

July 13, 2008

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Living in Freedom – Walking in Spirit*

Galatians 5:16 – 26

**One of the greatest practical implications of the gospel is freedom.** *It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.* Galatians 5:1 We have been freed through the death and resurrection of Jesus to live lives that are free of the tyranny of the world, the flesh and the devil – and freed to live lives fully satisfied in God, and overflowing with love toward God and one another. And yet, many Christians still live as those who have not been set free. They live as POW's in the enemy's camp, because they have never fully embraced the truth of the gospel. And the truth of the gospel is all about walking in freedom.

Paul tells us that there is a freedom to walk in that spontaneously fulfills the greatest commandment – **Love God supremely and love your neighbor as yourself** – and a freedom that successfully defeats all the desires of our fallen, natural flesh that only looks to satisfy itself at the expense of everyone else. Paul also clearly lets us know that **although the war is over – the battles are not.** That is, the victory Christ won on the cross to secure our freedom is a done deal – the back of the enemy has been broken – but there are still battles to be fought and won to bring the thing to a final conclusion. The outcome is not in doubt – but there are still opportunities for the flesh to break out.

When our nation was engaged in the uncivil, Civil War, many battles in many places were fought by men who bled and died for each patch of bloody ground. But at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in 1863 a battle was fought that decided the whole war. Now the war itself went on for two more years – but the outcome was not in doubt after that decisive battle. **The back of the Confederacy was broken in the fields and orchards and hills of Gettysburg** and everything afterward – though hard fought and bloody, were simply the dying gasps of a defeated foe.

The same is true of the Christian walk. Paul says in verse 24 that, *'Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.'* Galatians 5:24 This is in the past tense – **'have crucified'**. That means that something decisive was done – crucifixion. Crucifixion was not some torture exercise that left the victim hurting but alive – crucifixion was designed for one purpose, and one purpose only – to kill someone with the maximum amount of pain and humiliation possible. So when Paul says that Christians are those who **have crucified** the flesh – he was speaking of a final event.

So what are we to make of the verses that seem to contradict verse 24? The **promise** of verse 16: *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.*; the **hope** of verse 18: *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.*; and the **challenge** of verse 25: *If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.* Paul seems to be saying that although there has been a decisive Gettysburg – there are still battles to be fought and won as long as we are in this body and there is a means and a strategy to fighting these battles. **The means we employ in these battles is the Spirit of God** – the Spirit of God is the only one who can overcome the world, the flesh and the devil, and without Him we are so much dead meat. **The strategy we use is to walk by the Spirit** – that is to bring all our thoughts, desires and behavior under the control of the Spirit of God. Let's look at how Paul fleshes this out.

*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.* Galatians 5:16 **The flesh is full of desires that are just opposite those of the Holy Spirit** – but all of those desires are motivated by one big desire – the desire to please itself. And when we give space to that desire – it works itself out into all sorts of ugly-looking things: *immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these...* Because of the Fall, our flesh is motivated by the desire to fill its own emptiness with all the resources in its own power. And the outstanding characteristic of the flesh is that it is rebellious and defiant and does not want to submit to the absolute authority of God or rely on the supreme power of God or put itself in any position that looks like it needs anything.

But Paul says if we walk by the Spirit we will not do what the flesh desires to do – **and the implication is that we will do what the Spirit desires to do.** And what is it that the Spirit desires to do? In short, I believe we can sum that up by saying **the Spirit of God desires only what God desires.** I think we can look at Galatians 5:22-23 and get a glimpse of what that looks like: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.* Galatians 5:22 The Spirit only operates in this realm – and if this is where we live – in the Spirit – this is what it looks like. It looks like love – it looks like joy – it looks like peace – it looks like all these things. On the other hand the deeds of the flesh Paul said, are evident. That is – it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out which realm you are in. In other words, there is a clear distinction between the realm of the flesh and the realm of the Spirit. And the battle lines are drawn between these two realms.

*For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.* Galatians 5:17 We see two competing desires in this verse. You have **the desire of the flesh – that is the desire to do your own thing** – fighting against **the desire of the Spirit – the desire to be pleasing to God.** You need to understand right now that a Christian is not a person who never experiences any bad desires. A Christian is someone who is at war with those desires. Conflict in your soul is not all bad.

C.S. Lewis once said, *“The gospel means we can stop lying to ourselves. The sweet sound of amazing grace saves us from the necessity of self-deception. It keeps us from denying that though Christ was victorious, the battle with lust, greed, and pride still rages within us. As a sinner who has been redeemed, I can acknowledge that I am often unloving, irritable, angry and resentful with those closest to me. When I go to church I can leave my white hat at home and admit I have failed. God not only loves me as I am, but also knows me as I am. Because of this I don't need to apply spiritual cosmetics to make myself presentable to Him. I can accept ownership of my poverty and powerlessness and neediness.”*

**There is something worse than the battle between the Spirit and the flesh – and that is no battle at all.** Thank God for the war within! Serenity with sin is death! The sign of whether or not the Spirit of God lives in you is not that you have no bad desires, but rather that you are at war with them. So don't be discouraged if your soul feels like a Civil War battlefield sometimes. The battle tells you at least one thing – that the Spirit of God is within you resisting and opposing. So it is clear that when Paul says to walk by the Spirit – he means that we are in a battle and we must employ the Holy Spirit as the means to fight. **So to walk by the Spirit means to do battle.**

Now he uses another word picture to describe this battle – **led by the Spirit:** *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.* Galatians 5:18 We shouldn't see this being led like someone leading the way and we are following as best we can. The word 'led' here actually means to **lead by laying hold of.** That is, the way the Holy Spirit leads is by laying hold of us and taking us there. So what Paul is saying is **'If it is true of you that the Holy Spirit has gotten hold of you – if you have been born again – then you are no longer someone trying to be good on your own – but the Holy Spirit Himself is taking you to goodness on His back.'**

And then right away, Paul gives us the evidence of whether or not we can say that we are being led by the Spirit: *Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.* Galatians 5:19-21 Note the word practice. As we saw in the Epistle of John, to practice something here means that it is not a matter of occasional falling – but rather a way of life for you. If we look at our lives and see the evidence of the flesh habitually lived out in us in some area – then we need to take a deeper look at our commitment to Christ. We may not be Spirit-born at all.

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.* Galatians 5:22 The contrast is clear – that is the flesh – this is the Spirit. On the one hand there is a law against all the things of the flesh – on the other, the things of the Spirit need no law to legislate against them – they are the reflection of God Himself – nothing illegal there.

*Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* Galatians 5:24 What this verse says more than anything else is that **those who are genuinely born again have won the war against the passions and desires of the flesh that would see them pleasing themselves and cut off from any pleasure in God.** Not that there are not battles yet to be fought – but the final outcome is assured because God is in the fight. The other thing it says is that this crucifying of the flesh was not something we have done – even though the verse tends to appear to say it that way – but the crucial part is **'those who belong to Christ Jesus'**. It is by virtue of belonging to Him that the flesh with its passions and desires have been put to death.

The reason I can say that is that Paul said it first in Galatians 2:20: *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.* This is the only way you or I could be crucified – if we were crucified with Jesus. If it were left up to us – we wouldn't be crucified at all. I don't care who you are – nobody, not even the most masochistic person on earth would willingly choose to crucify himself. It's too hard – it's too painful – it's too unselfish. That is why in the mercy of God we who have been chosen by Him and in turn choose to follow Him – all have our death and resurrection bound up in Him. When He died – we died – when He went to the cross – we went to the cross. His death was imputed to us just as His righteousness was. There was no way we could do or earn it ourselves. And so because we belong to Him – the war has been won – all that remains are some battles to be fought. And fighting the battle is good evidence that you are on the winning side.

So Paul concludes with this: *If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.* Galatians 5:25 His argument is that **if we have been born again by the Spirit – then that is how we must live – by the Spirit.** And that is the \$64,000 question. **How do we walk by the Spirit?** If we remember that to walk by the Spirit means that we do battle by the Spirit – and if we compare other passages that speak of the same thing – a clear picture of what it means to walk by the Spirit begins to emerge. Look at Romans 8:13-14: *For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.* Romans 8:13-14 This says another way what this passage in Galatians has been telling us.

If we live according to the flesh, if we practice the deeds of the flesh – Galatians says that we will not inherit the kingdom – Romans 8 says we will die. On the other hand, if we live by the Spirit as Galatians says – if we put to death the deeds of the body as Romans says – we will inherit the kingdom and live eternally. Romans 8 links being led by the Spirit of God to putting to death the deeds of the body. And it is this putting to death that is the battle Paul talks about in Galatians 5. **So the answer to how do we walk by the Spirit is that we put to death the deeds of the body.** Or to put it another way – **we kill sin.** That great Puritan preacher, John Owen, explained this passage this way: **'Be killing sin or it will be killing you.'** **Walking by the Spirit means that we are actively engaged in killing sin.** It does not mean that we sort of drift along like a will-o-the-wisp, carried here and there by every current that blows – to walk by the Spirit means that we are engaged in the battle to kill sin and live in freedom.

**So how do we kill sin?** The key to killing sin is in our minds. Romans 8:5a says, *For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh,* Romans 8:5a In other words, there is a direct correlation between living or walking in the flesh and what we set our minds on. It is a condition of what fills our thoughts. If we are all the time thinking about what pleases us, what makes us happy, then we are setting our minds on the things of the flesh. But this verse goes on to say, *'...but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.'* Romans 8:5b **So the first step to killing sin and living in freedom is to set our minds on the things of the Spirit.** It is not enough to just say 'No' to temptation – we need to do that – but you have to do more: you have to direct your mind, your heart, your spiritual focus on the things of the Spirit.

**What are the things of the Spirit?** 1 Corinthians 2:13-14 says, *Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.* 1 Corinthians 2:13-14 In other words, the things of the Spirit come to us through the word of God. **So to set your mind on the things of the Spirit is to set your mind on the word of God and the realities of what they impart.** And as we set our mind on the word of God – which is, according to Ephesians 6 is the sword of the Spirit – the sword comes in to kill sin – to cut it off – to sever the life-line that feeds the deeds of the flesh.

When temptation comes, together with a very powerful and resolute NO!, you look to a word from God, especially a word that promises that He will **be** more for us and **do** more for us than what this sin promises. We must immerse our mind and heart in the fountain of truth and life and power – the promises of God, and when the temptation comes, take out this all-satisfying word, this sword of the Spirit, and by it sever the root of sin and walk in freedom.

When we are assailed by doubts and fears take the sword of the Spirit and put it to death with '*So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand*' Isaiah 41:10

When the dark demons of worry and anxiety appear kill them with '*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid*'. John 14:27

When the outlook is bleak and depression fills our hearts take the sword and slay it with '*...because of the Lord's great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning*' Lamentations 3:22-23

When you are without hope and all your plans have failed turn to the unfailing word of God: '*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope*'. Jeremiah 29:11

When you feel utterly defeated by sin and want to throw in the towel, take heart with the sword in Philippians 2: '*for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*'. Philippians 2:13

Live in freedom – walk in Spirit by ransacking the word of God, savoring the sweet promises of God, believing that His word is living and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword that will cut to the root sin and kill the thing that is hostile to God.

*Our gracious Father,*

*Grant that we would live in freedom – no longer bound by the deceit and treachery of sin – but free to love You supremely and love one another as Christ first loved us. Come and fill us Holy Spirit – open our blinded eyes to see the freedom into which You have delivered us. Give us faith to lay hold of all of the sweet promises of Your word and overcome our weak desires for holiness by Your power. Lead us to the cross and show us the wounds that bought our freedom and put sin to death. Expel every rebel lust and reign supreme in our hearts. Lead us into all truth and fill us with all understanding. Cause our hearts to overflow in love to You. Come as joy to live in us, move in us, energize us. Come as light dispelling the darkness and illuminating Your word. Take the things of Christ and imprint them on our souls – write them on our hearts so that we would be supremely glad in You and live to make others glad in You, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus, Amen.*

***May the Lord bless you and keep you,  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto you;  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on You,  
and give you peace.***