

LAW, LIBERTY, AND LIFE IN JESUS - Knowing How it all Works

Part twenty - Teaching #2169

Sunday, March 6th, 2022 - 10 a.m.

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

**THE SPIRIT OF GOD AND OUR EARTHLY EXISTENCE IN THE FLESH
(The Battle For Holiness Inside Our Own Skins And How It Can Be Won)**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:16-18 - "I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. [17] For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don't do what you want. [18] But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."

As we finished last week's study we noted Paul's striking words in

Galatians 5:14 - "For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself." - IPAD TEXT

That is quite an amazing statement. And, if you think about it for a while, it raises another very troubling question. How am I better off being told that, instead of trying to keep the whole law, all I have to do is love my neighbor as myself? ***Love my neighbor as much as I already love myself!*** I am to care about my neighbor's unemployment as much as I love being at work myself. I am to be as concerned about, and work as hard to alleviate, my neighbor's hunger as much as I love to eat my own food. I am to lay down my life to reach the lost as much as I enjoy my own salvation.

This is quite a demand! Who is able to do this? And what is Paul doing here, after describing this wonderful *freedom* we now have in Christ Jesus? Is he merely substituting one law of behavior for some others? And how is this easier to fulfill than circumcision, or dietary regulations, or a host of other Old Testament Jewish laws?

These are the issues of our text this week. And they're important because, as we all know, there are some sincere and dear people who constantly have a hard time trying to make the Christian life work. They find so many conflicting desires at work in their own skins. They feel pulled in so many different directions. They seem to be waiting for God to lift them up and transport them into a realm where they really could become the kind of Christian a part of them really wants to be, but they can't get spiritually airborne.

These verses hold some important keys. Let's break them down into manageable ideas:

- 1) **THERE IS NO POWER TO OVERCOME THE DOWNWARD PULL OF THE FLESH IN RELIGIOUS REGULATIONS OR PERSONAL WILL-POWER**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:16 - "I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh."

These words harken directly back to Paul's words in **Galatians 5:13 - "For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love."** - IPAD TEXT

Our freedom in Christ must always be understood as *freedom from sin* and never as *freedom from God's will*. We are, as Christians, set free from the law as a means of *earning* our salvation. We are set free to *follow God without condemnation*. We are set free to *love God with all our hearts* and to *love our neighbor as ourselves*.

But there is a problem with this freedom. While we are free from the law and free from condemnation, we are *not* free from the desires of our own fallen nature - the *flesh*.

The flesh, in Paul's writing, is the final confidence we put in *ourselves*, either to *earn righteousness before God through the keeping of the law*, or to *satisfy the emptiness of our own hearts through the casting off of restraint and, like a vacuum cleaner, sucking up all the pleasure we can find on our own terms*. Either *legalism* or *licentiousness* are always the manifestations of the flesh. One is *proud*, the other is *desperate*. Neither is ever *free*.

Overcoming the desires of the flesh is not as easily solved as we might think. It is of no good to simply **tell** people to **choose** to follow Christ by a sheer act of the will because it is **precisely the will** that has been corrupted and weakened by the desires of the flesh. To merely **instruct** people to choose Christ over sin is to tell a pig to grow wings and fly.

No. We will always need more than instruction. People will never be **educated** out of the misery of their sin. The help we **need**, and the help Paul says we **get**, is the ability to deny the desires of the flesh right **inside** our own skins, where the choices to follow Christ must be made.

Long ago a promise was made - a very large and beautiful promise - that was custom tailored by Father God to deal with the problem of overcoming the life of the flesh - **Jeremiah 31:33-34** - **“....Instead, this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days”**[Remember, Paul teaches all who are in Christ are the true descendants of Abraham] — **the LORD’s declaration. “I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. [34] No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know me, from the least to the greatest of them” — this is the LORD’s declaration. “For I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin.”** - IPAD TEXT

Wonderful news, this! And it all gets right to where we live. God was going to take an **external code** and replace it with an **internal power**. And that power is the indwelling **Holy Spirit**. There is absolutely no way anyone can overcome the downward pull of the **desires of the flesh** nor **fulfill the law in love** without the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

2) **PAUL DESCRIBES THE DAY TO DAY LIVING OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AS A CONFLICT OF OPPOSING FORCES**

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 5:17 - “For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don’t do what you want.”

While these verses describe a painful **process**, they should also be taken as words of **encouragement**. They are given to help us understand that this process of inner struggle isn’t a sign of God’s **absence**, but His **presence**. The most damning sins are sins committed in **serenity**.

The role of the Spirit is to ***set up internal conflict*** with the desires of the flesh. In fact, Paul says each of these poles in the Christian's being is working constantly to exclude the other. They can never mingle or call a truce. That's why Paul says, in such permanently exclusive terms, "***...these are in (present tense - all the time - totally) opposition to one another.***"

In other places in the New Testament the desires of the flesh are described in terms that are designed to wake us up to their extreme toxicity to our well-being. Peter paints them as ***militant terrorists*** that seek a brutal and violent dictatorship over your life:

IPAD TEXT - 1 Peter 2:11 - "Dear friends, I urge you as strangers and exiles to abstain from sinful desires that *wage war against the soul.*"

Then, back in our Galatians text, Paul adds a description of the effect this internal warfare has on our lives - "***...so that you don't do what you want***"(17). Now comes the interesting question. Does Paul mean, as we are led by the Spirit, we cannot do the things our desires would be pleased to do in the flesh? Or does he mean that, as we cater to the desires of the flesh, we cannot follow the leading of the Spirit as we would like. Most commentaries choose the latter, but, to be honest, Paul doesn't say.

What Paul says, and what he **means** to say, is whenever we choose, and whatever way we choose, there will be a part of us that won't initially like it. And, in my opinion, if we're honest, we all **know** this to be the case. When, as Christians we choose to cater to the flesh there is a part of us, perhaps a very large part, that says "Yes!" to that choice. But there is also a part of us that knows that in yielding to the flesh we are not going to become the kind of person we **really** long, in Christ Jesus, to be.

But there's some pain in choosing the other way too. When we **do** deny the flesh and yield to the Holy Spirit, while we know that ultimately we are doing the right thing, there is a part of our "self" that feels it is being refused, shunned and neglected. We feel out of step with many of our friends. There is a part of us, even if only a small, hesitant part, that would like to fill up life on its own terms.

This is what Paul is saying in this seventeenth verse. And it's crucial to remember this painful part of every choice we make. We will never make the effort, nor even feel the **need** to make the effort, to push through the deception of our own feelings to follow the Holy Spirit as He fulfills the holy law of God in our fallen lives unless we grasp the fact that we will have to, at least at the start, follow the Holy Spirit by **dragging some of a reluctant self along with us.**

Remember, this battle isn't a sign that you are unholy. And it isn't a sign that God isn't at work in your heart. Paul is simply calling us to remember how we are constituted as persons indwelt by the Holy Spirit in this world. The person who stands still until the "**waves of glory**" carry him into the path of the kingdom will probably wait a long time.

3) **IN THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, YOU HAVE TO WALK BEFORE YOU CAN BE LED**

I think it is very important to see the two different terms Paul uses in describing **our** role and the **Spirit's** role in our transformation out of the life of the flesh and into the life of love and freedom. Look at these terms with me:

IPAD TEXTS - Galatians 5:16 - "I say, then, *walk* by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh."

Galatians 5:18 - "But if you are *led* by the Spirit, you are not under the law."

My own feeling is that Paul is not merely using two different terms to say the same thing. The two terms say **almost** the same thing, but not quite. Paul is moving on to deal with the heart of the issue we all need to grasp. If the power of the Holy Spirit is what makes the living of the Christian life doable, then **how** does this happen in my life?

A big part of the answer to that question lies in understanding it is a mistake to try to do what only the Holy Spirit can do in my life. And it is also a mistake to wait for the **Holy Spirit** to do what God has called **me** to do in my walk with Him. And I think these two phrases "**walk in the Spirit**" and being "**led by the Spirit**" are helpful reminders of these truths.

Have you ever tried to **lead** someone who refused to **move**? It's a difficult business. Paul says we are to "**walk.**" In the Spirit, true enough, but we must make the choice to walk. We must choose the path of Christ. We must refuse the countless options our own pleading, conniving flesh will flash before our minds whenever the Spirit calls us to conform to the image of Christ.

Can we **do** these things in our own strength? No - not for a minute. But being **led** by the Spirit follows the choice to **walk** in the Spirit. **Power** follows **choice**. Remember, the Holy Spirit's leading isn't like the cold information of a map. His isn't an **external** giving of direction and advice. He leads us the way the engine leads the rest of the train down the tracks. There is **power** in His leading in our lives. But He will never make the **choice** to walk in His ways. The **choice** is ours. The **resources** are His.

There are too many examples of this principle to even begin to list them all. **Everything** works this way in the realm of the Spirit. We must do **our** part in order for Him to do His. Only the Holy Spirit can bring the power of His Word alive in a fruitful way in my heart. But I make the choice to come to church on Sunday night or commit to Christian Education. Only the Holy Spirit can renew my mind. But I make the choice to turn off MuchMusic, stay out of the bars, and quit renting "R" rated videos.

Remember, you **choose**, then the Holy Spirit **empowers**.

4) **"HOW CAN I MAKE A GOOD START, RIGHT WHERE I AM?"**

I said earlier that everything starts with our **choice** to walk in the Spirit. Even this is not quite right. No one makes a totally **cold** choice. We choose certain things because, in some obvious or less obvious way, we are **motivated** to make that choice.

So, if we really want to get back to the roots - back to square one - in our search to being led and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we need to look at what lies **behind** the choice. What makes us choose to walk in the Spirit when, as Paul has already stated, we will usually have to drag a least part of a reluctant self, kicking and screaming behind us?

The answer to this key question has been hinted at earlier in this very epistle. When Paul saw these Galatian believers being tempted to revert to the laws of ethnic Judaism as a means of being made complete in their salvation he called their attention back to the very beginning of their Christian experience:

IPAD TEXT - Galatians 3:2-3 - "I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard? [3] Are you so foolish? After *beginning by the Spirit*, are you now finishing by the flesh?"

The key for our present discussion is the way Paul uses two terms to describe the very same thing. He talks about their having **“*begun in the Spirit*”** (3) and describes it as the **“*hearing of faith*”** (2). The life in the Spirit and the hearing of faith are the same thing. The hearing of faith is what pleases and yields to the Spirit. And the Spirit is the One who empowers us to overcome the flesh **and** fulfill the requirements of God’s moral law. So obviously the ***hearing of faith*** is what motivates us to ***walk in the Spirit***.

We are not out on a limb with this theology. The Apostle Peter talks about the lusts of the flesh and he too says they are overcome with ***faith*** in God’s promises:

IPAD TEXT - 2 Peter 1:2-4 - “May grace and peace be multiplied to you through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. [3] His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. [4] *By these he has given us very great and precious promises, so that through them you may share in the divine nature, escaping the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire.*”

Verse 4 describes our subject perfectly. Faith in the promises overcomes the lusts of the flesh. Or, as Paul expressed the same process in different words, **“the hearing of faith”** (faith is **hearing and believing** the promises) is how one **“begins in the Spirit”** (**Galatians 3:2-3**).

If you want to greatly increase your capacity and willingness to **choose** to walk in the Spirit so your life will be **led** by the Spirit, **focus your mind on the promises of God**. Believe that there is more fullness of joy in His presence than in the highest paid job in the land. Believe that His Word is really more precious than the price of gold when the market closes. Believe that it is better to be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than have gold seats at a Leaf final in the Air Canada Center. Believe that if you diligently seek His Kingdom and His righteousness first, everything else about your whole life will be better than if you seek Him second.

Faith in the promises! Real, solid, passionate, risky faith, will enable you to choose to walk in the Spirit rather than sell yourself short on the lusts of the flesh. And that’s when the Holy Spirit can fly your life higher than you could ever imagine.