



GALATIANS: GOSPEL-ROOTED LIVING
The Sufficiency of the Spirit
Galatians 5:16-26

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¹⁶But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹envy, 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. ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Introduction

The church, it's a mess worth making. The only question is: How do you work your way through the mess? The answer we find in Scripture and in Galatians is counterintuitive: We work through the relational messes by leaning into them with love; the way through the mess is to "serve one another through love" (5:13).

But that's easier said than done, isn't it? What if I don't want to love people in the midst of the mess? What if I don't have any desire to love others—no motivation? It's not easy to serve others through love even on a good day, much less in the midst of a mess, when the harsh word has been spoken, the thoughtless comment made, or some conflict has reached a boiling point. What do I do then, especially when biting and devouring others comes much more naturally and, in the moment, can feel much more satisfying?

The Bible's answer is, on the one hand, rather blunt: You won't find the resources to love others within yourself. We're constantly tempted to look to ourselves for the resources to love

other people. But greater moral resolve won't do it; and sincerity and good intentions, I suspect as we all know, aren't sufficient.

On the other hand, the Bible's answer is thoroughly encouraging. Because the Bible teaches us that love comes from outside us. "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Therefore, love comes from God and through his Holy Spirit. And unless and until God sheds his love abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5), we lack the ability to love in any truly biblical sense.

So, then, it is all about the Spirit: looking to, relying upon, trusting in the Spirit to do his powerful work in our weak hearts, so that we can be who God calls us to be for one another and for the world. That's the purpose of this entire passage of Scripture: to convince you of the sufficiency of the Spirit; and to motivate you to rely wholly upon the Spirit in your daily life.

That's certainly the secret to the Galatians' success in moving forward through the mess they're in; it's also the secret to you and I moving forward through whatever messes we find ourselves in. We must "walk by the Spirit" (5:16), be "led by the Spirit" (5:18), "walk by the Spirit" (5:25), and "sow to the Spirit" (6:8).

So, the purpose of this message is to persuade you of the sufficiency of the Spirit for your daily life. The Spirit alone is sufficient to give you life, both now and forever. The Spirit is able to overcome the hindrances that stand in your way to experiencing life, both life in the here-and-now and life in the yet-to-come, eternal life.

My desire is that you would go away convinced of this one fact: "we live by the Spirit" (5:25). And, therefore, that you would go away with greater resolve to "walk by the Spirit" (5:25).

Sufficient To Overcome the Flesh (5:16-17)

This passage points out the sufficiency of the Spirit by first pointing us to something very practical: *the Spirit is sufficient to overcome the flesh*. This gets us to the nitty-gritty of daily life. "But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (v. 16).

This verse contains an amazing promise: victory over the flesh in our daily lives. The Greek original is stronger than the English translation; a more literally translation would be to this effect: *walk by the Spirit and you will in no way, not a chance, absolutely not fulfill the desires of the flesh!* Paul couldn't be more bold or confident about the power of the Spirit over the flesh.

The flesh is indeed strong. We all know that from daily experience; we don't need to be convinced of the powerful influence of the flesh, with its passions and desires (5:24). What we need to be convinced of is that the Spirit is stronger still. And as we rely upon the Spirit, we will live in victory over the flesh.

But it's not baseless confidence. What Paul goes on to explain is how we can have such confidence in the Spirit's ability to overcome the flesh (v. 17). And the gist of what he says is this: the Spirit is in deadly combat with the flesh. But if you yield to the Spirit and walk by the Spirit, you will find that the Spirit excludes from your life the flesh, with its passions and desires.

This is not about willpower. It's about the Spirit's power, to which you yield as you walk by the Spirit. It's not that you overcome the desires of the flesh, with the Spirit's help. Instead, it's the Spirit who triumphs over the flesh, with you yielding yourself to him. The Spirit is not

simply a resource you bring in to help. He is the one who wins the victory, with you marching in his army, walking in his way.

How confident are you of the sufficiency of the Spirit? Christians are often as confident in the Spirit as they are in the weather forecast. Ask yourself this question: When you find yourself frustrated by the desires of the flesh in your life, how do you keep from becoming completely discouraged and giving up? What keeps you going in your fight against the flesh? Perhaps you struggle with a hot temper or a short fuse that causes you to go off on the people around you. Maybe you battle with bitterness or jealousy, which makes you do and say things about others you sometimes regret. Or perhaps you wrestle daily with lust, gluttony, vanity, pride. Sad is the Christian who's signed a truce with sin because he's lost confidence in the Spirit to win the battle against the flesh.

Sufficient To Avoid the Curse (5:18-21)

The Spirit is sufficient for daily life, for our battle against the flesh but not only for daily life, but for eternal life as well. The Spirit is sufficient to free you from the power of the flesh, but also, secondly, to keep you from God's judgment.

Verse 18 is the conclusion to vv. 16-17. But it is also a thesis-like statement for vv. 19-23, the 'works of the flesh' and the 'fruit of the Spirit.' If the Spirit leads you, then you won't come under God's judgment. The phrase "under the law" is for Paul shorthand for "under the curse of the law." It's a reference to the judgment pronounced by the law upon disobedience. To be under God's law is to be under God's judgment, his sentence, his verdict. If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under God's judgment; you cannot be.

But were reminded of what happens if we fail to be led by the Spirit.

Israel came under the curse of the law because Israel didn't follow the leading of the Spirit. And as a result, the entire generation of Israelites died in the wilderness and didn't enter the land of promise. They were disinherited. Paul scripts the Galatians into the role of wilderness wanderers, who must themselves follow the leading of the Spirit or they will suffer the same fate as the Israelites did. If they succumb to the works of the flesh, they will not "inherit the kingdom of God" (5:21).

Think about that first generation of Israelites who through the Exodus came out of Egypt. How would you describe their life together in the wilderness, on their way from Egypt to the Land of Promise? Let's review: grumbling, disaffection, culminating in that great sin of apostasy, the making of the Golden Calf. This was then followed by series of acts of rebellion, biting and devouring one another, conceit, provoking one another, envying one another. In other words, what Paul describes in these verses is *Israel's own experience in the wilderness*. and his point is that it was precisely this kind of behavior that caused God to keep them from entering into the Land of Promise. And Paul wants the Galatians to understand this: that the same thing can happen to you!

Recognize, then, how serious sin is. Do you hear Paul's double-warning: "I warn you, as I warned you before . . ." (5:21). Paul's not playing around; he's deadly serious about this. And he's not trying to soft-peddle this stern warning, not even a little bit. In the next chapter, Paul will say this same thing just as starkly: "For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption" (6:8).

Yet many Christians are oblivious to the warnings of Scripture. They've become tone-deaf to the Bible's warnings of judgment for sin. All they can hear are the promises of Scripture, with their lavish offers of salvation to anyone who would believe. Preachers often don't help by singing only a few notes, rather than the whole range of the Bible's message. So that when they come across a stark warning they will drowned out its sound by turning up the volume on the promises and talking loudly about perseverance of the saints or eternal security. But the result is that we fail to hear, and thus aren't helped to heed the warnings of Scripture, which are designed to help us.

Recognize, as well, how serious church controversy and conflict is. When a community of faith degenerates into these kinds of behaviors, eternal destinies are at stake. And if that statement shocks you, it should. Paul's statement is shocking, and it's intended to wake them up to the seriousness of their own situation. They're on the verge of dying in the wilderness, being shut out of the kingdom of God, eternal life itself!

Sufficient To Fulfill the Law (5:22-23)

The Spirit is sufficient, then, not only to enable you to avoid the curse of the law, but also *to empower you to fulfill the law*. For you fulfill the law through love; this is the sum and substance of the whole law, as Paul has already said (5:14; cf. Rom. 13:8-10). And love is *the* very thing the Spirit creates in the life of the believer and the believing community. Love is the chief of the Spirit's fruits. You see in that wonderful list of the 'fruit of the Spirit' that love is mentioned first. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (5:22-23). That's not only to give love pride-of-place as the most important of the fruit; that's also to suggest that love is itself a summation of all the other fruit. Love contains the whole of everything God desires and requires of us.

This is why Paul can say so confidently about the fruit of the Spirit: "against such things there is no law" (5:23). Here he is simply reiterating what he's already said in 5:18 about the leading of the Spirit. The law is not against the fruit of the Spirit; indeed, the fruit of the Spirit—love—is the very thing the law itself calls for. Thus, the leading of the Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit which is the fulfillment of the law.

Love, then, ought to mark our lives as Christians. Indeed, love ought to be the hallmark of the Christian. We ought to be known by how we love one another—and the world. In fact, our love for one another is an indication of whether we're walking by the Spirit.

Love ought to mark the church as well. The church ought to be filled with the fruit of the Spirit. We ought to be like a garden, the garden of God, embodying the presence of the Spirit, recapturing the love that was present originally in the Garden of Eden. And this garden-church ought to be filled with fruit, new creational fruit borne of the Spirit of God within the lives of his people. Thus, the church ought to be an oasis in the midst of a barren wasteland, a place of nourishment and rest and healing and life smack-dab in the middle of this present evil age.

Conclusion—Let Us Walk By The Spirit! (5:24-26)

But in order for love to mark our own lives or the life of our congregation, we must draw upon the source of life, the Lord Jesus Christ. We must, then, learn to abide in Jesus Christ. For

as Jesus himself says, “apart from me you can do nothing.” He is the vine; we are the branches. And unless we abide in him, we cannot bear fruit. No branch can bear fruit of itself; it must draw its resource from the vine. And if we learn the secret of abiding in Jesus, he promises we will indeed bear much fruit to his Father’s glory (John 15:1-5).

Hudson Taylor, who spent five decades serving the people of China with the gospel of Jesus Christ, experienced a great turning point in his life, when he understood the spiritual secret of abiding in Jesus Christ. God used a letter from a friend of Taylor’s to open his eyes to the secret of the Christian life.

To let my loving Savior work in me his will, my sanctification, is what I would live for by his grace. Abiding, not striving nor struggling; looking off unto him; trusting him for present power; . . . resting in the love of an almighty Savior, in the joy of a complete salvation, “from all sin”—this is not new, and yet ‘tis new to me. I feel as though the dawning of a glorious day had risen upon me. I hail it with trembling, yet with trust. I seem to have got to the edge only, but of a boundless sea; to have sipped only, but of that which fully satisfies. Christ literally all seems to me, now, the power, the only power for service, the only ground for unchanging joy . . . Not a striving to have faith . . . but a looking off to the Faithful One seems all we need; a resting in the Loved One entirely, for time and for eternity.¹

The sufficiency of the Spirit, and not ourselves—this ought to be the best news in the world for all of us. It ought to be especially sweet music in the ear of a few folks. Here I’m thinking especially of *tired legalists*, who are convinced that Christianity is all about coloring within the lines. And it ought to be good news to *grumpy moralists*, who deep down are really depressed by the fact that, despite their best efforts to live a good Christian life, they don’t seem to be able to do it very well, perhaps not at all. And it ought to be good news to all the *insecure hypocrites*, those who know their life—especially their private life—doesn’t match their profession; they don’t walk the talk. They know it themselves, and so are insecure, hoping no one pulls back the curtain to discover who they really are.

Through the gospel, God has done what needs to be done to put us in good standing in our warfare against the flesh. When we embrace Christ Jesus by faith, we are crucified together with him (2:20), and thus our flesh, with its passions and desires, is crucified (5:24). But not only are we put to death, we’re raised to newness of life by the Spirit. In fact, as Paul says, “we live by the Spirit” (5:25). This simple statement summarizes the whole. The Spirit is sufficient for life; we live by the Spirit.

And this, in turn, is the confident basis upon which we stand—or rather the sure path upon which we are called to walk: “let us also walk by the Spirit” (5:25b). We are to walk no longer according to the ways of this world, giving expression to the desires of the flesh. “Let us not,” Paul says, “become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” (5:26). Instead, let us walk in newness of life, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, fulfilling the law of love.

¹ Howard and Geraldine Taylor, *Hudson Taylor’s Spiritual Secret* (Hendrickson, 2008), p. 131.

To walk by the Spirit means to walk by faith. God pours out his Spirit in our lives in response to our faith. Remember Paul's statement: "through the Spirit, *by faith*" (5:5). The Spirit is the power; faith is how you open yourself up to that power. And, as we learned earlier in the letter, God supplies the Spirit to you in one way: by faith (3:5). When you hear the word of God and respond to it with trust, God pours out his Spirit into your life in an increased way.

We must feed upon the word of God by faith. The word of God is food for the soul. Faith feeds till it is full, and then the soul is happy—happy in God. And when you are happy in God, satisfied with all that he is and promises to be for you in Christ, then you are far less likely to be distracted by the attractive pull of the flesh, with its passions and desires.

What I know from my own life, I also find confirmed in my counseling with many individuals. Unless you are feeding upon the word of God, you will not experience the empowering presence of the Spirit. God has chosen to honor his Son by joining the giving of the Holy Spirit to the receiving of the word of Christ.

This is the God-appointed means of being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). As the word of Christ dwells in you richly (Col. 3:16), you will find that you are filled with the Spirit. And the result is the same: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. You will not be able to walk by the Spirit and enjoy the empowering presence of the Spirit in your daily life if you are not feeding upon the promises of the word of God, Scripture, on a daily basis as well.

As we look to Scripture for daily nourishment, we find Christ there, standing forth in the pages of the Bible. And the Holy Spirit loves to see Jesus Christ treasured and trusted in, so he empowers us in our encounter with God's word and as a result of our encounter with God's word. This is, then, the one major practical application of this message: *Read your Bible on a daily basis. Otherwise, you will not—indeed you cannot—walk by the Spirit in your daily life.*

But it's not only about personal Bible reading. There are many other ways in which believers can take in and feed upon the word of God. That's why Christians of the past often referred to preaching and the Lord's Supper and corporate worship as *the means of grace*. For these were the ways in which ordinary Christians encounter the word of God by faith and, in turn, can receive fresh infusions of the presence of the Spirit in their lives.