**LIVE BY THE SPIRIT**

March 23, 2014

Galatians 5:1-26

Key Verse 5:16 “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

In the last week’s passage, we learned how God made slaves into his children and heirs of his glorious kingdom by faith in Jesus. Those who only knew condemnation under the law could suddenly call on God through faith as their loving Abba, Father, by the Spirit of Jesus in them. We praise God that we have the privilege to call on God as his children, and know that he will answer not as our Judge, but as our Abba, Father. In today’s passage, Paul encourages us to live by the Spirit. What does it mean? Some people may think about a mystical experience such as the Holy Spirit telling him/her what to do each day. No, it is not like that. Let’s see what Paul means by “Live by the Spirit.”

Let me give you the conclusion first. Verse 24 says, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.” When we believe in Jesus Christ, we crucified our sinful nature. But it did not die. It is still there even though it was rendered powerless. Even in that powerless state, it can exert the great power. God could have removed the sinful nature from believers when we believed in Jesus. But he did not choose to do so. How wonderful it would be if we do not have to struggle with our sinful nature. Why did God not remove the sinful nature from believers? He wanted to keep believers continually reminded of their own weakness; to keep them continually depend on Christ. Instead of removing the sinful nature, God gave us his own Spirit to indwell us. God’s Spirit and our sinful nature are at war, and will continue until we are taken from this earth. The believers’ part in the conflict is to yield to the Spirit. One theologian illustrated it as having two trees within us: old tree of the sinful nature, and new tree of the divine nature. How do we keep barren the old tree, and make fruitful the new tree? We can do that when we live by the Spirit. When we do not live by the Spirit, the old sinful nature may be revived and does great harm.

Look at verse 1. “It is for freedom that Christ set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” The freedom we have in Jesus is a special privilege and responsibility, just as the heir is given freedom so that he might properly steward his inheritance. But just as human heirs are notorious for misusing their inheritance, like the prodigal son, so sinful human beings are in great danger of misusing their freedom in Christ. Living in Christian freedom is like walking a golden road leading to the heavenly kingdom. But on both sides of the road are ditches that must be avoided, legalism and lawlessness; doing whatever I want to do regardless of the consequences. If we fall into either ditch, we get sidetracked and become bound and miserable. Satan has many ways of attacking God’s children to make them stumble and fall. But Paul in this chapter addresses Satan’s two-pronged attack on the children of God; first, he plants a sense of condemnation and tries to make us keep the law in order to feel righteous. Second, Satan deceives Christians that since it is impossible to live up to the law, we are free to indulge in our sinful desires and that God still saves us. Let’s look at each separately.

First, Satan’s deception to obtain righteousness by keeping the law. There is a saying, “Don't put all your eggs in a single basket.” To do so means risking everything you have. The Galatians subscribed to this idea. They were like modern Hindus, who say that “Christ is good. Buddha is good. Krishna is good.” In particular, the Galatians wanted to have Christ, and to subscribe to the law, just in case, as a back-up plan. The reason that the Galatians attempted to make such a tragic compromise was because of their weak consciences. They knew that they were not righteous, although they had believed. So they turned to the deceptive rigor of the law, unwittingly rejecting what was already theirs by faith. We know the story of Martin Luther. He was a monk. But he wanted to marry. He could not control his desires. He felt condemned and tried to obtain the forgiveness of sins by torturing his body, such as climbing on steps with broken glasses, bleeding. What does Paul think of this?

Look at verses 2-4. “Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.” The flaw in the plan of the Galatians is very obvious. The law is one, just as God is one. If we subject ourselves to the law, hoping in our own righteousness on one point of the law, for example, circumcision, then we are obligated to meet the requirements of the law at all points. A man who never cheats on his wife and pays all his taxes but has killed a man will certainly not be regarded as righteous by men, nor by God. When I first believed in Jesus, I felt guilty for not keeping the Sabbath law completely, because the Bible says that I should not work on the Sabbath. But sometimes I had homework due on Monday and I had to do work on Sunday night. Then I read somewhere that Jews count days from sunrise to sunset. So I justified myself for working on Sunday night. But I had troubled conscience. Paul did his best to obey the law in every way. But what was his testimony? He said, “A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Christ Jesus.” Only faith in Jesus gives us peace to our troubled soul. Then what do we do when Satan condemns us? Look at verses 5-6. “But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” To have something by faith is the same as living as if we have it. We have been promised a new life and an eternal inheritance in Jesus. We have been promised a righteousness that is by faith in Jesus. To live by faith is to live with this confidence. We do not yet have it, but it is ours, more surely than the money we have in the bank. Those who have this confidence are free indeed to grow in the image of Jesus, to love our brothers by faith, to carry out the world salvation work of God by sharing the love of Jesus with the whole world.

Second, Satan’s deception to abuse God’s grace. When Paul spoke about salvation by grace alone, and taught that Christians are free in Christ, some people misunderstood the message of freedom. They assumed that freedom meant doing whatever one felt like or desired. This misunderstanding leads to self-indulgence, which is equivalent to licentiousness. So Paul teaches us what freedom in Christ truly means. Look at verse 13. “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.” We are free to come to God and enjoy his presence. We are free to worship and serve God. In the past we were not free to serve God because of our sins and condemnation. Now we can come to God freely without fear. By faith we can now have fellowship with God freely, calling, “Abba, Father!” “Daddy!” We must not use this freedom to indulge our sinful nature, but to serve others humbly in love.

Look at verse 16. “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” To live in Christian freedom requires overcoming the desires of the sinful nature. The sinful 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 sinful nature. 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 live by the Holy Spirit.

In verse 17a Paul explained why we have to live by the Spirit. It says, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature.” The sinful nature and the Spirit are in conflict in regards to what each desires. The sinful nature desires to please itself. The Spirit desires to please God. The sinful nature desires immediate gratification with fleeting pleasure, which is followed by much suffering. The Spirit desires eternal joy, which comes through spiritual struggle. What the sinful nature 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. Verse 17b says, “They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what 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 sinful nature. 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 live by the Spirit. We know very well in our heads that we should live by the Spirit. But in reality, our natural tendency as fallen people is to live by the sinful nature. When we are filled with the Spirit, we are free from the desires of the sinful nature. But it is not easy for us to be always filled with the Spirit. We face a constant battle between the Spirit and the sinful nature. To overcome the sinful nature, we have to live by the Spirit. How? We can think of three ways: Pray, meditate, and praise and give thanks to God.

First, we have to submit to God through prayer. It is when we submit to God’s will that God fills us with his Spirit. As Jesus approached his death on a cross, he said his soul was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. But he didn’t let his feelings of anguish or sorrow take over. In the middle of the night he went a little further and came to God personally in prayer. After his honest, intense struggle in prayer to submit to God’s will, Jesus could live by the Spirit. He became spiritually strong enough not to be afraid, to face his accusers, to go through all the sufferings, to love so much that he could give his own life, and even while suffering intensely, to pray for those killing him, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk23:34). Prayer enables us to live by the Spirit.

Another way to live by the Spirit is to meditate on God’s word. Jesus once said, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.” (Jn 6:63). God’s words are full of the Spirit. So if we want to live by the Spirit, we need to make time to meditate on his words. Listening to God’s word helps us live by the Spirit.

Finally, we can live by the Spirit when we thank and praise God. Sometimes when our hearts are heaviest, it’s when our situation is the hardest, that’s the time to sing songs of praise to God. When we do, the Holy Spirit fills our hearts. Colossians 3:16–17 describes living in the Spirit in this way, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”May we live in the Spirit by praising and thanking God in all we do.

Look at verse 22-23. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control…”In his list of the fruit of the Spirit, they all describe one’s inner life and character. And the first fruit of the Spirit he mentions is love. Here love refers to agape love, which is God's self-sacrificing love that sent Christ to die for sinners. Any man or woman can love his/her family and friends to certain degree, but when it comes to loving others or even their enemies he/she cannot love them with an agape love. But a Christian who lives by the Spirit is filled with God's love and can serve others as Christ did. The other fruit of the Spirit—joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control—are so beautiful, our hearts are moved even to read them. They describe the character of Christ himself. This is the process of sanctification by the Holy Spirit. It is not automatic, but when we allow the Spirit to lead, convict and help us struggle against the desires of our sinful nature, he works within us to conform us to the image of God’s Son (Ro 8:29).

Look at verse 25, “since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” Here is Paul’s final tip on how to live by the Spirit: It is to learn to keep in step with the Spirit. It means to “set our minds on what the Spirit desires” (Ro 8:5). It means not to get sidetracked by our own desires, but to prayerfully follow the leading of the Spirit. Keeping in step with the Spirit seems especially to mean to keep on following his promptings to love. May we live by the Spirit to keep in step in loving God and others.