

A STUDY IN GALATIANS
Part 18 – “The Life of the Christian – Walking by the Spirit”
Galatians 5:16-18

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TAKE YOUR BIBLES, PLEASE...

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (Galatians 5:16-18 ESV).

In the first half of chapter 5 the Apostle Paul has represented the Christian life as a life of freedom. In developing this theme he has shown that freedom is at risk on the one hand by legalism and on the other by libertinism. True freedom, as Paul sees it, expresses itself through a life above either of these two extremes.

Of course, our question is simply, “how?” How is such a life possible? How do we find the appropriate balance between law and license? Paul outlines four principles in verses 16-26. Here the Christian life regulated by the Spirit of God. It is a very incisive presentation. Burton writes:

“This is not a middle course between legalism and license, but a highway above them both, a life of freedom from statutes, of faith and love.”

Perhaps I can make this clearer with a simple illustration. If you were to take an empty glass and try to rid it of the air, there are several options. You could try to empty the air with a pump. Of course, that would create a vacuum and likely implode the glass. You could also simply ignore emptying the glass and go on to another “more enjoyable task.” Or, you could take a pitcher of water and fill the glass thus displacing the air with water.

So it is in the Christian life. We don't pump out sin to live victoriously, we pour in the Holy Spirit of God! The Christian life is life in the Spirit. You simply cannot live the kind of life Jesus meant for you to live, the life of abundance, unless you live by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit. The law is powerless to work any change in us since it is external and demanding; but, the Holy Spirit can make the difference since He is internal and personal. It cannot be emphasized too much that Christians are people who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. He dwells within their hearts as the FULL presence of God! Everything we could possibly need is present within us!

There are two specific principles about this we should understand:

First, Living by the Spirit Means Following the Guidance of the Spirit in the Power of the Holy Spirit (v. 16a).

The phrase Paul uses, “But I say,” alerts us that we are about to hear something very important. What follows is the great imperative of the paragraph. The command is to walk by the Spirit.

This command assumes that the Christian has the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life. This is not a command to seek the Spirit, or to pray for the Spirit. Those who would come to you and counsel that you need to seek the coming of the Holy Spirit in your life simply do not understand the truth of Scripture. In the Christian's life the Spirit is present in all of His fullness all of the time! The Apostle Paul therefore counsels us to properly relate to the already indwelling Spirit. He desires that we recognize and relate to the Holy Spirit who is our Wonderful Counselor for the moral struggles of life. He is our divine helper. So the command is to walk in the Spirit. **There are two primary emphases here:**

1. **First, it involves the inner moral guidance of the Holy Spirit (v. 18).** In some translations this verse contains an "if statement." It is not an introduction of doubt or a question of the truth of the statement; rather, it emphasizes it IS the truth. All Christians are led by the Holy Spirit. Being a son of God and being led by the Holy Spirit are synonymous with one another.

This internal guidance of the Spirit works in two distinct ways. First, the Holy Spirit guides us by prompt conviction when we have done something wrong. All of us have known that before in our lives. We just know that we've done something wrong. That feeling deep down involves our intellect and emotions. It is the work of the Holy Spirit telling us we've made a mistake in our walk. *Second, the Holy Spirit works within us to teach us what is right.* The "water replaces the air." He deposits in us a desire to do what is right and pleasing to God and he helps us to understand what it is that pleases the Father.

2. **Second, the Holy Spirit enables us to do what we are called to do. He empowers us. The Holy Spirit is not the path we walk in; He is the one who enables us to walk.** The verbs Paul uses in this verse are both present tense which means it is a continuous action. It is a continuous flow in our lives. The life of the Christian is as much a demonstration of the power of God as the parting of the Red Sea!

A.J. Gordon was visiting with an English friend and preacher as they traveled to Niagara Falls. The Englishman remarked how sad it was to see such great power going to waste as the millions of gallons of water plunged over the falls in its deafening roar. He said, "This is the greatest waste of power in the world." Gordon answered, "No, my friend, the greatest unused power in the world is the Holy Spirit in the lives of the people of God."

Second, Living by the Spirit Is the Way to Overcome the Inner Struggle with the Flesh (v. 16b).

The Apostle Paul does not fail to mention the dark side of the Christian life. Many Christians spend their days trying to deny that there even exists a dark side. However, if we are honest with ourselves, even for a moment, we must acknowledge the struggles we face each day. While I know what is good and pleasing, my head and heart tell me what is right, it is still difficult to do what is right.

Listen again to the apostle: *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.* What does he mean by "the desires of the flesh"? Curtis Vaughn says of this word, "It is not to be understood as a reference to the bodily appetites. The word stands for all the tendencies and impulses which lead to wrong conduct." Actually the term refers to all that a

man is when he is apart from the Holy Spirit. It is human nature in its sinful, unredeemed state. As such it has some strong desires, or lusts. **These desires dominate the life of an unsaved man, and remain in the lives of the Christian. It is more than interesting to determine what these desires are in our lives.** It is a great error to think only of the “carnal” or “sexual” desires. While they can be an expression of this flesh, so can many others. Most of them can be identified by the presence of the word “self.”

- Selfishness is one of those. This is merely the desire for personal gain, at any cost, even the cost of others.
- Self-exaltation is another. This is the desire for the praise of men. Jesus had a great deal to say about this carnal practice. He spoke of the Pharisees who did their duties in front of men for their praise and personal gratification. Jesus further said they had already received all the reward they were due from their good deeds (cf. John 12).
- Self-vindication, or the desire to retaliate when we have been wronged, is a desire of the flesh.
- Self-gratification is yet another. This is the part of the flesh that leads us to come to believe that “if it feels good it must be OK.” Many homes have been destroyed by this principle at work in our lives.

There are many more, of course. However, of this we may be certain: they are all in direct conflict with the desires of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

THE BIG QUESTION IS HOW DOES GOD PREPARE US TO DEAL WITH THIS OLD NATURE?

Some have taught that God proposes to eradicate the old nature. They urge men to seek an experience of sanctification in which the old flesh will be cut out surgically by the Holy Spirit. It has been called the “sweat box” principle. My question for these folks is always, “How’s that workin’ so far?” Others would counsel us to simply suppress the old nature. Oswald Smith tells of a debate between these two groups. As the debate continued, it became evident that both sides were becoming angry. They shouted at one another, calling one another various high brow synonyms for stupid! They obviously had neither eradicated nor suppressed the sin of angry outburst! **Smith stood and finally having been given the floor, said, “Brethren, it is neither eradication nor suppression; it is habitation!”**

So it is habitation. Right alongside the old nature has come the new, the Holy Spirit of God. He does not destroy the old nature, but enables the Christian to overcome by creating a greater desire for good and a greater power to work in your life. He brings a new principle of life. In realizing that it is the living presence of the Holy Spirit that enables us to do what is good and pleasing we can understand two very vital truths.

1. *First, we no longer need deny the presence of the lower nature of our lives.* Just becoming aware of a desire to do something sinful in your life is not inconsistent with being a Christian. In fact, this awareness is a good sign! When you feel that temptation to do wrong and know the wrongness of it, this is a sign of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. There is no sin in the desire unless you delight in it and nurture it. The desire is a part of your old nature that still exists within our lives. Do you see what freedom from guilt this

knowledge brings to your life? Just to feel a desire to do something is NOT the same as doing it.

2. *Second, we are not powerless to do something about the old nature.* Some have erroneously assumed that since the old nature is still there, we are powerless to do anything about it. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even though you may be at the mercy of your flesh, the Holy Spirit who dwells within you is not! Victory over the flesh is possible through Him. Those who have said they just couldn't stop doing something wrong have not understood the power of God living within them. There is nothing impossible for Him. It is the promise of God. There is no excuse for your indulging the flesh. The power to stop is within you.

DO YOU HEAR THE NOTE OF ASSURANCE IN THESE VERSES? Those who are responding to and depending on the Holy Spirit will have inner strength to say "no" to the pulls of the old nature. You can have the victory over that inner desire of the flesh. AND DO YOU HEAR THE NOTE OF WARNING?

Billy Sunday, one of the truly great evangelists of all time, tells the story of a terrible blizzard raging over the eastern part of the United States making more and more difficult the progress of a train that was slowly making its way through the blinding storm. Among the passengers was a woman with a small child. She was very concerned that she might not get off at the right station. A gentleman, seeing her anxiety, said, "Do not worry. I know the road well. I will tell you when you come to your station." In due course the train stopped at the station before the one which the woman wanted. "The next station is yours, ma'am," said the gentleman. Then they went on through the storm. In a few minutes the train stopped again. "This is your station ma'am; get out quickly," he said. The woman took her child, and thanking the man, left the train. At the next stop, the brakeman called out the name of the station where the woman had wanted to get off. "You've already stopped at this station," called the man to the brakeman. "No sir," he replied, "something was wrong with the engine, and we stopped for a few minutes to repair it." "Oh, no!" cried the man, "I put that woman and her child out in the storm when the train stopped between stations." They did go back as quickly as they could, but it was too late. They found the mother with her child huddled together, frozen to death. It was a tragic consequence of following the wrong directions!

THE WARNING IS THIS... BEING LED BY ANYONE OTHER THAN THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL ONLY BRING DESTRUCTION.