

## LIVE BY THE SPIRIT

Galatians 5:16-26

Key Verse: 5:16

*So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*

“... loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community...”<sup>1</sup> Today’s passage teaches us that if we follow our sinful nature, we will live a life doing these terrible things. What is the alternative? St. Paul urges us to live by the Holy Spirit. Then we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. This is an important direction for our personal life of faith and for our fellowship. Let us humble ourselves to hear the word of God!

**First, a conflict within us** (16-18). Jesus set us free from our sin and death. We have freedom in Christ. Paul urged us to use our freedom to serve one another in love rather than indulge the sinful nature. The problem is that this is not as easy as it sounds. Look at verse 17. *For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.* There is a constant war going on in our hearts. There are two forces in us that are in conflict with each other. One is our desire to follow the sinful nature. The other is our desire to follow the Holy Spirit. We have been justified by the blood of Jesus, but this does not mean we suddenly become a holy man or woman overnight. We are now in the process of sanctification. We still wear the sinful body. Our body has not been transformed into a heavenly one. This won’t happen until Jesus comes again. Only then we will be changed into spiritual beings like angels. In the mean time, we struggle between these two conflicting forces. The flesh desires to please ourselves. The Spirit desires to please the Lord. The flesh desires instant gratification. The Spirit desires eternal joy. There is a fierce battle.



How many times have you personally experienced the following? You decide to get up early in the morning to pray for your family and our ministry, because you learned that Jesus did so in the midst of his busy schedule. So you set your alarm clock at 5:00 a.m. But when the alarm goes off the next morning, you keep on hitting the

---

<sup>1</sup> Gal 3:19-21 (Eugene Peterson’s The Message)

snooze button. You want to throw the alarm clock out the window. This happens time and again. Soon you don't even bother to set the alarm. Consider also your testimony writing. You want to write a love letter to Jesus with a sincere, honest and repentant heart, because you know this would please the Lord and also because you are tired of hearing superficial, insincere and half-hearted testimonies that others write. So you decide to devote several hours to write one on Thursday so that you can share it at the Friday meeting. But when Thursday comes along, you can't find time to write your testimony, because other things occupy your mind. You comfort yourself saying, "Well, there will be others who won't have a testimony to share." We can talk about many other examples. How about loving others as ourselves? How about being humble before God and others? How about putting others' interest ahead of ours?

How can we win this battle? We cannot win the battle naturally, because our natural tendency is to gratify the desires of the sinful nature. This is the fallen nature we inherited from Adam. This nature is hostile to God and prompts us to do things in rebellion against God. When we surrender to this nature, we become prideful, conceited and unthankful, like Adam did. So we need God's help to fight the good fight. We need the help of the Holy Spirit. We must live by the Spirit. Let us read verse 16 together. *So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*

What does it mean practically to live by the Spirit? We need to pray that God may fill our hearts with the Holy Spirit. God promised to send us the Holy Spirit if we sincerely ask him (Lk 11:13). We also need to study and obey the word of God rather than follow our own ideas. Jesus says in John 6:63: "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life."

Verse 18 teaches us that if we are led by the Spirit, we are no longer under the law. Before Jesus came, we were under the law. We were condemned because we could not keep all the laws. We fell short of the glory of God. But by his grace, God set us free from sin and death through the blood of Jesus. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Now we live by the Spirit.

**Second, the acts of the sinful nature (19-21).** What kind of things do we do when we follow our sinful nature? Look at verses 19-21a. *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.* Paul says that these acts of the sinful nature are obvious. They are obvious to us because we have personally committed many of these acts. Raise your hand if you never had an impure thought in your heart, never hated anyone or never had fits of anger? Yes, we are forgiven sinners. We all are human.

These acts of the sinful nature can affect not only our personal lives (both human and spiritual) but also our social lives. These acts can be classified into three categories: (1) sins of physical body affecting our personal and moral lives (sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, drunkenness and orgies); (2) sins of the soul that affect our relationship with God that is our spiritual lives (idolatry and witchcraft); and (3) sins

that we commit against other people which affect our social lives (hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy). But this list is not exhaustive. Even if you say, “I have never committed any of these,” don’t declare a victory for yourself just yet. Paul ends the listing with the words, “and the like.” He wants us to fill in the blank. What can we include here? (Greed, pride, ingratitude, slander, lies, laziness, ... ?)

Notice that the first thing Paul mentions in the list is sexual immorality. This sin leads to many other sins. Even men of God often trip over this sin. At the height of his successful ministry, a televangelist committed this sin with his secretary. His ministry was ruined, his wife divorced him and he went to prison. Sexual immorality damages not only personal life but also family. It also ruins community and society. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of this sin.



Those who serve the work of God must especially watch out for this sin. There must be not even a hint of sexual immorality so as to protect God’s flock. I respect Billy Graham for setting a good example on this. When he was a handsome, young evangelist, he decided on two things not to put himself in a tempting situation for women and money. He decided not to ride with a woman, even if it was his secretary, unless a third person was present in the car. He also set up a board of trustees to oversee the finances of his evangelistic association.

Some people say that the acts of the sinful nature are not serious when they do not hurt others, like a victimless crime. In their minds, adultery or fornication is no big deal if the sex is consensual. But I don’t think there is such thing as a victimless sin. The person who commits it is a victim. What we do and what we say also affect others, even if we do it in secret. Our sinful acts affect our Christian community. We don’t live alone in an island. Most of all, God is watching us. This is what St. Paul warns us in verse 21b. *I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.* What could be more serious than this? It concerns our life in eternity.

**Third, the fruit of the Spirit (22-23).** When we live by the Spirit, what kinds of fruit do we bear? Let us read verses 22-23. *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.* It is interesting to note that Paul uses the term, “the fruit” of the Spirit, as opposed to “the acts” of the sinful nature. Our sins are the results of our acting out the evil that is in our hearts. On the other hand, the fruit of the Holy Spirit is what the Spirit helps us to bear when we live by him. This fruit cannot be manufactured by our hard work. It grows out of life that follows the Holy Spirit.

There are three kinds of fruit of the Holy Spirit: (1) the fruit that is produced in us when we remain in God (love, joy, peace); (2) the fruit we have in relation to others

(patience or forbearance, kindness and goodness); and (3) the fruit in our personal life (faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). Among these, Paul mentions the fruit of love first because love affects all other aspects of our life. Paul said earlier that we should not abuse our freedom in Christ by indulging the sinful nature, but serve each other in love. He said we should have faith that expresses itself through love. Paul also said in 1 Corinthians 8: “We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God” (1Co 8:1b-3). Above all, Jesus told us this in John 13: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (Jn 13:34-35).

We can show that we are Jesus’ disciples by loving one another. Love builds up others; it does not tear down or divide. Legalism tends to tear down and divide. The legalist is happy to find someone’s wrongdoing. He cannot wait to criticize the person and talk about his fault, because it makes him feel better. This is not love. Love builds up others in Christ.

The joy and peace which the Spirit gives are different from the pleasure of sin and worldly peace. The joy as the fruit of the Spirit comes from knowing God and his grace upon us. God also gives us his joy when we serve him and his people with love (JOY = Jesus first, Others next, and then You). This is not a temporary elation of our emotion like when we get an iPad as present or receive a dozen long-stem roses. This joy is in our deep heart; it lasts. The peace that God gives us is not conditional. No one can take it away from us. We can have the peace in the midst of storms of life. This peace is like the undercurrent in a deep ocean. It is peaceful there even when there is a violent storm raging on the surface. Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (Jn 14:27).

When we live by the Spirit, God helps us to bear good fruit in our relationship with others. They are patience (or forbearance), kindness and goodness. If we follow our sinful nature, we cannot be patient or bear with those who are obnoxious or weak. We cannot be kind or good to others if we rely on our human nature. Only God can help us to bear this fruit through the Holy Spirit.

The last three are faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are qualities that God enables us to have as we live by the Holy Spirit. When we live by the Spirit, we bear the fruit that helps us to be faithful to God and kind and gentle to others. We can build up others in Christ. We also have peace and happiness in our inner hearts.

**Fourth, let us keep in step with the Spirit** (24-26). Verse 23b says that against the fruit of the Spirit there is no law, meaning that “legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way” (Eugene Peterson). The fruit of the Spirit reflects the character of Jesus and transcends the law. For example, about gentleness Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and

you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29). Matthew 12:20 says about him, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory.” Before Jesus saved us, we followed our sinful nature. Now we live by the Spirit. We follow the footsteps of Jesus who showed us the life of bearing the fruit of the Spirit.

Look at verses 24-25. *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.* What is the mark of Christian life in regard to the flesh? Paul says that *those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.* We are a new creation in Christ. We have the image of Christ on us. Our sinful nature has been crucified with Christ. We no longer boast about our sinful past; we live by faith in the Son of God.

But how can we keep in step with the Spirit in our daily life? We must follow his very gentle guidance in every step of our life. It means to remain in Jesus and his words. It means to repent our sins as we study the word of God. The Holy Spirit is gentle. He does not force us. He gently nudges us to follow the word of God. To listen to him and follow him, we need have to God’s word in our hearts and we need to be sensitive to his guidance. As individuals and as a ministry, we should make a good environment for us to live by the Spirit. That is why Paul says in verse 26.

*Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying*

*each other.* We cannot listen to the Holy Spirit if we become conceited. We cannot hear him when we become busy with provoking and envying each other. Our fellowship has members with diverse backgrounds, race, and culture. We are from America, Korea, Nigeria and Indonesia. We have large gaps in our ages and stages in career. We have children in different ages. Given this situation, how can we create a spiritual environment in which the Holy Spirit can work among us? We cannot if we spend our time and energy in provoking and envying each other or if we become conceited! We can have harmony if each and every one of us follows the Spirit by repenting our sins based on God’s word and praying for one another. Jesus says in John 15:5: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

Even before today’s passage reminded us, we knew that there is a conflict in our hearts—our inclination to follow the sinful nature and the desire to follow the Holy Spirit. Paul says that we will not inherit the kingdom of God if we deliberately choose to indulge the sinful nature. He urges us to live by the Spirit. When we do so through the word of God and prayer, God produces in us the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Let us make, humbly and honestly, a decision to follow the Holy Spirit!

The fruit of the Spirit is  love, joy, peace, kindness, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.  
Gal. 5:22