

Walking in the Spirit and Not After the Flesh

Galatians 5:15-26

Galatians 5:15-26: *“But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!”¹⁶ I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.¹⁷ For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness,²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies,²¹ envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.²⁴ And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.²⁵ If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.”*

Background Notes

When you have finished reading through the apostle Paul’s epistle to the Galatians, if you still think that somehow you can get into Heaven simply by living a good life, then you are not a good reader - you did **not** comprehend what you read! It’s impossible to read the book of Galatians and miss the point that salvation is **not by human works, but by grace through faith: God’s grace** in providing salvation for sinners, because Jesus died on the cross for our sin, and **our faith** in receiving the gift of salvation, by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Savior. That’s the gospel – pure and simple. You cannot mix faith and human effort to attain salvation!

The Judaizers, the false teachers of Paul’s day, taught that you had to perform all the works and requirements of the Old Testament Law along with faith in Jesus in order to obtain salvation. No, said the apostle Paul (and the Bible)! You cannot mix Law and grace, or grace is no longer grace. Grace is God’s **unmerited** favor toward mankind, and you can’t earn something that’s unmerited by working for it! So if you try to mix in any amount of human effort of any kind - even a little bit - then it is no longer grace.

What about sanctification? Sanctification is the process by which believers become more godly or more Christ-like in this life. Our natural thinking would say that we would become more godly by keeping God’s Law to the best of our abilities. No! Wrong! That would be “works-oriented” sanctification. The Law and/or any kind of human effort can never give life, and the Law was never intended to be the Christian’s rule of life. We are not saved by the works of the Law, and we’re not sanctified by the works of the Law.

In Galatians 3 we learned that God gave the Old Testament Law for two reasons:

- First, to prove that no one can measure up to God's standard of perfection.
- Second, to prepare the way for salvation by faith in Christ alone.

What, then, is the biblical method for sanctification? How should a believer go about gaining victory over sin and becoming more like Christ in this life? In Galatians 5:16 the apostle Paul gave us the answer: *"Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh."* That's the biblical method of sanctification in a nutshell!

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers who walk in the Spirit will not commit the deeds of the flesh.

What does it mean to *"walk in the Spirit"*? Basically, it means to be increasingly occupied with Jesus Christ. Essentially, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is to *"form Christ in us"* - or to make us more Christ-like. It's impossible to be fully occupied with Christ and at the same time continue to sin! So that's the key to a godly life and sanctification. If you are more and more occupied with Christ, you will automatically sin less and less.

"But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (v18). When we follow the Spirit's leading, we don't have to follow the Law as a rule of life because we will be doing God's will. Walking in the Spirit and being occupied more with the Lord Jesus Christ obviously means that we'll be involved in Bible study, prayer, worship, Christian fellowship, and Christian service.

What is *"the flesh"* (v17)? The flesh is the sinful nature – and we were born with a sinful nature. We can be sure that *"the flesh"* will try to everything it can to stop the process of sanctification, because the flesh is in opposition to the Spirit: *"For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish"* (v17).

When we become Christians, we receive a new nature. 2 Peter 1:4 says that believers are *"partakers of the divine nature."* The new nature that we have as Christians does not sin and does not want to sin. It is the new nature of the new life that we have in Christ. This is the life that is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

However, until we get to Heaven and receive our new bodies, we will still also have the old sinful nature that we were born with. Did you know that some Christians teach that once we are born again, we no longer have the sinful nature? The only reason we sin, they say, is because of *"bad behavioral patterns"* that we have learned in the past, and so we must be reprogrammed. If that is true, then why do adults who became Christians as children commit sins that they never committed as children - or never even dreamed of committing as children? (And that's just one of the arguments that refute the idea that a believer no longer has a sinful nature.)

Galatians 5 clearly teaches that a believer still has the “flesh” or sinful nature, and thus a believer is capable of committing any one of the sins of the flesh mentioned here: *“Now the works of the flesh are evident: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like...”* (v19-21). Because we still have the sinful nature, any Christian is capable of any one of those sins, which makes it all the more important for believers to *walk in the Spirit!*

What is the meaning of that last section of verse 21: *“those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God?”* Does this mean that Christians who commit any one of these sins will lose their salvation? No. However, if someone says he or she is a believer but who continues to practice these sins *as a way of life*, it’s a strong indication that they never were true believers. 1 John 3:9 says, *“Whoever is born of God does not practice sin.”* In other words, members of God’s family do not live a life that is characterized by sin. ***A true believer does not habitually sin and does not lead a life of sin.***

Again, what is the key for victory over sin in the Christian life? The key is to walk in the Spirit, by soaking up the Word of God and enjoying happy fellowship with other like-minded believers. Believers who walk in the Spirit will not commit the deeds of the flesh.

2. Believers who walk in the Spirit will exhibit the fruit of the Spirit.

Verses 22- 24: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”*

Notice that the contrast here is ***not*** between the fruit of the Spirit and the fruit of the flesh. It’s rather between the ***fruit of the Spirit*** and the ***deeds of the flesh***. There’s no fruit from the flesh.

Notice that it is the fruit (singular) of the Spirit - not fruits of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit in our lives is really ***Christ-likeness***. It is the life of Christ lived out in the life of the believer. Like our Savior, it is characterized by love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These are the character traits of the new life that we have in Christ. As we walk in the Spirit, this fruit will be exhibited in our lives.

What does verse 24 mean? *“And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”* Does it mean that you should persecute your body? No! This verse means that part of walking in the Spirit is to continually recognize our position in Christ - and ***put it into practice***. Our legal position before God is that we have died with Christ

and have been raised with Christ (see Romans 6). Now we need to recognize this truth in practice, and keep the flesh in the place of death. And that's what's involved in verse 24.

We cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit in our own strength, but we can refuse to read certain magazines or books, or watch certain videos, or participate in the wide variety of websites that appeal to the sinful nature. ***Don't feed the flesh*** - because the sinful nature is alive and well, and it will thrive if it's fed. Consider the flesh as having been crucified with Christ, or put in the place of death. Believers who walk in the Spirit will exhibit the fruit of the Spirit.

Practical Application

Remember, walking is a step-by-step process.

Verses 25-26: "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another."

Notice that verse 25 does not say, "If we live in the Spirit, let us also run or fly in the Spirit." When you **walk**, you move forward ***one step at a time***.

Some of you may be discouraged because you don't see the fruit of the Spirit in your life. Listen – keep on walking in the Word, and in prayer, and in Christian fellowship, and worship. If you do these things, the fruit of the Spirit will be seen in your life. And maybe that's your problem – maybe you're not walking in these practices.

On the other hand, if you walk hand-in-hand with your sinful nature, the flesh, little by little the traits of verse 26 will characterize your life. You'll become a conceited, angry, badmouthing, jealous Christian.

But if you walk hand-in-hand with the Spirit, little by little the fruit of the Spirit will characterize your life. Remember, walking is a step-by-step process.