

Galatians

Live by the Spirit

Galatians 5:16-26

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Scripture

The apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Galatians because they were drifting away from a proper understanding of the gospel. After the apostle Paul had started a number of churches in the region of Galatia, some false teachers—known as Judaizers—came after him and began teaching another gospel (Galatians 1:6-9).

The false teachers taught that salvation is the result of faith plus works. Paul insisted that salvation was the result of faith alone. Good works was the *product* of faith, not the *source* of faith.

After defending his credentials as an apostle sent by God in chapters 1 and 2, Paul described the nature of faith in chapters 3 and 4. In chapters 5 and 6 the apostle applies his teaching to the lives of Christian believers.

In the section we are studying today, the apostle Paul explains the work of the Spirit in our lives. Let us read Galatians 5:16-26:

¹⁶ So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

¹⁹ The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions

and desires. ²⁵ **Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.** ²⁶ **Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.** (Galatians 5:16-26)

Introduction

She stood on a small platform towering high above the crowd. Several yards across from her was another tiny stage cloaked partially in darkness. Between her and that distant platform loomed an intimidating abyss and a long, silver strand seemingly leading nowhere. Her face was hot from the glare of the spotlight; her hands were clammy from fear. She offered a bow of confidence to the silhouettes below, then stood erect and faced the wire with her heart racing. She closed her eyes and looked deep into her soul, finding strength and determination that seemed to flow from an outside source. Still longing to remain safe, she slowly filled and emptied her lungs. . . and gazed at the wire stretched out in front of her.

Then she did it—she carefully stepped onto the wire, first with one foot, then with the other. Soon she was halfway across, suspended in space and feeling as if she were free to spread her arms and take flight. But the ever present danger on every side made her yearn for the security of the metal platform. Finally, reaching her destination, she quickly bowed to the applause from below and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Like the circus's high-wire performer, Christians are perched on a tight-rope, trying to avoid two extremes—legalism on the one hand and licentiousness on the other.

Legalism presents itself as a platform of safety, saying, “Stop taking the risks of the free life and come back to me.”

Licentiousness, on the other hand, beckons us to stretch out our arms and fly toward our basest desires in total self-abandonment.

But God calls on us to keep walking the high wire of Christian freedom, balanced between playing it safe and living care-

lessly. What he is asking sometimes seems scary and impossible. Paul, however, reassures us that our walk can be filled with internal peace if we will only let the Holy Spirit help us.

Lesson

In our lesson today, we shall look at two main points. First, the issue exposed. And second, the problem resolved.

I. The Issue Exposed

In our study of Galatians, we have seen that receiving Christ by faith alone liberates us from the law's demands.

That's why we can turn our backs on legalism and embark on the free life.

But what can restrain us from using our freedom to plummet to the depths of licentiousness and immorality? We all feel the tug to step off the high wire and abuse our freedom. And yet, at the same time, our salvation has given us a new desire to put God's wishes ahead of our own.

What is this inner conflict? Can it be resolved? If so, how? Our very balance depends on our answers to these questions.

II. The Problem Resolved

Paul gives us the answers we need in Galatians 5:16-26. He describes the tug-of-war within us and the opposing forces involved. Then he explains how we can achieve victory and maintain our balance.

A. The Conflict Within (5:17)

First, notice the conflict within.

We all struggle with the conflict within, don't we? The hymn writer captured the conflict well when he wrote, " Prone to wan-

der—Lord, I feel it—prone to leave the God I love” (in “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”).

Christians are human battlegrounds. Raging inside us is a war between our sinful nature and the Holy Spirit. Paul says in verse 17a: **“For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other.”**

Justification does not kill our depravity; it merely sets us free from the *penalty* of our fallen condition. Once we are saved, however, we enter a war we never had to face as unbelievers. We become embroiled in a fierce battle between the Spirit and the sinful nature. And until we die or Christ physically removes us from the earth, we will continue to experience this tumultuous warfare. Our every emotion, thought, choice, and act will feel the pressures caused by these two forces. That is why Paul says at the end of verse 17, **“So that you do not do what you want.”**

B. The Forces Described

To help us understand the conflict warring within us, Paul describes the forces that are in conflict with each other.

1. The Sinful Nature (5:19-21)

First is the sinful nature.

In verse 19 Paul talks about the acts of the **sinful nature**. On the one hand we have our old sinful nature. It has not been eradicated by our new nature; it is still there. It still has its sinful tendencies and desires. These are described by Paul as **the acts of the sinful nature**.

These **acts** can be divided into four categories, each exposing the ugliness of our dark side.

The first category is *sexual*. Verse 19 says, **“Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery.”** These sins cover all sexual of-

fenses, whether public or private, between the married or the unmarried, or between homosexuals or bisexuals.

The second category is *religious*, which includes **“idolatry and witchcraft”** (5:20a). **Idolatry** is the worship of anything other than God. Idols can be power, prestige, money, or self. **Witchcraft** is “the secret tampering with the powers of evil,”¹ an ancient equivalent to today’s use of drugs to achieve “religious” experiences.

The third category concerns *personal relationships*. Paul continues the list in verse 20b, **“hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.”** These are all signs of the sinful nature at work.

The last category is in verse 21a and concerns *excessive alcohol consumption*: **“drunkenness, orgies, and the like.”** The sins listed here are obvious.

All the deeds in these categories are simply examples of how far Christians can fall when they serve the sinful nature rather than the Spirit.

Paul then gives us a warning. He says in verse 21b: **“I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”** This verse sounds as if believers can lose their salvation, but it means nothing of the sort.

The key to interpreting this verse lies in the tense of the Greek term that is translated in the NIV as **“those who live like this.”** The tense is present, indicating “a habitual continuation in fleshly sins rather than an isolated lapse.”² Paul’s point is that continual activity in sin is evidence of a lack of spiritual life, whereas occasional lapses into sin are a sign of carnality in the Christian.

Do you exhibit one of these lifestyles? If the former, you still need salvation. If the latter, you need to repent and live by the Spirit.

¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today series (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 147.

² James Montgomery Boice, “Galatians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. Ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), vol. 10, 497.

2. The Spirit (5:22-23)

The force that is opposed to the sinful nature is described by Paul as **“the Spirit.”**

Paul says in verses 22-23: **“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”**

When **the Spirit** works within us, he produces spiritual fruit. By the way, notice that **“fruit”** is singular. The Spirit produces **“fruit,”** not “fruits.” This **fruit** has nine virtues that brighten our lives.

The first three, **“love, joy, peace”** (5:22a), concern our *relationship to God*. He is our first **love** and our first **joy**, and because of him we are at **peace**.

The next triad, **“patience, kindness, goodness,”** (5:22b), describe our *relationship to other people*. We will seek their best and put up with their worst.

And the final three qualities, **“faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”** (5:22c-23a), concern our *relationship to ourselves*. We are able to master our passions and live a godly lifestyle. **“Against such things,”** Paul says, **“there is no law”** (5:23b). Since they are not of the sinful nature, they do not need to be restrained.

Author Eugene Peterson has an interesting statement about **the fruit of the Spirit**. He says:

Fruit is the result of a long organic and living process. The process is complex and intricate. Fruits are not something made, manufactured or engineered. They are simply not the product of the drawing board. . . . They’re the results of a life created by God.

We do not produce [fruit] by our own effort. We do not purchase it from another. It is not a reward for doing good deeds, like a merit badge, a gold medal, a blue ribbon. Fruits are simply there. Sometimes we experience them in another, sometimes in ourselves.

These nine [virtues] are also like fruit in that they are perishable. They spoil. They are beautiful to observe but cannot be kept on display for long. They must be used—eaten and digested. Fruit is something our bodies use to supply nutrients to live well. Just so, the Spirit gifts are what we take into our lives so that are able to live creatively.³

C. *The Way to Victory (5:16a, 25a)*

So, Paul has described the two forces at war within us. On the one hand you have the sinful nature. On the other hand you have the Spirit.

What can we do to overcome this raging war between good and evil? What is the way to victory?

Twice in this passage Paul says that we must live by the Spirit. In verse 16a Paul says, **“So I say, live by the Spirit.”** And he repeats himself in verse 25a, where he says, **“Since we live by the Spirit.”**

This process of living by the Spirit involves two actions that must become as basic to our lives as breathing.

1. We Must Remember That Our Sinful Nature Has Been Crucified (5:24)

First, we must remember that our sinful nature has been crucified.

Paul says in verse 24: **“Those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.”**

This means that our sinful nature is dying, not dead. It has been nailed to Christ’s cross, so it does not have the power over us it once enjoyed. Yet it can still influence us if we don’t let it stay there. Too often, John Stott says,

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Traveling Light: Reflections on the Free Life* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), 166.

We keep wistfully wishing to return to the scene of its execution. We begin to fondle it, to caress it, to long for its release, even to try to take it down again from the cross. We need to learn to leave it there. When some jealous, or proud, or malicious, or impure thought invades our mind, we must kick it out at once. It is fatal to begin to examine it and consider whether we are going to give in to it or not. We have declared war on it; we are not going to resume negotiations. . . . We have crucified the flesh; we are never going to withdraw the nails.⁴

Augustine was the famous Bishop of Hippo in North Africa who died in 430 AD. Prior to his conversion he lived a wild and immoral life. One day, some years after his conversion he was walking down the street when he bumped into a prostitute that he used to use before his conversion to Christ. They talked briefly, and the prostitute invited Augustine to take up where they had left off. Augustine refused. The prostitute pressed the invitation. “Augustine,” she said, “It is I.” To which Augustine responded, “Yes, but it is no longer I.”

Augustine knew that his sinful nature had been crucified and he had no desire to submit to his old, sinful nature again.

2. We Must Keep in Step with the Spirit (5:25)

And second, we must keep in step with the Spirit.

Paul says in verse 25, **“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”**

The phrase **“keep in step”** comes from the Greek word for “walk, walk in a line, or to march in battle order” (*stoichomen*).⁵

When I was in the South African Air Force I had the opportunity to march in a military tattoo. There were about 120 Air Force marchers lined up in rows of three. We drilled several hours a day for many weeks. Finally, we got to the military tattoo. It was

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The Bible Speaks Today series (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 151-152.

⁵ Vincent, M. R. (2002). *Word studies in the New Testament* (Vol. 4, Page 170). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

marvelous to watch 120 Airmen dressed in blue uniforms with white spats, white gloves and white belts marching in perfect unison. There was an incredible symmetry and harmony as we went through our drills that evening.

The secret to our marching was the lead person in the formation. He was in the front right. Everyone took their cue off that lead person.

Paul is saying that now that we **live by the Spirit** we are to take all our cues off the **Spirit**. We are to watch the **Spirit**; we are to follow the **Spirit**; we are to **keep in step with the Spirit**.

Just as the **Spirit** led Christ during his temptations in the wilderness (cf. Luke 4:1-2), so the Spirit will guide us through our battle with our sinful nature. But we must follow his lead and walk along the path of Christian virtue, not retreat into the traps of sinful indulgence.

How do we keep in step with the Spirit? This process includes focusing our minds on whatever is true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, attractive, excellent, and praiseworthy (cf. Philippians 4:8). For whatever occupies our thoughts permeates who we are (cf. Proverbs 23:7a).

Conclusion

Perhaps you find yourself swaying on the high wire of Christian liberty. Or maybe you are grasping the platform of legalism or falling into the darkness of licentious living.

Regardless of your situation, if you are in Christ, you can regain and maintain your balance by making this counsel an essential part of your daily training. Here are two suggestions about how you can do so.

A. *Resolve anew each morning to live by the Spirit*

First, resolve anew each morning to live by the Spirit.

Every day, even before you get up, commit yourself to the Spirit's control for that day.

B. Strive to keep in step with the Spirit each day

And second, strive to keep in step with the Spirit each day.

Don't turn away from the Spirit's lead so you can flirt with the sinful nature or with legalism or licentiousness. Walking the tightrope of freedom has its difficulties, but none of these compare to the hazards of going your own way. The Spirit will guide, protect, and empower you.

All you must do is follow him by faith. Amen.

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in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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