

LIVING BY THE SPIRIT

Galatians 5:16-18

The Christian Life is life in the Spirit. You cannot understand the Christian life unless you understand the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. While we are set free from the law in Christ, we are brought under the control of the Holy Spirit. This is so much better. The law was powerless to work any changes in us since it was external and demanding, but the Spirit can make a difference since He is personal and indwelling. It cannot be emphasized too much that Christians are people who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. He dwells within their hearts as the presence of God.

In a great summary statement Paul puts before us some of the most basic truths about the Christian life. This is one of those texts that understands me. As I have come to understand this statement of Paul it has explained what I have experienced in my life. Here are some truths that you can live by. The Christian alternative to the bondage of the law is living in the Spirit of God. What does this mean?

I. LIVING BY THE SPIRIT IS FOLLOWING THE GUIDANCE OF THE SPIRIT IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT.

"This I say then" alerts us that we are to hear something extremely important. We are to hear the word of Paul about the Christian life in contrast to those who would seek to live by the law. His word is, "Walk in the Spirit". This is the great imperative of the paragraph. The command is to "walk" in the Spirit.

Let's see if we can put this command into the proper context. This command assumes that the Christian has the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life. This is no command to seek the Spirit, or pray for the Spirit. It is rather much needed counsel about how the Christian who has the Holy Spirit dwelling within is to relate to the Holy Spirit. So many Christians seem to live for years without realizing that God has provided this wonderful Helper in the moral struggle of life. So the command is to "walk" in the Spirit.

There seems to me to be two primary things in this. First, it involves the inner moral guidance of the Holy Spirit. Paul will say, "But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law." The "if" in this statement does not question it, and rather introduces a statement of fact. All true Christians are "led" by the Holy Spirit. In the Roman letter, Paul makes this guidance of the Spirit a proof of sonship. "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." In both statements the guidance of the Spirit is in the context of moral freedom. Those who belong to Christ are being guided by the Spirit toward righteousness and godliness. This guidance of the Spirit is internal guidance and works in two ways.

The Holy Spirit will guide by bringing prompt conviction when we have done something wrong. He will trouble us about it. But more importantly is that He works in us to create a strong desire to do the right thing. He awakens compelling desires toward truth and righteousness. He develops in us a taste for the things of God. This is the emphasis in this word "led".

But the Holy Spirit does more than give us the desire. To work in the Spirit is to depend on the Spirit to enable us to do the thing He has given as the desire to do. We must not let the preposition "in" mislead us. The Spirit is not the path "in" which we work. Rather He is the One who enables us to walk in the path of righteousness. The preposition might be better translated "by".

The living by the Spirit is to be a life. Both of these verbs are present tense verbs which means that they have a continuous flow. This is to be the habitual practice of the Christian. Every day we are to be a living in the Spirit. The life of the Christian is to always be a demonstration of what God is able to do in a life.

II. LIVING BY THE SPIRIT IS THE WAY TO OVERCOME THE INNER STRUGGLE WITH THE FLESH

"And ye shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh." With this statement of assurance, the Lord brings before us the "dark side" of the Christian life. Many Christians spent their days trying to deny that there is a "dark side" to the Christian life.

We must determine what Paul means by "flesh" if we are to understand this passage. Some of the translations translate the term "sinful" or "lower" nature. By such a translation, they make us aware of the term not referring to just the physical body of man. Actually the term refers to all that man is apart from the influence of the Spirit of God. It is human nature in its sinful state. As such it has some strong desires, or lusts. These desires dominate the life of unsaved men, and remain in the life of the Christian man. What are these desires? It is a mistake to think only of "carnal" or "sexual desires". While they can be an expression of this flesh, there are many others. Most of them can be identified by the presence of the word "self". The desire for the praise of men---self-exaltation is one. The desire for the position over others is another. The desire to retaliate when we have been wronged is another. The desire for self-gratification is yet another.

Concerning the desires of the flesh, of this much we can be sure, they are in severe conflict with the desires of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Whatever my old nature will desire to do will just be in conflict with what the Holy Spirit wants to do. Now the great question in the Christian life is how does God prepare to deal with this old nature.

Some have taught that God proposes to eradicate it. They urge men to seek an experience of sanctification in which the old flesh will be cut out surgically by

the Holy Spirit. Others would counsel us to just suppress the old nature. Dr. Oswald Smith tells about a debate between those who taught eradication and those who taught suppression. Dr. A. B. Simpson was present at the debate. As this debate continued it was evident to everyone that both sides were becoming angry, and both were obviously coming under the control of "flesh". Dr. Simpson finally arose to say to them, "Brethren, it is not eradication; and brethren, it is not suppressing, but it is habitation." So it is! Right alongside the old has come the new, even the Holy Spirit of God. He does not destroy the old nature, but rather He enables the Christian to overcome by creating a deeper desire and releasing a greater power. He brings a new principle of life.

There are two errors addressed by this statement. First, it warns against a denial of the continued presence of the lower nature. Just becoming aware of a desire to do something sinful is not inconsistent with your being a Christian. Indeed, the painful awareness of the desire may in itself be a good sign. This approach to the Christian life that discourages honesty about these inner desires is both unhealthy and un-biblical. And just to feel a desire to do something is not the same as doing it. There is no sin in the desire itself unless you delight in it and nurture it.

But the other error is that of concluding that since the lower nature is still there that you are powerless to do anything about it. You are powerless, but in you as a Christian, you have the great power of God Himself right in your heart. Victory over the flesh is now possible through the power of the indwelling Spirit. There is no excuse for your indulging the flesh.

Did you catch the note of assurance in the statement? "And ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." Those who are responding to and depending on the Spirit will have the inner strength to say "no" to the pulls of the old nature. This means that when we gratify one of the desires of the lower nature, we yield to its control for awhile, it is prime evidence that we were not "walking in the Spirit." We were not allowing the power of the Spirit to be expressed through us. You can have victory over that inner desire of the flesh.

CONCLUSION:

Are you walking in the Spirit? This is not an optional way of life. It is an imperative for the Christian. But anyone who is serious about being a Christian would not really want to do anything else. Surely you want to experience fully in your life all that God intends. He intends for you to experience victory over the desires of the flesh through the Holy Spirit.