

# KEEP IN STEP WITH THE SPIRIT

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*Galatians 5:16-26*

## Introduction:

“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” (Gal. 5:25 NIV) Now we are really getting down to the nitty-gritty of how this is played out in everyday life.

After much discussion and reprimand by the Apostle Paul for their acceptance of the Judaizer’s demands for them to be circumcised and place themselves under the Jewish Law, these Galatian believers must have been looking for a reprieve. So Paul, having clearly laid out the reasons for rejecting the law as a means of attaining righteousness or gaining God’s favor, now has moved on to talk about living the Christian life under grace rather than under the Law.

We have talked about the freedom that we have in Christ. Freedom from bondage to the law, freedom from self-assured attempts to please God. But we have also looked at what Paul says about true freedom. Freedom is not to be used as an excuse to indulge the sinful nature. Rather Christ love frees from bondage to the law and to sin and sets us free to serve one another in love (see 5:13).

Last week we looked at vv. 16-18 and talked about the inner conflict that we have as believers in Jesus Christ. As I studied those verses some more this week, I was led to the book of Romans. There Paul says... *read Rom. 6:3-7*. As I looked at those verses and some study notes on them, I found an interesting comment in the MacArthur study Bible. He says...

*“Paul uses the terms “body” and “flesh” to refer to sinful propensities that are intertwined with physical weaknesses and pleasures (e.g., Rom. 8:10–11, 13, 23). Although the old self is dead, sin retains a foothold in our temporal flesh or our unredeemed humanness, with its corrupted desires (7:14–24). The believer does not have two competing natures, the old and the new; but one new nature that is still incarcerated in unredeemed flesh.”*

You may notice that his comment contradicts what I said last week. I stated that we do have two natures—the old sinful nature, which is still trying to lead us into sin, and the new spiritual nature, which gives us the desire to do what pleases God.

Well I am not going to argue with John MacArthur, but whether we call it two distinct natures, or one new nature that is incarcerated in unredeemed flesh, the ultimate fact is that we have a conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. That is what Paul says in Gal. 5:17 – *read it*. The Spirit of God who dwells in us and the flesh with its lusts and desires are at odds with one another. And as we said last week we need to be feeding our spiritual nature and starving the fleshly desires if we are to find victory over sin and temptation.

In verse 18, Paul clarifies that, as believers in whom the Spirit of God dwells, we are no longer under the law. The Spirit of God supersedes the Law, because when we are led by the Spirit of God the intent of the law will be fulfilled in us. However it will not be by our own human effort but by the power and the leading of the Spirit (see v. 14)

Now we come to the text for today. As we look at these verses there are a number of things that we need to notice and be aware.

## The Great Ethics Debate

First of all, whenever you begin to get into a discussion of ethics and morality there is a risk involved. Last week we talked about the importance of balance and that is what comes into our discussion again here.

Whenever you talk about or preach grace and freedom in Christ there is a risk that people will take an extreme view which leads to license and the interpretation that I am now free to live in any way I please, because I am under grace.

The other side is that if you begin to talk about morality and preach about right and wrong it will lead to legalism. It is easy to look at the issue of ethical and moral standards as a measuring stick to show the level of my standing before God.

Either one of these views is a distortion of the Scriptural teaching on law and grace.

I believe Paul is concerned that his readers do not make this mistake of misunderstanding what he is about to say in vv. 19-26. That is why he prefaces his statements on morality by saying in v. 18 – “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

Paul is about to give a little rundown of the difference between the desires and works of the flesh and the natural harvest of righteousness produced by the Spirit of God. But he wants us to know that just because the Scripture gives us a standard of righteousness to live by it does not mean that standard is some kind of law by which we are made right before God.

### The Works of the Flesh vs. the Fruit of the Spirit

The second thing that jumps out of this passage is Paul’s use of two different words when he speaks of the natural by-products of a life controlled by the flesh and a life controlled by the Spirit. Why would he call the produce of the flesh works but the produce of the Spirit fruit?

I don’t have a definitive answer for that question. However, it would seem that it is tied to the idea that the flesh, that sinful corrupt nature, knows nothing of grace and sees even its desires and what it receives in response to those desires as a debt that is owed to it.

By contrast, the Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life is one that is based on grace. Everything we have, everything about it is not the result of effort on our part, but is the outgrowth of the Spirit that dwells in us.

So the difference is that the attitude of the life controlled by the flesh is, “I earned it, I deserve whatever I can get.” That is self-centeredness, self-indulgence. But the attitude of the life controlled by the Spirit is that whatever comes my way is not my doing, it is the outgrowth of the Spirit within me.

Well, Paul gives us quite a sordid list of attitudes and activities that that constitute the works of the flesh. They cover all the key areas of life—sex, religion, and human relationships.

v. 19 – sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality (debauchery) – the words used suggest any type of sexual activity outside the bonds of marriage as well as every kind of lust and sexual excess and indulgence.

v. 20 – begins with a couple of terms related to religion – idolatry and sorcery (witchcraft). Obviously the life that is without God will seek to fill that spiritual void with something else. And anything that is used to replace God can be called idolatry. But even worse is turning to the very enemy of God as a spiritual power to engage in sorcery and witchcraft.

The next section is a whole litany of divisive and acrimonious actions and attitudes which negatively affect human relationships—enmity (hatred), strife (discord), jealousy, fits of anger (rage), rivalries (selfish ambition), dissensions, divisions (factions), envy... What a distasteful catalogue of failings when it comes to relationship with others.

Then Paul ends his list with a couple of items which can only be described as self-indulgent illustrations of profligate living – drunkenness, orgies and the like.

There, very briefly, is a list of works—actions and attitudes which indicate a life dominated by the flesh, devoid of the spirit of God. This is not to say that everyone who is outside of Christ is going to engage in all of these things. But this is the result when the lust of the flesh is released with no restraint. And such a person, without Christ, is destined for eternal judgment – see the end of verse 21.

In contrast to that, in vv. 22-23 we have the listing of the fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit produces fruit in us, which Paul describes as nine characteristics or qualities that inextricably linked with one another. We don’t have time to look at any detail, but let me just share with you the brief description of these qualities from the MacArthur Study Bible.

Love – One of several Greek words for love, agape is the love of choice, referring not to an emotional affection, physical attraction, or a familial bond, but to respect, devotion, and affection that leads to willing, self-sacrificial service.

Joy – A happiness based on unchanging divine promises and eternal spiritual realities. It is the sense of well-being experienced by one who knows all is well between himself and the Lord. Joy is not the result of favorable circumstances, and even occurs when those circumstances are the most painful and severe.

Peace – The inner calm that results from confidence in one’s saving relationship with Christ. The verb form denotes binding together and is reflected in the expression “having it all together.” Like joy, peace is not related to one’s circumstances.

Patience – The ability to endure injuries inflicted by others and the willingness to accept irritating or painful situations.

Kindness – Tender concern for others, reflected in a desire to treat others gently, just as the Lord treats all believers.

Goodness – Moral and spiritual excellence manifested in active kindness. Believers are commanded to exemplify goodness.

Faithfulness – Loyalty and trustworthiness.

Gentleness – Better translated “meekness.” It is a humble and gentle attitude that is patiently submissive in every offense, while having no desire for revenge or retribution.

Self-control – This refers to restraining passions and appetites.

Paul says, “Against such there is no law.” When a Christian walks by the Spirit and manifests the fruit of the Spirit, he doesn’t need an external law to produce the attitudes and behavior that please God.

## Victory over the Flesh

Well there are a couple more things we need to mention quickly before we close today. *Read v. 24* – “...have crucified the flesh...” I don’t know about you, but my experience indicates that the flesh with its desires and passions is very much alive. At least it certainly seems like it to me. So what does Paul mean here? I hope you will forgive me if I quote John MacArthur again...

*“One of four uses of “crucified” that does not refer to Christ’s crucifixion. Here Paul states that the flesh has been executed, yet the spiritual battle still rages in the believer. Paul’s use looks back to the cross of Christ, where the death of the flesh and its power to reign over believers was actually accomplished. Christians must wait until their glorification before they are finally rid of their unredeemed humanness, yet by walking in the Spirit they can please God in this world.”*

There are a couple of verses I would like to draw to your attention here, where Paul makes similar statements.

*“For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” (Romans 8:13 ESV)*

*“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.” (Colossians 3:5 ESV)*

It is not that our fleshly nature is eradicated and done away with. Yes, the final victory was won at the cross, but for now, as MacArthur says, the battle still rages. We must “put to death” or consider as dead those passions and desires of the flesh in order to live in victory. But the wonderful truth is that we do not have to do it in our own power.

Look at v. 25-26 – *Read them* – it is only as we keep in step with the Spirit that we will be victorious over the flesh. No one can boast or be conceited about it because it is the power of the Holy Spirit that gives us the victory.

## Conclusion

So, how are we doing? Paul began this section in v. 16 by saying, “Walk (live) by the Spirit...” He finishes in v. 25 by saying, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by (keep in step with) the Spirit.” There are two different words used there.

In the first case the word means to order one’s affairs, to regulate one’s life... It suggests coming under the control and direction of the Spirit of God. In v. 25 the word means to walk in a line behind a leader. I think the NIV puts it well when it says, “...keep in step with the Spirit.”

I close with one more passage from the book of Romans.

*“For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Romans 8:22-23 ESV)*

Until that day, let’s keep in step with the Spirit.