WALK BY THE SPIRIT

Galatians 5:16–26

Key Verse: 5:16

“So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

 We all know the famous saying, “It’s hard to teach an old dog new tricks.” We all tend to get set in our ways. We develop habits that are hard to break, and character traits and patterns of behavior that we follow unconsciously. Some scholars even say that our character and behavior patterns are already set for life in our early childhood. So how can we really change? Is it even possible?

In Galatians Paul has been urging us to live in the grace of Christ. In last week’s passage we learned that his grace gives us real freedom—freedom from legalism, as well as freedom from self-indulgence. In today’s passage Paul goes on to show us the secret of this freedom. It’s the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit sets us free both from legalism and from self-indulgence. The Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us, and he’s the one who changes us. But we also have to do our part. Living by the Spirit is a completely new way of living. Needless to say, it’s pretty challenging to change our whole way of life. It can seem overwhelming. So in this passage Paul gives us some practical tips on how to cooperate with the Spirit’s work, so that we can really live this new life in the grace of Christ. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Before we get into today’s passage, we should take a brief look back at verses 13–15. In these verses Paul addresses the concern that freedom in the grace of Christ will lead to gross abuse. God doesn’t give us freedom so that we can indulge our flesh; he gives us freedom so we can serve one another humbly in love. It’s actually what all God’s law is really trying to get us to do—to love one another as we love ourselves. Sadly, it’s often supposed Christians who’re biting, devouring and destroying each other.

So how can we not abuse the freedom God gives us in Christ? How can we serve one another humbly in love? How can we be prevented from biting and devouring each other? Let’s read verse 16. Literally in Greek it says, “By the Spirit, walk.” It emphasizes more the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And the Greek word for “walk” here literally means the way we behave and live. Probably one of the biggest problems with Christians is that there’s such a dichotomy between what we know and how we live. As so many people say, we “talk the talk but do not walk the walk.” Basically, it’s hypocrisy. We sing amazing hymns and praise songs at church on Sundays, but go out into the world and live as if there’s no God. We hear a sermon on “seek first his kingdom,” but then go out and put all other kinds of things as our priority. We hear countless sermons on loving others, but then go out and treat people so badly. The Jews in the Bible had the same problem. Jesus addressed this issue of hypocrisy. He said, “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them” (Mt23:2–4). Legalistic people are so concerned about keeping up the appearance of holiness and godliness with their strict adherence to rules and religious attendance. Jesus said that they diligently “clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence” (Mt23:25). He said they are “like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Mt23:27). Laws can change our outward appearance, but they cannot change our hearts. It’s so easy to pay attention to our outward appearance, to try to look good outwardly, but totally ignore what’s really going on in our hearts. But it’s our hearts that make us dirty and ugly. Jesus said, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Mt15:19). The famous Old Testament prophet Jeremiah said, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer17:9).

The “walk” Paul’s talking about is not the walk of looking good outwardly, of going to church, Bible studies and prayer meetings and doing and saying all the right things. It’s a walk that starts with the heart. It’s a walk that leads us to serve one another humbly in love. We can’t walk this walk unless our hearts are changed. What can change our sin-sick hearts? Only the Holy Spirit.

How do we receive the Holy Spirit? Paul reminds us how it happens back in chapter 3. It’s when we hear the message of Christ crucified and believe that he died for me. When we accept Jesus’ grace of forgiveness through his death on the cross for our sins, we receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit helps us to truly repent. And then God begins to work miracles in our lives (3:1–5). When we stay near the cross of Jesus, God enables us to live lives filled with the Holy Spirit. But as soon as we start relying on ourselves, on keeping rules and laws, on doing “the works of the law,” we lose the fullness of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

To “walk by the Spirit” means to receive the power of the Holy Spirit (Ac1: 8). Our sins make us powerless, as powerless as a corpse (Ro5:5). But the Spirit helps us to get up out of the deadness of our sins and begin to walk the Christian life by his power, not ours. Our Lord Jesus is the best example of walking by the power of the Spirit (Ac 10:38). How did Jesus walk by the power of the Spirit? It was when he accepted God’s mission for him (Lk3:21,22). With the power of the Spirit Jesus resisted the devil’s temptations in the wilderness (Lk4:1–13). After resisting them, the Bible says “Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit” (Lk4:14). Like Jesus, if we want to receive the power of the Spirit, we first need to accept God’s mission for us. And then, depending on the Spirit, we need to resist the devil’s temptations. Without accepting God’s mission for our lives and without resisting temptations, there’s no way we can have the power of the Spirit. Apostle Paul is another good example of someone who walked by the power of the Spirit. Many Gentiles were led to obey God, not through Paul himself, but through Christ working in and through Paul, through the power of the Spirit of God (Ro15:18,19). In his ministry Paul didn’t depend on wise and persuasive words, but on the Spirit’s power (1Co2:4). We’re all probably weaker than we’d like to admit. But God can strengthen us with power through his Spirit in our inner being, until Christ can dwell in our hearts through faith, and we’re rooted and established in love (Eph3:16,17).

Read verse 1 again. Here the word “walk” is a verb in the present tense, and it can be translated as “be walking” by the Spirit. It implies a daily lifestyle. To be walking by the Spirit every day, we all need to start our day with personal prayer instead of depending on our flesh, a.k.a. our own strength or willpower. We need to invite the Spirit into our lives, to help us to pray, because often we don’t even know what to pray for (Ro8:26). Jesus taught us that even though we’re evil, we should ask God for the Holy Spirit (Lk11:13). We need to be earnestly seeking the Spirit’s help and his guidance, and doing our best not to resist him but to carefully follow his promptings and his leading. When we resist him, the Bible says, we “quench” or drown out the Spirit and “grieve” the Spirit (1Th5:19; Eph4:30). The Spirit is in our lives not just for religious activities, but for everything. He leads us in our relationships, in our career, in where to live and how to spend our time. To walk by the Spirit means to stop depending on our own clever ideas or plans, but to really seek the Spirit for his wisdom, to involve him in all the choices and decisions of our lives.

Paul says in verse 16 that when we walk by the Spirit, we “will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” It means the Spirit empowers us to resist the desires of our flesh. The desires of our flesh are very strong. They’re so strong that they can completely take over our lives and cause us to make many foolish, reckless and harmful decisions that lead us to great regret and guilt. Paul goes on to describe this struggle. Read verse 17. We would like our lives to be free of struggle. We would like to think that receiving Christ means being set free from struggle. But Christian freedom is not a freedom from all struggle. It’s a freedom to struggle in the right way. And verse 17 tells us that we should expect a struggle. Though the Holy Spirit lives in us and changes us, we all still have our flesh. In Greek the word for “flesh” here doesn’t necessarily mean only our physical body, but also our sinful nature. We’re all born with a sinful nature, and it doesn’t go away when we become Christians. It’s always there, inside us, latent and eager to gain control and take over. We need to know that our sinful nature is always going to resist what the Holy Spirit is trying to do in our lives. Our sinful nature makes us stubborn. It makes us stubbornly choose what’s bad for us. It makes us so stubborn that we won’t listen to the Holy Spirit. Our sinful nature tells us to do whatever we want, to fully indulge ourselves and our desires. But the Holy Spirit tells us to do what God wants, even when it means to sacrifice ourselves and deny our own desires. So to walk by the Spirit, we have to be listening to what the Spirit is telling us, especially when it goes against our own desires. So to walk by the Spirit, we have to seriously ask ourselves a very personal question: Who am I listening to? My sinful nature? Or the Holy Spirit?

To help us, Paul goes on to describe what happens to us when we keep listening to our sinful nature and its desires. Read verses 19–21. If we follow the desires of our flesh, they’ll lead us to become very ugly people. Jesus didn’t die on the cross and shed is blood to give us his grace so that we could live such ugly lives. He died to save us from ourselves and from living such ugly lives. These acts of the sinful nature all have some common characteristics. They’re all basically selfish. Using sex and sexual pleasure for oneself. Trying to manipulate the spiritual world for oneself. Basing all my relationships with others based on my own ambitions, desires and greed. These acts of the sinful nature are also all basically destructive. They destroy ourselves. They destroy our relationship with God. They destroy our marriages, our families, our churches and our society. The world tries to make us think that following the desires of the flesh is free and fun and fantastic. But we need to know the truth: following the desires of the flesh actually leads to devastation.

Then Paul contrasts the acts of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. Read verses 22,23. What amazing fruit it is! We may have lived very ugly and sinful lives. We may have a very strong and stubborn sinful nature. But as we learn to walk by the Spirit, the road ahead is so beautiful and bright. And this is the fruit Jesus died for. He died so that this fruit of the Spirit could be born and grow, even within sinners like us. Just as the acts of our sinful flesh have common characteristics, so do the fruit of the Spirit. And they’re the polar opposite. They’re all unselfish, and, instead of *de*structive, they’re all *con*structive—they’re all used to *build up*, both ourselves and others. The first fruit on the list here is love. It’s the fourth time Paul mentions love in this chapter. Love is so important because it’s the very nature of God. It’s also the main point of all his law. It’s the greatest thing God wants to give us, greater even than faith or hope (1Co13:13). With love, all the other fruit starts to grow in us. Second on the list is joy. Following the flesh will make us feel so wretched. But following the Spirit, though sometimes painful, always leads to real joy. As we grow in the awareness of God’s love, it fills us with joy. The third fruit is peace. This is peace with God, real inner peace in our souls. It’s what everyone is really longing for. When we’re restless and anxious, it means we haven’t been walking by the Spirit. Walking by the Spirit leads us to great inner peace.

The first three fruits on this list seem to be personal, and the ones afterwards all seem to relate to how we interact with others: “forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” People can be hard to bear. People can be so selfish. People don’t deserve anything good. People can wear us out. But with the fruit of the Spirit we can bear with others, show them kindness, do good for them, be faithful to them and gentle with them. With the fruit of the Spirit we can control ourselves, not only for our own good, but also for the good of others. These aren’t qualities we have to strive for with our effort; they’re qualities the Holy Spirit himself produces in us as we learn to walk with him. They’re actually all parts of the character of Jesus. Our Lord Jesus was always full of love, joy and peace. He was full of forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, especially with his disciples. It’s nothing but amazing grace that this character of Jesus can actually grow in sinners like us, as we learn to walk by the Spirit. As the hymn says, “Fill with thy Spirit till all shall see/Christ only, always living in me!”

So what do others see in me? Vanity? Arrogance? Anger? Rudeness? Selfish indifference? Or Christ? Instead of obsessing about keeping certain rules or laws, we should earnestly be seeking the fruit of the Spirit in our personal lives. With the fruit of the Spirit we can be really happy and sleep well at night, even if we may have many problems. With the fruit of the Spirit, we can become influential to all those around us, even when people are dark and depressed and mean. With the fruit of the Spirit, we can contribute to building a beautiful community that honors God and is a source of refuge to the lonely and lost.

Read verse 24. This verse tells us a new attitude we have toward our flesh after we believe in Jesus. Why do we want to crucify our flesh with its passions and desires? It’s not to get a “ripped” body. It’s not because we’re morbid and full of self-hatred. It’s because we remember what Christ did for us on the cross. He had to suffer so much, shed his blood, be wounded, humiliated and killed on account of my sins. When I realize how much Jesus suffered to set me free from my sin, out of his great love for me, I’m done with sin (1Pe4:1). Only thinking about Jesus on the cross can change us in this way. It changes us from sin lovers to sin haters, especially hating the sins within ourselves. When we receive the grace of Christ, basically we’re crucified. We’re dead to sin (Ro6:11). We always carry around in our bodies the death of Jesus (2Co4:10). And when our flesh starts urging us with its passions and desires, we don’t fool around with it, indulging as much as we can get away with; instead, we put to death the misdeeds of the body by the power of the Spirit (Ro8:12,13). Without the Spirit, we can’t really crucify our sinful nature. But with the Spirit’s help, we can.

Read verses 25,26. How important it is, Paul says, to “keep in step with the Spirit.” It means to follow the Spirit’s leading very carefully. We shouldn’t be rushing ahead of what the Spirit is doing in our lives or in our ministry. We shouldn’t be blindly following our own desires or ambitions, or the pattern of this world; we should be carefully following the leading of the Holy Spirit. If we don’t keep in step with the Spirit, we so easily become conceited and start provoking and envying each other.

Today we mainly thought about what it means to walk by the Spirit. With the Spirit’s help, we have the power to change. With the Spirit’s help, we resist our own passions and desires. With the Spirit’s help, we can even bear the fruit of the Spirit. With the Spirit’s help, we can become beautiful persons like Jesus. May God help us to be filled with the Holy Spirit by staying near the cross of Christ. And may God help each of us each and every day keep learning how to walk by the Spirit, so that he may build a beautiful, Christ-like community among us.