

Keeping in Step with the Spirit (Part I)
Galatians 5:16-21

I was talking with a friend last week who mentioned that he was jealous of the original disciples because of the time they got to spend time with Jesus. He mentioned how Acts 1 says that Jesus appeared to the disciples over a period of 40 days after His resurrection “speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God.” He was saying how amazing it would be to be able to talk face-to-face with Jesus about the deep things of God. His enthusiasm over the prospect of being with Jesus stirred something within me. Perhaps it does within you as well.

Can you imagine what it must have been like to be one of the original disciples and actually be “with” Him?!? Imagine the wisdom, comfort, correction, and guidance you’d receive. Jesus actually anticipated this longing we have to be with Him. Jesus told His disciples that when He went back to the Father He wouldn’t leave them as orphans, but that He would be “with” them. Jesus actually told His followers, “It is to your advantage that I go away . . . if I go, I will send [the Holy Spirit] to you.” The Holy Spirit - the third person of the Trinity - is the personal presence of Jesus Himself in the life of the believer. The Spirit does in our lives the very same things that Jesus did in the lives of His original disciples: convicts us of sin, guides us, empowers us, opens our eyes to the significance of the Scriptures, etc. This reality addresses this longing we have to be with Jesus.

This week and next week our study of Galatians will focus on our life in the Spirit. In Galatians 5:16 Paul speaks of “walking by the Spirit”; in verse 18 he will mention being “led by the Spirit”; and in verse 25 Paul speaks of “keeping in step with the Spirit” (NIV). Just like the original disciples “followed” Jesus, we are to follow the promptings and leadings of the Holy Spirit. This chapter tells us much of what the Holy Spirit is doing so that we’ll recognize how to keep in step with Him.

Walk by the Spirit (and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh) (vv. 16-18)

Paul gives a command in verse 16:

16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

You and I need to be clear about this: the only way to avoid carrying out the desire of the flesh is “walking by the Spirit.” Avoiding the desire of the flesh isn’t a function of how guilty you feel over some sin or how much willpower/resolve you have to never indulge the flesh again. Walking by the Spirit is a matter of consciously trusting the Spirit for whatever you need. As I mentioned earlier, walking by the Spirit is also described in Galatians 5 as being led by the Spirit and keeping in step with the Spirit. We can’t manipulate or force the Spirit to do anything. We can ask the Spirit to work, but we

mainly try to stay in step with what the Holy Spirit already wants to do in our lives (including avoiding the desires of the flesh).

As we mentioned last week, the flesh is that part of us that craves sin, that lives independent of God. In verses 19-21 Paul will give a catalog of “deeds of the flesh” - ways that the flesh typically manifests itself.

Verse 17 stresses how antithetical the flesh and the Spirit are to one another. Notice that Paul begins with the word “for”; he is explaining why those who walk by the Spirit will not carry out the desires of the flesh.

17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.

The flesh has certain desires; the flesh wants certain things. And the Spirit has certain desires; the Spirit actually wants to produce certain things in our lives. The flesh and the Spirit are in opposition to one another. There is no compatibility whatsoever between the two. When we indulge the flesh, we are saying, “I side with the flesh against the Spirit. I opt for the desires of the flesh instead of the desires of the Spirit.” When we walk by the Spirit, we are saying, “I side with the Spirit. I want His will to be done in my life, not the will of the flesh.”

Commentators disagree about the meaning of the second half of verse 17: *for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please*. One interpretive question is whether “the things that you please” refers to sinful things that you want to do because of the flesh or whether it refers to good things that please God. Another interpretive question is whether you now “may not do” these things (NASB) or whether you now “**cannot** do these things” (as other translations suggest).

I understand Paul to be saying that because the Galatians now have the Spirit they are no longer permitted to do whatever they want; they **may not** do the things that the flesh desires. They are only permitted to do only those things that the Spirit desires. Only the fruit of the Spirit (not the deeds of the flesh) is compatible with their freedom in Christ.

In verse 18 Paul makes a point that picks up a larger theme in Galatians:

18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Here he speaks of being “led by the Spirit.” He’s talking about the same experience as walking by the Spirit. As Gordon Fee puts it, “. . . believers who walk by the Spirit do so because they are following where the Spirit leads” (*God’s Empowering Presence*, p. 438). The better you know and understand the Spirit, the more closely you’ll be able to follow where He leads. That will be our topic next week; the fruit of the Spirit describes what the Spirit is always wanting to do in our lives and in our midst.

Paul mentions that those who are led by the Spirit are no longer under the Law. We saw last week that the intent of the Law was love; those who love their neighbors as themselves fulfill the entire law. That's exactly what the Spirit prompts and empowers the believer to do. Since those who are led by the Spirit fulfill the Law, they are no longer under obligation to observe the regulations of the Law.

Understand the type of Life the Flesh Desires (and that the Spirit opposes) (vv. 19-21) In these verses Paul gives a tangible description of how the flesh commonly shows up in individual lives and in churches. This list could be taken as a check-list of things to avoid. But more importantly, if you are a believer in Jesus this list explains the things that the Spirit of God within you opposes. If you walk by the Spirit, these are the things (and types of things) “you will not carry out” (v. 16).

19 Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

It's certainly no coincidence that Paul speaks of the “deeds/works” of the flesh; this is the same term Paul has used throughout Galatians when he speaks of the “works of the Law” (e.g., 2:16, 3:2, 3:10, etc.). Both the works of the Law and the deeds of the flesh belong to the old life for those who are walking by the Spirit. When Paul says that the deeds of the flesh are “evident” he is saying that it should be obvious that these actions are manifestations of the flesh (and not the Spirit).

Paul's list can be broken down into four broad categories. This obviously isn't an exhaustive list because he ends with “and things like these.” Sins like theft and covetousness aren't mentioned here, but they did make the list when Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 6:10). This is a list that was especially appropriate for the church at Galatia. But as we'll see this list is appropriate for us as well.

The first category involves ***sexual sins***: immorality, impurity, sensuality. Immorality (*porneia*) is a general term that denotes any type of illicit sexual conduct; it was used specifically of prostitution but refers to any sexual activity with someone other than your spouse. Impurity originally meant “dirty” but came to have the metaphorical meaning of being ethically or morally unclean. Sensuality refers to reckless or unbridled sexuality.

The second category involves ***spiritual sins***: idolatry, sorcery. Idolatry is worshipping something other than God - whether it be a stone statue or the sun or the moon. Sorcery (or witchcraft) involves trying to use or manipulate evil spiritual powers; sometimes sorcery is referred to as black magic.

The third category involves ***relational sins***: enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying. Paul was especially concerned with this

category of sins within the church at Galatia. Enmity is hatred of another person or another class of persons; whereas the Spirit will produce love, the flesh produces hatred. Hatred leads to strife - discord/conflicts between persons. Jealousy is a term that could be positive (as in being “zealous” for good works) or negative (as here); jealousy is very similar to the last term in this category, envy. Outbursts of anger are very destructive to a person or a church. Dissensions and factions are the divisions that occur when people take sides against each other.

The final category involves ***sins of excess***: drunkenness and carousing. These two terms are usually taken together to refer to boisterous, drunken revelry.

So that’s Paul’s list of the deeds of the flesh. When you spot those things you’ve identified the flesh; you’ve also identified the things that the Spirit opposes.

The end of verse 21 probably got your attention when I read it earlier. After listing the deeds of the flesh Paul writes:

21 . . . of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul isn’t saying that if you indulge the flesh in any of the ways he’s mentioned that you won’t end up with God in His kingdom. The whole reason he is warning the Galatians about these sins is because they are a very real possibility for believers. When it comes to individual sins, genuine believers in Jesus Christ have as much capacity to sin as anybody else. That is apparent biblically and experientially. But we shouldn’t stop with what Paul ***isn’t*** saying. What ***is*** Paul saying?

Paul writes that “those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” He is talking about the pattern of a person’s life. I think he’s saying that the person whose life bears no evidence of salvation ultimately will not be saved. I want to be careful how I say this, but the consistent testimony of Scripture is that genuine salvation changes a person’s life. Salvation is described as being born from above, becoming a new creature in Christ, and being transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. Paul is saying that the deeds of the flesh are so incompatible with this salvation that if they describe the pattern of a person’s life, you have to conclude that they aren’t really saved and ultimately will not inherit the kingdom of God.

I’m tempted to add quickly, “But I’m sure Paul isn’t describing any of us here today. . .” But I’m going to resist that temptation because I think Paul wanted the Galatians to be stopped in their tracks and consider the tenor of their lives. I realize people will hear this in different ways. Some people are perpetually anxious about their salvation and need others to tell them, “I see evidence of salvation in your life . . . it’s obvious to me that you know God.” Other people might need to look at their lives and question whether or not they’ve ever trusted in Christ alone for salvation.

It's also important to understand that God doesn't work the same way in every person's life. Some people will tell you that when they trusted Christ that He immediately removed certain sinful desires and habits - some of the very things that Paul mentions in this passage (sexual sins, drug/alcohol abuse, etc.). Other people enter into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus and find that the flesh is very much alive and well in these same areas; their entire lives they are tempted in certain areas of the flesh. You may cry out to God year after year, "Take away these desires of the flesh!" but they still remain. I can't explain why God doesn't erase these desires in our lives; perhaps He wants to keep us desperate for Him. Just because you have temptations doesn't mean that the Spirit of God doesn't live within you.

In light of what we've seen in this passage I want us to think about what we can do to position ourselves to "walk by the Spirit" - especially when we're struggling with some aspect of the flesh.

Naming and turning from the deeds/works of the flesh. Perhaps as I talked through the deeds of the flesh you identified one or more items that characterize your life (at times anyway). There is a certain power in actually "naming" those things deeds of the flesh. For example, if you get frustrated and yell at somebody, you might think, "Wow, I'm having a bad day." But what about calling it what it is: "That outburst of anger was a deed of my flesh." Naming some action or attitude a deed of the flesh is a way of employing biblical categories so that you can address it biblically.

This should never be used to excuse our behavior ("It wasn't me who yelled at you; it was my flesh."). Neither should it lead to self-condemnation and self-loathing. Rather, naming something a deed of the flesh recognizes some behavior or attitude for what it is: a manifestation of that part of us that craves sin and that will never get better. As we saw in verse 13 last week, we need to understand that the flesh can establish a base of operations for dominating the rest of our lives. We need a healthy fear of what the flesh can do in our lives and in our fellowship.

Once we identify something as a deed of the flesh, our response should be repentance, turning from that sin and turning to God in faith. You can't really repent from having a bad day; you can certainly repent from an outburst of anger.

Trusting the Holy Spirit (who opposes the flesh) to lead us into godliness. This is my way of saying that we should actually believe what Paul says in Galatians 5 about the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit within you actively opposes the flesh; the Holy Spirit wants to produce the fruit of the Spirit in your life (next week's message). You don't have to try to convince the Spirit to work in your life; He is already committed to empowering and guiding you. Jesus made clear that the Holy Spirit would be His personal presence in the life of the believer - doing the same sorts of things in our lives that He did in the lives of the original disciples. You and I simply need to trust that He will work.

If some area of the flesh has a death grip on your life in some way, you might have a hard time believing that the Holy Spirit can actually make your life different. Maybe you struggle with some addiction or you may find that your flesh always sabotages relationships with others (enmities, strife, factions, etc.). Perhaps you know your flesh so well that you think it's highly unlikely that you'll ever be different. But what about the possibility of knowing the Holy Spirit so well that you have the faith to trust that His influence is stronger than your flesh? Paul says, "Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh."

Walking by the Spirit is not an exercise in willpower. It's a life of conscious dependence on the Spirit within you to do what God has revealed He will do. One way to express this dependence/faith is through prayer. We simply ask God that the Holy Spirit would fill our lives and lead us into godliness. We simply ask that the Spirit would empower us to avoid the deeds of the flesh.