

Walk by the Spirit

Galatians 5.13-21

Introduction

Paul has now wrapped up the doctrinal section of this epistle and is moving on to demonstrate what it means to live inside the freedom Christ brings. Christ's freedom calls us to a higher standard - one that places spiritual wellbeing and righteousness at the forefront. Paul's emphasis on love serves as a reminder that our actions and beliefs should stem from a place of genuine love. Whether it's in our relationships, our workplace, or our community involvements, love should be the driving force behind our acts of service. Freedom in Christ doesn't mean we live without boundaries. We have a responsibility to live a life that glorifies God, to love and serve others, and to constantly check our actions and intentions against God's word. It's a reminder to not misuse our freedom as an excuse to indulge in the desires of the flesh but to serve one another humbly in love.

In this section, Paul will outline the moral responsibilities that come with living in Christ.

5:13-15 – Freedom brings responsibility, not license.

Galatians 5:13-15 (CSB)

13 For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love.

14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.

15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another.

5:13 reminds us of what Paul wrote in 5:1. We gain freedom through Jesus Christ. Our freedom isn't without obligation, however. After coming to Christ, we begin the new work of overcoming the flesh and turn our devotion toward others, reaching out to them in service. It all could be summarized in this way:

- 5.13a – we make no *opportunity for the flesh*.
- 5.13b – we do not ignore others, instead we *serve one another through love*.
- 5.14 - This is all motivated by love, 5:14. In other words, we fulfill God's royal law by *loving our neighbor as ourselves*.

This might remind us of Jesus' statement in Matthew 22:37-40 and Paul's writing in Romans 13:8-10. Our Christianity is seen in the way we interact and care for those around us. It is where we have opportunity to shine for Christ.

Shining for Christ was not the focus of the Galatians. Their present controversy had diverted their attention from their primary mission. While they were devouring each other, they placed themselves in danger. We can imagine scenes of gossip, slander, and just general bad attitudes among the Galatian brethren. It would certainly not have been pretty. Christians in our time would do well to heed the warnings of Paul here.

5.16-18: Walk by the Spirit

Understanding the Command

Galatians 5.16 is an imperative, written in present tense. *Walk by the Spirit*. It denotes continuous

Galatians 5:16–18

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

17 For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don't do what you want.

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

actions. Step by step. Sometimes it might even get down to a moment-by-moment commitment. When we do this, *we will not gratify the desires of the flesh*. Here, Paul identifies what is the opposite of walking by the Spirit. It is the giving into the desires of the flesh. Our flesh is the part of us that gains satisfaction from independence, power, prestige, and worldly pleasure. These things are all around it. Paul's point is that if we are controlled by the Spirit, we are not controlled by these desires.

In 5.17, Paul contrasts two sets of desires that are in opposition to each other. The flesh produces one kind of desires, the Spirit produces another kind. We walk by the Spirit when we the desires produced by the Spirit are stronger than the desires produced by the flesh. So, what generates this? How do we allow the desires of the Spirit to come to dominate our life?

Inviting the Spirit into Your Life

Again, the command of 5.16 stands out. *Walk by the Spirit*. How is this accomplished? Since the Christian life begins with the Spirit (3.3; 4.6, 29), the only way to continue the Christian life is by the power of the Spirit. The internal spiritual struggle is a defining aspect of the Christian life, experienced by all who choose to live in accordance with the Spirit. Paul's description of conflict here is distinct from the moral dilemmas faced by everyone at various points in life, as well as from the struggles of a Christian who has strayed from their commitment to Christ. Rather, this struggle pertains to the devout Christian who makes a daily, conscious decision to "walk by the Spirit." Engaging in this spiritual walk means entering a relentless battle between the Spirit and our fallen flesh every day. It is crucial to underscore this reality, as numerous Christians are hesitant to acknowledge undergoing such an inner turmoil. They erroneously believe that spiritual maturity equates to transcending these types of struggles and assume that the revered saints were certainly too connected to the Spirit to experience fleshly desires. However, Paul directly challenges these misconceptions of hyper-spirituality.

Achieving spiritual alignment and strength requires one to immerse their mind in the things of the Spirit. As stated in Colossians 3.16, this is achieved by letting the word of Christ dwell within you, saturating every part of your being. It is essential to recognize the necessity for our personal cooperation with the Spirit. God respects our free will and does not force His intentions upon us; He allows us the freedom of choice. As mentioned in Galatians 5.17, the choice is ours, but it is not without conflict. The struggle between the desires of the flesh and the Spirit is real, and there are many instances where our earthly desires overshadow our spiritual aspirations, preventing us from pursuing our true intentions.

Ephesians 3.16 offers guidance on how to combat these conflicts. By inviting deity into our hearts, we allow God to empower us to manifest virtue and holiness through our words and actions. This also enables us to perceive the world in its transient nature and provides us with the strength to challenge Satan. But how does God achieve this? It is through absorbing the Spirit by heeding the word. The principles of Scripture should infuse our hearts, govern our thoughts, and fill our minds. It is crucial to reflect on the significance of incorporating the word into our lives. Do we recognize its absolute necessity? Are there moments of weakness, despair, or doubt?

For those seeking heightened spiritual confidence, trust, and assurance, 2 Corinthians 4.7-10 serves as an inspiring testament. The key to a resilient and vibrant life with Christ lies in nurturing inner strength, which comes from being guided by both the word and the Spirit. The outcome of this spiritual journey is beautifully encapsulated in Ephesians 3.17, which speaks of the indwelling of Christ. The term "dwell" suggests settling down and feeling at home. It's not merely about having Jesus in your life but ensuring He feels at home within you, as there is a clear distinction between the two. One can reside in many places, yet not feel entirely at home.

The central question then becomes: Have you surrendered to the Spirit, allowing Christ to comfortably reside and feel at home in your heart? This leads to walking by the Spirit. Reflect upon your heart's current state. What would Christ find there? Consider the things you consume, the desires that satiate your heart, and the nature of your fellowship with God. What secrets might be lurking in the hidden corners of your heart?

5.19-21 – The Lusts of the Flesh

5.19: Sexual Sin

Galatians 5:19

19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity,

Sexual immorality, moral impurity, and promiscuity are issues that have been addressed in many religious texts. *Sexual immorality* is a general term that describes unlawful sexual relationships. This would include adultery, fornication, homosexuality, bestiality, incest, and prostitution. *Moral impurity* and *promiscuity* describe sexual perversions. *Moral impurity* is translated *impurity* in other versions and

references something that prevents a person approaching God in moral cleanliness. *Promiscuity* refers to a lack of restraint associated with sexual excess. Remember, this text was written for Christians who needed to be reminded of the consequences of such actions. It's stated that those who engage in such behaviors will not inherit the kingdom of God.

And here lies the problem. It's not only non-Christians who get involved in these acts; many Christians find themselves deeply entangled in such behaviors. There are Christians who view porn, others who cheat on their spouses, some divorce for trivial reasons and remarry, and still others who engage in premarital relations.

Denying these realities serves no purpose. In fact, any form of denial only undermines our credibility, especially when we aim to influence others positively. We must confront these truths, express remorse,

and strengthen our determination to live according to our faith. If one wishes to rid themselves of *sexual immorality, moral impurity, and promiscuity*, the guidance is clear: *walk by the Spirit, and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh*, 5.16.

5.20a: Sins of Religion

Idolatry is often associated with heathen worship, commonly linked to sensuality or various forms of

Galatians 5:20

20 idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions,

sexual sin. Paul, in his letters, sheds more light on the aspects of idolatry. In 1 Corinthians 10:7 and 10:14, he connects idolatry with participating in temple feasts. Furthermore, in Colossians 3:5, he relates idolatry to an overwhelming desire for material possessions. From historical references, it's evident that idolatry was rampant in the first century world, as indicated in Acts 17 and Romans 1.

Here in Galatians 5.20a, he includes *idolatry* and *sorcery* in his list of works of the flesh. *Idolatry* is the worship of manmade images. *Sorcery* has always been about tapping into the unseen world for personal gains. The Greek origin of the word "sorcery" is "pharmakon," which is where we derive words like "drug" and "pharmacy" from. The use of drugs is ancient. Historically, drugs were employed in occult practices, often linked with black magic, exerting demonic control, poisoning, and even abortion.

The Greco/Roman world, as illustrated in Romans 1:22-25, is strikingly reminiscent of the world we live in today. The same can be said for our struggles with materialism and desire, even as we see ourselves as being more advanced than ancient civilizations.

The heart of the matter is covetousness. Colossians 3:5-7 raises the question: What should we eliminate from our lives? Paul, in his wisdom, equates covetousness with idolatry. William Barclay provides insight into this concept. He describes the essence of idolatry as the insatiable desire to acquire. While the ancients might have worshipped tangible idols, hoping to get something in return, today's challenges aren't much different. We might not bow to wooden or stone idols, but the underlying problem remains: the relentless desire to gain. Covetousness, as subtle as it is, can coexist with ostentatious piety. While it may not have the blatant ugliness of explicit immorality, this "respectable worldliness," due to its nuanced nature, poses an even greater threat, as Paul Earnhart aptly puts it.

5.20b: Sins Related to Human Relationships

Hatreds

Hatreds stand in stark contrast to love. In some translations, it is interpreted as "enmity." Hatred is not just a superficial feeling; it's deeply connected with hostility in any shape or form. Paul, in his teachings, draws our attention to the fact that hatred is fundamentally an attitude, something that resides and churns deep within one's heart. This negative sentiment can be likened to acid. It silently eats away at the person from the inside, fizzing, simmering, and smoldering. To the outside observer, its effects might be invisible, but beneath the surface, it is potently alive and corrosive.

Galatians 5:20–21

20 ...hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions,

21 envy, ...

Strife

Strife represents the tangible manifestation of the hidden animosity that hatred fosters. While hatred is an inward feeling, strife is its outward expression in actions and words. In the NIV translation, it is depicted as "discord." Strife is observable in consistent disagreements, prideful disputes, dissensions, and quarrels. It manifests as a contentious attitude towards someone, viewing them in a persistently negative light, openly expressing cynicism, and habitually expecting

the worst outcomes.

Jealousy

Jealousy, on the other hand, is a burning desire to possess what belongs to others. Paul, emphasizing the internal nature of this emotion, identifies it as a heart issue. The root cause of jealousy is a profound sense of ingratitude towards God. A person consumed by jealousy tends to view their own blessings with disdain, throwing them before God in an act of ungrateful defiance and resentment. Such individuals often become bitter and pessimistic. It's important to understand that jealousy is not restricted to materialistic desires. People can become envious of others' talents, unique personalities, familial relationships, and even their health. Satan, being the master deceiver, excels at masking this sin, convincing individuals that their feelings are warranted. He makes them believe that they've been dealt an unfair hand in life, perpetuating the narrative that they are the victims and others are the fortunate ones. This line of thinking promotes a self-centered perspective where everything revolves around "I" and "me."

Outbursts of Anger

It is obvious from other parts of the Galatian letter that these churches were divided bitterly into factions. Paul says in 5.15 that they were *biting and devouring each other*, and according to 5.26 brethren were *provoking and envying each other*. Much of this was due to the efforts of the false teachers to enforce the observance of circumcision and other nuances of Jewish law. *Outbursts of anger* are sudden, unrestrained expressions of hostility toward others, often with little justification.

Selfish Ambitions, Dissensions, and Factions

On the surface, the term *selfish ambitions* might seem synonymous with *dissensions*. However, the Holy Spirit's choice to include both these terms in the scripture prompts a question: What differentiates *dissensions* from *factions*? Dissensions typically refer to disagreements and disputes, but factions delve deeper into the aftermath of such disagreements. It signifies scenarios where disagreements have escalated to full-blown separations, leading to permanent divisions. Here, groups of brethren segregate themselves, forming cliques and stand against one another. The term is rooted in the original word meaning "to choose", which is the basis for the term "heresy". Essentially, it addresses the deliberate decisions made, stemming from a place of selfish pride and disputes. It's about endorsing and picking sides based on issues or elevating someone as the notable figurehead for a particular issue. This act is deeply rooted in self-centered ambitions and a divisive spirit. One can often witness scenarios where

individuals prefer to isolate themselves, rallying a devoted following. At times, they might even eye others' groups with envy, deriving pleasure from their misfortunes.

Envy

Moving on to 5.21a, the focus shifts to the term *envy*. Presented in plural, it hints at the myriad ways in which envious desires can manifest. At its core, envy is malice and animosity directed towards someone else or a different group. The scripture consistently casts it in a negative light, emphasizing its harmful nature.

Galatians 5:21

21 ..I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

A Stern Warning

Lastly, 5.21b delivers a stern warning.

I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Those who continuously indulge in these behaviors, making them a practice of their life, are cautioned that they will not inherit the kingdom of God.

What's In This for Us?

True Freedom in Christ

Reflect on the areas in your life where you might be taking your freedom in Christ for granted. How can you use this freedom to allow God more space in your life and serve others better by showing them love?

Check Your Motivations

Regularly take a moment to assess the motivations behind your actions. Are they driven by love and a desire to serve, or are they driven by selfish desires or some other fleshly thing?

Daily Commitment to the Spirit

Each morning is a new opportunity to consciously decide to walk by the Spirit. During challenging moments throughout the day, take a pause and ask, "What would walking by the Spirit look like in this situation?" Or "How can I magnify Jesus in this moment?"

Immerse Yourself in the Word

Commit to regular study and meditation on God's Word. Allow it to saturate your mind and influence your decisions, reactions, and interactions with others. This is the exhortation of Paul in Colossians 3.16.

Fight Back Against Temptation

Recognize the areas of temptation in your life and actively seek the Spirit's guidance in combating them. This might mean setting boundaries, seeking accountability, or changing certain habits. Periodically, take time to introspect and assess the state of your heart. Is Christ truly at home there? Are there hidden sins or desires that need addressing?

Empathy and Understanding

Understand that everyone, including devout Christians, struggles with fleshly desires. Be a source of support and understanding for those battling with their desires, rather than judging them. Offer counsel based on the Word and the Spirit.

For Thought and Reflection

1. How does Paul define the concept of freedom in Christ in Galatians 5:13-15?
2. In what ways can Christians misuse the freedom they have in Christ?
3. How is the concept of loving one's neighbor as oneself pivotal to understanding our Christian responsibilities?
4. What is the significance of the contrast Paul makes between walking by the Spirit and fulfilling the desires of the flesh in Galatians 5:16-18?
5. How can a Christian actively "walk by the Spirit" in their daily life?
6. What challenges might Christians face when trying to live by the Spirit and resist the desires of the flesh?
7. In what ways does inviting the Spirit into one's life help combat worldly temptations and challenges?

