MESSAGE FOR OCTOBER 25, 2026, FROM GALATIANS 5:16-18

We continue this week in our series of messages from Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. In this section of the letter, **Paul is filled with exhortations and commands related to how to live the Christian life**. Paul has addressed the problem of **the false teachers with their false gospel of salvation by grace AND obedience to the law**—what he calls being "under the law." He now turns to unpack **how believers are to *live* in the liberty of NOT being under the law—that liberty that Christ purchased for believers on the cross.**

In our text from last week, Paul begins to address this issue of believers living in freedom or liberty as opposed to living under the enslavement of the law. We saw that **spiritual liberty apart from the law is crucial to enjoying a loving relationship with God**. We also saw from the promise of the New Covenant relationship revealed in Jeremiah 31 that **the law of God still has a role to play in the life of any believer.**

It's not true that because Jesus has come that the law of God, with its revelation of God's will and his holy character, has been eliminated from the life of believers. Not at all! Jeremiah reveals that for the New Covenant believer, the law of God has simply been relocated from cold, impersonal tablets of stone to the hearts of believers where the Holy Spirit has inscribed it. Under this New Covenant in Christ, **the Holy Spirit has given the believer a new nature that causes our hearts to WANT to obey God. Obedience to the law of God, through the Spirit, is now part of the heart's desire of any genuine believer.**

We also saw last week that, **even with these new heart desires to please and obey God,** Paul warns believers that we **must not abuse our spiritual liberty by using it as an excuse to gratify our selfish desires that are opposed to God. Believers have been liberated from the law so that we can freely love and obey God,** but we can abuse our freedom when we instead use it as an excuse to satisfy our selfish, fleshly desires. We saw from verse 14 that **our freedom in Christ is instead given to us for the purpose of lovingly serving one another.** The ironic truth of the gospel is that **we've been liberated from the tyranny of the law with its enslaving demands so that we, by the Spirit, can live as willing, joyful slaves to one another.**

Paul could have used any number of examples of **how believers are to use their freedom** in addition to this one about serving one another. He could have cited our spiritual freedom **enabling us to be bold in our witness**. He could have cited our spiritual freedom to **generously give away our money or do other Christ-like acts of service**. **We see in verse 15 why he uses this particular one about living as loving servants to one another.** Apparently, the Galatians were experiencing some interpersonal conflicts and tensions because Paul says in verse 15, "**15** But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another."

The statement is so vague that we can't know the specifics of what was going on in these Galatian churches. Apparently, there were some heated interpersonal conflicts in the churches that Paul had heard about. As Paul continues his exhortations on living in Christian liberty, **in light of these conflicts** and **in light of the temptation to abuse our freedom** as an opportunity to sin, **he now explains HOW believers are to live in Christian liberty.** As we'll see, living in Christian liberty is NOT simply a commitment we make. Our liberty is not a spiritual switch we can turn on in our hearts. Though **our liberty is a gift of God to believers through the death of Christ,** like everything else in the Christian life, **we cannot live in spiritual freedom on our own. We need help.**

After Paul warns the Galatians about these **fleshly**, interpersonal conflicts, he writes in verses 16-18, "**16** But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. **17** 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*. **18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." When Paul says in verse 16, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" he's saying that **the way you live in spiritual liberty--the way you avoid abusing that liberty** is to "walk by the Spirit."

To better understand this, we need to see that **behind Paul's argument about how to live in Christian liberty, is the backdrop of salvation history**. That is, the truth **that believers live in this period of salvation history between the first and second coming of Christ.** In this era of salvation history **one of the central blessings believers have been given because of Jesus's saving work is the gift of the Holy Spirit to live in and empower those in Christ. The Spirit was not given *in the same way* under the old, law covenant.** The Spirit was sent to empower all believers to live the Christian life and that includes living in spiritual liberty.

But at the same time, in this era of salvation history before the second coming of Jesus, **believers are not yet perfected** but live with these sinful, rebellious "desires of the flesh" we looked at last week. **When you put those two truths together about this era of salvation history—the giving of the Spirit along with these fleshly desires, that means we live in a context of constant spiritual conflict.** During this period in salvation history, believers exist within a context of persistent, ongoing spiritual conflict. And this ongoing tension and conflict can become discouraging to sincere believers because **we don't like living in constant conflict.** Our natural tendency is to try to figure out or come up with a "fix" to escape this conflict.

I remember much of my early Christian life was spent in deep frustration and confusion over this. Like any born-again believer, I experienced some powerful moments of joy and peace and the presence of some (albeit immature) spiritual fruit in my life. But at the same time, I was very much troubled by these selfish and sinful desires that Paul here calls "the desires of the flesh." They seemed to me to be horribly out of place. I assumed that **there must be something desperately wrong with the way I was living the Christian life** that I could be living in what felt like a spiritually schizophrenic state.

I couldn't believe that the same person who, by God's grace, could experience some almost heavenly moments of real joy and peace and even show some spiritual fruit, could also have these hellish, wicked, self-centered desires. This tremendous inconsistency felt maddening at times, and I did what many believers who have little knowledge of the bible do.

That is, *I kept looking for a method, a secret,* or a technique *that surely God must have provided* so that **my godly desires could gain permanent dominance over or, if possible, even snuff out all the unholy, selfish desires I had.** I read many books and listened to many teachings in a search for THE way, the secret, **the experience I needed to have** in order to completely extinguish my evil desires. I remember being so frustrated by authors who would never give me THE answer as to how to get rid of, or at least permanently "fix" this sinful part of me.

There were some authors who, though they were mistaken, gave me hope that this could happen. They communicated that **if I just learned a certain technique or had a certain spiritual experience, then the consistent "victorious Christian life" would be mine.** For instance, I was

taught that if I just experienced one final, decisive surrender of my desires through some crisis experience, I would be free, at least in large measure, from my disgusting, sinful desires. I tried some of these so-called "Christian Secrets to a Happy Life" for months only to find that I never seemed to be able to get it right.

Another similar spiritual fix that many believers recommend is the "let go and let God" approach to the Christian life. That is, if you just gave up on your own sinful, self-centered efforts to live the Christian life and instead, passively trust in God, **victory over your sinful desires will be found as Jesus mystically lives his life through you.** This is living the Christian life **as if you are God's hand puppet** with your role being entirely passive. This view holds that constant spiritual striving is a sign that you aren't trusting in God.

There are many variations on those themes that some of you may have heard of, but you get the idea. The notion of being miraculously set free in a once-and-for-all crisis experience wherein you, from that moment on, will live in victory over sin—is VERY appealing. The New Testament also reveals that it's …a fantasy. The teachings in those books and the teachings I heard always had some scripture verses cited in support of their view. The problem is that **none of them adequately reflect what the bible clearly teaches about the depth and power of our sin problem as believers**.

They end up making far less of the depth of our sinfulness than the Bible teaches. **Neither do they speak much about a huge piece of the New Testament that reveals—as our text does today—*that the life of a believer is intended by God to be a constant, persistent fight of faith that continues until we die*.** The reason these books are still in print and sell copies is because many believers like me don't want a life-long fight of faith, we want Jesus to "fix" us.

Theologians call this error that I and many other believers commit the error of having an "over-realized eschatology." That means, **expecting Jesus to do for us in this interim period of salvation history before he returns what he has promised to do *only* in the age to come when Jesus comes back. You want MORE of the benefits of Jesus' death NOW in this life than God has chosen to give us.** What Paul describes in our text for today is NOT a call to have an experience or crisis moment where the believer is suddenly and permanently released from the power of sin.

Neither is it a call to "let go and let God" or some other one-time, permanent solution to our sin problem. Paul describes it in verse 16 as …a walk. "**16** But I say, walk [or live] by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." To "walk" means to live—every minute of every day by the Spirit—in the power of the Spirit—yielding to the influence of the Spirit.

Walking by the Spirit is **the believer rightly understanding and utilizing the energizing spiritual power that God has given to believers in this age of salvation history.** This is a …walk. This is a way of life, not a one-time crisis experience. **This is learning to walk by faith in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.** Walking by the Spirit means **living a life made up of hundreds of choices we make every day in the power, under the influence, of the Spirit**. We yield to the desires of the Spirit and, as we do that, we will NOT yield ourselves to the sinful, fleshly desires of our flesh.

It means, in the power of the Spirit**, choosing to NOT look at that billboard or that website.** It means, in reliance on the power of the Spirit, **choosing not to gossip about that person** or **not yielding to the temptation to fudge on your tax return** or **lie to your boss to stay out of trouble.**

It means, in reliance on the power of the Spirit, **making the choice to spend time in the word and prayer instead of scrolling social media or watching television**. These are NOT decisions that are made in your own power. They are made as you yield to the controlling influence NOT of your sinful flesh, but the indwelling Holy Spirit.

This means getting up in the morning and saying, "*God, my lazy, fleshly desires are influencing me to NOT want to read your word today, but you want me to do that so, by your power, let's go."* And then you act in obedience, trusting the Spirit to help you. And when you act in obedience, you generally experience the blessing of God. In other words, **walking by the Spirit is a life-long, moment-by-moment spiritual fight. Each one of those decisions we make to obey God is part of a lifelong spiritual battle.**

There is a cooperation between the will of the believer and the Holy Spirit. **It's NOT, as I very much wanted it to be, a matter of a once-and-for-all surrendering or allowing the Holy Spirit to do it ALL for me**! No, it's a matter of the believer **in a given situation, by the Spirit, being prompted or reminded as to the choice in line with God's revealed will and, in the power of the Spirit, yielding to *his* will and not the desires of my sinful, indwelling flesh.**

An important question, the answer to which helps us in this cooperation between our will and the Spirit, is "**why would God set up the Christian life this way with the need for this constant cooperation between my will and the Spirit**?" A related question is, "*Why wouldn't it glorify God more if my Christian life were ALL of him and nothing (or at least very little) of me? Wouldn't it glorify God more if we were like passive, God-controlled hand puppets and he did all the work through us?"*

To many sincere believers, the notion of a Christian life that is one spiritual battle after another doesn't sound reasonable. After all, isn't the Christian life supposed to be one of "rest?" Didn't Jesus say, "**28** Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you *rest*. **29** Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find *rest* for your souls."

Where people get this wrong is **they confuse the biblical understanding of rest with the world's concept of ease and leisure** and that is NOT what Jesus or other biblical authors mean by "rest." He means resting in HIM—joining him in HIS yoke. Being yoked with Jesus is ***cooperation***(!) but it's NOT the ease from all labor. Revelation 14 says that we WILL rest from ALL our labors …***when we die*** and not before. Resting in Jesus or trusting in Jesus is NOT ease or leisure. It's much more like what we see in Isaiah 26. The author is speaking of God and says, "**3**You [God] keep him in *perfect peace* whose mind is stayed on you, because *he trusts in you*." That's spiritual rest—by looking to God in faith and **enjoying close communion with God as you constantly look to him to give you the strength and the desire to live in obedience to him.**

One reason God set up the Christian life this way with this ongoing spiritual conflict and our ongoing need to trust in him is because, as we've seen before, in a life of faith we are constantly looking to God in child-like dependence. And THAT is what God wants because **the life of faith in the midst of the fight *maximally glorifies Christ* because we look to HIM as beggars and say, *"I can't do this, but you can, so let's go*." And when God works by the Spirit through our faith, HE gets the glory.** God is glorified most in this Spirit-led, moment-by-moment cooperation because, rather than him perform one miracle of "complete surrender" that allegedly liberates us, he does countless and successive miracles over the life of the believer as we learn to trust him.

As we struggle and cry out to him—as we despair of our own efforts and call on him—as we see our own pathetic weakness and look to his infinite strength—**God is glorified**. **Also, as we lean on him over and over and over again, *we come to KNOW him and LOVE him and WORSHIP him for his great love and grace and patience and faithfulness because we have seen all of those divine qualities 1000's of times in the midst of the lifelong fight*.**

Paul says it's as we walk by the Spirit that we will "not gratify the desires of the flesh." One result of walking by the Spirit, yielding to the Spirit, is that we will not gratify the sinful desires of the flesh. Spiritual enslavement is seeking to gratify our selfish desires, but spiritual liberty is experienced when we yield to the Holy Spirit. We see this cooperation manifest in places like Philippians 2:12-13. "**12** Therefore, my beloved, as you have always *obeyed*, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, [there's the conflict] **13** for **it is God** who works in you, both **to will** and to work for his good pleasure." There's the cooperation! **We** work with great earnestness—in fear and trembling AND …**God** works to not only give us the power to DO his will but through the Spirit, the DESIRE to do his will.

As we come to verse 17, Paul explains **the reason it is so important** to walk in the Spirit. He says, "**17** 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*." This is Paul's description of the fight. **This battle is fought on the field of *desire.*** The **desires** of our sinful, self-centered flesh versus the God-honoring, Christ-exalting **desires** of the Spirit.

Paul boils down the nature of this spiritual opposition to its two most basic elements. It's **my fleshly desire for my glory and for short term ease and pleasure** versus, **God's desire for his glory and his exaltation in my life.** If I cave into the desires of my flesh, I am living as a slave to sin but if I yield to the desires of Spirit, I experience freedom and joy.

Notice there are actually THREE entities Paul mentions here. First, "the desires of the flesh." Second are "the desires of the Spirit" and third, "the things I want to do." That means that **my sinful flesh tries to keep me from doing what I want to do.** As born-again believers, our hearts have been changed, liberated to want what God wants. But Paul is saying here that as believers, **when we sinfully yield to the selfish desires of our flesh, we are NOT doing what we, in our new natures, want to do**.

So, the spiritual conflict is not only between my sinful, fleshly desires and the holy desires of the Spirit. **Its also between my sinful fleshly desires and what I, in my new nature, want to do. That's why it's an expression of spiritual liberty to yield to the Spirit because when we yield to the Spirit, *we are doing what we in our new natures want to do.*** We feel no regret, guilt, or shame if we do what GOD wants us to do and ultimately what WE want to do.

Paul concludes in verse 18 with, "**18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." This raises a couple of questions. First, what does it mean to be "led by the Spirit?" Some believers wrongly understand being "led by the Spirit" as the Spirit's moment-by-moment, personal guidance in our lives. That's how they understand being "led" by the Spirit here. As if, the Spirit is constantly transmitting his GPS signals to you and being "Spirit led" means being constantly "in tune" with the Spirit so that we can clearly receive his transmission to us in all situations.

People who think the Spirit leads this very intensified way tend to be troubled by questions like whether the Spirit is directing them to buy the blue car or the red car. This very exacting

understanding of the leading of the Spirit wrongly assumes that **God can't or won't control the direction of your life unless YOU are finely tuned onto his wavelength**. Trying to stay in touch with the Spirit as if you need to stay tuned precisely into his wavelength is an enslaving way to live.

The truth is that **God sovereignly controls ALL things including our lives** whether you're "in tune" with him or not. Proverbs 16:9 says, "**9**The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps." Whatever our plans are, the Lord is controlling our steps. God is not limited by our plans or purposes. He sovereignly leads us where he wants us to go.

In rare moments, God can and does choose to exercise his control over us by giving us personal, specific direction through the Spirit. Luke says in Acts 16 about Paul's second missionary journey, "And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, *having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit* to speak the word in Asia." That appears to have been some kind of personal communication from the Spirit that prevented Paul and his companions from going to Asia. But **most of the time** God does NOT lead that way. Through his **revealed will in Scripture** and **his divine Providence,** God directs us and puts us where he wants us. When Paul's ship in Acts 27 was being driven to Malta by a terrible storm, or when he was arrested and placed in a Roman jail, God was just as much leading him as when the Spirit personally forbade them to go to Asia.

Being led by the Spirit is not about the believer discerning his personal GPS guidance as we daily seek to follow God's will for us. Being led by the Spirit is simply **being directed by the Spirit to live a life that pleases God**.[1] This is about being led by the Spirit in those moment-by-moment decisions as we yield to **God's will revealed in his word** which keeps us from gratifying the desires of our sinful flesh.

This is the same way Paul uses this phrase "led by the Spirit" in Romans chapter eight where he says, "**12** So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. **13** 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. **14** For *all who are led by the Spirit of God* are sons of God." We see again that Paul places being led by the Spirit **in the context of living in this world and making choices about whether to live in the Spirit or according to the sinful flesh.** Being led by the Spirit means not living according to the sinful desires of the flesh but doing things like putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit. When we do that, however imperfectly, we reveal that we are sons of God.

So that's what Paul means when he says in verse 19, "But if you are led by the Spirit…" The question is, what does he mean when he finishes that sentence by saying, "you are not under the law." **What is the connection between being led by the Spirit and not being under law?** We mentioned it when we spoke of the Spirit being part of this new age in redemption history. His point is that now, in **this** age of the history of salvation, we can serve God in the power of the Spirit in spiritual liberty. Before the Spirit was given however, God's people lived under the law, under a curse, spiritually enslaved because they were not under grace but under law.

Paul is saying that if you are led by the Spirit, **you are showing that you have been set free from enslavement by the law.** That's his point when he says in verse 19, "But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law." If the Galatians were to revert to living under the law, as the false

[1] Schreiner, ECNT Galatians.

teachers wanted, they could NOT be led by the Spirit and would be re-enslaved to their sinful desires because the law cannot kill those, only we can do that by the Spirit.

As we close, let's think about two truths. First, **Believers don't have to be confused about how to overcome our sinful desires, wrongly looking for any once-for-all solution but we can instead be content with a life of ongoing spiritual conflict.** Please know that, though there are people out there who will wrongly tell you differently, the solutions they are offering to living the Christian life are not biblical and therefore, will not work. And **we should not be discouraged by the persistent conflict in our lives because it's GOD'S plan for us that we spend our lives in war against our sin.**

This life of **constantly leaning on God in the midst of the fight** is, more than anything else, what teaches us to walk by faith and faith glorifies him. Each time we choose to fight the fight of faith and yield to the Spirit, he is glorified and as believers **we should be living for God to be glorified in our lives**. Though **Jesus' death purchased for believers a complete and total victory over our sin**, we will not be able to walk in that perfection until he returns.

Second, ***Believers should not become discouraged by repeated failures in their fight against sin.*** It's very easy for sincere believers who grieve over their sin to at some point believe they can't possibly be Christians because they fail so often in their fight against sin. Tom Schreiner helps us here when he says, "*The opposition between the flesh and the Spirit is the normal Christian life which is not marked by perfection but by war."* That means that **THE confirming indicator of the genuineness of your faith is NOT the presence of perfection but the presence of war wounds.** Are you in the fight? That's the proof of your genuine status as a follower of Christ! "*Am I in the fight?"* That's the question the believer should ask, not, "*why aren't I winning every battle?"*

The apostle John reminds us in First John chapter one, "**8** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." That's the promise we cling to. If you are discouraged by your many failures, talk to someone about it and let them share their war wounds with you. Read a good gospel-soaked book and rediscover the love God has for you because of Jesus. May God give us the grace to live in the freedom we have in Christ so that we might fight the good fight and grow in our faith for his glory and our joy.