuck is because you don't begin with a proper view of God. Let me apply this to my own life because God has shown me that there is no problem that I have that wouldn't be significantly healed if I was able to more clearly and more profoundly embrace his love and acceptance of me. I remember struggling this one time with great envy toward another person. I was really eaten up inside as I compared myself to this other person and really was upset by the acclaim this other person was getting and how much people liked this other person. Envy and competitiveness was destroying me. I was stuck. And so I began to pray about my envy and competitiveness and as I did God gave me a very simple picture in my mind's

eye. It was a pie, a very small pie that was hanging in the air as I was praying. As I was looking at that little pie I felt the Spirit of God speak to me and say, "Rich, that is the way you think about my generosity and my provision for you. It is this tiny little bit of pie and you are afraid that if someone else gets a slice of the pie there is not going to be enough for you and that is why you are so envious and so competitive."

And as I was praying and looking at that pie, the pie grew and grew and grew until it was filling the room. And the Lord was saying, "Do you have any idea, Rich, how incredibly generous I am to you? Do you have any idea how much favor is on your life? Never worry about what someone else is getting. There is always going to be enough of the pie for you."

Do you have any problem that wouldn't be helped by a deeper sense of the Father's love for you? Or your position before him as a fully accepted son or daughter? Let me state it in the form of a principle. Our behavior is determined by our beliefs. You can write that down. Your behavior is determined by your beliefs. If you believe that you are a dirty rotten sinner who always screws up and who God is just sick and tired of, you will probably relate like a dirty rotten sinner. But if you begin to believe that you are a beloved child of God no matter what, that God loves you and wants to relate to you, enjoys your company, is not sick of you, then I will lay money on this: your behavior is going to become better and better.

Haven't you watched this principle at work with your own relationship with your children? Sometimes you will battle with your kids and struggling. There is a big tug of war over their behavior. You are getting the response back, "Why should I?" And you start raising your voice and they are raising their voices. And the anger level is heating up. Have you ever been in one of those situations where you have suddenly said, "Look, I don't want to fight any more. I love you. I really want what is best for you." I will tell you what; you are going to see the anger in the room just dial down immediately. It is really hard to keep shooting at someone who has laid down his or her guns and has said, "I love you. I accept you. I want to have a relationship with you. I don't want to fight with you anymore."

Try doing that with your spouse sometime in the middle of an argument. Turn and say, "I love you. You are wonderful. You are the picture of my desires. You are what I am living for. I appreciate you." Talk about defusing the other person.

This is the starting place in terms of your breaking free of stubborn habits – hearing God say to you, "You are my beloved child. I love you and accept you." See; let me underline this truth because I really want you to get this. I believe that we often start in the wrong place and we never get four feet down the road without falling again. If someone comes to me and says, "Rich, I want to get free from this habit, what do I need to do first?" I know they haven't a clue regarding how the Christian life really works. You don't have to do anything first. You don't have to memorize anything. You don't have to engage in discipline. You don't have to fast first. You just need to believe. You need to believe that God is a loving Father whose smile is on your life, who could not accept you anymore than he does right now. Who, when you picture him in your mind's eye, is not frowning, totally disapproving with his arms folded, if you placed your faith in his Son, Jesus, and received his free gift of salvation.

What if you were able to say with real confidence, "I am loved." And you weren't just faking it, but with deep assurance felt "I am loved by God" not because I am performing

well, but because he just loves me. He just thinks I am wonderful. I am accepted by God. I am telling you something; it would change your relationship with God. You would start laying your guns down. You would stop being so hostile to the Lord. You would stop being so angry with God.

The second foundational issue in getting liberated from stubborn habits is to understand what Christ has done for you. God loves you and here is what Christ has done for you. Verse 5, "It is for freedom Christ has set us free." Christ died to set you free, not to make freedom a possibility for you, if you are really disciplined, if you are really diligent, if you could fix all of your brokenness. Christ didn't die to grant the possibility of freedom to the few, the proud, the Marines – the special Saints in our midst who had the privilege of being raised in totally functional, loving homes. Christ died to make you free period! Are you free from stubborn habits?

You say, "No, Rich. No, I am not."

Why aren't you free? It says, "For freedom, Christ has set us free." So why aren't you free? Remember I said your beliefs determine your behavior? Many of us are trying to accomplish what Christ has already accomplished.

The popular speaker Zig Ziegler relates an incident from Harry Houdini's life that I think shows real clearly how a wrong perspective can keep us from freedom. He tells the story about how Harry Houdini, the famous escape artist, used to go around issuing challenges wherever he went. He said whenever he came to a new town to the sheriff, "Lock me up in the local jail. I can escape from any jail anywhere in the country." Well, this one time he was locked up in this jail and something went wrong. After the jail doors clanged shut in back of him, he took out from his belt this concealed piece of metal. He had this little device, a lock pick, and he gets to work on the jail door lock and found that he couldn't pick it. He worked for 30 minutes and couldn't open it. He worked for an hour, two hours, and began sweating. It was really hot in the jail. After two hours of working and wrestling, he just collapsed against the jail door in frustration. When he fell against the door, the door swung open. It had never been locked at all. In his mind the jail door was locked and he had to exert all of his strength and all of his effort to get out. But actually the jail door was unlocked and he just needed to walk out.

This is a very foundational issue for addicts, for Christians who are stuck. What is your position if you are a Christian? Listen to me; this is a real important issue. Are you now in a locked jail trying to come up with the key that will open the door or as a result of the death of Christ are all the jail cell doors open so you can walk out with him? The apostle Paul says in the clearest possible terms, "It was for freedom that Christ has set you free." It is the aorist tense in the Greek. It is a past tense, accomplished at one point in time at the cross. The cross broke open jail door cells. The cross broke people free from addictions. The cross liberates people from stubborn habits. The cross didn't just open the possibility of some future freedom. The cross accomplished freedom now. Beliefs determine behavior.

Watchman Nee, the great Chinese Christian pastor, said that is a great thing to see that we are in Christ and therefore we are free. Think of the bewilderment of trying to get into a room in which you already are. Think of the absurdity of being asked to be put in. If we recognize that we are put in, we shall make no effort to enter.

You are loved by God. You are accepted by God. And if you are in Christ because of your faith union with him, you are free.

You say, "I don't feel free."

Well, I understand that you don't feel free. In large measure it is because you don't believe that you are free that you are not free. And remember I told you that this issue of freedom is a fight. There is another enemy on the field always wanting to rob you of the truth of your freedom in Christ, constantly lying to you.

During the Civil War many slave masters hid the fact of the Emancipation Proclamation from their slaves. They didn't allow the Emancipation to be published in Southern towns. They hid Lincoln's words from the slaves working in their fields. At the penalty of death, they forbid anyone from sharing with the slaves that they were free. And whenever a slave got the word through the grapevine that they were free and began spreading it around, that slave was severely punished and the owners even hired other slaves to argue with them and tell them that they weren't free, that it was just a rumor.

Brothers and sisters, when you begin to explore the dimensions of your freedom, you will be astounded, because you know that God just doesn't want you to be free from the particular habit that you are bothered by. Freedom is something that God wants to bring into every dimension of your life. For example, God wants you to be free from the pain of your past. So many of us have locked up behind closet doors buried memories of abuse, neglect, and abandonment. I read the story of one alcoholic who said that his dad was a raging alcoholic, constantly angry, constantly saying to him that he couldn't do anything right. One day when he was 11 years old he saw that a tree had fallen in his back yard. He said that he spent the entire day cutting up the tree and chopping it up and stacking the wood next to his house. He said to himself, "You know, if I do this my dad is really going to be proud of me." He spent nine hours working and laboring and stacking the wood. When his dad came home he flew into a rage. Who stacked this wood here? The son said, "Well, I did." Dad said, "You are so stupid, can't you do anything right? Don't you know that wood like this will have termites in it? You put it next to the house, you idiot."

Do you know the kind of freedom that God wants to bring into your life? It is freedom to face the pain of the past and spread it before God so that you don't have to medicate it away. You don't have to run away from the pain of the past. God wants to give you the freedom to not only face the pain of the past, but to forgive people who have caused you pain. I have met people who were afraid to forgive. It seems as if they forgave, then their whole excuse for why they are the way they are would be taken away. If I let this person off the hook, if I let the father I described off the hook, I won't have an excuse for the way I am now.

And not only is the freedom Jesus came to give us a freedom to face the pain of our pasts and the freedom to forgive, but the freedom to presently fail now. In walking out freedom from our habits, it is often the case that we do stumble. I think about a fellow walking in the street that slips and falls into a mud puddle. What would you say to the guy? Just lie there and wait for a car to roll over you. Look at you, you are so dirty and filthy and muddy. You are just a good for nothing. Or would you say, how about I get up and take off those muddy clothes, take a shower? That is what forgiveness in the cross is all about. That when we occasionally do fail, although I will tell you when you get a handle on your freedom you won't fail nearly so often, but when we do fail we don't just lay down and say, "Well now that I have gotten mud on my pants, I might was

well roll around on the muddy grass and throw mud all over my self. I have gone this far, why not go the whole way and get roaring drunk.” If you have a little stumble, get up. Turn to Christ, ask his forgiveness and he will grant it to you. And then keep moving on.

Will self-effort ever allow you to maintain the freedom Christ has won? Paul says no. Verse 18: “When you are dealing with this tug of war, if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law.” He has told us throughout this letter that the law is powerless to set us free. You can by rules and regulations and programs and plans and goals, you can get yourself to abstain from something. That is okay if your only goal is to abstain from the habit. But the freedom that I was talking about is a bigger freedom than just abstaining from cigarette smoking or abstaining from over eating. The law can get you to abstain, but the law cannot set you free inside. It can’t set you free from your past, it can’t make you free to forgive.

And so many folks approach their habits this way. They say, “Well, I haven’t been able to get free by running on this treadmill of performance. But maybe if I sped up the treadmill, I will get free.” The old if something is not working, then double your efforts – get more committed, more disciplined, try harder, run faster on the treadmill. That makes as much sense as if you have a bad investment and you are losing money. Just invest more money. Rules and law just affects our behavioral change, but it won’t set you free.

And self-effort won’t allow you to maintain the freedom Christ has won. The apostle Paul says in verse 24, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature [literally the flesh] with its passions and desires.” The flesh is not only just the sinful nature. That is why I don’t like the NIV translation here when it translates the word Greek word “sarx” into the phrase “sinful nature.” Sarx is literally flesh and it is not just sinning, doing bad stuff, sarx is life lived independently of God.

Listen to me on this. You are not just operating in the flesh when you go out of your way to sin. You are operating in the flesh whenever you try to defeat sin on your own independent of God and the Holy Spirit. You may think to yourself, “I am finally doing something that is really honoring to God, but every time you are relying on your own resource, your own strategizing, your own plans to make yourself free of this particular habit, you are in the flesh. And in the flesh, independent of God you will never live free – at least not free at the level that God wants you to live free, to really have a freed up will. To be free of you’re past, not just the symptoms of your problem, but free at the core. The fact is that the more you lean in by your flesh, the farther you will be from freedom.

AA often talks about coming to the end of yourself, hitting bottom. Some people have to sink all the way down and some people don’t. AA says it just takes what it takes. Some of us have an awful lot of rope before we come to the end of our rope. Some people come to the end of their rope real quickly and they immediately turn to Christ and try to rely on him. But some of us have miles of rope. We can fail and fail and fail and, yet, we have another strategy or self-help book, another program and plan and another memory verse, another goal. We keep believing and believing that we, on our own, can set ourselves free. And then we sink into despair.

The problem is not that we are too weak. The problem is that we are too self-reliant. We are too much in the flesh. We are too independent of God. We don't recognize our weakness enough. And in that place begin to live out freedom that Christ gives.

Let's consider the fourth question. If the law won't enable me to maintain liberty and my own efforts won't enable me to walk out and live in the liberty that Jesus intends for me, what power is available to enable me to live in the liberty that Christ has bought for me?

Paul says throughout this text the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse 16: "So I say live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature." Verse 18: "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." Verse 25: "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." It is living by the Spirit; being led by the Spirit; walking in the Spirit – that is the power source for walking in liberty and freedom.

You say, "Rich, this is all very mystical to me. I don't understand how to live in the Spirit or be led by the Spirit or walk in the Spirit."

Well, let me demystify this. This is not just for those of you who have reached a higher plane of existence. Living in the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, walking in the Spirit is the normal Christian life. You wake up in the morning and you say before God, "Today, God, I cannot live out your will in my own strength. I want to renounce before you today self-dependence, self-reliance. I ask you, God, right now, as my hands are open before you to fill me with the Holy Spirit. Fill me, God. Strengthen me. Live the life of Jesus Christ through me."

You know what living in the Spirit is? It is asking Jesus to live his life through you. There is someone at your job that you just have a horrible time relating to. You just don't like them. They are obnoxious and annoying. They are insensitive and aloof. You just have a horrible time with this particular person. You see them and have all these negative feelings toward them. In that moment, to live in the Spirit means to say, "Jesus, I don't have the strength to love this person, but you love them through me. Be kind through me. With all that you are and all that you have, produce your mercy through me." Living in the Spirit is just asking the Lord Jesus Christ in every situation to live his life through you, not just figuring out what Jesus would do in your situation and try to do that, but literally asking him to fill you and empower you to do his will.

Being led by the Spirit is simply responding to those little inklings you get inside where God is pressing you about a small matter or a big matter. Regarding one of those shame-producing habits, you say to the Lord, "Lord, make me really sensitive to little departures from your will, so that I don't find myself making huge departures from your will. Make me really sensitive to when I am getting on the road and I am beginning to take step by step toward destruction." It might begin with a thought. "It would be really nice to take a drive." But you know in your heart where you are taking the drive. You are going to be driving by the local bar or by the mall. Lord, make me sensitive. You have a problem with lying. Lord, make me sensitive to little inflations or exaggerations of the truth, or little deceptions.

I tell you, as you begin to respond to God's press on your spirit, and he will press, you can immediately correct those habitual exaggerations or habitual deceptions. That wasn't quite right, what I just said. It is really more like this. I didn't get in at 11:00 p.m. last night, it was 12:00. No, I didn't really didn't complete that report yet. I intend to

complete it and I'll have it on your desk by noon, but it is not quite done yet. No the dog didn't eat my essay. I just haven't done it. Can I hand it in tomorrow.

The power source for living in liberty is the Holy Spirit.

Last thing. What is the purpose of this freedom that God has given? What is God's will for your life? Grasping God's purpose for breaking free will enable you to keep walking in freedom. Is all that God wants for you just stopping smoking or partying? There is a list of sinful behaviors of the works of the flesh that Paul has in verses 19-21. The first three are sexual sin, sexual immorality, sexual impurity and debauchery. Those pretty much cover the scope of all sexual sin and not just intercourse outside of marriage. He is talking about your heart, your mind, what you do with your body.

The next two are religious sins: idolatry and witchcraft. Then the next eight are relational sins: hatred, discord, jealousy, and fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions and envy. Isn't it wonderful that the Bible doesn't just center on private little sins that affect only us? But as Paul lists his works of the flesh, the major things that he is concerned about are the harmful things we do in our relationships with each other. So rarely do we confess things like jealousy or selfish ambition or a divisive spirit – I am a very independent person and I don't really like anyone's authority over my life. Paul calls that sin.

And then the last two are sins of partying: drunkenness and orgies and the like. He is obviously not saying that this is an exhaustive list. These are just representations of evidences of living independently of God.

What I appreciate though, is that Paul immediately switches gears from the works of the flesh and talks about what the fruit of the Spirit is: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. In understanding God's will for your life, and we will close with considering this issue, we need to recognize that Christianity is not essentially a negative thing. It is not essentially about just breaking a habit. Christianity is not, essentially, at its core about giving something up, saying no to a bad habit, saying no to a secret pleasure, saying no to partying or some sin. Too often that is the view that non-Christians have of Christianity. And that is why many people say: Why would I want to be a Christian? It is boring. Becoming a Christian is a life sentence in a monastery or federal penitentiary. It is giving up a lot of stuff and living on bread and water – lots of rules and regulations. It is taking all the zip and fun out of your life.

Listen to me on this. The view that Christianity is a negative thing, saying no to a lot of your bad habits is one of the biggest lies that Satan has ever lied to us about. That Christianity is a negative thing is the lie of false legalistic Pharisee-ism that Jesus fought so hard against, that Paul continually fought against in Galatia or Colossae in his letter to the Colossians. But legalistic Christians and legalistic churches have communicated widely the idea that Christianity is essentially a negative thing. It is all about what you are giving up. It is all about not partying, not having sex before marriage and not getting drunk and not sharing juicy gossip, not looking at racy pictures.

There is one reason – listen, this is the truth – there is one reason why you say no to stubborn habits in your life. There is a reason why Christ has set you free already and then by the power of the Spirit enables you to live out your freedom and walk out your freedom. There is one reason why Christ has opened the jail door cell and then empowered you by his Spirit to live free. You choose to say no to a stubborn habit so

that you can say yes to God. See, Christianity is not about to say no to a stubborn habit, it is about your capacity to start choosing to say yes.

C.S. Lewis, in his essay called "The Weight of Glory" said the problem of our desires is not that they are too strong, but that they are too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink, sex, and ambition when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child, who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by an offer of a holiday at the sea, we are too easily pleased.

Christianity is not about the denial of your pleasures; it is not about the satisfaction of your pleasure. It is about saying no and choosing to say no to certain habits so that you can more fully say yes to infinite pleasure. Christians are people who say why go scavenging for some old half eaten McDonald's in a dumpster when you can enjoy the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Think about this. Given a choice about what to eat, a banquet spread in this gorgeous banquet hall, beautiful tapestries on the wall, and great decorations, incredible music playing in the background. There is this banquet table in the banqueting hall – incredible salads and hot bread, the aroma of which is just filling the room, steaks cooked to perfection and prime rib and 2½ pound lobsters, drawn butter – everything that you would want to eat. And desserts that just make you want to cry – chocolate desserts of all kinds that look so good that you just want to put your face in and pies that are screaming, "Eat me." If you saw the enormous banquet, would you say, "Just a second, on the way here I passed by a dumpster and I just want to climb in and see if there are any old moldy french fries thrown in or some sour milk, some rotten old lettuce."

Satan's tactic is to rob us from the reality of the banquet. He lies to us and says that even if a banquet like that existed, you could never enjoy it. God would never want to give you love, joy, peace, patience and kindness in your life. You are too hopeless, too helpless, too much of a mess, too much of a loser. God might want to give the banquet to someone else, but not to you.

Satan's tactic is to say, "You can't eat at the banquet" and then on top of that he tries to make the dumpster look really appealing. Maybe we will get Hollywood to film a series of movies on the incredible pleasure of eating out of a dumpster. And we will get some sexy actors and actresses, really good-looking young people to celebrate dumpster living, just laugh about the fun they are having eating dumpster food. Mocking and making fun of people who go to banquets and how boring they are. Carrying on discussions regarding whether or not the banquet even exists. We will get some really great hip composers to play music celebrating dumpster.

God says, "My will for your life is so much more than just getting you to stop a habit. It is to get you to enjoy love." It is what you have always been looking for. It is what you have always wanted, love. You have never been able to get love from food or destructive relationships. But if you say "no" you can say "yes" to God and get the love you have looked for your whole life. God's will is to give you joy. His goal for your life is not abstinence, it is joy.

Psalm 4 says, "You have filled my heart with greater joy than when the grain and new wine abounds."

Psalm 16 says: "You have made me know the paths of life. You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand."

Psalm 43 says: "Then I will go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight."

Psalm 126 says: "The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy."

John 15:11 says: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete."

There are over 200 verses in the Bible that tell us that God wants to make us exceptionally happy. He is not trying to rip anything off of us. He wants to fill our lives with joy, peace so that we are not agitated. He wants us to be able to know what it feels like to be faithful, to keep our promises, to be kind and good, to have our lives under control.

In Christ he has granted you the power to say no to stubborn habits, but so much more. He desires you to say no so that you can say yes to God and so that you can come to the banquet and be satisfied as a beloved child of God. Christ dies to set you free.

Let's pray.