

“Walking by the Spirit,” Galatians 5:1,13-25
Tom Johnson, June 27, 2010

People have been attracted to religion for various reasons. Some want meaning in their lives. Some want to calm a troubled conscience. Some want the assurance of life after death.

And people still want to be a part of religious life for these reasons. But today, more and more people want religion that makes a difference in the life of individuals. They want something authentic—something that really does transform lives.

Nothing does more damage to the reputation of Christians and the name of Jesus, than people who publically profess their Christian faith but live lives that deny the faith they profess.

People ask, “Where were the Christians in Germany when Hitler was killing 6 million Jews?” People ask, “Why would I want to be a Christian when the Christians I know are no different than everyone else?”

Or even worse, people ask, “Why would I want to be a Christian when the Christians I know talk the talk but don’t walk the walk?” As I heard someone recently say, “Genuine religion should make a person a better human being.”

Mahatma Gandhi said it this way: “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

In our reading from Galatians, Paul has the same concern: “Walk by the Spirit.” “Be led by the Spirit.” “Bear the fruit of the Spirit.” In other words, “Live a life that manifests the Holy Spirit’s presence and activity in your life.” Walk the walk.

As Christians, we should be harming ourselves and harming those around us less. As Christians, we should be blessing those around us more. As Christians, we should be more like our Christ.

But the problem with simply asking anyone—even Christians—to just “walk the walk” or “be more like Jesus” is that it is not that easy. It’s not as simple as you or I deciding that we are going to live better lives. It is not asking us to merely do better or try harder. In fact, that is not what our Scripture is asking us to do.

Notice that Paul mentions that Christians are caught in crossfire. We in the midst of a battle. Paul says, **“the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh.”** When we believe in Jesus, we enter a battle. In this life, the struggle between sin’s power and God’s power wages on.

There is a war going on between God and our old human nature. Our old self wants to live for itself and its own pleasure. It’s a sad reality of our broken, human condition that we naturally want to live for ourselves.

We want, in Paul’s words, to **“gratify the desires of the flesh.”** We live for “A #1.” We serve “me, myself, and I.” We are lost and enslaved to our own little world where the only thing that matters is what I need and what I want. And the activity that follows is called “sin” or “the works of the flesh.”

And you can see the list right there in black and white in our reading from Galatians. Paul's list is not intended to be comprehensive or exclusive—any activity that damages a healthy relationship with God or with our fellow human beings is a work of the flesh.

We are living under the power of the old sinful nature when we, either by negligence, laziness, or malice do those things. Paul reminds us of the Golden Rule. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

But we have been set free from the slavery of the flesh! We no longer have to live our lives consumed by our own needs and desires. Jesus died and rose again to give us the freedom to love one another as God wants us to do. We not get to live by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus sent the Holy Spirit into our lives to give us the desire and the ability to live transformed lives. The Holy Spirit set himself against our old nature and our old ways. The Holy Spirit has drowned the old self in the water of baptism. The Holy Spirit empowers us through prayer and the reading and hearing of the Word of God.

The Holy Spirit is the one who has begun a good work in us. And as Scripture boldly says, **“I am confident that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”** (Philipp 1:6).

The Holy Spirit has done mighty things in our lives. He has forgiven our sins. He has adopted us as daughters and sons of God. He assures us of eternal life. It only makes sense that if God forgives our sins in the past and guarantees our eternal life in the future that he also cares about our lives in the meantime.

And so our Scripture says, **“If we live by the Spirit, let us walk by the Spirit.”** If we have been given life by the Spirit, then we should also conduct our lives by that same Spirit. If we are led by the Spirit, we will love our neighbor as ourselves. We will fulfill the Royal Law because that is what the Spirit does. Here is one story:

Jermaine is in the State Penitentiary in Joliet for drug related crimes. It was here that he often remembered how his grandmother who raised him would send him to school with a kiss and a prayer and a hug when he got home safely.

Through the study of God's word, Jermaine's eyes were opened to see more clearly the path he had taken. In one of the poems he wrote, he calls the community he grew up in “a hood of alcoholics where people worship narcotics, same circle rotating making us act robotic.”

It was through his faith in Jesus Christ that he broke free from addiction. It was through the Holy Spirit that he no longer felt “robotic” and a slave to the power of sin and self-destruction in his life.

Since Jermaine's deepened relationship with God, he now appreciates the powerful witness of his grandmother. He writes letters and poems to her. He apologizes for becoming a thug and a convict. He let her know that her love and prayers for him were not in vain. He's okay. He's got a good cellmate. His faith is in God.

Now Jermaine wants to help people in his community, and communities like his, to see—to see how sin and the devil work tirelessly to keep them in the darkness and slavery to a broken

system—the works of the flesh. But even more than that, he wants to be free and “show them how to follow the Light”—and walk by the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit works in our lives now just as He did when we were given new life, forgiveness, and eternal salvation—by faith. When we hear and read God’s Word, the Holy Spirit is filling us up and will help us to walk.

When we encourage each other as sisters and brothers in Christ...when we pray for each other trusting in God’s promises, the Holy Spirit gives us the strength and sustaining power that we need.

When we receive the bread and the wine—the Body and the Blood of Jesus in the Lord’s Supper, the Holy Spirit is there to build up our faith. **“If we live by the Spirit, let us walk by the Spirit.”** God has made us alive. He wants us to live that life abundantly.

For Jermaine, the transformation is dramatic—from drunkenness and fits of anger—works of the flesh—to peace and self-control—fruit of the Spirit. For his grandmother, it was less dramatic but just as powerful—but the same fruit of the spirit—the kindness, goodness, and gentleness of a kiss and a prayer as her grandson went off to school and a hug when he came home safely.