

Galatians: Faith Alone in Christ Alone

Walk by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on July 28, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ One of the major themes in this letter to the Galatians has been our freedom in Christ. Freedom specifically from the ceremonial aspects of Old Testament law. Meaning those of us who come to God the Father through faith in God the Son – we are under no obligation to adopt all the various Jewish customs dictated by the Law of Moses. We don't have to keep a kosher diet or observe a strict Sabbath or circumcise our sons.
 - But more generally, it means we are free in Christ from a slavish dependence on our obedience as the basis for a right relationship with God. **Paul has been warning of the dangers of legalism – of putting your hope (and finding your identity) in your performance.** He's been stressing the good news that a right relationship with God is founded – not on *your* obedience but Christ's; not on *your* performance but his – which you receive as a free gift of grace by faith alone. You're justified (counted right) in God's eyes by the righteousness of Christ and not your own. That's the gospel Paul taught the Galatians. It's the gospel he's afraid they're abandoning.

- ❖ But Paul recognizes that any extended teaching on our freedom in Christ might trigger an unintended counter reaction. **In our attempt to avoid the spirit of legalism, we might fall into an equally dangerous error in the opposite direction. We might entertain the spirit of lawlessness.** We might embrace an overly permissive attitude towards the Law. If it's true that those in Christ are no longer under the Law, then I can just ignore what it commands. And just let my conscience alone be my guide.
 - Paul knows how prevalent this kind of thinking is and how appealing it can be. Which is why – in the verses prior to our passage – he has to warn against the abuse of our freedom. Look at v13, *“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”*
 - **In other words, freedom in Christ doesn't give you permission to indulge your fleshly desires and just do whatever you want.** It's not a freedom to sin. It's actually a freedom *from* sinning. To be free in Christ means you're free to resist the flesh. To choose otherwise. To be led – not by the flesh – but by the Spirit of God to do works of love and service. You're free to do that!

- ❖ **But just because you're free to do that – to do the desires of the Spirit – that doesn't mean you automatically will.** It's not that simple. Anyone who's been a Christian for longer than a day can tell you that walking by the Spirit doesn't just happen by default. In fact, our default seems to be to do the opposite – to gratify the desires of the flesh.
 - Paul goes on, in this morning's passage, to explain the reason why. **Why we – as reborn, redeemed, children of God, filled with his Spirit – why we don't simply do what we'd expect Spirit-led people to do.** At least not as consistently as we would hope. Why is it a constant struggle, a constant battle, to do the right thing? Why is it so hard? There are answers in this text.
 - **Paul is going to draw attention to an ongoing internal conflict – an inner battle – that's waging inside every Christian.** Every one of us in Christ has a war taking place in our souls. Between the flesh and the Spirit.

- ❖ In this passage, Paul unpacks that conflict further. Take a look at your Bible. Starting in vv16-18, he'll (1) identify the competing desires within every Christian. Then in vv19-23, he'll (2) list out the contrasting characteristics of the flesh versus the Spirit. And finally in vv24-25, he'll (3) remind us of the crucified flesh of everyone who belongs to Christ.

The Competing Desires Within Every Christian

- ❖ Paul begins by identifying the competing desires found within every Christian. He starts off in v16 with a command to “*walk by the Spirit.*” **That is, to live in such a way that the Holy Spirit is the animating power in and over your life.** That’s what it means to walk by the Spirit. Further on, Paul speaks of being led by the Spirit (v18) or keeping in step with the Spirit (v25). So to walk by the Spirit is, in one sense, to walk by his side. But, in another sense, it means he goes before you leading the way. And, in another sense, he’s behind you providing the strength to take your next step – to keep up with him.
 - **The point is that, if you’re a Christian, you’ve been redeemed (freed) – not to live a life doing whatever you want – but to live a life in an ongoing, day-to-day relationship of dependence upon the Spirit of God.** The very language of walking conveys the idea that the Christian life is an ongoing journey with God. You don’t arrive once you accept Christ. Once you pray that prayer. You haven’t arrived. You’ve just started to walk.
- ❖ But based on our lived experience, we know how difficult it is to walk by the Spirit. We’re too stubborn and obstinate. Far too often we refuse to follow his leading. We don’t aim to fulfill his desires. We aim to fill another’s.
 - **Paul goes on in v17 to explain that the inner battle waging inside every Christian is a fight between two competing desires.** Look at v17, “*For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*”
 - Brothers and sisters, I know you have a sincere desire to walk by the Spirit – to keep in step with him. But the reason why you have such a difficult time doing so is because your flesh wants the opposite.
- ❖ Now here’s where we need to be careful. **It’s easy to confuse what Paul is saying with the teachings of Eastern religions that locate the source of all our struggle and suffering in the human flesh (body).** As if the problem lies in our desires. As if we’re too attached to the things of this world. And the solution – the path to perfect peace – is through the elimination of all desire. Detachment. So it’s easy to interpret Paul as suggesting something similar.
 - But the difference is that Paul is not using the typical Greek word for body (*soma*). The term for flesh (*sarx*) can be used more figuratively. Especially when contrasted with the Spirit. **In those instances, Paul means that aspect of our redeemed selves that has not been fully renewed (sanctified).** That aspect of ourselves that still desires sin. That’s why some translations prefer the phrase “*sinful nature*” (NIV84). The desires of the *sinful nature* are contrary to the Spirit. In Ephesians 4, Paul speaks of the old self (sin-loving aspect) in conflict with the new self (Spirit-renewed aspect).

- ❖ **The point is that, according to the biblical worldview, human fleshliness is not the problem.** The human body was created by the Lord. It's intrinsically good. But in this fallen world, it has been corrupted by the effects of sin. **The solution is for our bodies to be renewed – not done away with and eliminated.**
 - And the same could be said for our desires. **The problem, according to Scripture, is not that we have all these desires.** The desire for love and affirmation; for friendship and family; for significance and achievement; for comfort and rest; for food and drink; for sex and pleasure; for leisure and entertainment, etc. None of these human desires are inherently wrong.
 - **The problem is *not* that we desire but that we over-desire.** We have inordinate desires. In Christianity, desiring bad things is just as wrong as desiring good things too much. **The only thing you can't desire too much – you can't over-desire – is God himself.** When your desires grow inordinate for anything else – when you look to things of the earth to accomplish what only God can do – **you're committing what the Bible calls idolatry.**

- ❖ So what's the biblical solution? Paul already gave it to us back in chapter 2:20, *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* **The solution calls, first, to be crucified with Christ.** To trust in him and identify with his death and resurrection. Where you die to your old self and live in the new self. Where it's no longer you who live but Christ lives in you.
 - **But Christians live in this unique stage within the story of redemption between the already and the not yet.** We have *already* been crucified with Christ. But we are *not yet* made entirely new. We still await the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:23). And so the lives we now live *in the flesh*, we live by faith in the Son of God – believing he'll return to complete the good work he began in us (Phil 1:6).

- ❖ **But until that day comes, this constant internal battle that Paul speaks of will be a part of the normal Christian life.** Yes, we have the Holy Spirit in us creating new desires for God and his glory, for one another and our mission and ministry. But since we're still living in the flesh, the reality is that we'll be constantly drawn to gratify its desires.
 - That's why the NT constantly exhorts us to *“make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”* (Rom 13:14) To *“put to death therefore what is earthly (fleshly) in you.”* (Col 3:5) *“To abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”* (1 Pet 2:11)

- ❖ No Christian should be surprised if you continue to struggle with sin. That battle is going to go on until your death or until the Lord comes for his own. Whichever comes first. **That means our Christian lives won't be marked by perfection.** You can hope and aim for progress. But don't expect perfection on this side of glory.

- ❖ And yet, I don't want to give the impression that we are mere passive victims. As if we're helpless, tossed to and fro, at the whim of these two competing forces. **No, we still have agency. We still have responsibility.**
 - It's not up to us to renew our flesh. But it is up to us not to gratify the flesh. Look back at v16. That word for gratify (*teleo*) literally means to fulfill a goal or to carry out a mission. **So this warning against gratifying the flesh is a warning not to take orders from your flesh.** Not to submit once again to its desires and demands.

- ❖ And that's not asking too much of you, as a Christian. Because, again, that's what it means to be free in Christ. **You've been set free from sin's control.** Now since you're still living in the flesh, you're not yet free from the presence of sin and its enticing desires. But you're certainly free from its enslaving power. **Unlike before you put on Christ, you're no longer forced to take orders from the flesh. You can say No.** You can choose otherwise.
 - Before the Spirit of God entered your life, there was only one set of desires. You did the bidding of your flesh, of your sinful nature. **But now that you have God's own Spirit in you – you have the freedom to choose.** To choose to walk by him. To choose to be led by the Spirit – and not the flesh.

- ❖ And notice back in v16 – **notice how the only command in this passage is to choose to walk by the Spirit.** There's no command telling us not to gratify the flesh. Because apparently “not gratifying the desires of the flesh” is what results from walking by the Spirit. That's such an important observation. Because, far too often, our efforts are only centered on not gratifying the flesh. We're so focused on trying *not* to sin. **And only until we're finally making progress – avoiding enough sin – do we feel worthy to walk by the Spirit.**
 - But what if we've got it backwards? According to Paul, the focus should be on walking by the Spirit. That's what God commands us to do. And at the same time, that's what he qualifies us to do – by justifying us by faith alone in Christ alone. **God makes us worthy and calls us to walk by his Spirit – to keep in step with him.** To lean on him more. To rely on him more. **And the result of that kind of walking will be to sin less.** To be less swayed and dominated by the desires of the flesh.

- ❖ Like we said, the normal Christian life will be marked by this ongoing conflict between these two competing desires. And there very well could be seasons in the normal Christian life where the desires of the flesh seem to get the upper hand.
 - **But in the aggregate – the normal Christian life will be a life overall dedicated to walking by the Spirit and *not* characterized by gratifying the desires of the flesh.** Because in the end, we're not unsure about the outcome of that internal battle. We know the Spirit of God and his desires will prevail. So while we should be **realists** about the present struggle we'll all face. But we should be **optimists** about where the path leads when you keep in step with the Spirit.

The Contrasting Characteristics of the Flesh Versus the Spirit

- ❖ But that leads to an important question – **what does the normal Christian life look like?** What does it look like to live a life committed to walking by the Spirit? And what about the opposite? What does it look like to live a life characterized by gratifying the flesh? That’s what Paul addresses in vv19-23. This leads to our second point. Paul is going to list out the contrasting characteristics of the flesh versus the Spirit. He’ll describe the “*works of the flesh*” and set it against the “*fruit of the Spirit*.”
 - Look at v19 and notice first how it says, “*the works of the flesh are evident*.” Which implies that the distinction between the two should be obvious. Evident to all. The point is that it’s not a mystery. **If I’m going to try and discern who you’re walking by – the Spirit or the flesh – who you’re gratifying – then I should be able to look at your overall way of life and a discernible pattern should be evident.**
 - Let’s start reading in v19, “*19Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.*” The way it ends suggests that this is not an exhaustive list.
- ❖ What Paul is saying is that if someone’s life exhibits a pattern of enslavement to sexual sins, to self-absorption, to self-worship – if your life is marked by constant strife and quarreling – if it’s dominated by drugs or alcohol – then **you’re looking at a life under the reign of the flesh.** A life taking orders from the flesh. Gratifying the flesh.
 - But look at v22, “*22But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23gentleness, self-control.*” So, if on the other hand, I look at your life and there’s a pattern of love, joy, peace, patience, and so on – then that’s a life under the reign of the Spirit. A life lived in step with him.
- ❖ **So it’s about looking for a pattern.** Let’s be clear about that. Because I realize how v21 ends. After listing those vices, Paul says, “*I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*” It sounds like if you do any one of those sinful things in vv19-21, then you won’t inherit the kingdom. You won’t go to heaven.
 - But in my ESV Bible, there’s a footnote explaining that an alternative translation could be “those who *make a practice* of doing such things will not inherit the kingdom.” So Paul’s warning is really for those whose lives are characterized by such things. They make a practice of doing such things without repentance. **It’s so important to make that distinction between a hardened heart that practices these things versus a repentant heart that struggles with these things.**
- ❖ Now maybe some of you do need to take the warning in v21 to heart. **If your life can be characterized by any of these works of the flesh, then take it to heart that you won’t inherit the kingdom of God if you remain in that pattern.** Don’t reassure yourself that you’re just fine because of that prayer you prayed. Because of that decision you made for Christ. No, if you’re making a practice of any of these works of the flesh, then you should be worried. And you should turn back to the gospel. Repent of your sin. Trust in Jesus.

- ❖ But even if you go and do that – even if now you’re a genuine Christian – **the reality is that any of these works of the flesh could show up in your life.** The presence of these sins is concerning. But their presence alone is not damning. I would press further and ask – **Is there a pattern of you struggling with them?** Are you making a practice of regularly confessing and repenting of your sins? If yes, be encouraged. And I’d also ask – **Is there a pattern of fruit bearing in your life?** Could your life be characterized by the fruit of the Spirit? Because that’s what you’d expect based on vv22-23.
- ❖ It’s notable that they’re called “fruit of the Spirit” when calling them “works of the Spirit” would’ve flowed better in parallel with “works of the flesh.” **But I think Paul didn’t want to confuse us into thinking that these virtues ultimately come from us.** From our own strength or will. When in fact love, joy, peace come from the Spirit of God dwelling in us. We can cultivate the conditions for the fruit to thrive – but only God can make it grow.
- ❖ And when you use this imagery of vegetative growth – of plants and trees – it’s especially encouraging for those of us who look at this list of virtues and feel anxious at how long it’s taking to develop in our lives. We thought we’d be further along by now. Why does it take so long for this fruit to be ripe and mature in my life?
 - **But our impatience with the gradual change probably stems from an ignorance of what God is growing us into.** If you imagine God is changing you into a radish, then it should only take a couple of weeks for you to mature. But is that what a Christian is meant to be? A radish? **No, it’s more accurate to say he’s changing us into mighty oak trees.** And that could take decades – even a lifetime – to mature.
- ❖ But I’m sure there are some of you who are still doubtful you could ever be changed. Or you know someone who is so hardened and engrained in the practice of sin and you wonder if they could ever be changed. **But we underestimate how powerful the growth can be.**
 - Take a walk in any Houston neighborhood, and you’ll encounter the familiar sight of a sidewalk or driveway in shambles. All because, years ago, a tiny acorn grew up into a mighty oak – just a bit too close. That concrete sidewalk didn’t stand a chance. If all you had to compare was a slab of concrete and a tiny acorn, you’d think the concrete is vastly superior in strength. **But an acorn-over-time is always going to win.**
 - So be encouraged. No matter how hardened a heart; no matter how stubborn a will; no matter how engrained a pattern of sin – **the Holy Spirit-over-time is always going to win.**
- ❖ Now notice one more observation. Notice how it says “*the fruit of the Spirit*” and not *fruits* of the Spirit. Like *works* of the flesh. **But using the singular, fruit, I think it means we can’t separate these qualities – we can’t parse them apart – and assure ourselves that we bear some of these virtues but not all.** “I’m growing in all these except faithfulness and self-control. But that’s okay. At least I’ve got seven out of nine.” No, we can’t think that way.

- ❖ **When the Spirit bears his fruit in your life, you will manifest all these qualities.** But not always in equal proportion, at the same rate. Imagine two men, before their conversion, where one was temperamentally gentler and the other was temperamentally harsher.
 - After conversion, as the fruit of the Spirit bears forth in their lives, it's understandable if the naturally harsh man would seem to be lagging behind in gentleness, especially compared to his friend. But even the naturally gentle brother has to grow in Spirit-led gentleness and not just fall back on his temperament.
 - A naturally gentle person might appear peaceable and diplomatic. But if his gentleness leads him to avoid conflict at all costs, then that's probably not the fruit of the Spirit he's displaying. Because Spirit-led gentleness will be accompanied by love and faithfulness – virtues that would move him to give godly correction or work at reconciling a conflict.

- ❖ **My point is that the fruit of the Spirit shouldn't be viewed as a collection of individual virtues that we try to work on.** Again, there's only one command in this passage. And it doesn't say anywhere to bear more love or joy or peace. It doesn't command us to be fruitful.
 - **The only command is to walk by the Spirit. To keep in step with him. And then the fruit will come.** All of these virtues will bear forth *together*. Because the Spirit's goal is not just to grow a bunch of virtues in you. His goal is to mature you into the image of Christ. **And what are vv22-23 but a description of Christ?** So if you walk by the Spirit, the Father has promised to mature you into the image of the Son.

The Crucified Flesh of Everyone Who Belongs to Christ

- ❖ That's an encouragement for all of you who have put on Christ and are trying to walk by the Spirit. Like we've been saying, it's not going to be easy. There will be a constant, ongoing battle of desires taking place in your heart. You still have your flesh to contend with.
 - **But if you're a Christian, the good news is that your flesh has been crucified.** Which leads to our third point. In v24, Paul reminds us of the crucified flesh of everyone who belongs to Christ. Let me read the verse, "*And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*"

- ❖ **Those who belong to Christ are those who submit to him as Lord.** He's our master. So he owns us. We belong to him. And it's because of that identification with Christ, that we have been crucified with him (2:20) and have crucified our flesh with its passions and desires.
 - **Which, again, means that our flesh – with all of its sinful desires – has no binding hold on us.** We're not under its thumb. And Paul's point – which has been the main point of all of Galatians – is that the flesh has been dethroned and defeated – not by the law of Moses – but by the cross of Christ.

- ❖ **His rivals erred in teaching that the Galatians could overcome the flesh by keeping the law.** Which is not surprising – considering how that's usually our instinct as well. Our instinct when trying to control our fleshly passions is to apply rigorous rule-keeping and self-discipline. We self-impose all these rules hoping to curb our passions and lusts.

- ❖ And we're not alone in this. **Christians over the ages have misinterpreted this idea of crucifying the flesh with treating your body harshly.** Either through extreme fasting or self-flagellation or deprivation. They knew how strong the desires of the flesh can be. And they thought they could combat it with more rules, more discipline, more accountability.
 - But that's like walking into a knife fight with a spoon. **If our only weapons are self-imposed rules and self-discipline, we're tragically ill-prepared.** Because sin does not fight back with rules. Your flesh never tries to impress upon you an obligation to obey. It never tries to twist your arm and compel you to do its will.
 - No, it entices you. It dangles promises of pleasure – if you only feed it. Your sinful flesh offers you instant gratification and easy satisfaction.

- ❖ **So if we try to fight the desires of the flesh with the law – with mere rules and a mere sense of duty – we'll quickly find ourselves outgunned and outmatched.** Sin is fighting us with fire, and we're resorting to squirt guns. We need to fight fire with fire.
 - **We need to fight pleasures with greater pleasures.** To resist the desires of the flesh by finding our joy and satisfaction in the greater desires of the Spirit. That's what happens when you keep in step with him (v25). Your moral tastebuds begin to change and mature. And slowly but surely, the desires of the flesh begin to lose their appeal. **The pleasures of sin begin to look grossly inferior and fleeting compared to the superior, lasting pleasures found in a close walk with the Spirit of Christ.**
 - That's how you fight your flesh. Not by trying to control it or corral it. Not by trying to suppress it or beat it into submission. **No, you fight the desires of the flesh by outshining them.** By enjoying your walk with the Lord – as you keep in step with his Spirit.