

Living *by the* Spirit



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 5:16–25; Deut. 13:4, 5; Rom. 7:14–24; Jer. 7:9; Hos. 4:2; Matt. 22:35–40.*

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

One of the most beloved Christian hymns is Robert Robinson's “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” Robinson, however, was not always a man of faith. The death of his father left him angry, and he fell into debauchery and drunkenness. After hearing the famous preacher George Whitefield, Robinson surrendered his life to the Lord, became a Methodist pastor, and wrote that hymn, which originally included the lines: “Oh, to grace how great a debtor / Daily I'm constrained to be! / Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, / Bind my wandering heart to Thee.”

Uncomfortable with the line about the Christian's heart wandering, someone changed the words to read: “Prone to worship, Lord, I feel it, Prone to love the God I serve.”

Despite the editor's good intentions, the original words accurately describe the Christian struggle. As believers we possess two natures, the flesh and the Spirit, and they are in conflict. Although our sinful nature will always be “prone” to wander from God, if we are willing to surrender to His Spirit, we do not have to be enslaved to the desires of the flesh. This is the thrust of Paul's message in the texts for the week.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 16.

Walking in the Spirit

Read Galatians 5:16. What does the concept of “walking” have to do with a life of faith? *Deut. 13:4, 5; Rom. 13:13; Eph. 4:1, 17; Col. 1:10.*

“Walking” is a metaphor drawn from the Old Testament that refers to the way a person should behave. Paul, himself a Jew, makes use of this metaphor often in his letters to describe the type of conduct that should characterize the Christian life. His use of this metaphor is also likely connected to the first name that was associated with the early church. Before the followers of Jesus were called Christians (*Acts 11:26*), they were known simply as followers of “the Way” (*John 14:6, Acts 22:4, 24:14*). This suggests that, at a very early date, Christianity was not merely a set of theological beliefs that centered on Jesus but was also a “way” of life to be “walked.”

In what way is Paul’s metaphor about walking different from those found in the Old Testament? *Compare Exod. 16:4; Lev. 18:4; and Jer. 44:23 with Gal. 5:16, 25 and Rom. 8:4.*

Conduct in the Old Testament was not defined as simply “walking” but more particularly as “walking in the law.” *Halakhah* is the legal term Jews use to refer to the rules and regulations found in both the law and the rabbinic traditions of their forefathers. While *Halakhah* usually is translated “the Jewish law,” the word actually is based on the Hebrew word for “to walk” and literally means “the way of going.”

Paul’s comments about “walking in the Spirit” are not contrary to obedience to the law. He is not proposing that Christians should live in a way that violates the law. Again, Paul is not opposed to the law or to obedience to the law. What he is opposed to is the legalistic way in which the law was being misused. The genuine obedience that God desires never can be achieved by outward compulsion but only by an inward motivation produced by the Spirit (*Gal. 5:18*).

What has been your own experience of “walking in the Spirit”? How do you do that? What practices in your life make this kind of walk more difficult?

The Christian's Conflict

“For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would” (Gal. 5:17; see also Rom. 7:14–24). How have you, in your own life as a believer, experienced the harsh and painful reality of these words?

The struggle that Paul describes is not the struggle of every human being. It refers specifically to the inward tug-of-war that exists in the Christian. Because humans are born in harmony with the desires of the flesh (*Rom. 8:7*), it is only when we are born anew by the Spirit that a real spiritual conflict begins to emerge (*John 3:6*). This does not mean that non-Christians never experience moral conflict; they certainly do. But even that conflict is ultimately a result of the Spirit. The struggle of the Christian, however, takes on a new dimension, because the believer possesses two natures that are at war with each other, the flesh and the Spirit.

Throughout history, Christians have longed for relief from this struggle. Some have sought to end the conflict by withdrawing from society, while others have claimed that the sinful nature can be eradicated by some divine act of grace. Both attempts are misguided. Though by the Spirit's power we certainly can subdue the desires of the flesh, the conflict will continue in various ways until we receive a new body at the Second Coming. Fleeing from society does not help, because no matter where we go, we take the struggle with us, and we will until death or the Second Coming.

When Paul writes in Romans 7 about the inward conflict in Christians as preventing them from doing what they want, he is underscoring the full extent of that conflict. Because we possess two natures, we are literally on both sides of the battle at once. The spiritual part of us desires what is spiritual and detests the flesh. The fleshly part of us, however, longs for the things of the flesh and opposes what is spiritual. Because the converted mind is too weak to resist the flesh by itself, the only hope we have of subduing the flesh is by making a daily decision to side with the Spirit *against our sinful selves*. This is why Paul is so insistent that we choose to walk in the Spirit.

From your own experience of the battle between these two natures, what advice would you give to a Christian who is trying to come to terms with this never-ending struggle with self?

The Works of the Flesh

Having introduced the conflict that exists between the flesh and the Spirit, Paul elaborates on the nature of this contrast in Galatians 5:18–26 by means of a list of ethical vices and virtues. The catalog of vices or virtues was a well-established literary feature present in both Jewish and Greco-Roman literature. These lists identified behavior to be avoided and virtues to be emulated.

Carefully examine the vice and virtue lists in the passages below. In what ways are Paul’s lists in Galatians 5:19–24 similar to, yet different from, these lists? *Jer. 7:9; Hos. 4:2; Mark 7:21, 22; 1 Tim. 3:2, 3; 1 Pet. 4:3; Rev. 21:8.*

Although Paul was well aware of vice and virtue lists, there are significant differences in the way he uses the two lists in Galatians. First, even though Paul contrasts the two lists, he does not refer to them in the same manner. He labels the vice list as the “works of the flesh” but the virtue list as the “fruit of the Spirit.” This is an important distinction. As James D. G. Dunn writes, “The flesh *demands*, but the Spirit *produces*. Where the one list breathes an air of anxious self-assertiveness and frenetic self-indulgence, the other speaks more of concern for others, serenity, resilience, reliability. The one features human manipulation, the other divine enabling or engracing, reinforcing the point that inner transformation is the source of responsible conduct.”—*The Epistle to the Galatians*, p. 308.

The second intriguing difference between Paul’s two lists is that the vice list is deliberately labeled as plural in number: “*works* of the flesh.” “Fruit of the Spirit,” however, is singular. This difference may suggest that the life lived in the flesh can promote nothing more than division, turmoil, divisiveness, and disunity. In contrast, the life lived in the realm of the Spirit produces one fruit of the Spirit, which manifests itself in nine qualities that foster unity.

In this context, some people claim that what a person believes about God doesn’t really matter as long as he or she is sincere. Nothing could be further from the truth. Paul’s list of vices suggests the opposite: corrupt views about God lead to distorted ideas about sexual behavior, religion, and ethics, resulting in the breakdown of human relationships. Furthermore, such ideas can lead to the loss of eternal life (*Gal. 5:21*).

Look through the list of “works of the flesh.” In what ways can you see each as a violation of one or more of the Ten Commandments?

The Fruit of the Spirit *(Gal. 5:22–24)*

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (*Gal. 5:22, 23, ESV*). **In what ways does obedience to the Ten Commandments reflect the fruit of the Spirit as it is expressed in these verses?** (*See also Matt. 5:21, 22, 27, 28; 22:35–40.*)

The Ten Commandments are not an alternative to love; they help guide us in how we are to *show* love, both to God and to humankind. However much it might transcend the letter of the law, love is not in conflict with the law. The idea that love for God and love for our neighbor void the Ten Commandments makes about as much sense as saying that love for nature voids the law of gravity.

Also, in contrast to the fifteen one-word descriptions of the works of the flesh, the fruit of the Spirit is described in nine elegant virtues. Scholars believe these nine virtues are organized into three clusters of three, but there is little agreement on the significance of their order. Some see an implicit reference to the Trinity in the number three. Others believe the three triads reflect the ways in which we should relate to God, to our neighbor, and finally to ourselves. Still others see the list as essentially a description of Jesus. Though each of these views has some merit, the most significant point not to be overlooked is the supreme importance Paul places on love in the Christian life.

The fact that Paul lists love as the first of the nine virtues is not accidental. He has already highlighted the central role of love in the Christian life in Galatians 5:6 and 13, and he includes it in his virtue lists elsewhere (*2 Cor. 6:6, 1 Tim. 4:12, 6:11, and 2 Tim. 2:22*). Whereas all the other virtues appear also in non-Christian sources, love is distinctly Christian. All this indicates that love should be seen not merely as one virtue among many but as the cardinal Christian virtue that is the key to all other virtues. Love is the preeminent fruit of the Spirit (*1 Cor. 13:13, Rom. 5:5*), and it should define the life and attitudes of every Christian (*John 13:34, 35*), however difficult it might be at times to show love.

How much self-denial is involved in love? Can you love without self-denial? What does Jesus teach us about love and self-denial?

The Way to Victory

Although an inward conflict between the flesh and the Spirit always will rage in the heart of every believer, the Christian life does not have to be dominated by defeat, failure, and sin.

According to Galatians 5:16–26, what is the key to living a life in which the Spirit reigns over the flesh?

Galatians 5:16–26 contains five key verbs that describe the type of life in which the Spirit reigns. First, the believer needs to “walk” in the Spirit (*Gal. 5:16*). The Greek verb is *peripateo*, which literally means “to walk around or to follow.” The followers of the famous Greek philosopher Aristotle came to be known as the Peripatetics because they followed Aristotle everywhere he went. The fact that the verb is in the present tense implies that Paul is not talking about an occasional walk but rather a continuous daily experience. In addition, since it is also a command “to walk” in the Spirit, it implies that walking in the Spirit is a choice we have to make on a daily basis. The second verb is “to be led” (*Gal. 5:18*). This suggests that we also need to allow the Spirit to lead us where we should go (*compare Rom. 8:14, 1 Cor. 12:2*). It is not our job to lead, then, but to follow.

The next two verbs appear in Galatians 5:25. The first is “to live” (*zao* in Greek). By “live,” Paul is referring to the new-birth experience that must mark the life of every believer. Paul’s use of the present tense points to a new-birth experience that is to be renewed daily. Additionally, because we live by the Spirit, Paul goes on to write that we also need “to walk” by the Spirit. The word translated as “walk” is different from the one in verse 16. Here the word is *stoicheo*. It is a military term that literally means “to draw up in a line,” “to keep in step,” or “to conform.” The idea here is that the Spirit not only gives us life but should direct our lives on a daily basis also.

The verb Paul uses in verse 24 is “to crucify.” This is a little shocking. If we are to follow the Spirit, we must make a firm decision to put to death the desires of the flesh. Of course, Paul is speaking figuratively. We crucify the flesh by feeding our spiritual life and by starving the desires of the flesh.

What changes and choices must you make in order to have the victories you are promised in Christ—victories that now continually elude you?

Further Thought: “The life of the Christian is not all smooth. He has stern conflicts to meet. Severe temptations assail him. ‘The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.’ The nearer we come to the close of this earth’s history, the more delusive and ensnaring will be the attacks of the enemy. His attacks will grow fiercer and more frequent. Those who resist light and truth will become more hardened and unimpressible, and more bitter against those who love God and keep His commandments (MS 33, 1911).”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1111.

“The influence of the Holy Spirit is the life of Christ in the soul. We do not see Christ and speak to Him, but His Holy Spirit is just as near us in one place as in another. It works in and through every one who receives Christ. Those who know the indwelling of the Spirit reveal the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith (MS 41, 1897).”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1112.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Dwell more on the idea of crucifying the desires of the flesh. What does that mean? How do we do it? How often do we have to do it? Why would Paul use such a strong verb? What does his use of the word *crucify* tell us about just how hard the battle with self is?
- 2 What role, if any, does human effort play in producing the fruit of the Spirit? What does your own experience tell you about this role?
- 3 Paul says that those who practice the works of the flesh will not inherit the kingdom of God. How do you reconcile this statement with the fact that Paul says we are saved by faith and not by works?
- 4 In your own walk with the Lord, what’s the biggest struggle you face? Is it not sin and what sin does to your relationship with God? What Christian hasn’t felt alienation, doubt, and disappointment as a result of the sin in his or her life, especially because we have the promise of victory over that sin? Given this fact in the context of victory over sin, why must we always remember that our salvation rests totally upon what Jesus has done for us?

Summary: Although in the life of all believers a conflict exists between the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit, the Christian life does not have to be doomed to failure. Because Christ has conquered the power of sin and death, the Christian life can be a life in which the Spirit reigns, bringing us a daily supply of God’s grace to enable us to keep the desires of the flesh at bay.