

Live by the Spirit
Galatians 5:16-24
Sunday, March 8th, 2026
By Ryan Perry

Scripture

Galatians 5:16–24

[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. [19] Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, [20] idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, [21] envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. [22] But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. [24] And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Let's Pray

Illustration

A couple of years ago, we had some friends who brought home a rescue dog who had been badly treated. For years, this dog was beaten, neglected, and yelled at by her previous owners. So everything she experienced up to that point in her life was unstable and unloving, and it created in her a great sense of fear.

However, when our friends brought the dog home, everything changed. They fed her well, spoke gently, and gave her a safe place to live.

But even though the dog was now safe, she still acted like she was in danger. When someone reached down to pet her, the dog flinched. If someone raised their voice, the dog might run and hide. Sometimes she would even growl or bite at the very people who were taking care of her.

The dog had been rescued, but she hadn't learned to live like she was free.

In many ways, that's what the Christian life can feel like. Through the cross, Christ has rescued us from the power of sin. The chains have been broken. The jail cell has been opened. We now belong to him.

And yet, we still feel the pull of our old life. Old desires, old habits, and old fears. Because the flesh still whispers to us, trying to get us to live like we used to before Christ.

This is the exact struggle that the apostle Paul describes in our passage this morning. The struggle between our old life in the flesh and our new life of freedom in the Spirit.

But the good news is that he doesn't tell us that we are left to fight this battle by our own efforts or that we should just give up because we will never be victorious.

No, he tells us that through Christ, we have been given the Spirit of God so that we can live out the freedom that he purchased for us.

Or, as our main point says:

Main Point: Because Christ has broken the power of the flesh, we can live out our freedom by the Spirit.

So today, as we unpack this passage, Paul is not only going to call us to walk or live out our freedom by the Spirit, but he will begin to show us what this should look like in our lives, even as we continue to struggle with our fleshly desires.

Let's begin by looking at his call and with it the real struggle that exists between our new life in Christ and the flesh.

Here's the call.

1. Live by the Spirit Christ gave you.

Illustration

So I would consider myself someone who really enjoys running. I love being outside, I enjoy the exercise, and I like using that time to listen to music, a sermon, or a nerdy podcast about the future of AI.

However, I hate, emphasis hate, running in the winter! So, for the most part, I stop running once it gets cold. But that creates a problem! Because once the warm weather rolls around and I try to run again, **I struggle.**

But you might be surprised to hear that my struggle usually isn't a physical one. **It's more mental than anything else.**

I begin to run, I get a mile or two in, and I start to hear a voice in my head that says, “*You should stop! You should take it easy! You haven’t run all winter! You should probably just give up!*”

Now, I admit that there are times when I have listened to that voice and have chosen to stop. But there are others when I actively speak to myself and say things like, “*You’ve got this! You’re not too tired! Just one more block! Just one more mile! Just keep putting one foot in front of the other,*” **and I make it to my desired distance.**

So there is a constant battle that happens between my inherent desire to be lazy and that part of me that is motivated to be healthy and energized.

This is the same kind of battle that Paul says is happening in the Christian life. Look with me at Galatians 5:17:

[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.

Now, when Paul uses the term *flesh*, he’s not necessarily referring to our physical bodies. Instead, he is referring to that part of us that wants to go our own way and doesn’t want to submit to the will of God.

This is why he says that the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit and that the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh. There is a constant tension and war going on within us, where we are being pulled in two directions.

On the one hand, we have been set free by Christ and are trying to live into the new life he has given us. And on the other, sinful passions still exist within us and are tempting us to do things that are completely opposed to God.

Now, by the grace of God, there are hopefully many times that we reject our sinful desires and choose to do the things that honor him.

But we also need to be honest that there are times when we choose to give in to these evil desires.

This happens because Paul says that the flesh and Spirit are opposed to each other, and this opposition keeps us **(at times)** from doing the good and God-honoring things that we want to do as his people.

Application

In fact, this probably means that there are some of you here who are struggling with sin issues in your life. You want to follow Christ, and yet you seem to continually give into the same sin over and over again. **So you feel defeated, you feel worthless, and you feel like giving up.**

If this is you, I want you to know that you are not alone. Even the apostle Paul himself struggled with sin, which is why he said in Romans 7:19:

[19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

And yet, I also want you to realize that your very real struggle with sin doesn't give you a license to simply say, **"I guess that's just the way I am!"**

Because in Galatians 5:16, 18, Paul gives us a solution for how we can combat these desires that exist within us. Here's what he tells us:

Galatians 5:16, 18

[16] But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

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

Text

If you have put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, then you have not only been set free from the power that sin and death used to have over you, but you now have the Spirit of the living God inside of you.

This means that we all have the God-given ability to do what honors God because we get to live and be led by the power of His Spirit that is at work in our lives.

Application

So, you don't need to live feeling condemned by your sin because you have been set free from it. **You are no longer under the law!**

And because you are no longer under the law, you can choose to live each day under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit so that you will not gratify those evil desires within you.

But how do we begin to do that, and what does that actually look like in our lives? This is what our remaining three points will begin to unpack for us. First, we need to...

2. Heed the warning of earthly passions.

Galatians 5:19-21

[19] Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, [20] idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, [21] envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Illustration

I think most of us are familiar with the phrase **“I know it when I see it.”** Well, what you might not know is that it came from the Supreme Court Justice, Potter Stewart, in 1964, when he was asked to describe his threshold for movies that are too obscene, offensive, or immoral to be shown in theaters.

Instead of trying to lay out a huge list of every possible word, action, or gesture that could be considered too immoral for the big screen, he simply responded with **“I know it when I see it.”**

Text

In a way, this is exactly what Paul is doing in Galatians 5:19. He says, *“the sinful works of the flesh are evident.”* **They are so obvious that you don’t even need to list them all out. You know them when you see them.**

To which you will probably reply, “Um, pastor Ryan? He actually does list them out!”

And you are right! However, it’s important to notice that he only lists 15 things when he could have listed way more. Also, when we peel back the curtain of the Galatian situation, we can see that he picked these 15 for a specific reason.

For instance, if we look at 7 of them, sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, drunkenness, and orgies, these are all sins and practices relating to the pagan culture in which these believers live.

Roman society was a free love culture where sex, drunkenness, and orgies (wild parties) were everywhere and were often used as acts of worship given to false gods (idols).

So Paul mentions these things to the Galatians so that they will understand that their new life in Christ doesn't give them the freedom (license) to participate in these evil practices.

But then the next 8, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy, are all marks of the Judaizers and their false gospel of works (legalism).

Unfortunately, Paul has to list these sins because the Galatians have begun to believe this false gospel, which is leading to infighting, friction, and relational breakdown within these fairly new churches.

Application

Now, I wish I could stand up here and tell you that all of these were merely issues in the 1st century church, but we don't need to worry about these things as a 21st century. **But you would instantly know that I am lying.**

We not only just went through a season where we experienced the fruit of infighting, friction, and relational breakdown. But we know that the things that existed in the Roman culture are all too common today.

So there is actually a double warning that we need to take to heart this morning.

One, if we live into these kinds of sins as Christians, it will not only have a serious and negative effect on our own spiritual life, but it will have disastrous consequences on our church. **These are things that can destroy a church.**

Two, if we are okay with these things existing in our lives, then it may mean that our faith isn't genuine. This is why Paul warns them at the end of verse 21:

[21] I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Application

However, before you start to think that you're not a Christian because you got angry, had a lustful thought, or had a few too many drinks one time, you need to understand what he's actually saying.

When he says, **“those who do such things,”** the Greek is actually talking about people who regularly practice these things as a way of life, and do it without any sense of remorse or repentance.

So if you're angry, drunk, full of envy, and sexually immoral, and you don't really care or even try to live differently, then there is a good chance that your faith in Christ might not be genuine.

This means that the Holy Spirit isn't in you, and that you are not a true child of God. You will not inherit his Kingdom.

This same idea is confirmed in 1 John 3:6 when the apostle writes:

[6] No one who abides in him keeps on (makes a practice of) sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.

But I hope you understand that this isn't some scare tactic from Paul. He isn't saying to us, "You better get your act together and do the right things, or you might not get to be with Jesus." If he were, he would be no better than the legalistic Judaizers who are preaching Christ plus works.

Rather, he's giving us this sober warning so that we will stop relying on our own human efforts to save us, because they only lead us into sin. And instead, he is calling us to put our full trust in the Spirit of God to produce his good, lasting, and kingdom-building fruit within us.

3. Trust the Spirit to make you more like Christ.

Galatians 5:22-23

[22] But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Illustration

When I think about this rescue dog responding like she was still in danger even though our friends gave her a new home full of love and compassion, **it reminds me that change is really hard.**

Whether it's an animal, an individual, or an institution, changing ingrained habits and patterns of thinking is not an easy thing to do. In fact, psychological research would say the same thing. As one article pointed out:

"Psychological research suggests that once our minds are made up on important matters, changing them can be as difficult as stopping a train hurtling at full speed, even when there's danger straight ahead."

This leads many people, including Christians, to conclude, "I guess this is just who I am; I can't change." **And in some ways, this is true for people who don't know Jesus.**

Text

But the difference between Christians and the rest of the world is that we have the Spirit of God in us, who is doing the work on our behalf.

And if you were here 3 weeks ago for my message on the Spirit, then you know that we talked about what that work is. Here's what we learned:

- The Spirit gives us new life (Romans 8:11).

He is the one who actually brings new life to our souls when we put our faith in Christ.

- The Spirit is the one who teaches us what is true (John 16:13).

He reveals to us the true meaning of God's Word, and he helps us to understand fact from fiction.

- The Spirit is our helper and guide (John 14:26).

He leads us to what is right, and he sustains us through any and all struggles.

- The Spirit intercedes for us (Romans 8:26-27).

When you don't know what to pray, the Spirit is taking to God on your behalf, and God is responding to and answering those prayers.

- The Spirit empowers us (Acts 1:8)

The power of the living God is inside of us so that we have the ability to live a full, Christ-honoring, and joy-filled life.

And finally, we learned that the Holy Spirit of God transforms us.

Where our sinful nature can only produce **destructive works** that separate us from God and destroy the church, the Spirit is able to produce **life-giving and life-transforming fruit**.

Things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The reason that love is first on this list is because love is at the very heart of who God is and how he wants us to live as his people.

In fact, all of these other attributes are only possible if the Spirit first produces love within us. **First and most importantly, a love for God, and with it a love for other people.**

Because it is impossible to experience a real and lasting joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, etc... if we are motivated by selfishness, vanity, or self-love.

But if the Spirit is motivating us by the love of God, then these other fruits will not only grow in us, but he will begin to shape our lives so that we look more and more like Jesus.

As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

[18] And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image (Christ) from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

The point here is that you can't save yourself, you can't sustain yourself, and you can't truly change yourself to live in a way that honors God. Only the Holy Spirit can do that work in you and through you.

Application

So when we talk about living or walking by the Spirit that Christ has given us, were not talking about a self-improvement process, nor are we talking about a situation where we've got to work hard so that the Spirit can do his work in us.

When Paul says walk by the Spirit in verse 16 or keep in step with the Spirit in verse 25, he is talking about living a life where we **prayerfully trust and depend on the Spirit.**

Where we daily recognize our inability to live a Christ-honoring life on our own. Where we come to God in prayer, confessing our sin and confessing our need for him.

And where we ask God, by the power of his Spirit, to lead us and direct us, and to give us exactly what we need, each day, so that we can live the full and rich life that is ours through Christ.

So it's less about doing, and it's more about recognizing our need, asking for help, and trusting that the Spirit will actually change our desires and affections so that we can live in a way that pleases our great God and King.

But if we are going to get to a place where we actually turn away from our fleshly desires and put our full trust in the Spirit, then we need to believe that we are no longer held captive by our sin nature (the flesh). **Its power has been fully and forever broken by Christ.**

4. Remember Christ has broken the power of the flesh.

Galatians 5:24

[24] And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Illustration

Even though our friends have had this dog for a couple of years, and she has definitely made a lot of progress, there's a good chance that she will continue to live and respond like a rescue dog.

What she has experienced is ingrained within her, and it is very unlikely that she will ever fully change.

Text

Paul, however, doesn't want us to think about our Christian lives that way. Instead, he wants us to continually realize and live into three essential realities of our life with Christ.

The first one is that Jesus set us free from sin by breaking its power and control over us on the cross.

Application

When Jesus died on the cross, he not only took the punishment that we deserve for our sin, but he literally destroyed its stranglehold on us. As Paul writes in Romans 6:6:

[6] We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

Text

Two, we now belong to Christ, which means that we have a new identity and nature.

2 Corinthians 5:17

[17] Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

Application

As Christians, we have not simply been set free from sin. We have been given a whole new life and nature. Our core identity is no longer "slave," but it is now "Child of God."

Text

Third, because we have been set free from our slavery to sin, and have been given a new nature and identity as God's children, we have been given a new heart, new desires, and a new ability to live and be led by his Spirit that lives within us. As it says in Ezekiel 36:26-27:

[26] And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. [27] And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Application

We can stop living in repetitive sin cycles, and we don't have to just shrug our shoulders and say, "I guess this is just the way I am."

Because we now have the ability to reject those desires, to walk in the opposite direction, and to do what pleases God. For his Holy Spirit lives within us, is guiding us, and is conforming us more and more to the image of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

So yes, we will always be in a constant battle in this life. The battle between the sinful desires of the flesh and the joy-filled and Christ-honoring desires of the Spirit.

But if we continually remember that the power and penalty of sin have been broken by Christ, and if we rely on his Spirit to work in us, then we can live out the true freedom that we have been given.

We can joyfully love God and one another. We can be at peace with each other. And we can pursue God-honoring things like patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control within the body of Christ and in the world.

Because our desires will no longer be selfish or self-seeking, but they will be about loving one another as God in Christ has loved us.

So church, let's stop living like people who are still trapped, let's stop returning to the same sins as if nothing has changed, and let's stop acting like we're a rescue dog whose still in danger. **Because we are not.**

Instead, let's live into the new identities we've been given. Let's walk by the Spirit, reject fleshly desires, and joyfully live out the freedom that Christ has purchased.

Let's Pray.