

“Walk By the Spirit”

The Eleventh in a Series of Sermons on Galatians

Texts: Galatians 5:16-26; Jeremiah 31:27-37

In face of attacks made upon the gospel by the Judaizers, Paul exhorted the Galatians to stand firm in the freedom won for them by Jesus Christ. Taking up a discussion of the Christian life in the fifth chapter of Galatians, Paul tells his hearers that although they are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, the faith through which they are justified is also a faith that works in love. Paul also says, the Law—obedience to which cannot justify—is fulfilled through obedience to the command to love one another. But the power to fulfill the law is not our own. It must be given to us through the indwelling Holy Spirit, so that we “walk by the Spirit.”

Paul’s critics in Galatia accused him of preaching one gospel of “faith alone” to the Gentiles and another of “faith *plus* circumcision” to the Jews. But if Paul were doing such a thing, why was he being persecuted? The Judaizers have told the Galatians repeatedly that Paul’s doctrine of justification is positively dangerous, since supposedly it leads to license—which is why the Judaizers were snooping around in the Galatian churches spying on Gentile liberty. The Judaizers accused Paul of being an antinomian—slandering the apostle by claiming he had no regard for circumcision, the Law, or the traditions of the fathers. In Galatians 5, Paul must correct a number of the ways in which he and the gospel have been misrepresented. He takes great care in setting out just how it is, since we are justified by grace, alone through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, that we are to live our lives in light of Jesus Christ’s saving work. The life which springs from faith in Jesus is “*walking by the Spirit*.”

In verses 16-18 of Galatians 5, Paul draws a contrast between the Holy Spirit producing the fruit of the Spirit (characteristic of the Christian), with the works brought forth from the flesh (our sinful nature, apart from Christ). Paul describes the Christian’s intense struggle with sin as a war between what we were in Adam and what we are presently in Christ. Paul tells the Galatians they were called by God to be free, but they were not to use this freedom as an excuse to indulge the sinful nature (flesh). Instead they were to use their freedom in Christ to serve one another in love (5:13-15) and not devour each other as wild animals. As is his custom, Paul follows these comments with an imperative [command] in verse 16 (which opens our passage). “*But I say, walk by the Spirit*.” “To walk” is an Old Testament figure of speech descriptive of how one lives one’s life. The one who walks in the Spirit “*will not gratify the desires of the flesh*.” Paul exhorts us to walk by the Spirit as a habit of life because in doing so we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

There is a loud Old Testament echo here. The notion of life in the Spirit was a central blessing of the coming messianic age and the new covenant yet to dawn, and a major theme in the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34 of the new covenant (as in our Old Testament lesson). Under the old covenant, the law was an eternal code of conduct (i.e., a list of rules). But when the Holy Spirit is given to all of God’s people in the new covenant era, the law is said to be written on our hearts as an inward principle through the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit.¹

¹ Fung, *Galatians*, 248-249.

The Old Testament expectation of a new covenant was, in part, that the messianic age would be characterized as the age when the Law would be written on each heart, and in which the Spirit would indwell each believer. The two things—the Law written upon the heart, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit—necessarily go together. Those who are called to be free are also called to walk in the Spirit. We are not to let sin reign in our lives. Paul is clearly talking about the third use of the Law—where an imperative (command) follows the indicative (statement of fact) in Galatians 5:13. Since we are called to be free (indicative), we are to walk in the freedom that is given us by the Spirit (the imperative).

As Paul stated earlier in Galatians 2:20, *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* Now Paul speaks of a life empowered for good works because we are united to Christ through the indwelling Holy Spirit. For Paul, the old Pharisee is dead, the regenerate Paul is now alive to God and his commandments. This is why in 2 Corinthians 3:17, Paul writes, *“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”* To *“walk by the Spirit”* is living out the freedom we have in Christ. We are free to obey God’s commandments because we are not obedient in order to be justified, but because we *are* justified. Since we are indwelt by the Spirit of freedom, the Holy Spirit directs our course of life. We are free from the things which once enslaved us—the curse of the Law and the tyranny of sin. Says Paul, now we are free to serve one another in love.

Nowhere in this discussion does Paul hint or imply that this will be easy. Paul never states that in *“walking by the Spirit,”* we will be able to subdue all manifestations of the sinful nature in our lives (the flesh), and attain a state of perfection (holy living). The sinful nature is not eradicated at the moment of regeneration, but the sinful nature is cut off from its source of life. The flesh will slowly but surely wither and die. Although a defeated foe, the flesh will nevertheless fight a determined guerrilla war until we die or until Christ comes back, whichever comes first, as Paul states in the next verse.

The key question is *“how do we walk in the Spirit?”* In the historic Protestant tradition, the work of the Spirit is connected to means—the word and sacraments. We walk in the Spirit by taking avail of the means of grace that God has given to us. The Spirit works in and through the word (read, preached, or studied) to convict us of sin, to reveal God’s will to us, and to point us continually back to the sufficiency of Christ’s death for our many sins. The Holy Spirit reminds us that Christ’s righteousness covers our own unrighteousness. The Spirit motivates us to pray. The Holy Spirit causes us to live in freedom by serving one another in love as a result of the mysterious union between ourselves and other members of Christ’s church as together we are conformed to the image of Christ.

But we cannot fulfill Paul’s imperative by merely re-doubling our efforts, or by attempting to reach a higher-level or more intense Christian experience. Walking in the Spirit is participating in the ordinary means of grace (word and sacrament) as well as things such as prayer and fellowship. The result is growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, along with progressive conformity to his image. We do not gratify the desires of the flesh when we take avail of the means God has given. If we focus however upon stopping the desires of the flesh apart from God’s means, we will only fuel the fire! We must be careful not to confuse cause and effect!

For Paul, life in the Spirit is the characteristic of every Christian. There is nothing to indicate that some Christians *“live in the Spirit,”* yet others do not. The New Testament does not teach a bifurcated Christian life, wherein some of God’s people live the Spirit-filled life and others remain *“carnal Christians.”* The Christian who has been called by God will persevere in the faith and will *“walk by the Spirit.”* In a parallel discussion (Romans 8:1-17), Paul contrasts life in the Spirit and life in the flesh in

more detail. The contrast in Romans 8 is not an option for the Christian to walk in the flesh or to walk in the Spirit as a victorious Christian. The contrast between flesh and Spirit is between believer and unbeliever. All Christians “walk by the Spirit” (which is true of all Christians) while all non-Christians “walk in the flesh” (as unregenerate). This is why Paul says in Romans 8:8-9, *“those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”*

But if this is true, why is the Christian life such a struggle? In Galatians 5:17, Paul makes clear what has been implied throughout this entire letter, *“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.”* This explains, in part, why it seems so difficult to actually do what Paul has commanded in the previous verse. While we are exhorted to walk by the Spirit (and not to let sin reign in our mortal bodies) the reason that we so often do not obey the Law as we should, is because the sinful nature and the Spirit *“are opposed to each other.”* The normal Christian life is characterized by an intense struggle between the new life in the Spirit and the old way of life in the flesh, or what is also known as “indwelling sin,” the remnants of sin and its habits. This is a clear parallel to Paul’s comments in Romans 7:14-25. In that passage Paul describes his present struggle with sin—the struggle with sin experienced by an apostle. The “normal” Christian life as one characterized by a struggle with indwelling sin, not a life of total victory over all sin and sinful habits supposedly achieved by some.

Sadly, Christians are often told that the struggle with sin and any perception of lack of victory, or lack of continual progress, are reasons to doubt the assurance of their salvation. But it is only a Christian, indwelt by God’s Spirit, who experiences a struggle between the Spirit and the flesh (“indwelling sin”). Non-Christians live “in the flesh.” Non-Christians do not have the intense struggle between the sinful nature and the indwelling Spirit. God’s Spirit is not provoking internal conflicts within them. The struggle with sin is perhaps the clearest sign that one is actually converted! This is why we must draw our assurance of salvation and God’s favor toward us from the promises given to us in the Scriptures, rather than attempting to draw assurance from our personal progress in holiness. Some of those who have progressed the farthest in sanctification are those most dissatisfied with the progress they are making in the Christian life. Assurance should be drawn primarily from the promise in Scripture that God will save sinners, from the witness of the Spirit to those promises, and only secondarily from our progress in the Christian life. While we will indeed make progress, it is at times very difficult to gauge.

This is why we must preach law and gospel on a continual basis and not moralize to people. The Law excites and gives life to sin, exposing our need for a Savior (Romans 7). As Christians, the Law is written on our hearts yet the sinful flesh (which remains) resonates with the Law’s demands. This why we must hear the external proclamation of God’s favor towards us in Jesus Christ—the absolution or declaration of the forgiveness of sins—or we else we have little hope of forgiveness for our repeated and constant sins. If one is guilty they need gospel. If one is apathetic or indifferent they need law. Moralism, on the other hand, consists of watered-down imperatives designed not to expose sin, but give us principles for making ourselves better. Nothing is more poisonous to the soul than moralistic preaching. Like New Year’s resolutions, we do not keep such rules for long. Our failure to keep “law-lite,” i.e., moralistic rules only frustrates us. Christianity is primarily a religion of rescue and redemption, and only secondarily a religion of morality and ethics.

In verse 18, Paul repeats his original assertion made in verse 16, *“if you are led by the Spirit,”* adding that *“you are not under the law.”* It is important to carefully qualify what Paul means when he says we are not under law. There are three ways in which those who are in the Spirit are not under law. **First,**

Paul means that we no longer suffer the law's curse for our infractions of God's revealed will, Galatians 3:13—*"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'"* The curse is removed through the death of Christ for us. **Second**, we are no longer under the slavery of the Law (Galatians 3:22; 25; 4:1-3), since Christ has set us free (Galatians 5:1). **Third**, we are free from all of those "things indifferent" (*adiaphora*) things which are not expressly forbidden in Scripture. The Spirit gives life and freedom, something the Law cannot do.

Although we are not under the Law as a means of justification, this does not mean that Christians are not to strive to obey the law. Paul is not a dispensationalist, who argues that the Law was for a previous dispensation, and therefore, the New Testament is the age of grace, and the Law is no longer binding. All ten of the commandments are re-affirmed in the New Testament. The Reformers were correct to speak of a second and a third use of the Law. What Paul is talking about is that because we are justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone, we are free from obedience to the Law as a means of justification—according to the second use of the Law. But this also means we are now free to obey the Law according to the third use. We do so out of gratitude because we are justified. Now we can serve one another in love since this fulfills the Law, as this is the Spirit's work in our lives.

In verses 19-21, Paul sets forth what is characteristic of the flesh. *"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."* At this point we encounter one of the so-called "sins lists" found in the New Testament. Paul contrasts the works of the flesh in verses 19-21 with the fruit of the Spirit in verses 22-23. The two lists stand in stark contrast to one another, reflecting Paul's frequent use of antithesis.

It is important to notice that there is no distinction made between "mortal" and "venial" sins as the Roman church erroneously teaches. There is also no distinction made between "big" and "little" sins, as many Christians teach. Not mentioned are the so-called "house rules" of American fundamentalism: i.e. smoking, drinking, etc. Too many Christians are concerned with things that God is not, and not concerned enough with things that he is. It is vital to understand that all sin equally condemns, (whether in thought, word, or deed) but not all sins have equal consequences.

The sins mentioned here fall into four basic categories. **First**, there are sexual sins, such as sexual immorality (*pornea*, which includes incest and temple prostitution) and debauchery (a good translation would be promiscuity). **Second**, there are false religious practices, such as idolatry and witchcraft. **Third**, sins of self-centeredness, such as hatred of others, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy. **Fourth**, there are sins of intemperance, such as drunkenness and orgies.

Paul is emphatic that those whose lives are characterized by such sins will not inherit the kingdom of God. Our own sinfulness is readily apparent in the fact that we are all prone to hear these lists, look around at others, and then condemn them because they "do such things." But these sin-lists condemn all of us. This is what they are designed to do. The Law of God exposes these sins in all of us. Just because we have not committed these sins with our hands or bodies does not mean that we haven't done them in our minds or hearts. If we have merely contemplated it, we are as guilty as if we had done it a million times, though thinking about it certainly does not carry with it the consequences of actually committing the act. After we read this list we too should come to realize *"for all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them'"* (Gal. 3:10). Paul's list of the works of the flesh condemns us all. There is not

a person in the room who can look down on anyone else and say, “I am better than you are.”

Those who are in the flesh are enslaved to the law and characterized by conduct just listed by Paul. The Christian, on the other hand, is characterized by the following list (the Fruit of the Spirit), not the former (the works of the flesh) though the remnants of indwelling sin will frequently manifest themselves, since the sinful nature conflicts with the Spirit, and “you do not do what you want.” In verses 22-26, Paul sets out the fruit of fruit of the Spirit, in obvious contrast with the works of the flesh. *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.”* The fruit of the Spirit are characteristic of the Christian indwelt by the Holy Spirit. When the Christian receives the Spirit, they begin to bear its fruit spontaneously, as signs of the Spirit’s indwelling.

There is important biblical background to Paul’s discussion of the Fruit of Spirit. Love is at the top of the list (cf. verse 13), as Paul has indicated elsewhere, it is superior to faith or hope. There are numerous references to love throughout Paul’s writings. The reason that Christians are to love one another, is because God has first loved us (Ephesians 2:4-7; Romans 5:8). Love is described by Paul as the atmosphere in which we relate to one another (Eph. 5:2); it is a garment that we are to put on (1 Corinthians 16:14); it is the secret of unity (Col. 2:2), it is characteristic of Christian maturity (Eph. 4:15); and provides the proper restraint of Christian liberty (Gal. 5:13; Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:1; 13). For Paul, the Law is fulfilled in love, and love is demonstrated in serving one another.

Joy is also mentioned, but joy is not to be equated with happiness. The joy of which Paul speaks is in a real sense being aware of God’s favor towards us because the work of Christ has been applied to us through the Spirit. Paul exhorts us to “rejoice in the Lord” (Phil. 3:1). We are to have joy in the faith (Phil. 1:25). This means that we can be unhappy, suffer trials, and endure tribulations, yet still have joy! Peace is drawn from the Hebrew *shalom*, and conveys the idea of a sense of wholeness, soundness, and prosperity. As for peace, “*eirene* appears most commonly in greetings and benedictions, where God (with Jesus) is identified as the source of peace. Paul also speaks of ‘the God of peace,’ (Rom. 15:33; 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11, etc.)...The [gospel] is called ‘the gospel of peace’ (Eph. 6:15),”² because Christ has made peace with God for us, through his shedding of blood on the cross for our sins.

Patience derives from God who is patient with us (Exodus 34:6). According to Paul’s letter to Timothy, the supreme example of patience is seen in Jesus Christ. As Paul says, “*I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life*” (1:16). We are to be patient with others (Ephesians 4:1-2) and to keep the unity of the Spirit. Kindness refers to God’s gracious attitude toward sinners, primarily the kindness by which God leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). In fact, salvation itself is spoken of as God’s love for mankind (Tit. 3:4). As we have experienced God’s kindness to us, so we are to demonstrate that same kindness to others.

Goodness is closely related to kindness, and refers to “an attitude of generous kindness to others, which

² Fung, Galatians, 265.

is happy to do far more than is required my mere justice.’³ Faithfulness is understood in the sense of being trustworthy. Gentleness is a term which means “an ethical grace in the believer’s life, ‘gentleness’ may be described as a humble, patience, and forbearance towards others, regarding even insult or injury as God’s means of chastisement (cf. 2 Sam. 16:11) or training (cf. Num. 12:3). It implies but is not identical with, self-control.”⁴ Self-control is the ability to keep one’s lust or passions under control.

The indwelling Holy Spirit will begin to produce these fruit in the lives of each Christian believer. But we do not bear such fruit by self-consciously trying to produce the fruit mentioned on the list. Instead, we will bear the fruit of the Spirit by taking avail of the means of grace that God gives to us, so that we do bear the fruit of the Spirit. It is also important not to attempt to derive the sole assurance of your salvation from the fruit that you are bearing, though some of us may be able to do so. Look for fruit in your neighbor, and look to Christ for your own assurance. Too often we are taught to look within to see how we are doing. The danger is that our dissatisfaction with our personal progress in sanctification, which might be a genuine mark of Godliness, is instead turned into a morbid fear that we might not be Christians because we are not bearing the kind of fruit we think we should. Look to Christ’s promises in the word and the sacrament for the assurance of salvation.

Paul wraps up by returning to the Spirit-flesh conflict depicted in verse 17. His focus now is upon Christ’s victory over sin and “the flesh” for us. Those who are “in Christ,” those who “belong to Christ,” are said to have “crucified the flesh.” The fact that the verb (“have crucified”) is in the aorist tense, meaning a completed action, clearly indicates that the believer was crucified with Christ at the time of their conversion (Galatians 2:20), which was signed and sealed in their baptism, when Paul says “they put on Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27). The power of sin over a believer has been forever broken (objectively). But subjectively (in terms of our experience), this victory will not be the constant psychological experience of the Christian (i.e., Romans 7:14 ff). Instead, we feel the struggle with sin.

It is characteristic of every Christian believer that despite the difficult struggle with indwelling sin, the power of sin is broken. Every Christian will make some progress in their growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, and in conformity to the image of Christ. The curse of the Law has been removed by Christ’s death. The sentence of death, which the curse brings upon us, has been replaced for every Christian by the life of the Spirit. The slavery that resulted from our bondage to sin and the flesh have been done away with through Christ’s death for us and through the life imparted to us by the Spirit. While the sinful nature remains a potent and subversive foe, its power over us has been broken. It is defeated. The Christian life, while a struggle, is not one of defeat. Christ has lived the victorious life for us. Everyone who is in Christ, has already crucified the flesh, and will “*keep in step with the Spirit*,” since it is through the Spirit that the Christian lives at all. Once the power of sin has been broken through union with Christ, we are to walk by the Spirit. As we walk by the Spirit, we daily crucify the flesh. We walk in the Spirit by taking avail of the means of grace (word and sacrament), through fellowship with God’s people, and through prayer, the chief exercise of thanksgiving.

As Paul understands the Christian life, every Christian will manifest the fruit of the Spirit. We will persevere to the end and be saved. We will put to death the deeds done in the flesh. We will serve one another in love, and we are given the imperative not to become conceited, since all that we have is a gift

³ Fung, Galatians, 269.

⁴ Fung, Galatians, 270.

from God. We are not to provoke each other; as the Judaizers were doing. We are not to envy each other, since it is God who calls us to faith, not because of anything good in us, but because of his sovereign pleasure and purpose.

What can we learn from Paul's treatment here of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian? Paul's doctrine of the Christian life is that all Christians "live by the Spirit," and walk according to the ways of the Spirit. In doing this, says Paul, we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. But even though the guilt and power that sin once held over us is broken, we will nevertheless struggle with the remnants of that sinful nature ("indwelling sin") until we die, because the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit. This means that the normal Christian life is described as "walking by the Spirit" which is characterized by a fierce struggle with the remnants of sin. But every Christian will win this battle because Christ ensures that they do. The struggle with indwelling sin is not only normal, it is essential, since the indwelling Spirit will never allow a Christian to live in complacency towards their sin.

As Christians "living by the Spirit" and struggling with indwelling sin, our hope is focused upon the grace and power of Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us and who, as the Risen and Ascended Lord of Glory, lives to make intercession for his people, ensuring that our faith will not fail. It is the Risen and Ascended Lord who baptizes his people in the blessed Holy Spirit, who ensures that all of Christ's saving benefits are made ours through faith alone. Since we "live by the Spirit," we live in the light of Christ's death for our sins and trust in his perfect obedience to the Law as our only means of withstand God's unsearchable judgements. Living by the Spirit means that we must take avail of those glorious gifts that God gives to us, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ, which comes to us through the word, and confirmed in the broken body and blood of the Savior himself, who is offered to us in the Supper. To hear and believe the Word of God, to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, to wage war on indwelling sin, to bear the Spirit's fruit is to "walk by the Spirit." This is what Paul commands us to do.