

WALKING BY THE SPIRIT

Galatians 5:13-18

Introduction:

Turn with me to Galatians 5:13-18. I would like to read these verses, which will be the foundation of our thoughts this morning.

One of the keys to the Christian life—well, really to everything in life—is balance. In every area of life, there is a tendency to become unbalanced—to go to extremes in one direction or the other.

In the area of health and fitness, you have those who spend hours a day exercising and working out, counting every calorie, being careful to never eat anything considered unhealthy. They can be so obsessed with doing everything with their health in mind, that they cannot truly enjoy the health they have. On the other side you have those who are completely careless about it. They are the couch potatoes whose only exercise is to walk to the fridge to get something more to eat.

In the area of money you have spenders and savers. Some are so extreme one way or the other, they cannot truly enjoy what God has given them either. In every area of life it is possible, if we are not careful, to become extreme in our thinking.

The same thing is true when it comes to the biblical teaching regarding our walk as Christians. In our study of Galatians, Paul has been warning his readers about the Judaizers who are trying to compel them to be circumcised and put themselves under the OT Law of Moses in order to truly satisfy God's standards or requirements.

Even though we may not be tempted to go the route that these Galatian believers were taking, yet there is a very real temptation for us, as Christians today, to move into a legalistic rigid approach to the Christian life. There is always that tendency to establish a list of rules—those things we must do, and those things we must avoid—if we want to truly be a “good Christian.” I think the reason this is so tempting is that there is something reassuring about having a list. Then we can compare our lives to the list and say, “Yes, I’m doing fine. I’m keeping all the rules.”

The problem with legalism is that it is focused on the outward actions with no regard for the spiritual condition of the heart. There is, however, another extreme which is equally dangerous—these are people we might call libertarians. Instead of being bound to the law, however unintentional it may be, these people take the idea of grace to the extreme.

Their approach is that since we are under grace, and God's grace covers all my sin, it doesn't really matter what I do. I am free from the law therefore I am free from any restrictions, so I can live as I please. I can do anything I want. After all, I'm covered by the grace of God.

Once again, there is a problem. Taken to the extreme, grace becomes not grace, but a license to sin. That that is a distortion of grace. The key is balance—neither legalism nor license, but rather a life that is controlled by the Spirit of God. That is what Paul is calling for in our text today.

Let's have a look at what he says.

Freedom to Serve Others

Verses 13-15 are a review. We looked briefly at these verses last week. Paul's case is very clear in v. 13 – You have been called to freedom. You are no longer under bondage to sin. Trying to keep the law leads only to bondage, but in Christ you are free from that. So live in the freedom that Christ offers and provides.

However, he goes on to say that freedom does not mean being free to indulge the sinful nature, but rather to serve one another in love. As I mentioned last week, that self-centered, self-serving, self-indulgent approach to life is really what we have been set free from. You no longer are bound by the need or desire to do things for yourself. You have now been set free to serve others, motivated by the love of Christ himself.

In vv. 14-15, Paul contrasts these two very different life patterns. *Read v. 14.* When we are living a life of love, focused on others, we are fulfilling the law, not because we have to, but because our goal is to serve and love others.

But look at v. 15 – *read it*. When we are caught up in the self-indulgent, self-serving life that many people consider freedom, we are trapped in a life of conflict and strife, of destruction and ruin. Why? Because my “freedom” to do what I want conflicts with your “freedom” to do what you want.

So, how do we find the power and capacity to live the life of true freedom that Paul urges us to live? How do we gain victory over the selfish sin nature that leads us to viewing freedom as self-indulgence? I’m glad you asked. That is exactly what Paul goes into in the next few verses.

The Conflict Within

Read v. 16 – here is the alternative to the biting, devouring and consuming lifestyle of v. 15. If we are going to gain victory over the flesh (the sinful nature), we need to be guided, controlled and empowered by the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. Walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

In the following verses Paul goes into a discourse on what it means to walk in the Spirit, and the contrast between the deeds of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. However we are not going to get into that today. Rather I want to focus on v. 17, which in turn is going to lead us back to the book of Romans and the passage we read earlier.

Read v. 17 – sounds like a battle going on, doesn’t it. Well, it really is a battle.

We need to begin by defining or explaining the word “flesh.” The NIV uses the term “sinful nature” throughout this passage. That is a pretty good definition. The word that Paul uses is “sarx” – a word which has great variation of meaning in the Greek language. It does refer to the fleshly part of man, the body. But Paul is clearly not using it in that way here. The word is also used to refer to the sensuous nature of man, “the animal nature.” It can be used to denote the human nature, the earthly nature of man apart from divine influence, and therefore prone to sin and opposed to God. I think you can see that perhaps the best way to think of the “flesh” is the sin nature, that nature we received through Adam, which leads us to do that which is evil.

We all have this sin nature. We all struggle with the flesh. And the worst part is that when we come to faith in Christ, we do not get rid of that sinful, fallen nature. Even though we receive a new nature, and we are indwelt by the Spirit of God, we still have the old nature as well. We still must contend with the flesh, that sinful nature.

That is why Paul says – *read v. 17 again*. There is a conflict within us. Paul described that conflict in detail in the passage we read earlier from Romans 7. There Paul identifies clearly a conflict going on within him.

Without taking a lot of time to go through that passage in Romans, let me just mention a few things that Paul points out in the passage.

As believers, we will struggle with sin all of our lives. Paul is clear that, even though he has been a believer, and even though we know him as a great missionary, yet he has a constant struggle with temptation and sin. The old nature is still with him. Even though as Christians, we are free from the condemnation of the law, sin nonetheless continues to dwell within, and we all (along with Paul) should be profoundly aware of how far we fall short of God’s absolute standard of righteousness.

One of the things that stands out to me in all of this is that, in many ways, life is easier as an unbeliever. When we are without Christ, we are controlled and dominated by that old nature. We do what “comes naturally.” We live according to the desires of flesh, the sin nature.

When you come to Christ and you are indwelt by the Spirit of God, you now have conflicting natures within you. Now there is a battle for control of your life. Your flesh, the sin nature is pulling you to continue to do those things which come naturally. The flesh desires the things of the flesh, the deeds and activities that appeal to the sensuous desires of the fallen human nature.

But at the same time you have within you the Holy Spirit, and your spiritual nature is pulling you to the things which appeal to the spiritual nature. There is that desire to do what pleases God. These two natures with their different desires are at odds with each other. So you have that constant struggle within. It is like a continual tug-of-war within you, something you never had to deal with before you knew Christ.

This is the conflict Paul is describing in Rom. 5:17. We have two natures which create a constant struggle. As Paul says, we want to do what is right, yet so often we find ourselves doing the very things we don't want to be doing. That may involve worry over things we can't control. It might be destructive thought patterns—negativity about ourselves. Or it could be areas of anger, or greed or lust, or a host of other attitudes and behaviors, which we want to be free from, yet keep pushing themselves up in our lives.

So what is the answer? Well, hopefully we will see more detail in the weeks to come as we go through the remainder of this book, but for right now, the short answer is to walk by the Spirit. Verse 18 says...

Conclusion: Walking by the Spirit

So what does it mean to be led by the Spirit? Well, again, Paul gives more information as we go on. He contrasts the deeds of the sinful nature with the fruit of the Spirit. We will get into that next week. But for now, let me just put it this way:

The key to victory is to be growing stronger in the Spirit. I am reminded of a story which you have probably all heard before.

There was an old Indian who had been led to the Lord by a missionary. After a few weeks he came to the missionary one day and said, "Ever since I accepted Jesus, I feel like there are two big dogs fighting inside me—a black dog and a white one. There is just a constant struggle going on inside." The missionary explained that the fight between those two dogs was really the struggle between the old sinful nature and the Spirit of God. Then he asked, "So which one is winning?" The Indian replied, "It depends on which one I feed the most."

I think that man had it figured out. If you feed the Spirit on the truth of the Word of God, you will find the Spirit winning more and more. If you feed the sinful nature with the lusts desires of the flesh, you will find yourself losing the battle for righteousness.

If you are a believer in Jesus, you have the same conflict inside you. So which one is winning in your life?