

Articles and Sermons :: The War Within: Flesh vs. Spirit by John Piper**The War Within: Flesh vs. Spirit by John Piper - posted by TrueWitness, on: 2016/11/13 12:35**

Galatians 5:16-18,

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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 prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law.

Last week we learned from Galatians 5:13-15 that the good news of Christ is a call to freedom. God's revealed will for all of us is that we have the opportunity, the ability, and the desire to do what will give us the greatest satisfaction now and in a thousand years. We also learned that the only activity which we can perform in freedom is love. "You were called to freedom . . . so through love be servants of one another" (5:13). This love is not optional. It is commanded. And it is very radical: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In other words, we are called in our freedom to desire and seek the happiness of others with the same zeal that we seek our own. But if you take this command seriously, it is so contrary to our natural inclinations that it seems utterly impossible. That I should get up in the morning and feel as much concern for your needs as for my own seems utterly beyond my power. If this is the Christian life "caring for others as I care for myself" then it is hard, indeed, and I feel hopeless to ever live it out.

Paul's answer to this discouragement is found in Galatians 5:16-18. The secret is in learning to "walk by the Spirit" (v. 16). If the Christian life looks too hard, we must remember that we are not called to live it by ourselves. We must live it by the Spirit of God. The command of love is not a new legalistic burden laid on our back; it is what happens freely when we walk by the Spirit. People who try to love without relying on God's Spirit always wind up trying to fill their own emptiness rather than sharing their fullness. And so love ceases to be love. Love is not easy for us. But the good news is that it is not primarily our work but God's. We must simply learn to "walk by the Spirit."

So I want to build today's message around three questions: What? Why? And, how? What is this "walking by the Spirit"? Why is it crucial to walk by the Spirit? And, how, very practically, can we walk by the Spirit?

What Is Walking by the Spirit?

First, what is this "walking by the Spirit"? There are two other images in the context which shed light on the meaning of "walk by the Spirit." The first is in verse 18: "If you are led by the Spirit you are not under law." If Paul had said, "If you follow the Spirit you are not under law," it would have been true, but in using the passive voice ("If you are led") he emphasizes the Spirit's work, not ours. The Spirit is not a leader like the pace car in the "Daytona 500." He is a leader like a locomotive on a train. We do not follow in our strength. We are led by his power. So "walk by the Spirit" means stay hooked up to the divine source of power and go wherever he leads.

The second image of our walk in the Spirit is in verse 22: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, etc." If our Christian walk is to be a walk of love and joy and peace, then "walk by the Spirit" must mean "bear the fruit of the Spirit." But again, the Spirit's work is emphasized, not ours. He bears the fruit. Perhaps Paul got this image from Jesus. You recall John 15:4-5: "Abide in me, and I in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit." So "walk by the Spirit" means "abide in the vine." Keep yourself securely united to the living Christ. Don't cut yourself off from the flow of the Spirit.

So in answer to our first question, What is this walking by the Spirit? we answer: It is "being led by the Spirit" and it is "bearing the fruit of the Spirit." The work of the Spirit is emphasized, yet the command is for us to do something. Our wills are deeply involved. We must want to be coupled to the locomotive. We must want to abide in the vine. And there are some things we can do to keep ourselves attached to the flow of God's power. But before we ask how to walk by the Spirit let's ask . . .

Why Is It Crucial to Walk by the Spirit?

Why is it crucial to walk by the Spirit? The text gives two reasons, one in verse 16 and one in verse 18. In verse 16 the i

incentive for walking by the Spirit is that when you do this, you will not gratify the desire of the flesh. The RSV here is wrong when it makes the second part of verse 16 a command instead of a promise and says, "Do not gratify the desires of the flesh." All the other major versions are right to make it a promise because this particular Greek construction has that meaning everywhere else in Paul. The verse should be translated, for example with the NASB, "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh." So the first reason we should walk by the Spirit is that when we do, the desires of our flesh are overcome.

In recent messages I've tried to define the flesh as Paul uses it. Most of the time (though not always, see below) it does not simply refer to the physical part of you. (Paul does not regard the body as evil in itself.) The flesh is the ego which feels an emptiness and uses the resources in its own power to try to fill it. Flesh is the "I" who tries to satisfy me with anything but God's mercy. Notice Galatians 5:24, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Now compare with this Galatians 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." In 2:20, "flesh" is used in its less usual meaning referring to ordinary bodily existence, which is not in itself evil ("I now live in the flesh").

But the important thing to notice is that in 5:24 the "flesh" is crucified and in 2:20 "I" am crucified. This is why I define the flesh in its negative usage as an expression of the "I" or the "ego." And notice in 2:20 that since the old fleshly ego is crucified, a new "I" lives, and the peculiar thing about this new "I" is that it lives by faith. "The life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." The flesh is the ego which feels an emptiness but loathes the idea of satisfying it by faith, i.e., by depending on the mercy of God in Christ. Instead, the flesh prefers to use the legalistic or licentious resources in its own power to fill its emptiness. As Romans 8:7 says, "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law." The basic mark of the flesh is that it is unsubmitive. It does not want to submit to God's absolute authority or rely on God's absolute mercy. Flesh says, like the old TV commercial, "I'd rather do it myself."

It is not surprising, then, that in verse 17 there is a war between our flesh and God's Spirit. It is a problem at first glance that there is a lively war between flesh and Spirit in the Christian, according to verse 17, but the flesh is crucified in the Christian, according to verse 24. We'll talk more about the sense in which our flesh is crucified when we get to verse 24. For now, let's give Paul the benefit of the doubt and assume that both are somehow true, and focus on this war within: our flesh versus God's Spirit.

God's Spirit Conquers Our Flesh

Verse 17 says, "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 prevent you from doing what you would." The main thing to learn from this verse is that Christians experience a struggle within. If you said to yourself when I was describing the flesh, "Well, I have a lot of that still left in me," it does not necessarily mean you aren't a Christian. A Christian is not a person who experiences no bad desires. A Christian is a person who is at war with those desires by the power of the Spirit.

Conflict in your soul is not all bad. Even though we long for the day when our flesh will be utterly defunct and only pure and loving desires will fill our hearts, yet there is something worse than the war within between flesh and Spirit; namely, no war within because the flesh controls the citadel and all the outposts. Praise God for the war within! Serenity in sin is death. The Spirit has landed to do battle with the flesh. So take heart if your soul feels like a battlefield at times. The sign of whether you are indwelt by the Spirit is not that you have no bad desires, but that you are at war with them!

But when you take verses 16 and 17 together, the main point is not war, but victory for the Spirit. Verse 16 says that when you walk by the Spirit, you will not let those bad desires come to maturity. When you walk by the Spirit, you nip the desires of the flesh in the bud. New God-centered desires crowd out old man-centered desires. Verse 16 promises victory over the desires of the flesh "not that there won't be a war, but that the winner of that war will be the Spirit."

In fact, I think what Paul means in verse 24, when he says the flesh has been crucified, is that the decisive battle has been fought and won by the Spirit. The Spirit has captured the capital and broken the back of the resistance movement. The flesh is as good as dead. Its doom is sure. But there are outlying pockets of resistance. The guerrillas of the flesh will not lay down their arms, and must be fought back daily. The only way to do it is by the Spirit, and that's what it means to walk by the Spirit "so live that he gives victory over the dwindling resistance movement of the flesh." So the first reason why we must walk by the Spirit is that, when we do, the flesh is conquered.

God's Spirit Creates Law-Fulfilling Fruit

The second reason to walk by the Spirit or be led by the Spirit is found in verse 18: "If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law." This does not mean you don't have to fulfill God's law. You do. That's what verses 13 and 14 said, "Through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" And Romans 8:3-4 say, "God condemned sin in the flesh in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Therefore, not being under law does not mean we don't have to fulfill the law. It means that, when we are led by the locomotive of the Spirit, we cruise on the railroad track of the law as a joyful way of life and are not left to climb it like a ladder in our own strength from underneath. When we are led by the Spirit, we are not under the punishment or the oppression of the law because what the law requires the Spirit produces; namely, love. Notice verse 22: the first and all-encompassing fruit of the Spirit is love, which verse 14 says fulfills the whole law.

And to confirm that this is just how Paul is thinking, he ends the list of the fruit of the Spirit in verse 23 with the words, "Against such there is no law." In other words, how can you be under the oppression or punishment of the law when the very things the law requires are popping out like fruit on the branches of your life? So the second reason to walk by the Spirit is really the same as the first. Verse 16 says, do it because you get victory over the flesh when you walk by the Spirit. You nip temptation in the bud. Verse 18 says, do it because then you are free from the oppression and punishment of the law, because the fruit the Spirit produces fulfills the law. The Spirit is the fullness that overflows in love. Therefore it conquers the emptiness that drives the flesh, and it spills out in acts of love which fulfill the law.

How Do You Walk by the Spirit?

But the \$60,000 question is, How do you walk by the Spirit? All of us have heard preachers say, "Let the Spirit lead you," or, "Allow the Spirit to control you," and have gone away puzzled as to what that means practically. How do you allow the Spirit to control you? I want to try to show you that the answer is, You allow the Spirit to control you by keeping your heart happy in God. Or to put it another way, You walk by the Spirit when your heart is resting in the promises of God. The Spirit reigns over the flesh in your life when you live by faith in the Son of God who loved you and gave himself for you and now is working everything together for your good.

Here's the fivefold evidence from Galatians. First, Galatians 5:6, "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love." Genuine faith always produces love, because faith pushes out guilt, fear, and greed and gives us an appetite to enjoy God's power. But Galatians 5:22 says love is a fruit of the Spirit. So if love is what faith necessarily produces and love is a fruit of the Spirit, then the way to walk by the Spirit is to have faith. A happy resting in the promises of God is the pipeline of the Spirit.

Second, notice Galatians 5:5, "For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness." How do you wait for Jesus through the Spirit? "By faith!" When you keep your heart happy in God and resting in his promises, you are waiting through the Spirit and walking by the Spirit.

Third, look at Galatians 3:23, "Now before faith came, we were confined under the law." The coming of faith liberates a person from being under law. But what does 5:18 say? "If you are led by the Spirit you are not under law." How, then, shall we seek to be led by the Spirit? By faith. By meditating on the trustworthiness and preciousness of God's promises until our hearts are free of all fretting and guilt and greed. This is how the Holy Spirit fills and leads.

Fourth, see Galatians 3:5, the clearest of all: "Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing of faith?" The Spirit does his mighty work in us and through us only by the hearing of faith. We are sanctified by faith alone. The way to walk by the Spirit and so not fulfill the desires of the flesh is to hear the delectable promises of God and trust them, delight in them, rest in them.

Finally, consider Galatians 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." Who is the Christ who lives in Paul? He is the Spirit. As 4:6 says: The Spirit of God's Son has been sent into our hearts. And how, according to 2:20, does the life of the Son produce itself in Paul? How does Paul walk by the Spirit of the Son? "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God."

Day by day Paul trusts the Son. Day by day he casts his cares on God, frees his life from guilt and fear and greed, and is borne along by the Spirit. How, then, do we walk by the Spirit? The answer is plain. We stop trying to fill the emptiness of our lives with a hundred pieces of the world, and put our souls at rest in God. The Spirit will work the miracle of renewal in your life when you start meditating on his unspeakable promises day and night and resting in them. (See also Rom

ans 15:13, 2 Peter 1:4, and Isaiah 64:4.)

The Secret of Walking by the Spirit

Yesterday at 5:30 a.m. I was in Pasadena, California, standing in the kitchen of my beloved teacher Daniel Fuller talking to his wife Ruth. One of the things I will never forget about that kitchen is that over the sink are taped four tremendous promises of God typed on little pieces of paper. Ruth puts them there to meditate on while she works. That's how you walk by the Spirit.

I keep a little scrap paper by my prayer bench, and whenever I read a promise that can lure me away from my guilt and fear and greed, I write it down. Then in dry spells I have a pile of promises to soak my soul in. The fight of faith is fought with the promises of God. And the fight of faith is the same as the fight to walk by the Spirit. He works when we are resting in his promises. George Müller wrote (Autobiography, pp. 152-4):

I saw more clearly than ever that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not how much I might serve the Lord, or how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished. . . . Now what is the food for the inner-man? Not prayer but, the Word of God.

George Müller learned the secret of walking by the Spirit: Meditate on the precious truths of the Word of God until your heart is happy in God, resting in his promises.

Hudson Taylor had learned it too. He received word one day of rioting near one of the inland mission stations. In a few moments George Nichol, one of his evangelists, overheard Taylor whistling his favorite hymn, "Jesus, I Am Resting, Resting in the Joy of What Thou Art." Hudson Taylor had learned that for him, only one life was possible "just that blessed life of resting and rejoicing in the Lord under all circumstances, while he dealt with the difficulties inward and outward" (Spiritual Secret, p. 209).

I say to you, brothers and sisters, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. You will have victory over temptation and know the guidance of the Lord if you keep your heart happy in God by resting in his promises.

<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-war-within-flesh-vs-spirit>

-Daniel