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WHAT YOU WANT TO DO: AN EXEGESIS OF GALATIANS 5:16-18

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DR. ROBERT CARA
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BY
JON OLIPHANT
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In his epistle to the Christian churches in Galatia, the Apostle Paul adamantly challenges new Christians to hold fast to the gospel he initially proclaimed to them and to live accordingly. Evidently, these young Christians were being challenged by the Judiazers to return to the Jewish customs, specifically circumcision, and to adhere to the Jewish customs generally, in order to be seen as true followers of God.¹ Paul, a firm believer in salvation by faith in Christ alone, had nothing to do with this false teaching. This can be seen by the fact that he skips his usual thanksgiving section in this letter and directly challenges the new Christian's failure to believe the gospel. He says, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Gal 1:6)². All throughout this letter, Paul's words are united in the purpose of undercutting the teaching of the Judiazers by reminding the believers in Galatia of the one true gospel and its implications for their daily lives.³

In order to logically and succinctly refute this false gospel, and simultaneously strengthen the Galatian churches, Paul organizes his letter into three sections: a biographical section (chapters 1-2), a doctrinal section (chapters 3-4) and a practical section (chapters 5-6).⁴ In this final section Paul spends a significant amount of time (5:16-25) describing the conflict between the Spirit and the flesh. Before laying out a long list of vices of the flesh and countering with the famous passage about fruit of the Spirit, Paul details the conflict between flesh and the spirit verses 16-18. In the middle of this section, verse 17, we find a difficult clause to translate and interpret: ἵνα μὴ ἂ ἐὰν θέλητε ταῦτα ποιῆτε. Scholars have debated how to translate the word ἵνα

¹ For a detailed discussion of Paul's opponents and their message see Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC 41 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), lxxviii-c.

² All Scripture quoted is in the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

³ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1957), 63.

⁴ *Ibid*, 65-7.

and what exactly the verb θέλητε refers to. Stated briefly, the three options for interpreting this clause are (1) referring to a willingness to do what the Spirit wants,⁵ (2) a willingness to do what the flesh wants⁶ and (3) a willingness that remains under the control of humans.⁷ This paper argues that this final clause in verse 17 should be understood as a willingness to do what the flesh wants. The word ἵνα should be understood as a purpose conjunction and θέλητε as referring back to what the flesh desires.

To begin, this paper explores the broader context of Gal 5:16-18 in order to provide a better understanding of Paul's message. Second, it analyzes the structure and content of each Greek phrase within this specific passage. Finally, a thorough evaluation of the grammatical, syntactical and theological elements of verse 17 is conducted to demonstrate the position taken.

The Context of Gal 5:16-18

As already noted, Paul wrote the book of Galatians primarily to combat the false teachers, who were bewitching many Christians in Galatia to believe they must follow the Jewish customs and be circumcised.⁸ Most likely these teachers were Jews from Jerusalem or Antioch whose

⁵ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, Luther's Works 27 (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 364-365; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, Calvin's Commentaries 11 trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 163; Herman Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, trans. Henry Zylstra, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), 203-204; Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 210; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Galatians*, NTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 215.

⁶ George S. Duncan, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary Series (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1934), 167-8; Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 394-396; John Brown, *An Exposition of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians*, GSC (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 296-7.

⁷ John M.G. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth: Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1988), 114-19; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black's New Testament Commentary 9 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 299-300; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 245-6; Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, ECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 356; Ernest De Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1921), 301-2; Hans D. Betz, *A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), 279-81; Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 249-251; F.F. Bruce *Commentary on Galatians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 244-5.

⁸ Phillip G. Ryken, *Galatians*, REC (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 8-9.

theology can be summarized by the discussions at the Jerusalem Counsel in Acts 15.⁹

Assumedly, Paul received word about these Judaizers, and the false teaching they were promoting, and wrote this letter to counter their false gospel. He describes it as a “different gospel” (1:6), “a gospel contrary to the one you received” (1:9), a teaching that made them “foolish” (3:1, 3), the “weak and worthless elementary principles of the world” (4:9), the practice of “observing days and months and seasons and years” (4:10), something that makes Christ “of no advantage” (5:2) and coming from a motivation to “make a good showing in the flesh” (6:12). In order to reorient the Galatian Christians back to Christ, Paul reminds them over and over again of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He makes statements like “Christ Jesus raised from the dead” (1:1), “the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins” (1:3-4), “the truth of the gospel” (2:5, 14), “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (3:13), “God sent forth his son...to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (4:4-5), “for freedom Christ has set us free” (5:1) and “but far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:14). Finally, Paul reminds the Christians of Galatia that they received the gospel by faith. He says, “we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16), “I live by faith in the Son of God” (2:20), “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (3:2), “the righteous shall live by faith” (3:11), “in order that we might be justified by faith” (3:24) and “by faith we ourselves wait for the hope of righteousness” (5:5).

A very important concept in the book of Galatians, and pertinent to this study of 5:16-18, is Paul’s teaching on the Spirit. He reminds these Christians that they received the Spirit by faith (3:2) and that God is the giver of the Spirit (3:5). Further in 4:6 he describes the role the Spirit plays in enabling us to cry, “Abba! Father!” Then in the entirety of chapter 5, Paul relies heavily

⁹ Ryken, *Galatians*, 8-9.

on the role the Holy Spirit plays in the process of daily life. While the majority of commentators fail to acknowledge the role of the Spirit in Galatians,¹⁰ thoughtful study of this book must include recognition of the Spirit's involvement in the lives of believers. Moreover, one must not fail to understand that Paul sees the Spirit interconnected in the doctrine (chapters 3-4) and practical (chapters 5-6) sections.¹¹ Clearly, Paul understands and teaches that the Holy Spirit is intricately at work in all believers.

Finally, one must understand the context of chapter 5 to grasp what Paul means in 5:16-18, which is bookended by two sections (1-15 and 19-26) on Christian living. The chapter begins with a discussion of the freedom that is for believers because of Christ's work on the cross (v. 1). This refers to freedom from the law: not that the law has no role in the life of the believer, but that following the law is not the source of salvation like the Judaizers were teaching (2-12). In verses 13-15 Paul challenges the Galatians to not use their freedom as an opportunity for the flesh.¹² Following verses 16-18 is a section on the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. Here Paul lays out what is opposite to godly living and what godly living actually looks like. Interestingly, Paul ends this discussion on living with a reminder of the role the Spirit plays. He says, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit" (5:25). With this context in mind, careful consideration of the structure and meaning of the passage can be achieved.

The Structure and Meaning of Galatians 5:16-18

In order to be able to carefully study the $\text{iv}\alpha$ clause in 17d, one must first analyze the structure and content of the entire passage. The logical progression found in Appendix 1 visually

¹⁰ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 102.

¹¹ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 102.

¹² Longenecker takes this to mean that there were Christians struggling with Libertine tendencies in Galatia. However, there is no certainty that this is the case because this is the only place he warns about the abuse. Instead, one should see Paul's main focus in chapters 3-6 as dealing with the legalism taught by the Judaizers, and that this is only a short caveat on the abuse of freedom. So Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 394-5.

portrays the flow in Paul's thought. Paul begins this section with a command and a promise. He then provides comments on the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit (17a-c) and lastly closes 17 with the ἵνα clause. The passage ends with a reminder about being lead by the Spirit.

Verse 16

Paul begins this passage with the declaration λέγω δέ: "But I say."¹³ Paul gives an emphatic introduction to this section, which shows a transition in his argument and stands in contrast to verse 15.¹⁴ Whichever approach one takes on connection between these words and the previous verses, one cannot miss the importance Paul gives to what he is about to say.

Following this introduction he says πνεύματι περιπατεῖτε: "walk by the Spirit." The verb περιπατεῖτε is a present imperative, which denotes the call to continue in the way they had started.¹⁵ This verb carries a wide range of meanings from a literal walking around/following someone to a figurative conducting one's life.¹⁶ Here, as in many other places in Paul's writing, περιπατεῖτε carries the figurative sense of living one's life. So the believers are to continue living by the Spirit.¹⁷ This idea stands in contrast to living by the law. Dunn helpfully states, "By speaking of of a 'walk by the Spirit' Paul is deliberately posing an alternative understanding of how the people of God should conduct themselves – not by constant reference to laws and statutes, but by constant reference to the Spirit...."¹⁸

¹³ All translations of the Greek are the author's own.

¹⁴ See Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 393 and Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*, Sacra Pagina Series 9 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 199. Contra Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, ECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 342; Ronald Lutjens, "'You Do Not Do What You Want'" What Does Galatians 5:17 Really Mean?" *Presb* 16 (1990), 110.

¹⁵ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 244-5. Longenecker demonstrates how περιπατεῖτε obtained this sense through the translation of the Hebrew word *halak*. Therefore, the Hebrew essence of the word was one of living by the law.

¹⁶ BDAG, 803.

¹⁷ The majority of commentators rightly agree that Paul refers here to the Holy Spirit and not just grace that God gives us. So... Contra John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, trans. Arthur Golding (Aubobon, NJ: 1995), 736.

¹⁸ Dunn, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 295.

The result of *πνεύματι περιπατεῖτε* will be *καὶ ἐπιθυμίαν σαρκὸς οὐ μὴ τελέσητε*: “and you will certainly not fulfill the cravings of the flesh.” In saying *οὐ μὴ τελέσητε* (*οὐ μὴ* + the aorist subjunctive), Paul uses the strongest form of negation for something in the future.¹⁹ In other words, Paul means that when one walks by the Spirit, there is no way he/she will fulfill the cravings of the flesh.²⁰ This does not mean that believers will never sin, but rather they will find victory over the flesh as they walk by the Spirit.²¹

Verse 17

In verse 17 Paul elaborates on the aforementioned ideas of the flesh and the Spirit. He says in 17a-b *ἡ γὰρ σὰρξ ἐπιθυμεῖ κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα κατὰ τῆς σαρκός*: “For the flesh craves against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh.” Paul gives the reason why it is so necessary for believers to walk by Spirit: there is a conflict between the Spirit and the flesh.²² Paul uses the postpositive conjunction *γὰρ* here to explain the nature of this conflict between the Spirit and the flesh. He says the flesh craves or lusts²³ against the Spirit. Interestingly, Paul does not say the Spirit *ἐπιθυμεῖ* against the flesh but rather is simply against the flesh. This makes sense within an orthodox understanding of the divinity of the Holy Spirit and His inability to crave in a sinful way. Rather, the Spirit simply desires against the flesh.

¹⁹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 468.

²⁰ Some mistakenly translate this as another command: “do not gratify the flesh (RSV).” However, this should be rejected. So Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 111; Witherington, *Grace in Galatians*, 393; Bruce, *Galatians*, 243, Schreiner, *Galatians*, 343.

²¹ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 343.

²² It is not immediately clear what Paul means by the term *σὰρξ*. So NIDNTTE, 255-8 provides an excellent discussion on the various uses of *σὰρξ* in Pauline literature. Silva takes its use here to involve more than just evil. He says, “In fact, *σὰρξ* can function almost as shorthand for the present evil world and for human existence apart from God, both of which have a drive that is opposed to God. The flesh not only serves as an occasion for sin but also becomes entangled in it.

²³ BDAG, 371-2. This strong desire to do something is often used in a negative sense: hence crave/lust.

Paul further qualifies this flesh/Spirit conflict by stating ταῦτα γὰρ²⁴ ἀλλήλοις ἀντίκειται: “For these things are against one another.” While it is possible γὰρ is causal (because these things are against one another), it is more likely used as a marker of clarification (so we see these things are against one another).²⁵ Ταῦτα most clearly refers to both the flesh and the Spirit and how they are against one another.²⁶ While this conflict is real and important in the lives of each Christian, one should not make the mistake of thinking this conflict means the flesh and the Spirit are gridlocked with no way forward.²⁷

Paul finishes verse 17 with the most difficult to interpret and most debated part of the whole passage. He says ἵνα μὴ ἂ ἐὰν θέλητε ταῦτα ποιῆτε: “in order that whatever you might want, these things you are not doing.” Given that the remainder of the paper seeks to interpret this clause, a detailed exegetical study will be done in the next section.

Verse 18

Paul concludes this passage with a reminder about the necessity of the Spirit and a promise regarding the outcome of His work in a believer’s life. He says εἰ δὲ πνεύματι ἄγεσθε: “And if you are led by the Spirit...” Here the δὲ should not be understood as adversative (but), but rather as a simple connecting conjunction.²⁸ With this understanding, Paul is continuing his thought process from verse 17. He provides a conditional statement about submitting to the Spirit.²⁹ Therefore, this conditional element to this sentence invites believers to fulfill the

²⁴ There is a minor textual variant found in the manuscripts. κ* B D* F G 33 lat all have γὰρ whereas κ² A C D² Ψ have δὲ. While γὰρ seems to be the original word, δὲ would not chance the sense of Paul’s elaboration on the mutual opposition between the flesh and the Spirit.

²⁵ Moo, *Galatians*, 354; BDAG, 189.

²⁶ J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul’s Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925), 276. Machen says, “The contrast between ‘flesh’ and ‘Spirit’ therefore is...a contrast between human nature, of which sin has taken possession, and the Spirit of God.”

²⁷ Contra Longenecker, *Galatians*, 245-6.

²⁸ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 246. Contra Schreiner, *Galatians*, 345.

²⁹ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 345. Contra Longenecker, *Galatians*, 246.

proposed statement. This fits with Paul's discussion of a battle between the flesh and the Spirit and the need for Christians to be active in this fight (cf. Phil 2:12).

Paul's use of πνεύματι ἄγεσθε should not be overlooked. He uses the present passive to indicate that believers must submit to the leading of the Spirit. While this idea of being "led by the Spirit" is mostly synonymous with "walking by the Spirit," one must recognize Paul's emphasis on the primacy of the work of the Spirit.³⁰ Christians do not simply tack on the Spirit's work to their efforts, but rather submit to, and act in accord with, His leading.

What is the result of being led by the Spirit? Paul says οὐκ ἐστὲ ὑπὸ νόμον: "you are not under law." Debate surrounds the exact meaning this statement. Some commentators take this to mean that the believer no longer has a need for the law because of the Spirit's guiding.³¹ However, this is not likely because elsewhere Paul refers to the law functioning in a manner to bridle sin. Rather, Paul is making a redemptive-historical statement regarding the blessings of the new covenant. Whereas, being under the law meant being under sin in some senses, being led by the Spirit means that believers are under grace (cf. Rom 6:14-15). However, if the Galatians followed the message of the Judaizers, they would have brought back the power of sin.³² Therefore, the blessings of following the Spirit are of immense importance in the believer's life.

³⁰ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 222. Ridderbos says, "In all these varied phrases the same thought is given expression again and again: that believers have been taken up into the new life-context of Christ, in which the Spirit rules... a life that consists in being disposed toward, letting oneself be led by, and walking by the Spirit."

³¹ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 247; Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 110.

³² Schreiner, *Galatians*, 345-6.

A Defense of Θέλητε Referring to the Desires of the Flesh

As noted at the beginning of the paper, scholars disagree on the meaning of the ἵνα clause and specifically to which idea θέλητε refers. Traditionally,³³ there are three interpretations of this clause that are noted by scholars.³⁴ Before one can fully understand these three interpretations and their strengths/weaknesses, one must grasp the grammatical and syntactical nuances of the entire clause (ἵνα μὴ ἂ ἐὰν θέλητε ταῦτα ποιῆτε).

The conjunction ἵνα + the subjunctive (θέλητε) often indicates purpose, but can occasionally demonstrate result.³⁵ If ἵνα is taken as purpose, it should be translated as “in order that.” Conversely, if ἵνα is taken as result, it should be translated as “so that” or “with the result that.” Syntax alone is not sufficient to determine the use here in verse 17, which means context must be used. The relative pronoun ἂ is the object of θέλητε and ταῦτα should be understood as referring to this pronoun and is the object of the verb ποιῆτε.³⁶ The verb θέλητε in the subjunctive should be translated as want or desire. Therefore, ἂ ἐὰν θέλητε generates the sense of whatever you want/desire. Ταῦτα is a demonstrative pronoun that is accusative, neuter plural and can be translated “these things.” As a result, grammatically, it can refer to the things the Spirit desires, the things the flesh desires, or the desires of both. Finally, ποιῆτε is a present, active subjunctive verb that refers to the acting out of the desires just mentioned. Clearly, the grammar of this clause is complicated and requires thoughtful consideration.

With this functional understanding of the syntax the two alternative perspectives can be explored. Some commentators take ἂ θέλητε to refer to desires that the Spirit wants and ἵνα would be ecbatic. Under this view, the flesh would be the subject of the ἵνα clause. A working

³³ Schreiner outlines 6 different views before offering his own. So Schreiner, *Galatians*, 344-5. Yet these views are either simply subdivisions of the main categories, or are obscure ideas that are not generally respected.

³⁴ So Moo, *Galatians*, 354-6; Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 112-15; Lutjens, ““You Do Not Do...,”” 104-7. These three provide helpful summaries of the three positions.

³⁵ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 471-2.

³⁶ Moo, *Galatians*, 354.

translation would be, “The flesh works...with the result that what the Spirit wants, you are not doing.” In order to find support for this view, proponents often turn to Romans 7:14-15.³⁷ This argument states that Paul uses very similar wording in Romans 7:15 (ὁ θέλω) in reference to the things he does not do. Moreover, this argument claims this understanding is the most natural reading of the text and prevents one from performing exegetical gymnastics to solve the problem.³⁸ Finally, this view unites Paul’s words here in 17d with an adversative understanding of verse 18 (“But if you are lead by the Spirit...”).³⁹

Other commentators, including the majority of modern scholars, take ἃ θέλητε to refer to both what the believer desires according to the flesh and what he/she desires according to the Spirit.⁴⁰ In regards to the nature of ἵνα, commentators disagree.⁴¹ As a result the verse could read, “The flesh and the Spirit are against one another and the result/the purpose of this struggle is that you cannot do what you desire.” This view takes the ἵνα clause as subordinate to ταῦτα γὰρ ἀλλήλοις ἀντίκειται: a seemingly logical assumption based on proximity. This view emphasizes the controlling powers of the flesh and the Spirit at work in a believer, which lead to the believer losing his/her autonomy.⁴² Therefore, when a Christian wants to do something good, the flesh is right there fighting against him/her. Similarly, when the Christian wants to do something bad, the Spirit is right there to intervene. In other words, the only way for the believer to find victory is to allow the Spirit to take control and fight for him/her.

³⁷ Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 210; Hendriksen, *Galatians*, 215; George, *Galatians*, 386; Ridderbos, *St. Paul’s Epistle*, 204; Calvin, *Galatians*, 163.

³⁸ George, *Galatians*, 386.

³⁹ Hendriksen, *Galatians*, 215.

⁴⁰ Lujens, “You Do Not Do...”, 104-5.

⁴¹ ἵνα of result: Moo, *Galatians*, 356; Bruce, *Galatians*, 245. ἵνα of purpose: Dunn, *Galatians*, 299; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 246; Burton, *Galatians*, 302.

⁴² So Moo, *Galatians*, 356; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 246; Bruce, *Galatians*, 245; Fung, *Galatians*, 251; Dunn, *Galatians*, 299; Burton, *Galatians*, 302.

While each of these ideas offer a thoughtful approach to understanding the complex nature of this verse, they also suffer from multiple weaknesses. First, the view that this passage should be interpreted in light of Romans 7 is not a strong argument. While both passages appear to be talking about the struggles in the life of a believer, the absence of any reference to the Spirit in Romans 7 makes a connection between the two a stretch.⁴³ Moreover, exegetically, it is hard to understand why Paul would use an indefinite statement (ἐὰν θέλητε) to refer to the good actions a believer would want to do.⁴⁴ Finally, this argument fails to do justice to the syntax and grammar. Interestingly, Calvin and Lightfoot make no mention of how the this view fits the structure of the passage and simply assume (with no real explanation) that this has to be the correct interpretation.

Similarly, the other understanding suffers from a couple shortcomings. First, this view claims that Paul means that a believer can literally do nothing he/she wants to do: the Spirit and the flesh are always preventing the person from doing either good or evil. This understanding does not fit with Paul's challenges for believers to do good works (cf. Eph 2:10 and Phil 2:14). Moreover, this view does not seem to fit within the greater context of 16-18. In verse 16 Paul clearly teaches that if one walks by the Spirit, he/she will certainly not fulfill the desires of the flesh. Why we he completely undermine this understanding with 17d?⁴⁵ As a result, it is not likely that this is what Paul originally meant.

Given the inadequacy of the first two interpretations, the final view will be explored and defended. This view, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, takes ἵνα as meaning purpose. Following that rendering, ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε refers to the desires of the flesh and takes the Spirit to be the subject of the entire clause.

⁴³ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 344.

⁴⁴ Moo, *Galatians*, 356.

⁴⁵ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 245.

In order to understand the rationale for this interpretation, the word ἵνα must be explored. According to Wallace, the use of ἵνα + the subjunctive is one of the most common uses of the subjunctive in the NT.⁴⁶ The primary use of the ἵνα + the subjunctive construction in the NT at large is telic.⁴⁷ Specifically, Paul uses this construction as purpose in Rom 1:11, 1 Cor 4:6 and Eph 2:9. On the contrary, Paul allegedly uses ἵνα + the subjunctive to mean result in Rom 11:11, 1 Thess 5:4 and 2 Cor 1:17.⁴⁸ However, upon further examination, this may not be the case.

In the Greek, 1 Thess 5:4 reads, “ὁμεῖς δέ, ἀδελφοί, οὐκ ἐστὲ ἐν σκότει, ἵνα ἡ ἡμέρα ὡμᾶς ὡς κλέπτῃς καταλάβῃ.” This is translated, “But you, brothers, are not in darkness, so that/in order that that day might not surprise you like a thief.” While there is a possibility that the result of their not being in darkness is that they are not surprised, it is probable that they are not in the darkness with the purpose of not being surprised on that day.⁴⁹ Therefore, the ἵνα in this verse is better understood as connoting purpose rather than result.

Similarly, the second half of 2 Cor 1:17 reads, “ἢ ἄ βουλεύομαι κατὰ σάρκα βουλεύομαι, ἵνα ἢ παρ’ ἐμοὶ τὸ Ναὶ ναὶ καὶ τὸ Οὐ οὐ. ” This is translated, “Do I make my plans according to the flesh, so that/in order that I might be ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time?” Again, this passage may refer more to Paul’s purpose of making plans rather than simply the result of his plans. Finally, in Romans 11:11 it says, “Λέγω οὖν, μὴ ἔπταισαν ἵνα πέσωσιν; μὴ γένοιτο.” Here Paul says, “So I ask, did they stumble so that/in order that they might fall?” In the greater context of Paul’s argument, it seems that he is referring to an intentional purpose in

⁴⁶ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 471.

⁴⁷ Cf. Matt 12:10, 19:13; Mark 1:38, 6:8; Luke 9:12; John 1:7, 20:31; Acts 4:17, 16:30; Jas 1:4; 1 John 2:1, 3:8; Rev 2:21, 8:6.

⁴⁸ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 998.

⁴⁹ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of Paul’s Letters to the Thessalonians*, ed. William Young (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005), 181.

stumbling.⁵⁰ Moreover, the ESV translators agree with this interpretation since they translate it as “in order that.”

This study of Paul’s use of ἵνα shows that it almost always is, or at least could be, taken to mean purpose. Given its abundant use with this understanding, the logical result is that ἵνα in Galatians 5:17 should also be taken as denoting purpose. The question then arises, “How does the telic use of ἵνα affect the meaning of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε?”

First, this rules out the first option: that it refers to a willing to do what the Spirit wants. There is no way that Paul, in the context of verses 16-18, would say that the purpose of the flesh is to prevent one from doing what the Spirit desires. While this is true theologically, it does not fit the context. It completely undermines the emphatic promise of 16b: “You will certainly not fulfill the desires of the flesh.” The second option, that ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε refers to both the willing of the Spirit and of the flesh, is not completely ruled out. However, a ἵνα of result would fit much nicer. It would make more sense for Paul to mean that the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit results, rather than purposes, in you not doing what you wish.

The phrase ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε, as noted early, is taken to be referring to the sinful desires that the Spirit prevents the believer from doing. In order to understand why this is the case, one must hold in view verse 16. Paul has just given an emphatic declaration of the ministry of the Spirit in the life of the believer. This statement should remind us that the Spirit and the flesh are not fighting with equal power.⁵¹ While the flesh is a real enemy with power that should not be underestimated, Paul does not see the two as equally powerful. In Ephesians 6:10-20 Paul describes the enemies of the believer and calls him/her to put on the whole armor of God. Here Paul recognizes the seriousness of the struggle, yet says, “Therefore take up the whole armor of

⁵⁰ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. 2*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 554.

⁵¹ Duncan, *Galatians*, 167; Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 394.

God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.” (Eph 6:13). Clearly Paul has confidence in the power of the armor and the Spirit of God to enable believers to find victory.

Admittedly, Gal 5:17 teaches that there is conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. The two are opposed to one another. Yet just because Paul talks about each one with similar amounts of words does not mean that each one has the same amount of power. Rather, Paul tells the Galatians that the two are fighting; yet the Spirit works in such a way as to restrain the flesh from doing the things it wants to do.⁵²

This understanding fits with a non-adversative translation of $\delta\epsilon$ in verse 18. Paul reinforces the victory that comes from the Spirit by stating that if the believer is led by the Spirit, he/she will not be under the law.⁵³ Therefore, the whole context of 16-18 teaches that walking by the Spirit leads to victory over the flesh, albeit not in every instance, but rather ultimately and more and more every day.

Moreover, this makes sense of the list of the works of the flesh Paul mentions in verses 19-21. In this text, Paul lists off 15 actions of the flesh that are to be avoided. As a result, it fits that Paul says $\tilde{\alpha}\ \epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu\ \theta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\eta\tau\epsilon$ in reference to the things of the flesh. “Whatever you want” has a much stronger correlation to the desires of the flesh than the desires of the Spirit.

Finally, this understanding of $\tilde{\alpha}\ \epsilon\acute{\alpha}\nu\ \theta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\eta\tau\epsilon$ fits the context of Paul’s entire letter to the churches in Galatia. One must remember that Paul is writing to encourage them to forsake the teaching of the Judaizers who wanted them to return to the Mosaic Law. Witherington notes that because Paul’s entire letter reflects a challenge to this legalistic tendency, verses 16-18 are

⁵² Duncan, *Galatians*, 168; Brown, *Galatians*, 297.

⁵³ TDNT, 52.

reminding them they cannot have it both ways.⁵⁴ As a result, Paul’s statement about “whatever you want” really challenges the Galatian believers to see their sinful desires for what they really are and recognize the freedom that comes from following the Spirit.

Given that many scholars disagree with this position, objections are often raised. Schreiner challenges that this view diminishes the role of the flesh in verse 17.⁵⁵ While it is clear that this view takes the role of the Spirit as superior to the role of the flesh, it does not diminish the role of the flesh. Admittedly, the flesh is at work, just not at the same level, or with the same success, as the Spirit.⁵⁶ Moreover, just because Paul gives similar word count to each idea does not definitively mean both should be the subjects of the clause. On a similar note, it is helpful to note that Paul states ἡ γὰρ σὰρξ ἐπιθυμεῖ κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος, τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα κατὰ τῆς σαρκός. Notice that it is not an exact match in wording. Paul says the flesh craves against the flesh and the flesh is against the Spirit. While Paul’s reasoning for leaving out ἐπιθυμεῖ in reference to the Spirit is unclear, perhaps it shows he does not see them working in equal but opposite manners.

Conclusion

Galatians 5:17 is not an easy passage to understand. Moreover, difficulty arises because none of the proposed interpretations of the ἵνα clause are heretical, nor are they clearly supported by other passages. However, given the context of 16-18, and in light of the entire book of Galatians it is apparent the Paul refers to the Spirit’s work in preventing believers from doing the evil desires they want. As a result, the Christian can find great hope in knowing the power of the Spirit at work in him/her to provide victory over the power of the flesh.

⁵⁴ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 395.

⁵⁵ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 344. Moo raises a similar objection. He says, “The major problem is why, granted the precisely equal attention that Paul has given to the flesh and the Spirit earlier in the verse, the implied subject of the last clause should be the Spirit.” Moo, *Galatians*, 356.

⁵⁶ Duncan, *Galatians*, 168.

Appendix 1

Logical Progression of Galatians 5:16-18

- ¹⁶ Λέγω δέ,
πνεύματι περιπατεῖτε
καὶ ἐπιθυμίαν σαρκὸς οὐ μὴ τελέσητε.
- ^{17a} ἢ γὰρ σὰρξ ἐπιθυμεῖ κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος,
^{17b} τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα κατὰ τῆς σαρκός,
- ^{17c} ταῦτα γὰρ ἀλλήλοις ἀντίκειται,
^{17d} ἵνα μὴ ἂ ἐὰν θέλητε ταῦτα ποιῆτε.
- ¹⁸ εἰ δὲ πνεύματι ἄγεσθε,
οὐκ ἐστὲ ὑπὸ νόμον.