**WALK BY THE SPIRIT**

October 13, 2019

Galatians 5:1-25

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

In 2013 International summer Bible conference, there was an interest group on the Holy Spirit. One senior missionary expressed his exasperation, “Why am I still struggling with sin after 30 years of missionary life?” This question comes from a wrong theology, which says that you can achieve Christian perfection; it is possible for a believer through spiritual discipline to be sanctified to such a level that he is free from sin and depravity. It is a wrong theology. As we studied in Chapter 3, it is not what the Bible teaches. The cross chart shows that as we grow in Christ, our awareness of sin grows, and our awareness of God’s holiness also grows. So we will struggle with sin more and more as we grow in Christ.



The missionary felt that we need some mystical experience such as speaking in tongues to feel the Holy Spirit so that sin may be gone from his life. The Bible does not teach that you can reach the state of perfection where you never sin again. In today’s passage, Paul teaches that we face a constant battle within us between the Spirit and the flesh. In order to win the victory, we need to walk by the Spirit. It doesn’t say “leap” by the Spirit, “jump” by the Spirit, “run” by the Spirit. It says “Walk” by the Spirit, one step at a time. It is a daily moment-by-moment walk. That is why Paul said, “I die every day.” The only way you can walk by the Spirit is to have our minds set on what God desires. What God wants most is our praise. That is why we need to give thanks to God every day, not just on Thanksgiving Day.

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 license to sin; legalism is doing something to earn God’s favor, and license to sin is doing whatever I want to do regardless of the consequences. If we fall into either ditch, we get stuck and miserable, and we become very ineffective in being witnesses of Jesus Christ. 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, why not indulge in our sinful desires because God still forgives us. Let’s look at each separately.

**First**, Satan’s deception to obtain righteousness by keeping the law. 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.” 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 had a poor understanding of the law, and so 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 sunset to sunset. So I justified myself for working on Sunday night. But I had troubled conscience. Then what do we do when Satan condemns us? Only faith in Jesus gives us peace to our troubled soul. Look at verses 5-6. “For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith 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 and sisters 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 licence to sin. So Paul teaches us what freedom in Christ truly means. Look at verse 13. “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly 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 flesh, but to serve others humbly in love.

Here “flesh” means your remaining humanity, your unredeemed humanity, the part of you that hasn’t yet been redeemed. When you are born again, you become a new creation. It was an amazing transformation. When we die, we don’t become an eternal, blessed, new creation because we are already a new creation. We simply get rid of the unredeemed body. As long as we are physically alive, the flesh is still there. Some people have a wrong idea that through spiritual discipline, we can achieve Christian perfection and holiness. Then they are surprised that they need to struggle with their sin even long after becoming Christians. Let me explain using the example of Lazarus. When Lazarus was raised from the dead, he still had the grave clothes. As long as the stinking grave clothes filled with decay and the stench of death clung to him, he did stink, and he was hindered in expressing his new life. Likewise, we have been raised to walk in a new life. But we are still wrapped in the remnants of our fallenness. Even though we are raised from the dead, the grave clothes are still stuck to us with a stench of death. In Lazarus’ case, the grave clothes could be removed, but in our case, it cannot be removed because it is who we are. Removing the flesh means physical death. That is why we groan. Paul said in Romans 8:23, “Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies.” We eagerly await a day when we are transformed into a glorious body when there will be no sin. Until then we groan. The spiritually dead person cannot feel the stink. Only spiritually alive person can smell the stink. As we walk by the Spirit, the aroma of Christ will overpower the stench of death by the flesh. As we are aware of our sins, we will smell the stench of death more and more, but if we walk by the Spirit, the aroma of Christ will overpower.

So you have a war going on inside of you. Look at verse 17. “For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.” This describes the Christian life. The addiction is broken but there is still in you an attraction to the sin drug. You are weak at the point of your flesh. We all are. It is the unredeemed nature that becomes the attack point for temptation and the bridge to sin. It is the battleground for the believer. What does your flesh want to do? Look at verse 19. Here is what the flesh does, here are the acts of the flesh: Sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy, drunkenness, orgies, and the like, and the list could be almost endless. That is what the flesh wants. That is what the flesh produces. And there will always be that battle, although the power of the flesh will decrease as you become more like Christ in the process of sanctification. And one day, the flesh will disappear—you will have a body like Jesus’ glorious body (Phil 3:21).

But in the meantime, how do you win the battle? Look at verse 16. “So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” We face a constant battle between the Spirit and the flesh. To overcome the flesh, we have to walk by the Spirit. Suppose you are crossing a field full of land mines. The flesh desires are like land mines. The Spirit knows exactly where each was buried and how to cross the field safely. In order to live, we need to walk by the Spirit very closely. How can we walk by the Spirit practically in our daily lives? We can think of three ways: Pray, meditate, 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 walk by the Spirit. Another way to walk 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 walk by the Spirit, we need to make time to meditate on his words. Listening to God’s word helps us walk by the Spirit.

Finally, we can walk by the Spirit when we thank and praise God. Sometimes when our hearts are heaviest, it is when our situation is the hardest, that is 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 walk by the Spirit by praising and thanking God in all we do.

Many people complain that they cannot overcome the flesh, and they cannot obey God’s commands. They do not have obedience problem; they have the love problem. John 14:23 says, “Jesus replied, ‘Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.’” Only when we love God, the Spirit of God can work from inside and bear the fruit. Look at verses 22-23. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control…”In this list of the fruit of the Spirit, they all describe one’s inner life and character. 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 flesh, he works within us to conform us to the image of God’s Son (Ro 8:29).

Look at verse 24. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” When we believed in Jesus Christ, we have crucified the flesh on the cross together with Jesus. But 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 sins? Why did God not remove sinful nature from believers? Because 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. We can do that when we walk by the Spirit.

May God bless you to walk by the Spirit by setting your minds on what God desires, namely, love God and love our neighbor. May God bless you to give thanks to God every day.