

# Walk by the Spirit

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Littlebourne - Sunday 14th July 2024 - Galatians 5:16-26

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We're getting a good way through the letter to the Galatians, and like most of Paul's letters, there's a pattern of around half the letter being doctrinal, teaching about what the truth of the matter is, and the second half more practical, about how we should apply the first part of the letter. Galatians is no exception. We're past the explanation of the law and the gospel and how salvation is not by any works we might do, up to and including following the law of Moses, now Paul is talking about the implications and the practice that comes with that truth.

He has been telling us since the start of chapter 5 about freedom - "for freedom Christ has set us free". He's gone on to explain that to follow the law on circumcision, is to follow a different path than to follow Christ. To seek justification through the law is to forfeit justification through grace. In practice, to get circumcised because you think that's going to get you favour with God is foolishness.

Just before we reach chapter 6, Paul continues to tell us that we are called to freedom, then expands on what that freedom is to be used for (v13-15):

*13 For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." 15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.*

So this freedom God has given is to be used for good - it's not a self serving freedom, not a licentious freedom. Rather, we are free to live rightly for God. Now Paul tells us how.

**v16-18**

*16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 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. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*

The immediate thing we notice is the contrast between going the Spirit's way, and going the way of the flesh. The two are opposed to each other. You can only walk in one direction at a time - walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. But gratify the desires of the flesh, walk that direction, and you won't be walking by the Spirit. To walk toward God is to walk away from lesser things, but when we seek out those lesser things above God, we're walking the opposite direction.

Now the word 'flesh' gets used in different ways - it can be a reference to humanness, or to a physical body. For example Paul tells Timothy (1 Timothy 3:16) that God was manifested in the flesh - that is, that He took on human form. Jesus really is a human man. In that usage, there's no indication of sinfulness associated with the flesh. But here, when we see flesh in contrast to the Spirit, it refers to the corrupted human nature. The sinful nature we inherit from Adam. The human race, in its fallen condition. In verse 13 Paul says that the agitators in Galatia want to circumcise in order to 'indulge/glorify in' their flesh. He is in effect saying that what they're doing is not following the Spirit - the only alternative being that it's following fleshly motivations.

Notice also that this is centred around desires - the desires of the flesh as opposed to the desires of the Spirit. The problem can't be helped by cutting off a bit of flesh, like the circumcisers are encouraging - the problem is deeper than physical being, it's a heart problem.

Paul takes for granted that we remain having the desires of the flesh, the desire to sin. But he also take for granted that those he is writing to, those who he argues are justified by faith and not by the law, have the Spirit, and the desires that the Holy Spirit gives. In order for us to really change, the Spirit must give us new desires - new desires to displace the desires we have.

And it's your desires that really drive you. They control what you do, how you act. Each keeps you from doing the things you want to do. Does Paul mean that really we want to sin, but the Spirit holds us back? Yes, I think so. Or does Paul mean that we want to go the way of the Spirit, but our flesh holds us back? I think that's right too. Maybe this is deliberately ambiguous - it immediately makes you think of the end of Romans 7 where Paul says:

*22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.*

Then in verse 18 Paul brings it back to the central theme of Galatians. "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law". We are set free from the law, free to actually follow the spirit of the law. The law can't condemn us, it has no hold over us through guilt, because our righteousness lies not in fulfilling the demands of the law, but through Christ alone.

## **v19-25**

*19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 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. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 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 keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.*

Paul says that the works of the flesh are evident. He doesn't need to tell us. But he gives us a list anyway, and as he makes clear at the end of the list, this is not exhaustive. The list includes both acts and attitudes. The attitudes listed are those that separate and divide people - enmity, jealousy, rivalries, dissension, division, envy.

Paul lists the sorts of things that the legalists would condemn - the people he's writing against would take a hard line on sexual immorality, idolatry, sorcery, drunkenness and orgies. But Paul also lists the things he sees they are guilty of - divisions, rivalries, dissention. They are dividing the church in Galatia, and Paul is explicitly saying that they are therefore not walking by the Spirit. Those who substitute the law for the Spirit don't end up following the law and walking that way, they end up violating the law.

The warning is that they will not inherit the kingdom of God - one of four occasions that Paul uses this phrase (1 Cor. 6:9-10, 15:50, Eph. 5:5). Take this in context with what we've read already - Paul isn't saying that if you've done one of these things listed, you can't be a Christian, but that if these are the things that really rule you, if these are characteristic of your life as a whole, if you're really ruled by the flesh and have no Spirit, then that's a big problem. If it's correct that all Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, then you should be displaying some of the next list - fruits of the Spirit.

The fruits of the Spirit form a contrasting list. These are matters of attitude and mentality - it's not a list of things to do necessarily, but how to do everything. These are the changes that the Spirit brings in us - the Spirit's work is to change us from the inside out. When we have the Spirit, our hearts are changed, our desires are influenced, we become more like Christ.

Paul said in verse 14 that the law is fulfilled in the command to love your neighbour as yourself. Jesus said that the law is summed up as loving God and loving neighbour. The first fruit of the Spirit is love, and the rest are things that make living in peace with our neighbour, loving them, more possible. To go the way of the Spirit is to really be following the spirit of the law.

Paul says "against such things there is no law" - if we are acting in line with the Spirit, if we are acting out the fruits of the Spirit's guidance in our lives, living by His ways, the law cannot condemn us. Now we know we are not condemned by what we have done or failed to do - there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, as He has paid for all our sin. But more than that, we can be transformed - we can live in a way that sin has less and less hold in our lives.

If you substitute the law for the Spirit you end up with neither. But those who go the way of the Spirit, get the benefits of both.

Paul says that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires". For those united to Christ, we are united to Him in His death and resurrection. I often pray here that Christ lived a perfect life in our place, died the death we deserved and rose in new life that we too can have new life in Him - His perfect life, His satisfying death, His resurrection, these are ours through our union with Him. We have been crucified with Christ - the old sinful us has been put to death. Now our old selves don't always act dead yet, but it's a certainty. Our new selves don't always act alive either, but that too is a certainty. Paul said back in chapter 2 (verse 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.*

If we have been crucified with Christ - our old selves, descended from Adam, inheriting a sinful nature, being put to death - and resurrected into life by the Spirit, in Christ, as chosen by God the Father, we should act like it. (See also Colossians 3).

Lastly for today, Paul tells us verses 25 and 26:

*25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.*

If you live by the Spirit, if you are made alive by Him, as all Christians are, then keep in step with Him. You don't want to be trying to go one way when He is leading you another.

And Paul again warns the Galatians - don't become conceited, provoking one another or envying each other. Don't be those that Paul is writing against - envious, provoking, proud. Humility is important, but as we've seen with the lists Paul has given us, it's not something that just happens - those attitudes that constitute humility - love, kindness, gentleness, peace - are fruits of the Spirit. Again, it's through walking by the Spirit that we achieve humility. The legalistic attitude that says 'I follow the law' is the attitude of pride and then division.

## **Unity by the Spirit**

You'll remember hopefully the mnemonic for remembering the works of the Spirit within us - the points of the compass. One of the points is the 'W', standing for 'We' - the way the Spirit unites us together as the church. Now we might usually take that as being something special and supernatural that the Spirit does that unites people that typically wouldn't get on - that's true enough. But the uniting together of us is related to the other points as well - we are given 'N' new life in Christ, which unites us together as one body in Him. We are 'E' empowered in ways that lead us to help one another, in ways that complement each other, which unites us. And what we've been reading about today, the 'S', Sanctification, the ongoing transformation of us to make us more and more Christlike, more and more walking by the Spirit, and thus expressing the fruits of the Spirit. Those fruits of the Spirit that encourage humility, that lead us to love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control - these are invaluable in

keeping us together as a body.

We can look around the church and some people we don't find it hard to be united to, but others we wonder how will we spend eternity with them around, 'this uniting work of the Spirit really must be supernatural'. But for all those in Christ, the fruits of the Spirit are something that we all receive - and will receive in their fullness when Christ comes again. The people in the church that annoy us today will delight us when all is said and done - because we will all be who we were made to be in Christ, through the power of the Spirit, when we are bodily resurrected and glorified, after the pattern of Christ.

## Conclusion

Galatians is written by Paul to combat the false ideas of the Judaisers and out of his concern for the wellbeing of the Galatians themselves. The past chapter he has talked about freedom - he wants the Galatians to be free.

Free from the corrupting influence of those that seek to mislead them, free from the consequences of that influence - being dragged down into guilt and having to do unnecessary things to earn salvation. True freedom rests in following the Spirit, going the Spirit's way.

Paul also wants the Galatians to be united - to not be divided.

Paul's solution to both - to bring freedom and unity is to walk by the Spirit.

Ephesians 1:13-14:

*And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.*

No Christian is without the Spirit. Paul says "when you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit". Salvation is a package deal, there's no being united to Christ, without the Spirit's indwelling too. There's no redemption and forgiveness, without transformation. These things all come together.

If you belong to Christ, you have the Spirit, and you will experience the fruits of the Spirit.  
And if you want more of the fruits of the Spirit, walk by the Spirit.