

THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S GRACE ALONE CREATES LOVING RELATIONSHIPS & COMMUNITIES Galatians 5:16-18

Please review this week's catechism question.

INTRODUCTION

Are you now or have you ever been involved in any relationships that Gal 5:15 perfectly describes?

Do you find it easy or difficult to “be a slave” to other Christians? Why?

Gal. 5:13-15 tells us that we are to use the freedom God gives us in Christ not to be slaves to our flesh but to be slaves to one another because the whole will of God for human beings is fulfilled in this one command, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It's one thing to say we should not use our freedom to serve our flesh but rather use our freedom to be slaves to one another. It is another thing to do it. When I'm so hurt and so angry by what someone else did to me or so consumed with worry or lust or fear, how will I love someone else? When we live to fulfill the desire of the flesh that is when we bite and devour and consume everyone and every relationship in which we are involved. The desire of the flesh is the cause of failed marriages, friendships and churches. What Paul says in Gal. 5:16-18 is that the only way to put an end to consumed relationships and to be a slave to others, is to live by the Spirit.

STUDY

1. What is the implication behind the fact that Paul commands Christians to live by the Spirit? What is the implication that the command is “walk (NIV=live) by the Spirit”? What is the implication that the command is in the present tense?

The first thing to note is that this is a command. That means it is possible to be a Christian and to not be walking by the Spirit. Paul clearly believes that there are many people in Galatia who are Christians but who are not currently walking by the Spirit but rather are using their freedom to serve their flesh. Also, as the NIV translates it, the verb "walk" means "conduct your life" or "live". What Paul is describing here is the practical daily experience of living life. We are to be parents, husbands, children, workers, shoppers, TV watchers, church members by means of the Spirit. All of life is to be lived in and by the Holy Spirit. There is no part of my life that is to be lived apart from the Holy Spirit. Our lives are not divided into spiritual and non-spiritual categories. As if you automatically are living by the Spirit when you read your Bible but you can't live by the Spirit when you watch a Brewer's game or when you go shopping. Some activities, attitudes and emotions are always a “fulfillment of the desire of the flesh but there are no activities that are automatically in the Spirit. Just because you are in church does not mean you are living by means of the Spirit. Just because you are sharing the gospel with a neighbor does not mean you are living by the Spirit. You can fulfill the desire of the flesh when in church and when sharing the gospel and when looking at pornography. Every moment of your life you are either living by the Spirit or you are fulfilling the desire of the flesh. The present tense command shows that this is not a one-time decision or action but an ongoing reality.

2. If you were to ask one of the false teachers in Galatia, “How do you be a Christian and how do you live the Christian life?”—What would they answer? See 2:16, 3:2-3, 10, 4:10, 21, 5:1-6.

They would answer, “In order to be a Christian and to live like a Christian you must learn the law of God in the OT and you must seek to obey all of it. The means of living the Christian life is knowing what the law of God requires and then doing it. It is only by this obedience that God will accept you as righteous because you will actually be righteous.”

3. In v. 16 Paul answers that question by saying you must “walk/live by the Spirit.” What does he mean by this phrase? To answer that question we need to examine three things:

i. What does the OT tell us about the work of the Holy Spirit in these passages?

- Isaiah 11:1-5 *When the Messiah comes he will live and work in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Savior of the world will live in the fullness of the Holy Spirit and he will accomplish his mission but the Holy Spirit's power.*
- Ezekiel 36:22-26 & 37:1-28, especially vv. 14 & 24 *The future restoration of Israel, i.e., the people of God, the church, will be effected by God's sending his Holy Spirit in conjunction with his word and thus giving life to his dead people. That Spirit will place within the hearts of his rebellious people the desire and capacity to obey his law. His people will be one people, ruled over by David (Jesus) and obedient to the will of God by the work of the Holy Spirit.*
- Joel 2:28-32 *The last days, that is the days of the coming of the Lord, of the Messiah will be characterized by God's sending his Holy Spirit to fill all of his people. All of God's people will receive that Spirit and all of God's people without respect to gender or race or economic condition will be filled with the Spirit and will know God and his truth. Peter quotes this passage in Acts 2 to explain what is happening when the 120 disciples in the upper room begin to declare the greatness of God in over a dozen languages they did not know.*

ii. What has Paul already told us about the work of the Holy Spirit in this letter?

- Gal 3:1-5 *The receiving of the Holy Spirit is evidenced in/associated with faith in the Christ as the crucified Savior. All who are trusting in Christ's life and death as the ground of their being declared righteous in God's sight (justified) have received the Holy Spirit. In fact the Holy Spirit is the person who has began that faith and it is the Holy Spirit who is the one who will continue that faith.*
- Gal. 3:14 *Again, Christ has redeemed all who trust him from the curse of the law with the result that we are now, Jew and Gentile, recipients*

of the blessing God promised to Abraham, i.e. that we would be his people and he would be our God and this blessing is the same thing as saying that we have received the “promise of the Holy Spirit.” In other words the presence of the Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of the promised blessing of Abraham.

- Gal. 4:6 *The Holy Spirit is the one who turns us from slaves into sons. We know God as our father and cry out to him as our Father not because of what we have done but because of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.*
- Gal 4:29 *Isaac was born by the power of the Spirit and so are we given divine life and made heirs of God by that same Holy Spirit.*
- Gal. 5:5 *We are able to eagerly await the hope of righteousness by means of the Holy Spirit.*

iii. How does all this correlate with what Jesus says about the work of the Holy Spirit in John 16:5-15 and Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18?

We are now in the age of the Spirit because Christ has come and fulfilled the law and bore its curse and has returned to his Father's right hand and has poured out his Spirit on his people. We are no longer in the age of promise and shadows and types of Christ. We are in the days of the Messiah and his Spirit has been poured out on all his people. The language that most helps me to understand how it is that the Holy Spirit applies the gospel of Christ to my life is this: the HS reveals the glory of God in Christ as Jesus describes in John 16:15 and Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18. We do not, by nature, see the glory of Christ as Savior from sin and as the satisfaction of our souls. He is not our treasure. That is until the Holy Spirit, contrary to what we deserve and through the preaching of the gospel shows us that Christ is glorious. This is what happened to the apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. He, by the power of the Holy Spirit saw that Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. He saw what he could not see until the Holy Spirit revealed it to him: the glory of Christ. This is what he meant in Galatians 2:20, “The life I now live in this mortal body I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” To live by the Spirit is to live seeing the glory of Christ as the one who loved me and died for me. It is to pursue this glorious Christ by being with God's people in worship and prayer and fellowship. It is to pursue this glorious Christ by listening to his word

preached, by reading his word, by sharing his word with your family. It is to believe this word, not only that it is true but that what is promised to us in it, through Christ, is better than the whole world. It is to see the glory of God in the face of Christ and to yearn to see that glory more and more. To live in the Spirit is to believe that God is going to give me heaven not because of me but because of Christ and to believe that going to heaven is better than having children respect me, a wife who loves me, enough money to retire, watching NASCAR, friends who care about me, or living a long and healthy life here.

4. Paul says when we live by the Spirit we will not gratify (literally: fulfill) the desire (not desires) of the flesh. What is the desire of the flesh?

In 5:24 Paul says the flesh (NIV: sinful nature) has passions and desires, plural. However, right here he says that the flesh has one desire. What is the desire of the flesh? What is the overarching lust or passion or desire of our sinful nature that when we are living by the Spirit we will not fulfill? All human beings from the moment of conception are not impressed with the God who made them. We are, by nature, far more impressed with creation and the pleasures of creation than we are with the Triune God who made us. What appears glorious to us are the pleasures of sex the way we want it, the pleasures of a happy home, the pleasures of good food, the pleasures of a secure job and adequate savings, the pleasures of good friends, the pleasures of healthy bodies, the pleasures of ruling over those whom we hate, the pleasures of drunkenness, etc. We are attracted to the gods who promise to give us more of these things that we love. So you will find all kinds of people interested in Jesus because they believe he will take away their loneliness or he will take away the guilty feelings or he will give them a happy marriage or he will make them sober or heal their body or give them money. Every Christian has within us an old nature, the nature of Adam in his fallen state, the flesh, which is firmly committed to finding joy and life and purpose and happiness in everything or anything except for God himself. It is the desire of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to be like God without God.

5. Why is it that if you are living by the Spirit, you will not fulfill the desire of the flesh?

The Holy Spirit is absolutely sure that the only glorious being in the universe is the eternal Son of God who became the Son of Man. The Holy Spirit's greatest ambition is to promote the worth and glory and sufficiency

of Jesus Christ. When the Holy Spirit reveals the glory of Christ to you then you will gladly lose everything to know him and have him and his salvation. So when your heart is set on finding your life in Christ, then you have no desire to find your life in anything or anyone else. You can't be living in the Spirit and thus full of the Spirit's love for the Son and be filled with the desire of the flesh to ignore Christ and find life in something else. When you live by the Spirit, that is when you live believing that Christ is your Savior and that his salvation is the best thing in the universe, then you will not fulfill the desire of the flesh to find life outside of Christ.

6. How are you doing in walking by the Spirit? How does this absolute statement, "Walk by the Spirit and you will not ever fulfill the desire of the flesh," affect you?

7. What does v. 17 tell us is true about the relationship between the Spirit and the flesh?

What the Holy Spirit wants and what the flesh wants are always and forever diametrically opposed to one another. What the Holy Spirit desires, the glory of Christ and what the flesh desires, the glory of everything but Christ, are in opposition to one another.

8. What is true for every Christian because of this conflict between flesh and Spirit?

Because you are a Christian, the real you is the Spirit born you. What you really and ultimately want is the glory of Christ because the Holy Spirit dwells in you. However, the flesh is always present pressuring you to desire other things besides Christ. The result is that even while you are pursuing Christ and believing he is better than all things, yet you feel the backward pull of the flesh towards other things. You never do what you really want in the way you want to do it. Our obedience to God is tainted by pride and self-righteousness. Our reading of the Scriptures is often perfunctory. Your love for your wife or your husband comes with strings attached. Your giving to the church is not always cheerful, as it ought to be. I serve another Christian but then I want to make sure that others know about what I did. Verse 17 is an exact description of my life. I aim to live by the Spirit. I desire what the Spirit desires but I find my flesh desiring in an opposite way and so I end up not fully carrying out the desires of the Spirit. I do not do what I want to do.

9. Why does Paul tell us v. 17, right after v. 16?

This is a comfort to every true Christian. We want above all things to pursue all our joy in Christ and in obedience to his command to love one another as he has loved us. This verse helps us to be patient with God's work in us. We find, no matter how long we've faithfully fought the fight of faith that we must yet fight on. We know we will never be perfect in this life, only that we will make progress.

10. How does knowing this help me in my relationship to other Christians?

I know that you, because the Holy Spirit lives in you, want to love God and others. I know that you want to love me. However, I also know that because you are still living in this world, that your sin nature does not want to love me, but rather you want to use me or hurt me if I don't cooperate with the desire of your flesh. Therefore, I am patient with you. I will not demand from you what I know that I cannot produce. By the Spirit, I will be quick to forgive you and to bear with your failures because you are just like me, wanting to love but finding that you cannot do what you want to do.

11. "Being led by the Spirit" (v. 18) and "live by the Spirit" are synonymous phrases. Why does Paul remind us that when we are living by the Spirit we are not under law?

Every Christian needs the promise in this verse. We know that our obedience is not perfect. We know that we don't love God and people with the zeal and joy and effectiveness that we should. Therefore, we begin to fear that perhaps we will not be acceptable to God. Then this verse comes along and we are reminded that the law cannot condemn us any more. Christ has born the condemnation we deserve; he has born the curse of the law. We are forgiven and God counts us perfectly righteous because of what Christ has done, not because of anything we have done or will do. I don't look at my halfhearted obedience to find assurance of my salvation. I look at the wholehearted obedience of Christ. I don't look at my partial death to the pleasures of this world. I look to the complete and final, once for all, death of Christ for sin to find my confidence that God will accept me. Luther says it this way, "the law cannot accuse them, nor pronounce sentence of death against them, although they feel sin, and confess themselves to be sinners; for the power and strength of the law is taken

from it by Christ.... As long as we cleave to Christ, we are led by the Spirit and are free from the law."

But not only does this verse tell me that I am not under the curse of the law but it also reminds me that any good that I do, any obedience I render to God is not due to my ability to keep the law. I do not go to the law to find the power to love. Living the Christian life is not about keeping a list of rules but about going to the Spirit to find from him the desire to do what God asks of me. I obey God, I love him and people and live a holy life because of the enabling work of the Holy Spirit, not because I'm trying to keep laws. I don't live the Christian life by going to the Bible as a rulebook. I go to the Bible as the revelation of the glory of Christ and as the revelation of my need for Christ. Nothing good dwells in me, in my own nature as a human being. All the good that is in me and that comes from me is due to the gift of the Holy Spirit. I can take credit for nothing. Therefore, pride is destroyed.

12. How will not fearing God's judgment and knowing that any good I do does not come from me, affect my relationships with others?

I have nothing to boast about. I have no ground for viewing myself as superior to anyone else. I cannot wonder why others are not as good as I am. I cannot condemn others as less than I or worse than I. Because I am being led by the Spirit and not under the law I am free from fear and pride. Fear and pride are community destroying emotions. Fearful people and proud people cannot love but always bring chaos into relationships. I have nothing to fear and nothing to be proud of, therefore I am free to love you, no matter how you treat me or what kind of person you are.

13. Honestly, do you believe that the reason your relationships are not what they should be is because you are fulfilling the desire of the flesh? Do you believe that the solution to biting and devouring relationships is to "live by the Spirit?" Why or why not?