

“Live By the Spirit”

Text: Galatians 5:16-26

Paul has told the Galatians to stand firm in the freedom won for them by Jesus Christ in face of the attacks made upon the gospel by the Judaizers. As he now turns to a discussion of the Christian life in Galatians 5, Paul reminds 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, and that the Law—obedience to which cannot justify—is fulfilled in the command to love one another.

Paul has been accused of many things by the Judaizers. He has been accused of simultaneously preaching one gospel of “faith alone” to the Gentiles and another of “faith plus circumcision” to the Jews. But if he were doing that, why was he still being persecuted? The Galatians have been repeatedly told by the Judaizers that Paul’s doctrine of justification is positively dangerous, since it supposedly leads to license. That is why the Judaizers were snooping about in the Galatian churches spying on their liberty. And, no doubt, the Judaizers were accusing Paul of being a libertine—contending that he had no regard for circumcision, the Law or the traditions of the fathers. Thus here in Galatians 5, Paul is correcting a number of the ways in which he and his gospel have been misrepresented and he takes great care in setting out how it is, that *if* we are justified by grace, alone through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, we are to live our lives in light of that great truth.

In verses 16-26, Paul sets out the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Christian life contrasting the fruit of the Spirit and the so called desires of the flesh. Beginning in verse 16, Paul describes the Christian’s struggle with sin. *16 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. 17 For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.*

Paul has told the Galatians that they were called by God to be free, but that they were not to use this freedom as an excuse to indulge the sinful nature. 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. “*So I say, live by the Spirit*”—literally “walk in the Spirit,” which is a Hebrew 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 sinful nature.*” Simply stated, Paul exhorts us to walk by the Spirit as a habit of life, and in doing so we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

There is an important Old Testament echo here. The notion of life in the Spirit was a central aspect of the blessings of the coming messianic age and new covenant, and is a major theme in the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and the new covenant. As one commentator points out,

the guidance of the Spirit can be experienced as a reality in the life of the believer is a sign that Jeremiah’s prophetic word about the new covenant has been fulfilled. In OT times the Israelites knew God’s law as an external code, but in the NT dispensation the law of God is set in his people’s understanding and written on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Heb, 8:8-12); God’s will

is now an inward principle, the result of the leading of the Spirit within the believer.¹

Thus the Old Testament expectation 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.

This means that the Law, which was formerly an external declaration to us written externally upon tablets of stone, is now written upon our hearts through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Thus, those who are called to be free are also called to walk in the Spirit—they are not to let sin reign in their lives. Here, Paul is clearly talking about the third use of the Law—where an imperative [command] follows the indicative [statement] in Galatians 5:13. Thus Paul’s understanding of the Christian life is quite simple. Since we are called to be free—indicative—therefore, we are to walk in the freedom that is given us by the Spirit—the imperative. Paul had already hinted at this earlier in Galatians 2:20, “*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*” Paul speaks of a life empowered for good works because one is 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 can write, “*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom.*” Thus to “live [or walk] by the Spirit” is the living out of the freedom we have in Christ. We are free to obey because we are not obedient in order to be justified—but because we *are* justified. Since we are indwelt by the Spirit of freedom, he will ensure that we live by the Spirit. For we are now free from the things which had enslaved us—the curse of the Law and the tyranny of sin—hence, says Paul, we are free to serve one another in love.

But nowhere in this whole argument does Paul remotely hint or imply that this will be easy. Paul does not state that by “walking in the Spirit,” we will be able to subdue all manifestations of the sinful nature in our lives, and therefore attain a state of perfection in this life. The sinful nature is not eradicated at the moment of regeneration, but the sinful nature is cut off from its source of life. It will slowly but surely wither and die. But though a defeated foe, it will nevertheless fight a determined guerrilla war until we die or until Christ comes back, whichever comes first—as Paul will state in the next verse.

The key question here is “how do we walk in the Spirit?” In the historic Protestant tradition, the work of the Spirit is connected to the Word and Sacraments. Thus we walk in the Spirit by taking avail of the means of grace that God has given to us precisely for this reason. The Spirit works in and through the Word—read, preached or studied—to convict us of sin, to reveal to us God’s will, to point us continually back to the sufficiency of Christ’s death for our many sins. The Holy Spirit’s work is to remind 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, effecting the mysterious union between ourselves and other members of Christ’s church as together we are conformed to the image of Christ. But we do not fulfill Paul’s imperative by merely re-doubling our efforts, or by attempting to reach and attain a higher-level or more intense Christian experience. Walking in the Spirit is participating in the means of grace—Word and Sacrament—as well as things such as prayer and fellowship, the result of which is growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and progressive conformity to his image. We must be careful not to confuse cause and effect! We will not

¹ Fung, *Galatians*, pp. 248-249.

gratify the desires of the flesh by taking 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!

It is also important to note that for Paul, life in the Spirit is the characteristic of every Christian. There is absolutely nothing here to indicate that some Christians "live in the Spirit," and 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, therefore, persevere in the faith and will "walk in the Spirit." In a similar text, Romans 8:1-17, Paul sets out the contrast between life in the Spirit and life in the flesh. The contrast is not between the 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 the contrast between believer and unbeliever. For Paul, all Christians "walk in the Spirit" and all non-Christians "walk in the flesh." This is why Paul says in Romans 8:8-9— "*Those who are controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit lives in you.*"

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, namely that the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and visa-versa. Says Paul, these "*two are in conflict with one another, so that you do not do what you want.*" 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 in the Spirit—and therefore, 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 in conflict with one another so that you do not do what you want.*" This means that the normal Christian life is one which is characterized by the 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 defeated by the cross and the indwelling Spirit. This is a clear parallel to Paul's comments in Romans 7:14-25. In that critical text, Paul describes his present struggle with sin—indeed the struggle with sin as experienced by an apostle. Paul is, therefore, describing the "normal" Christian life as one characterized by a struggle with indwelling sin.

Many times Christians are 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, or God's favor towards them. But as Paul makes very clear, it is only the Christian, indwelt by God's spirit, who experiences a struggle between the Spirit and the flesh or "indwelling sin." Non-Christians are only "in the flesh," hence God's Spirit is not provoking such internal conflicts. Thus the struggle with sin is perhaps the clearest sign that one is actually converted! Non-Christians do not have the intense struggle between the sinful nature and the indwelling Spirit. This is why we must draw our assurance of salvation and God's favor toward us primarily from the promises given to us in the Scriptures, rather than attempting to draw assurance from our own progress in holiness. Some of those who have progressed the farthest in sanctification are also 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 it.

This is also why we must preach law and gospel on a continual basis and not moralize to people. The Law, as we have seen, excites and gives life to sin, therefore exposing our need for a Savior. But as Christians, the Law is written on our hearts and the lawyer inside of us will resonate with the Law's demands. Thus 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 have little hope of forgiveness for our

repeated infractions of God's law. 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, because like New Year's resolutions they do not work and our failure to keep the rules only frustrates us. Christianity is a religion of rescue and redemption, and only secondarily a religion of morality and ethics.

Paul now returns to his original assertion made in verse 16, "*if you are led by the Spirit,*" only this time he adds a new conclusion: "*you are not under 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 perfect will, Galatians 3:13—"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." The curse has been done away 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," 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 certainly correct to speak then 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, and 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 verse 19, Paul sets forth what is characteristic of the flesh. *19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

At this point we encounter one of the so-called sins lists in the New Testament as Paul contrasts the fruit 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 practice of antithesis. It is extremely important to notice that there is no distinction made here between "mortal" and "venial" sins as the Roman church erroneously teaches. There is also no distinction made between "big" and "little" sins, as evangelicals are apt to teach. Neither are many of the so-called "house rules" of American fundamentalism mentioned here either— i.e. smoking and drinking. etc. Too many Christians are concerned with things that God is not and not concerned with things that he is. It is vital to understand that all sin equally condemns—whether in thought, word or deed—though not all sins have equal consequences.

The sins mentioned here are divided into four basic categories. **First**, there are sexual sins, such as sexual immorality (*pornia*—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 of others, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy. **Fourth**, there are sins of intemperance, such as drunkenness and orgies.

Paul is very clear that those who live like this—those whose lives are characterized by these things—will not inherit the kingdom of God. There is no doubt that this passage is law, plain and simple. Our own sinfulness is readily apparent as we are all prone to hear these lists and look around and point our fingers at those whom we know struggle with the things mentioned in this list and 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 them with our hands or bodies does not mean that we haven’t done it in our minds or hearts. Thus, 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 “*all who rely on the law are under a curse, for it is written cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the law* (Gal. 3:10).” This list levels 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 under law and enslaved to the conduct described here. The things mentioned characterize their conduct. The Christian, on the other hand, is characterized by the following list—the Fruit of the Spirit—not the former—the Fruit 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 verse 22, Paul now contrasts the fruit of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. *22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.*

The fruit of the Spirit stand as characteristic of the Christian who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. When the Christian receives the Spirit, he or she begins to bear its fruit spontaneously, meaning that all Christians will begin to show forth these fruit which are signs of the Spirit’s indwelling, even though they may not see it. The fruit of the Spirit has important biblical background. 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 loved us first (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 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 tribulations and yet still have joy! Peace is drawn from the Hebrew *shalom*, and

denotes more than the merely negative notion of absence of war and trouble; it denotes a positive state of 'wholeness'— 'soundness' and 'prosperity'....In Paul, *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). Indeed, according to Paul's letter to Timothy, the supreme example of patience is seen in Jesus Christ, "*who displays his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life*" (1:16). Thus 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 a term closely related to kindness, and refers to "an attitude of generous kindness to others, which is happy to do far more than is required by mere justice."³ Faithfulness is understood here 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.

Thus the indwelling Holy Spirit will indeed 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 indeed bear the fruit of the Spirit. It is also important not to try and derive the assurance of your salvation from the fruit that you are bearing, though a number 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 progress in sanctification—which might be a genuine mark of Godliness—is instead turned into a morbid kind of fear that we might not be Christians at all because we are not bearing the kind of fruit that we should. Learn to look to Christ's promises in the Word and the Sacrament for assurance. This is why all the Reformers exhort us to celebrate the Lord's Supper frequently.

Paul again returns to the Spirit-flesh conflict depicted in verse 17. But here, the focus is upon Christ's victory over sin and therefore, "the flesh" for us. Those who are "in Christ"—those who "belong to Christ"—are said by Paul to have "crucified the flesh." The fact that the verb here ("have crucified") is

² Fung, *Galatians*, p. 265.

³ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 269.

⁴ Fung, *Galatians*, p. 270.

an aorist tense—meaning a completed action, and clearly indicates that the believer was crucified with Christ at the time of their conversion (Galatians 2:20), and which was signed and sealed in their baptism when Paul says “they put on Christ” (Galatians 3:26-27). Thus the power of sin over a believer has been forever broken, objectively speaking—though subjectively speaking, this victory will not be the constant psychological experience of the Christian (i.e., Romans 7:14 ff). It is indeed the characteristic of every Christian believer, that despite the difficult struggle with indwelling sin, the power of sin is broken, and that 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. And the slavery that resulted from our bondage to sin and the flesh have been done away with through Christ’s death for us, and the life imparted to us through 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—for 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 indeed to walk in the Spirit. As we walk in the Spirit, we daily crucify the flesh. And we walk in the Spirit by taking avail of the means of grace—Word and Sacrament—and things such as fellowship and prayer.

As Paul understands the Christian life, the Christian will indeed manifest the fruit of the Spirit. We will persevere to the end and be saved and 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 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,” or 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—called “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 in the Spirit” and will be characterized by a fierce struggle with the remnants of sin, but which every Christian will win because Christ will ensure that they do so. 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. Indeed, 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. Thus 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. And 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 the broken body and blood of the Savior himself, who is offered to us in the Sacrament. To hear and believe the Word of God and receive the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper is to “live by the Spirit,” and this is what Paul commands us to do.

