

Walk By The Spirit

Galatians 5:16-26

Key Verse: 5:16

"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."

In the previous lesson we learned that God has given us wonderful freedom in Jesus Christ. We are free from the burden of the law and the power of sin. We are free to come to God through the blood of Christ. We are free to enjoy God, whom we can now call our **"Abba, Father."** We are free to love our neighbors and serve them. How wonderful is the freedom God has given us! This is the kingdom of God! To enjoy this freedom, however, we have to stand firm in it. We must avoid two dangers: legalism and licentiousness. They are enemies of Christian freedom. So we can say that obtaining freedom is one thing, keeping it is another. America obtained freedom through a costly Revolutionary War. Yet to keep this freedom has been even more costly. Our forefathers often said, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." Likewise, we must maintain our Christian freedom. Today's passage tells us how to do this and why it is so important.

I. By the Spirit, not by the flesh (16-18)

Look at verse 16. **"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."** To live in Christian freedom requires overcoming the desires of the flesh. Here the flesh refers to the fallen sinful nature that each person has inherited from Adam. This nature is hostile to God and is rebellious, lustful, arrogant, greedy, and so on. This nature constantly seeks gratification. Many people have realized that human misery stems from the desires of the flesh. But how to deal with this problem is the issue. Buddha taught that if we empty our hearts of flesh desires we can be happy. However, the Bible does not teach us to empty our hearts; it teaches us to fill our hearts with the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:18 says, **"Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery, instead be filled with the Spirit."** Then we can walk by the Spirit, and we will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

In verse 17a Paul explained why we have to walk by the Spirit. It says, **"For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh."** The flesh and the Spirit are in conflict in regards to what each desires. The flesh desires to please itself. The Spirit desires to please God. The flesh desires immediate gratification with fleeting pleasure, which is followed by much suffering. The Spirit desires eternal joy, which comes through spiritual

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struggle. What the flesh desires leads to the ruin of one's body and soul. What the Spirit desires leads to eternal life. Their purposes are opposed to each other, and the consequences of each are opposite. They cannot coexist. They are in conflict with each other.

Each Christian has these two forces battling within. This is why we cannot be free apart from God. Verse 17b says, **“They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.”** Many people misunderstand freedom, thinking it means doing whatever one wants, as their feelings lead them. But they end up in bondage to the flesh. We can have true freedom only in God. For example, if a fish is in the water, he is free to swim around. But suppose he observes a bird, envies it, and tries to fly, leaving the water. What happens? He dies in a few minutes. We can enjoy freedom only in God. That is why we have to walk by the Spirit.

We know very well in our heads that we should walk by the Spirit. But in reality, our natural tendency as fallen people is to live by the flesh. When we are full of the Spirit we are free from the desires of the flesh. But it is not easy for us to be always full of the Spirit. We face a constant battle between the Spirit and the flesh. Sometimes we are tempted to live by the flesh. We think we can enjoy fleshly pleasure for a while and then abandon it. But it does not work that way. When we indulge our flesh, we lose spiritual desire. We become vulnerable to Satan's power and he traps us. Satan is strong. No one can escape his grasp by their own effort. We need help. Jesus helps us. Jesus said in Luke 4:18-19: **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”** When we call on Jesus, he gives us his Spirit, and the Spirit sets us free. Jesus already crushed Satan's head through his death and resurrection. Sometimes our sinful desires and the power of Satan can look as intimidating as Goliath. But when we depend on Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit, like the teenage boy David, God gives us the victory over all powers that stand against us.

Still, many people have a problem in their hearts. They realize that since they became Christians and had to face spiritual conflict, their lives are so much harder than before. Sometimes they feel that people in the world are living happily without any struggle, and they begin to envy them. This causes them to lose spiritual strength. It is true that people in the world do not seem to struggle like Christians. But this is misleading. They do not struggle because they already belong to Satan. They are like dead fish floating downstream. But Christians have

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been made alive by the Spirit. We are like live fish who must struggle hard against the currents and waves. The fact that we have this conflict reveals that we are alive. As those alive by the Spirit, we are called to walk by the Spirit.

In verse 18 Paul says we are **“led by the Spirit.”** When we combine this with walking, we can see a picture of our Heavenly Father. He takes us by the hand to help us walk by the Spirit. He gives us support, help and guidance-and will catch us if we fall. But he wants us to walk. This means to serve him actively and positively, with the Spirit as our power source. Here to “walk” is different than to “sprint.” We are not to serve God only in short bursts with long vacations in between. We are to serve God though a consistent daily life in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit. It means listening to the Spirit every day through meditating on the word of God and prayer, and to thank God and praise God always (Jn 6:63; Lk 11:13; 1 Th 5:16-18). The Holy Spirit is God himself and gives us divine power and wisdom. When the Holy Spirit fills our minds and hearts we can participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires (2 Pe 1:3,4). When we walk by the Spirit we do not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. Instead, the Spirit, who is opposed to the flesh, puts to death our sinful nature and sanctifies us more and more. The Spirit makes us holy, for he is the Holy Spirit. He enables us to serve God gladly and grow in faith.

There is a young man who had the sinful desires common for youth. When they began to arise in him, he would take his guitar to a quiet place where he would praise and worship God in song. He was like the boy David with his harp. When this young man praised God in song, his mind and heart were consumed by the Holy Spirit and all the temptations fled from him. He found joy and meaning and the peace of God. As he continued to do this, his holy desires became so strong that he decided to enter intern training to be a full-time shepherd. One man struggled hard to survive in the midst of financial trouble and family strife. He was overwhelmed daily by problems and felt helpless. Many people in this situation become petty and seek to relieve their stress by indulging in fleeting pleasures. But this man decided to participate in early morning prayer as one of the Daily Bread messengers. He began to struggle with the word of God. When he did so, the Holy Spirit worked in him. The Spirit gave him a heart of compassion for children in the high school where he teaches. Though other teachers and administrators branded the students as hopeless, he began to care for them by the strength of the Spirit. When he showed genuine concern and hope for them, they responded. Gradually, the school’s atmosphere changed from one of despair to hope. Now he has a vision for all of Chicago’s public schools to transform in the same way. Today our heavenly Father is holding out his hand to each one of us and inviting us to take it

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in trust. He wants to lead us through the Spirit into a joyful, meaningful and fruitful life that far exceeds what we can ask or imagine. Let's take our Father's hand in faith and walk by the Spirit.

Verse 18 says, **“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”** The law provoked our flesh and made our sinful desires arise all the more. It was impossible to serve God under the law. Rather we only suffered from condemnation all the time. However, when we are led by the Spirit the law cannot place its demands on us any longer. Romans 8:2 tells us that the law of the Spirit of life sets us free from the law of sin and death. The Spirit gives life to our souls and unites us with Christ. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Ro 8:1). Now we can serve God freely and joyfully without fear, all the days of our lives (Lk 1:74-75).

II. Acts of the flesh; the fruit of the Spirit (19-26)

In verses 19-23 Paul examines in detail the contrasting outcomes of living by the flesh and by the Spirit. He gives a clear warning of the certain consequences which will result from each lifestyle. Then, in verses 24-26, he encourages us how to live victoriously and to keep in step with the Spirit.

First, the acts of the flesh (19-21). Paul spells out the acts of the flesh clearly for us. Look at verses 19-21a. **“The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like.”** Paul says that the acts of the flesh are obvious. They are not hidden but apparent; they are not vague but very clear. When one lives by the flesh, these obvious acts will follow. They may be produced unintentionally. But they are clearly revealed through one's speech and behavior. If we see the acts of the flesh in our lives we must conclude that we lived by the flesh. We cannot make any excuses and we cannot claim ignorance. We cannot say, “I didn't mean to do it,” for it is the inevitable result of living by the flesh.

We can categorize these acts into three groups: moral (sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, drunkenness and orgies), religious (idolatry and witchcraft), and social (hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy). The words “and the like” mean that there are more than what Paul listed here, such as ingratitude, pride, self-glory seeking, lying, stealing, murder, violent assault, greed, gluttony, heartlessness, mercilessness, and so on, and so forth.

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Why did Paul mention sexual immorality first? Sexual immorality may have the most serious effect on one's personal life, family, community and nation. Historically, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed when their society became overwhelmed by sexual immorality. The word "Sodom" came to express a kind of gross immorality. The fall of Rome was not primarily the result of external enemies. It was a result of corruption in people's hearts due to sexual immorality. These days many people have become numb to such sins, like pornography and homosexuality. But we have to realize that these are serious sins before God which will lead to the destruction of our society. Sexual immorality is often followed closely by idolatry. So it is not surprising that our sexually permissive society has seen a rise in witchcraft and interest in sorcery, vampires and werewolves. When people live by the flesh, the resulting sins destroy communities. Value systems are distorted and social order is broken down. People do not trust each other any longer. It is significant that in Paul's list, sins which destroy communities are most numerous. Those who hate others, sow discord, and make factions may think they are a little better than the sexually immoral. But the consequence of their sin will be the same.

Paul concluded this part by giving a strong warning. Look at verse 21b: **"I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."** Why is this important? Some people say, "I don't need the kingdom of God. I don't mind going to hell." Those people don't know how terrible it will be to spend eternity in hell without any hope. Suffering in hell is unbearable. Revelation 21:8 says that hell is a fiery lake of burning sulfur. Those in hell long for even one drop of water to be put on their tongues (Lk 16:24), but receive nothing. Not to inherit the kingdom of God is the most serious consequence of living by the flesh.

Second, the fruit of the Spirit (22-23). Paul uses the word "fruit" in regard to the Spirit, as opposed to "acts" of the flesh. The work of the Spirit differs in character. It is not subject to the law of cause and effect. Rather, it grows endlessly and limitlessly, like fruit on a well cultivated tree or plant. When we live by the Spirit, the Spirit produces in us good fruit. We can categorize the fruit of the Spirit in three ways. Love, joy and peace are in relation to God. Forbearance, kindness and goodness have to do with others. Faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are in regard to ourselves.

The first fruit mentioned is love. This love is "agape," that is God's love, which has a divine quality. In the past we did not know what true love was. Though we

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tried to love and be loved, we only understood erotic love or brotherly love. Relationships based on these kinds of love never satisfied our souls. However, when we were touched by the love of God through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we began to know what true love is and were able to love others (1 Jn 3:16). This love is not self-centered, but understands and seeks the good of others. This love blesses others according to their needs and always builds up; it never tears down. This love is the mark of Jesus' disciples (Jn 13:34).

The joy and peace the Spirit gives are different from the pleasures of sin and worldly peace. The joy the Spirit gives is like a spring of water welling up in our hearts. This joy enables us to overcome sorrow and grief and leaves no regret. The peace the Spirit gives comes from a right relationship with God. No one can take away this peace. This peace is like an undercurrent. We can have this peace in our hearts no matter how turbulent our situation may be. When we have peace in our hearts, we can become peacemakers.

Forbearance is to bear with those who harass and persecute us. Some people suddenly burst out, after anger has accumulated for years, and say, "Do you know how long I have endured this? I cannot tolerate it any longer." This is not forbearance. Forbearance means that nothing accumulates in one's heart, and that he or she can endure endlessly. Kindness is happily doing favors for those in need. Goodness refers to one's inner motive and ability to discern what is truly good and do it for others. Goodness compels us to seek out those in need. Faithfulness and trust are the same word in Greek, "pistis." When we live by the Spirit we become faithful and trustworthy. It is good to find a marriage candidate who has the fruit of faithfulness. Gentleness refers to the humble exercise of power. Spirit-filled believers have real power to love and serve others. But they do not use this power like worldly rulers. Rather they are like Jesus who did not break a bruised reed, or snuff out a smoldering wick. Self-control is the power to control oneself, such as one's emotions, body, mind and so on. There is no law that forbids good virtues (23b). So we can bear fruit abundantly and limitlessly. If we live by the Spirit we can bear the fruit of the Spirit so that our lives become fruitful and happy. We enjoy the kingdom of God in this world and inherit the kingdom of God in the age to come.

When we think about all the fruits of the Spirit, it becomes evident that this reflects Jesus' character. When we live by the Spirit, we can bear the image of Jesus. This is God's ultimate purpose for each of us. In the past we bore the bad fruits of sin when we lived by the flesh. But now, when we live by the Spirit, we bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Everybody wants to bear good fruit,

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not bad fruit. No one wants to end his life meaninglessly without good fruit. The problem is how can we bear good fruit? There is no way to bear good fruit except living by the Spirit. When we live by the Spirit we bear good fruit more and more. We can live a blessed life with overflowing happiness.

Look at verse 24. **“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”** Living a Spirit-filled life is closely related to our faith in Christ and the power of his cross to solve our sin problem. But we should understand that this verse emphasizes the attitude of believers toward their flesh. The verb **“have crucified”** is past perfect tense. It means that believers crucified their flesh on the cross fully with Jesus. They nailed their flesh to the cross in its entirety and left it there. They see it for the horrible, shameful, thing that it is. They do not reminisce about their flesh lives. They do not admire their flesh lives like trophies, but abhor them like the abominable things that they are. They do not try to take them down from the cross or revive them. They leave them on the cross to die the slow and painful death that they deserve.

Let's read verse 25. **“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”** The Spirit is living and moving. He is our source of life. He wants to work in and through us each and every day. He does not just visit us from time to time. He wants to walk with us constantly, now and always. He wants to live in a committed relationship with us, like a vine and its branches (Jn 15:5). But we must decide to follow his guidance and do our best to keep in step with him day by day.

Look at verse 26. In community life, legalistic people become conceited, provoking and envying one another. Those who live by the Spirit are humble and bear with one another in love.

As we have learned through this study, there are two forces within each of us. One is the desire of the flesh, which produces acts that lead to misery and death. The other is the Spirit. The Spirit lives in us by God's grace through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. The Spirit is willing and able to work in us with divine power and wisdom. The Spirit puts our flesh to death and produces spiritual fruits that please God, bless others, and make us happy. Let's accept God's gracious provision and decide to walk by the Spirit, with a clear conviction that our flesh has been crucified with Christ.