

The Epistle to the Galatians: The Gospel of Grace

Lesson 16: Walking by the Spirit – Part 1: The Command and the Conflict (5:16-18)

“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.”

I don't know about you, but as someone who has walked with the Lord for nearly twenty years of my life, I recognize my sin now more than ever. As a young believer (even before I was a believer), I looked at religious people and considered them to be as close to perfect as a person could get. Before Christ, I can honestly say that the holy aura that surrounded those people wasn't something that intrigued me, it was more something that I ridiculed them for. My initial expectation after coming to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ was that I would grow into the likeness of those people I once mocked, but my expectations were wrong. As I have journeyed with Christ through these years, I have overcome sin, and my life has changed course drastically, but in my heart, I still feel that pull from sinful nature. Even all these years later, there is still a war going on inside of me. And I know that if the Lord allows me to live another twenty years, that I'll only see more of my depravity.

What set my expectation of the Christian life so terribly wrong was my theology. I believed before Christ that most people were at least good enough to go to Heaven. And so I believed that those people that I saw striving with all of their might to be holy were really just wasting their lives trying to get to a place where most of us were already going. What I learned from the scriptures concerning the total depravity of my sinful nature, and the unconditional election of my soul from a loving God who sent His Son to die as a propitiatory sacrifice for me changed my life. I learned that, as much control as I had over who my parents would be, and what hospital I'd be born in, and what year my life would begin, that's how much control I had over my second-birth in Christ. I learned from the scriptures that the salvation of my soul is a gracious gift from God, planned by the Father before the world began, executed and accomplished by Jesus Christ my Lord, to the glory and praise of God now and forevermore. My salvation was not only graciously given to me, it was given in the place of the judgment of God for my sin that I deserved.

To the exact same degree as we needed Jesus Christ to accomplish the salvation of our souls in justification, we need the Holy Spirit to strengthen us for sanctification. The error that I believe many make as they live as a Christian, is forgetting to walk in the strength of the Holy Spirit. We still try and live to glorify God in our own strength, as though we had any ability whatsoever to do so. There is only one way that a Christian can ever overcome their own fleshly desires and progress further down the road of sanctification, and that is by walking in the Spirit. Without the Spirit's aid, we will take our justification and become a legalist, or we will take our justification and become one with a license to sin. Only by walking in the Spirit can a person truly use our freedom to please God with our lives.

Paul uses two expressions in our text, to teach the Galatians how to live to honor Christ. In verse 16 he tells them to **“walk by the Spirit”** and in verse 18 he talks about being **“led by the Spirit”**. We get an English word (that I've never heard of) from the word Paul used for 'walk' (*peripateo*). It the word 'peripatetic', and for those of you unfamiliar with the word, it speaks of someone who travels around quite frequently. You could say that someone active in the military is peripatetic because they live here and there, moving about as they are re-stationed for service. Aristotle, the famous philosopher, was

peripatetic, and his students were called the Peripatetic School because they learned from him as they traveled about. I would think the same parallel could be drawn with the disciples, learning from our Lord Jesus Christ. The peripatetic way is the way that we are to walk by Spirit. Whether we are waking up, eating, driving, working, conversing, mowing the lawn, or whatever else we do, we are to be walking under the influencing power of the Holy Spirit. In verse 18 Paul uses the expression “**led by the Spirit.**” The word he used for ‘led’ is a word that I hope you are familiar with because we touched on it back in chapter 3. The word is ‘pedagogue’. Just as the law was the pedagogue, the **guardian until Christ came**, (3:24), so now the Holy Spirit is our pedagogue since Christ has come, until we finally in our glorified state.

Phil Ryken writes, “*Now that we have come to Christ, however, we need a different kind of pedagogue. Christ has set us free from sin, guilt, death, and eternal judgment. Now we need the inward work of the Holy Spirit to teach us how to handle our newfound freedom. He becomes our pedagogue and guide, leading us to live free in Christ.*”¹

So Paul commands the Galatians to walk under the influence and guardianship of the Holy Spirit of God. It is the power of God at work in Christians that causes them to grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ. It is God’s sustaining power, as He carries along His efficacious work in us until our final glorification. Between the time that God justified us, until the time that God will glorify us, He will be actively sanctifying us. And while it is true that our salvation is monergistic (God’s work alone apart from our effort), the Galatians (and therefore all Christians by extension) are **commanded** to walk.

The command to walk certainly isn’t a command to earn our salvation. That would make our salvation synergistic (God’s work coupled with our effort). When we speak of our blood-bought salvation, we look to the finished work of Christ on the cross, His defeat of over death and sin, and His resurrection. The command has nothing to do with our justification. Nor does the command to walk make our effort in sanctification synergistic with God, for we walk not in our own strength, but in the power of God.

There was a saying that was introduced to the church years ago, likely one that all of you have heard before. The saying goes “Let go, and let God.” The saying grew into a movement that captivated believers, and led to much literature being produced. It may even shock some that the saying isn’t rooted at all in scripture. There is a way to understand the saying that is biblical. If by ‘letting go, and letting God’, we mean that we abandon our sinful efforts, and lean entirely upon God for salvation, then we’re right. But that isn’t what the movement teaches. The idea of ‘letting go, and letting God’ is to become a spiritual statue, to literally stand still and ‘let God do His work’. It’s the opposite command of walking. The New Testament is filled with commands that tell us to be active in our Christian life. Paul encouraged Timothy in 1 Tim. 6:12, “**Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.**” In Ephesians 6:11, Paul commands believers to “**Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.**” To let go and let God is to go against scripture.

There is a *walking* that all Christians are commanded to do, and this walk is to bear fruit for Christ. Jesus said very clearly in John 15:5, “**I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.**” Apart from God we do nothing. Nothing at all. Even the good things that we, if they are done in our own strength, are so sin-saturated

¹ Phil Ryken *Galatians: Reformed Expository Commentary* P&R, p.220

that God gets no glory in it, and it's nothing. We are to live and exist in the strength of the Spirit. We are to live like branches says Jesus. He is the vine, we are the branches. It's an easy teaching picture, isn't it? What good is a branch that is snapped off of the plant? It's no good, it's dead. The branch lives because it is dependant upon the vine for water and nutrients. And the branch exists for one sole purpose, to bear fruit. I have a vegetable garden. By my own admission, I am a terrible gardener. However, I have learned a thing or two about gardening over the years. To maximize the health and size and number of tomatoes on my plants, I have been taught to remove the 'suckers' off of the plant. I'm sure that's not the textbook definition, but the principle applies to our thought process. It's my goal to remove all useless branches from my tomato plant, leaving the remaining branches with maximal exposure to the resources of the root of the plant to bear the maximum amount of fruit. This is exactly where Jesus was going one verse later in John 15:6, **"If anyone does not abide in me he thrown away like a branch and withers; the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire."**

The command given to members of churches across the world today is to 'let go'. The command is to stop trying, stop striving, stop struggling. But that isn't what Jesus said. He said in Luke 13:24, **"Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able."** Did Jesus just command people to strive for their justification? No. Jesus is commanding believers to be diligent, to be active to make every effort to overcome sin and progress in Christlikeness. Far from being commanded to not struggle as the 'let it go' movement says, we are commanded to struggle. Paul said to Timothy in 2 Tim. 2:3, **"Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus."** The New Testament command is to walk forward, make progress, get dirty, willingly suffer for the sake of Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The believer who is led by the Holy Spirit must be willing to walk where the Spirit leads. Like a good soldier who follows his superior into the heart of the battle and fights, the Christian must to be willing to do the Lord's work, wherever the Spirit leads him. To walk by the Spirit is to walk contrary to the sinful appetite of our hearts. All of us, universally, have a nature that seeks to gratify our own sinful cravings. Therefore the universal command to every Christian is to combat these sinful desires by walking in the Spirit. You're either walking by the Spirit, or you're gratifying your fleshly desires, there is no third option. To walk by the Spirit is to pattern ourselves after the life of Jesus Christ. Paul encouraged the Colossian believers to **"let the word of Christ dwell in you richly."** (Col. 3:16) That doesn't happen by sitting idle in the faith. The word dwells in us richly as we diligently walk by the Spirit, reading and exposing ourselves to the regular intake of God's Word. To walk by the Spirit, is to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), to literally fill your belly up with the Spirit. **"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit."** To gratify our flesh is to fill our belly with wine, and to let the wine pollute our body and control us with its influence. We are commanded therefore to fill our stomachs with the Holy Spirit of God, so that God becomes the overriding and controlling influence of our life.

So we see two options, two roads that are before every believer. We are all **commanded** to choose walking by the Spirit, and so comes the **conflict**, verses 17-18, **"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."**

These verses immediately remind me of Paul in Romans 7:18-23, where we see the struggle that Paul had against his resident sin nature, his flesh. Flesh can mean many things in scripture: it can mean the physical body, it can also be a term used figuratively to refer to the state of the unsaved. In the text in Romans, as well as our text in Galatians, the use of the term refers to the moral and spiritual weakness and helplessness of our sinful nature. Our flesh here refers to our propensity to sin, the part of our body that is still awaiting redemption and glorification.

This is where the command to walk by the Spirit sparks conflict in the life of the believer. There is conflict wherever the Spirit is at war with the flesh in a person's life. Because there is conflict, the Spirit is yielded too, and made evident at times, and the flesh is yielded too at other times, and made evident. The believer is frustrated many times when the desire from the heart was to glorify God in a given moment, and yet the weakness of the flesh won, and sin was born.

Inside of every believer is war for control of the heart. There is a war going on over every word, every thought, and every deed of a believer. One mark of a seasoned veteran in the faith is that they recognize more and more just how serious and massive the war going on in their heart is. New believers have a theological understanding of the sin and need for the Spirit, but there is a deeper understanding that comes to a believer as he walks with the Lord. A believer for decades will understand with much more clarity just how sinful they are. While I argue that time will allow a believer to grow in the knowledge and grace of our Lord, what I truly mean is that walking by the Spirit over the years causes us to grow in our understanding of sin and grace. Do you remember what the apostle Paul said about himself in 1 Timothy 1:15? **"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."** The unsaved person would scratch their head over this statement! The world assumes that religious people become moral, and ethical, and holy. And yet here Paul calls himself the foremost of sinners near the end of his life? How can Paul say that?

All believers do grow in holiness. The world is right, when people genuinely come to Christ, their lives do change radically. They do make every effort to live in such a way that pleases the Lord, because they love Him, and seek to glorify Him. But believers also grow in the knowledge of sin. They see sin more in their life as they grow, then they ever did before. Was Paul the world's worst sinner? Of course not. But in his mind, he might as well have been. What happens to a believer as they walk by the Spirit, is that their definition of good is changed. The believer was one who once categorized themselves as a 'good person' before coming to Christ. But the longer we live in the light of Christ, the more we realize our darkness in comparison. Isaiah, considered to be the holiest of men of his day, was shown a vision of the throne of Heaven. When he saw the Lord in His holiness, he then saw just how sinful he was. His response in Isaiah 6:5, **"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"**

Inside of the heart of every believer is a battle between the Spirit and the flesh. This battle may sound so fierce, and so lengthy that no person could ever win the battle. In our own strength, the assessment of the battle is true. None of us can overcome sin on our own. Fortunately for us, the Spirit that indwells us is powerful enough for us to overcome any sin. There isn't a single opportunity to sin in our life that will present itself as too much for the Spirit to overcome. Consider Romans 8:12-14, **"So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."** How do we overcome our fleshly desires? By

walking by the Spirit. Paul talks about how, instead of feeding into the desire to sin, we need to make every effort to starve the desire to death. He said in Romans 13:14, **“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”** How do we practically avoid feeding the temptation to sin? We walk by the Spirit, considering what Paul wrote in Philippians 4:8-9, **“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”**

John MacArthur wrote, *“A believer can accomplish nothing for the Lord in his own power, but, on the other hand, the Spirit can accomplish little through a believer apart from the believer’s submission and commitment. The opposite extreme of quietism is traditionally labelled “pietism,” in which a believer legalistically strives in his own power to do everything the Lord commands of him. There the emphasis is overbalanced on the side of discipline, self-effort, and personal diligence.”*²

It’s not “let go and let God”, nor is it “move over everyone, I got this”. To walk by the Spirit is to actively go through life yielding to the Spirit’s guidance and power, being led by Him. Let’s finish our lesson by looking at Galatians 5:18, **“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”** To live under the law (what the Judaizers were asking them to do) is to live by the flesh. To live by the law is either to fulfill the law, or break it. Either way, it’s accomplished in the flesh. The flesh is powerless to fulfill the law, and the law is powerless to overcome our fallen flesh. 1 Corinthians 15:56-57, **“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** God has given us the victory over the law which convicts of sin and death. That is why we are not under the law any longer, if we are led by the Spirit.

Those who are saved from sin, are adopted into God’s family, considered sons of God. The Father planned your salvation from eternity past. The Lord Jesus Christ died and resurrected for the sins of those whom the Father chose to give Him. And now the Spirit lives in you. If He lives in you, you can be sure that He is already actively leading you, so make every effort to follow Him. Make every effort to choke the life of out your sin. Make every effort to yield think about the things that you know please and honor the God who bought your salvation. **“You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”** (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

² MacArthur, John *Commentary: Galatians* Moody, p. 157