

Living by the Spirit

In his letter to the Galatians Paul addresses quite severely some issues that threatened the freedom that believers have in Christ Jesus. The legalists were seeking to impose the laws of Judaism upon new followers of Christ, saying that the way of salvation is through first becoming a follower of the law in preparation for accepting the gospel of Christ. The libertines said that if we're saved by grace, then we can do as we wish, since our salvation is "locked up" through a decision we made to become followers of Christ. The church in Galatia was threatened by both of these distortions of true freedom in Christ, which Paul describes in our NT Scripture text:

Follow as I read **Galatians 5:16-25**:

¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.¹⁷ For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

The key expression in our text is "live by the Spirit," which is the modern English equivalent of the original expression, "walk in the Spirit" (as translated in the King James [Authorized] Version). Perhaps our more modern translations, for sake of modern equivalency, have sacrificed something of the poignancy of this original word picture. "Walking" is a biblical metaphor for one's conduct and pattern of behavior, and the concept of walking with someone expresses compatible conduct and a cordial relationship with another.

If you've been acting unkindly or rudely toward your spouse, you'd be unwise to ask her or him to take a walk with you. Your spouse just might refuse the offer and tell *you* to take a hike, *alone!*

The prophet Amos expressed this principle with the question, "Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (Amos 3:3). Though little is said about the ancient Enoch, we can conclude much about his character of godliness because of the statement that he "walked with God" (Gen. 5:24). Since the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Triune God we can conclude that Paul was exhorting a similar walk with God, living in a compatible, close relationship with the One who indwells us in the person of the Holy Spirit.

There's a nuance in meaning between living and walking by the Spirit. "Walking by the Spirit is the outward manifestation, in action and speech, of living by the Spirit. Living by the Spirit is the root. Walking by the Spirit is the fruit." The fruit is the practical reproduction of the character and conduct of Christ in the lives of his people. As we live according to the direction and control of the Holy Spirit, in agreement with God's Word and will, we shall then walk in step with the Spirit, who'll produce in our lives the fruit of the Spirit—Christ-likeness (F.F. Bruce).

By way of contrast to the Christ-like life, Paul lists certain acts of the sinful nature (v.19-21). This sordid list describes the results of giving free reign to the old, pre-conversion life. The regenerated child of God will not continue in those same patterns of conduct that characterized life before meeting Christ. But we also know that, as long as we live in these sin-inclined bodies of ours, we'll feel the downward tug of the old nature, which Paul calls the flesh. In moments of weakness, when we're not living in the awareness of God's presence, we'll commit particular sins. Maybe they'll not be as sordid as some on Paul's list, and perhaps they'll be sins of attitude or inaction, i.e. failure to act in response to the promptings of God's Word and Spirit. Whatever the shape of our sinful nature, we're all equally sinful before holy God.

This doesn't mean that the body, as separate from the Spirit, is inherently evil, as some of the Gnostic Greeks believed. The flesh is that part of us that still feels the downward tug of our pre-conversion life. Though our entire being has come under God's grace and redemptive power and is being transformed by the Spirit into Jesus' likeness, we must still resist the inclinations of old patterns, thoughts, habits, attitudes and emotions that are against God's new purposes. The old nature, as an echo of the past, still haunts us as the voice of Satan, trying to hinder our spiritual growth.

The atmosphere of the world around us, such as the conduct and conversation of immoral and insensitive folk with whom we must live or work, can incite these old desires and tempt us to a momentary return to these acts of the sinful nature (19, "works of the flesh"). Jerry Bridges has aptly described these recurring struggles as the Christian's continuing "guerrilla warfare." The battle for the soul has been won by Christ decisively. We belong to Christ and have the victory described in Romans 8. But enough of the influence of the Enemy remains around to engage us in the occasional skirmishes that continue to disturb and threaten to defeat us.

Paul gives a partial listing of acts that give evidence of a sinful nature, the outworking of a life without the converting, controlling influence of the Holy Spirit (v. 19-21). Unlike the listing he'll give in the following verses of the fruit of the Spirit, these works of the sinful nature are chaotically thrown together to show that the life apart from Christ lacks control and order.

Paul lists sins that seem to fall, albeit chaotically, into groupings of: sexual sins, religious sins, such as tampering with the powers of evil, and idolatry, which is placing anyone or anything before God; and social sins, listing eight attitudes and actions that destroy. He then throws in drunkenness and orgies for good measure, as if to take us to the lowest level of shameful conduct. And this list is certainly a partial one, with Paul ending with “and things like these” (v. 21). It’s as though Paul is allowing this partial list to simply strike a familiar chord and get us close enough to think of our own specific sins. They may not be as outwardly heinous or as socially conspicuous as these, but we know our own sinful nature. We all have our tendencies to sin, in thoughts, attitudes, and spirit, as well as these more overt ones.

Some Christians will excuse their social and/or behavioral sins based on their inherited personality traits or their cultural background and idiosyncrasies. But we can’t excuse a volatile temper by saying we’re Irish or have red hair. We’re now God’s new creation and are given the Holy Spirit, whose purpose is to make us more like Jesus and less like unconverted Irish or red-haired sinners.

Paul noted to the Corinthians that the wicked and immoral will not enter the kingdom of God, and he gives a list of sordid behavioral sins. He says that some of the Corinthian believers were guilty of this behavior in the past, but adds that this was what they were in the past, before Christ. “But,” he says, “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor. 6:9-11). All of these sins are forgivable, but they are not to remain dominant in our lives, else they’re evidence that we’ve missed the grace of God (Heb. 12:15).

In contrast to the acts of the sinful nature, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit, which is essentially a description of the character of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. The goal of holiness is no less than reaching the measure of total Christlikeness. Certainly we’re by grace saved from hell and are bound for heaven, but we’re saved for the larger purpose of glorifying God by reflecting his nature (Rom. 8:29).

Just as the earlier listing of the acts of the sinful nature was not exhaustive, so this list of the fruit of the Spirit is not meant to contain all of the virtues of holiness and Christ-likeness. But this list does give a balanced portrayal of the character of Jesus that is reproduced by the Holy Spirit in the life of the obedient child of God (v. 22 & 23). Just as the acts of the sinful nature were a chaotic and disjointed description, the fruit of the Spirit presents a unified portrait of a life that rightly relates to God, others and oneself.

Toward God we exhibit love, joy and peace, the kind that is unique to the life in the Spirit. God’s love is the agape love of selflessness, the kind of love God showed in sending his Son to die for us. His peace is more than the absence of warfare, but is a sense of wholeness and spiritual health and wellbeing that comes from being reconciled to God (Rom. 5:1). Joy is more than happiness,

which is restricted to fortuitous circumstances. God's joy is a robust affirmation of life that is more of a discipline than an emotion (Phil. 4:4).

Patience (long suffering), kindness (in disposition) and goodness or generosity (kindness "with its sleeves rolled up" for practical action) are expressions of God's love, mercy and grace that he enables us to express even toward our enemies. Faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are characteristics that enable us to be people of utmost integrity and allow us to live righteously even in a spiritually dark and degenerate world. And the crowning virtue of all the fruit of the Spirit is love, this godly, sacrificial and unconditional love that always acts on behalf of others. As Paul says in his great Love Chapter, love is defined by these other virtues, and without love nothing else is of value or meaning (1 Cor. 13).

The fruit of the Spirit describes the character of Jesus himself, and the calling of every Christian is to conform to the likeness of Jesus. This is the goal of perfection to which Jesus points in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:48). And, during our earthly pilgrimage we're to seize every opportunity to grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18). We should not be discouraged by our lack of progress, and must not grow weary in our growth in holiness. God's at work in us, even when spiritual growth doesn't seem to be taking place.

Like you, I wonder often if I will ever change my old, sinful ways. But I must once again hear the call of Christ to be holy, because he, who lives in me, is holy (1 Pet. 1:15f). He who's saved us and called us to be his holy people will enable us to become more like him, "being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18, NIV). An important fruit of the Spirit is humility, which reminds us we've a lot of growing to do before we consistently reflect the character of Jesus.

We belong to Christ Jesus (v. 24). Rather than saying Christ belongs to us, Paul says we belong to Christ and those of us who belong to Christ are identified with his dying on the cross and are in the process of crucifying the old, "sinful nature with its passions and desires" (v. 24). Followers of Jesus are those who're answering his call to deny self and take up a cross daily (Luke 9:23ff). We're called to say "no" to the impulses of the sinful, self-centered nature and "yes" to the call of God to follow the pattern of Jesus' holy love. We're talking about selfless, Jesus-dominated thinking and living. When we received Christ's free gift of saving grace we realized it wasn't cheap—it would demand that we surrender to an execution the passions and desires of the old, unconverted sinful nature. We took this nature and nailed it to a cross.

We're Christians because we've been given life through the Spirit, by the same power that raised Jesus from death (v. 25 & Eph. 1:19-20). Since we live by the Spirit, Paul says, let's be consistent and "keep in step with" and "walk by the Spirit" (25). The way of holiness, living and walking in the Spirit, becomes our

way of life as we begin to practice spiritual disciplines and turn our life into a prayer offering to God. The spiritual disciplines are not confined to acts of personal piety, but involve service and witness to others. We're commanded to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit, which means that God indeed will fill us with his fullness and give us the needed grace, joy, power and blessing we need to live a Christ-honoring and fruitful life. You don't need to wait for a "second blessing," or some special manifestation. All you need to do is surrender, seek, trust, obey and believe.

In your growth toward Christlikeness, be encouraged. Sometimes God allows adversity and conflict to remind us of our need to walk in step with him, even and especially in our darkest hours. Walking in step with the Spirit can take us to dangerous places and difficult trials. Even when we take the wrong way, the Spirit continues to walk with us, and will lead us back onto the right path, "for His name's sake" (Ps. 23:3). You may feel very much alone and seriously misunderstood, but God is always with you and his Spirit will guide and strengthen you, and even restore to you the joy of his salvation (Ps. 51:12). God's always at work in us, and sometimes in ways unknown to us. Others may see and God definitely will see the progress we can't see, and will be pleased that we have sought to walk in and live by the Spirit.

Sometimes I'd like to post a sign over my life that says something like what we can read at a construction site: "Please excuse my mess. I'm under construction. God isn't through with me yet."