

Weekly Reflection – “Confession, Repentance, and Walking by the Spirit”

If the Christian life is a life of recognizing you have sinned, confessing or agreeing with God that you have rebelled, that He is the Judge, that the death and resurrection of Jesus is the only way to be forgiven, repenting, changing your mind, turning around and going the other way, and now obeying with all of your strength; than it is a hard and heavy life to live. But we find throughout the Word of God that we are not called to obey in our strength but rather in the strength that God supplies. One of those scriptures is Galatians 5:16-26.

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Galatians 5:16 ESV

The key is in learning to “walk by the Spirit” 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 confession, repentance, and obedience is not a legalistic burden laid on our back; it is what happens freely when we walk by the Spirit. The good news is that it is not primarily our work but God’s. We must simply learn to “walk by the Spirit.”

What Is Walking by the Spirit?

I want to look at two images here in the context of Galatians 5 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.” Paul uses the passive voice (“If you are led”) and 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 by His power.

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. A branch doesn’t brag about producing fruit, a branch just stays attached to the tree and receives what it needs to produce fruit. It does take part but all the resources for fruit come from outside of the branch. ***“Abide in me, and I in you. As the 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. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:4-5 ESV)*** 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.

What is this walking by the Spirit? 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 hooked to the locomotive. We must want to abide in the vine.

What keeps us from walking by the Spirit?

What could possibly keep us from walking by the Spirit? Why would we not want the Holy Spirit to lead us with His power, to produce fruit through us? ***“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.” (Galatians 5:17 ESV)*** The flesh. What is that? Most of the time it does not simply refer to the physical part of you. The flesh is the ego which feels an emptiness and uses the resources in its own power to try to fill it. The flesh is the part of us which feels an emptiness but dislikes

the idea of satisfying it by faith, that is 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 8:6-7 says, ***“For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.”*** The basic mark of the flesh is that it is unsubmissive. It does not want to submit to God’s absolute authority or rely on God’s absolute mercy. Flesh says, “I’d rather do it myself.”

It is not surprising, then, that in verse 17 of Galatians 5 there is a war between our flesh and God’s Spirit. There’s a sense where it’s a war between pride (do it myself) and humility (the Holy Spirit does it through me). The enemy is sneaky here; there is a way that our flesh can act that seems right, feels right, but is actually quite dangerous. We know that our flat-out rebellion against God is wrong, when we just do whatever we want however we want. But when we try to obey God by the flesh it feels right, we want to do it for Jesus, I want to obey because Jesus died for me, so I’m going to do it for Jesus in my own strength. But that way of trying to obey (in our own strength and willpower) is wrong and dangerous. Maybe you’re asking, “Why is that wrong, it’s obedience?” The giver of the power, the enabler of the obedience, gets the glory. Here’s the way 1 Peter 4:11 puts it: ***“Whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”*** You see how clearly Peter makes the connection: God gets the glory for our service if God gives the strength (grace) for our service. When we obey in our strength, we get the glory and that is wrong. When we obey by faith in God’s strength, God gets the glory and that is good.

We also need to understand that our flesh can do nothing supernatural, and true lasting heart transformation is supernatural. The best we can do in the flesh is clean up the exterior, live a moral life, religious life. It can look good, and the enemy will try to deceive us that it is good, but Jesus teaches us in Matthew 12 that it is quite dangerous.

“‘When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, ‘I will return to my house from which I came.’ And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation.” Matthew 12:43-45 ESV

This is a parable, so Jesus is teaching a principle, the illustrations He uses are not necessarily literal. Like the parable of the 4 soils. Our hearts are not literally dirt, they are like one of the 4 types of soil. In this parable I do not believe the “unclean spirits” are only referring to demons. Merlin Miller said this, “In the text just prior to that where Jesus is being accused of casting out a demon by the power of Satan, the specific word for demon is used each time. Jesus is addressing a specific accusation. But here in these verses he uses a broader term to say “unclean spirit.” Why does Jesus use a different word? I would say it is because He is broadening this further teaching to include impurities of all kinds, anything that is not of the Holy Spirit.”

In verse 44 Jesus says that the unclean spirit came back and found “the house empty, swept, and put in order.” This is Jesus’ way of describing a person who has tried to turn over a new leaf, tried to make a new start in life, tried to clean up his or her act, tried to engage in a moral self-renovation, tried to be a better person, tried to live a better life, tried to stop doing really, really heinous sins and get things swept up and in order in life and try and live at least outwardly a more righteous way, a less obviously ungodly way. We read that the house is swept and put in order and that seems like a good thing. What could the problem be? There’s nothing in that house. That heart is empty. That heart has not been changed. The heart has been swept up a bit, things have been tidied up a bit, but the house is empty.

Listen to what J.C. Ryle says, "How dangerous it is to be content with any change in religion short of thorough conversion to God. There is no safety except in conversion. In thorough Christianity to lay aside open sin is nothing unless grace reigns in our hearts. To cease to do evil is a small matter if we do not also learn to do well. The house must not only be wept and whitewashed, a new tenant must be introduced or else leprosy may again appear on the walls. The outward life must not only be garnished with the formal trappings of religion, the power of vital religion must be experienced in the inner man. The devil must not only be cast out, the Holy Spirit must take his place. Christ must dwell in our hearts by faith. We must not only be moralized, but spiritualized. We must not only be reformed, but born again. Jesus is teaching that conversion is more than mere external renovation. It is a heart that has been changed and transformed and softened and given new and eternal life by the work of the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Walk by the Spirit

"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." (Galatians 5:16 ESV) The first part, "walk by the Spirit" is a command. The second part, "and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" is a promise. This means that when we submit, surrender, humble ourselves and walk by the Spirit we will experience victory over our sinful proud flesh. Walking by the Spirit is how we are transformed, it is the power for obedience.

Application

"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit," (Ephesians 5:18 ESV) A literal reading of the last part of this verse is, "Continue to be being filled with the Holy Spirit." The way to continue to be being filled with the Holy Spirit is by asking. ***"And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:9-13 ESV)***