



A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact *you*

## **Walking By the Spirit**

### **The Means by Which Christians Grow in Grace**

**by Ryan Habbena**

Ever since the fall, humanity has been engaged in an age-old struggle against the power of sin. Sin, being defined as "both fallen humanity's state of separation from God and as a person's purposeful disobedience to God's will as evidenced in concrete thought or act,"<sup>1</sup> is the ultimate problem of the human race. While remaining corporate, it is also a very real individual problem. We find this truth presented from virtually the beginning of the Biblical accounts. When Cain was enraged with his brother regarding the insufficiency of his own sacrifice, God informed him "sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, *but you must master it*" (Genesis 4:7b [*emphasis added*]).<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the history of the church, we discover many feeble attempts to "master" sin. The Ascetics believed sin could be mastered by withdrawing from the world. Those who practiced asceticism would attempt to remove all "outside" temptations, living a life of rigid self-denial. Those who vowed to live an ascetic lifestyle found themselves just as tormented and drawn by sin as those living "in the world."

Most know of Martin Luther's "insanity" before he came to a realization of the grace of God. In his understanding of the intensity of sin, he would physically discipline himself in an attempt to overcome it. In fact, "he punished his body so severely that he later commented it was in the monk's cell that he did permanent damage to his digestive system."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most amusing case of attempting to master sin through rigorous external means is that of the ascetic Simeon Stylites. He was so troubled by the people who came near the cave he dwelt that "he put up a pillar and made his home on the top of it for over thirty years."<sup>4</sup> Regarding this man, I once heard a teacher state "The real saints were the ones who picked up after him for thirty odd years!"

Throughout the extremes noted above, a common thread is evident. All of these believed (and practiced) that sin could be mastered through rigorous external means. This is not a phenomenon that is exclusive to the past. Similar legalistic teachings are just as prevalent today. Given the extremes we encounter through all of these, a pertinent question arises: a question that is of utmost importance for all who are truly regenerate believers in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *How* does one "master" sin in this present age?

The task of this work revolves around this very question. In our struggle against sin, the Scriptures never command us to physically beat ourselves.<sup>5</sup> Nor do they command us to retreat from the world.<sup>6</sup> It is clear from the examples noted above that no one can successfully hide from the sinful desires of our fallen humanity. However, the Scriptures

*do* proclaim that believers have been freed from slavery to sin and are now under the law of the Spirit of life (Romans 6:17, 8:2). Perhaps the most significant passage regarding the "how" of mastering sin is found in Galatians chapter 5: "But I say to you, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please" (Galatians 5:16-17)

Therefore, the two-fold task of this work is as follows. First, we must clearly understand *what* this text is proclaiming, especially when Paul most significantly asserts, "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh." Second, given the generality of this command, we must explore the whole counsel of God in discovering exactly *how* one indeed "walks by the Spirit." When these two tasks are carefully examined, accepted, and brought into everyday life, one is well equipped to "master sin" by "walking by the Spirit."

## **What is "Walking by the Spirit"**

Paul's epistle to the Galatians carries with it a severely admonishing tone. Many in the church at Galatia had succumbed to the dangerous teaching of the "Judaizers" - a sect that proclaimed one must rigorously follow the Old Testament law in addition to Christ in order to remain in God's favor. As a sign of this, circumcision needed to be added to the grace of Christ. For the apostle Paul, this was a departure from the only true Gospel.

In this epistle Paul attempts to correct the Galatians' perilous departure. After Paul affirms the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ and the necessity to abide in it, he turns to matters regarding Christian living. It is fairly safe to assume these Judaizers were after a stringent keeping of the Old Testament law. In Paul's discourse regarding Christian living, he declares that "life in the Spirit" is not antinomianism, a doctrine many accused the apostles of teaching.<sup>7</sup> Rather, a "life in the Spirit" is one that seeks to obey and serve God in a profound, intensified manner

For Paul, faith in the Gospel is a necessary prerequisite for "walking by the Spirit." Thus, one must "begin" in the Spirit before "continuing" in it. Paul's overriding concern is clearly seen in the following:

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Galatians 3:1-3)

Paul's rhetoric is unmistakable. The Galatians, having begun in the Spirit by believing, were now seeking to mature by obeying a system that was only a shadow of things to come. Such a practice was utter "foolishness" to Paul. Therefore, in chapter 5, Paul gives

the definitive answer to how one matures and obeys the true and living God: "Walk by the Spirit and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh." This phrase is begun with a command (Walk by the Spirit) and finished with a promise (you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh). There are three elements in this passage we must understand in order to grasp Paul's intention. We must understand the terms "walk," "Spirit," and "flesh."

**Walk** - The Greek word *peripateite* is one of four verbs used in Galatians 5 to designate "life in the Spirit." All seek to convey a similar meaning - a lifestyle consumed by the power of the Holy Spirit. "Although this is the only place in Galatians where the word 'walk' is used in this sense, it is a common Pauline designation for one's daily conduct or lifestyle."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Paul is using the word "walk" in the sense of a continual lifestyle.

**Spirit** - To ascertain Paul's intention of the Greek word *pneuma* one needs to examine the context. This Greek word has a variety of possible translations: the human spirit, wind, unity, the Holy Spirit, etc. Given the context of the entire epistle and the immediate passage, Paul is clearly referring to the Holy Spirit, which empowers the regenerate believer to live a dynamic, obedient life in relationship to God.

**Flesh** - There has been considerable debate over the translation of the Greek word *sarx*, mainly stemming from the NIV translation committee's decision to translate this word "sinful nature" in many instances. While I have some reservations in accepting that word translation, overall I believe *sarx*, in this particular context, indeed carries the meaning of the fallen nature of humanity. Timothy George notes, "Throughout Galatians 5-6 flesh is used as an ethical term with a decidedly negative connotation. Flesh refers to fallen human nature, the center of human pride and self-willing."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, "fulfilling the desires of the *sarx*" is simply equivalent to "sinning."

In light of the above observations, the meaning of Paul's command can be succinctly stated as the following: *Live your life by the power of the Holy Spirit and your sinful desires will remain unfulfilled.* Again, George is helpful here: "In Paul's vocabulary, to walk in the Spirit or be led by the Spirit means to go where the Spirit is going, to listen to his voice, to discern his will, to follow his guidance."<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, this text confirms it is not through *external* means, such as a legalistic regiment, as the Judaizers were affirming, or self-inflicting punishment, or a manipulation of one's own environment, that sin may be overcome. On the contrary, it is through the *inner* working of the Holy Spirit, changing the heart and purifying it in service to God, that one "does not fulfill the desires of the flesh." This does not entail, however, that we take *absolutely* no part in our sanctification and the mortifying of the "flesh." To be sure, it is the Holy Spirit, not our human wills, that ultimately purifies us from all unrighteousness, yet, He accomplishes this through certain and various means, in which we are called to participate.

Therefore, since we know *what* "walking by the Spirit" is, we must answer the question: *How* specifically do we "walk by the Spirit" so we do not "fulfill the desires of the flesh?" A careful reading of the Scriptures reveals three prime "devotional disciplines" that the

Spirit works through in continually purifying the children of God. It is primarily through these that we engage in our "walk."

## **How Does One "Walk by the Spirit"**

In the day of Pentecost, after the promised Holy Spirit was poured out, the apostle Peter proclaimed: "This is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 'And it shall be in the last days,' God says, 'that I shall pour out my Spirit on all mankind'" (Acts 2:17). The new discipleship community was being established. Those who believed had indeed "begun by the Spirit." With this having occurred, how were the individuals rooted in this community living in this radical new way of life?

Those who believed and were included in this new discipleship community did not remain passive. On the contrary, after Peter gave his Pentecost address, it is written that "those who had received his word were baptized . . . they were continually *devoting* themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:41,42 [*emphasis added*]). Having "begun with the Spirit" these were indeed "continuing in Spirit." In the above, three devotional disciplines are clearly presented: *Feeding upon the Word of God*, *Practicing Prayer*, and *Devotion to Christian Fellowship*.<sup>11</sup> It is through devotion to these, I will argue, that one fulfills the heart of the command: Walk by the Spirit.

## **Feeding Upon the Word of God**

"Man shall not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). The word of God is proclaimed as spiritual nourishment for all those who believe. The Scriptures testify that the Holy Spirit is active in fueling the believer with power and growth through the word He inspired. "Like newborn babes," exhorts Peter, "long for the pure milk of the word, *that by it you may grow* in respect to salvation" (1 Peter 2:2 [*emphasis added*]).

The Scriptures must be read with an awareness and dependence upon the Holy Spirit. There is indeed an objective nature to the reading of the Scriptures. However, we must be careful, lest we divorce the necessity of *illumination* when the Scriptures are read by an open heart and mind. The great 19<sup>th</sup> century preacher, Charles Spurgeon has noted:

It is one of the peculiar offices of the Holy Spirit to *enlighten* His people. He has done so by giving us His inspired Word, but the Book is never spiritually understood by anyone apart from the personal teaching of its great Author. You may read it as much as you will and never discover the inner and vital meaning unless your soul is led into it by the Holy Ghost Himself. You may have done well to learn the letter of truth, but you still need the Spirit of God to make it the light and power of God to your soul.<sup>12</sup>

This illumination is presented in John 16:13: "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth." These were the words spoken by Jesus to His disciples, yet they also have significant meaning for all that believe. R. Kent Hughes notes regarding this verse: "The Holy Spirit guides us into 'all truth.' We will grow as he further illuminates the Scriptures to us. That does not mean we will have all knowledge regarding the sciences, but we will be taken deeper and deeper into the essential truth about God and Christ and eternal life and our souls."<sup>13</sup>

The Scriptures should never be divorced from the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit. He has inspired and brought illumination to the significance and power of the Scriptures. When one devotes oneself to the Scriptures, with a keen awareness and dependence upon the Holy Spirit, the believer will be equipped and upheld by His powerful working through the inspired word.

## **The Practice of Prayer**

Prayer is clearly and directly commanded in Scripture: "Devote yourselves to prayer" (Colossians 4:2). Prayer is simply communication with God, and is practiced through a variety of means: petition, thanksgiving, praise, worship, intercession, etc. The Holy Spirit is especially active in this endeavor. Not only are we commanded to pray, we are commanded to pray "in the Spirit" (Jude 20, Ephesians 6:18). Praying in the Spirit "seems to indicate a deep, free, and intensive time of prayer, when the Spirit takes over and controls and leads the prayers."<sup>14</sup>

Scripture affirms the special presence and activity in the believer's endeavor of prayer, for "we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). Therefore, prayer is a devotion in which we are commanded to participate, as the Holy Spirit comes beside us, both inspiring us towards communication with God<sup>15</sup> and interceding "for the saints according to the will of God" (8:27b). As we, by the Spirit's inspiration, devote ourselves to communication with God, the Holy Spirit actively works by interceding, comforting, sanctifying, and protecting in ways our finite minds are not able to grasp.

## **The Blessings of Christian Fellowship**

Christ has established the church as a *community*. The benefits of being in Christ not only entail participating in the eternal relationship of the Trinity, but also fellowship with other believers. Contemporary Evangelical culture often centers on the individual nature of faith and practice. While individual, daily worship and service are indeed a characteristic of a healthy spiritual life, it is incomplete without belonging to a local fellowship of believers. There needs to be devotion to Christian fellowship.

The Holy Spirit is active in a special way "wherever two or three are gathered" in the name of Christ. In Old Testament Israel, the Temple was where God's special presence resided: within the "Holy of Holies." However, it is now in the collective hearts of His children where His special presence resides through the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul proclaims, "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" Here Paul is not referring to a believer's physical body as God's temple, but rather the community of believers. The Greek word for "you" in this verse is in the plural. It is in this fellowship where God's Spirit dwells in a special and powerful way.

The benefits of Christian fellowship are numerous. It is in this community setting where we worship, hear the word of God, corporately pray, serve God and others through our spiritual gifts, and remember Christ's death through the Lord's Supper. In all these things the Holy Spirit is working powerfully: conforming believers, both individually and corporately, into the image of Christ and the triune God.

By devoting oneself to Christian fellowship, a believer is engulfed in activities where the Spirit is actively working. In fact, in the New Testament, when members of the church are placed out of fellowship for disciplinary reasons, they are said to be "delivered unto Satan."<sup>16</sup> They had been removed from God's sphere of safety present within the church. Being plugged into a body of true believers offers protection from our spiritual enemy and the temptations of this fallen world. Clearly, therefore a devotion to pure fellowship protects and edifies the believer through the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

A pure devotion to these disciplines was prevalent in the new discipleship community after the Spirit was poured out on Pentecost. It is clear the Holy Spirit is *especially* active throughout all of these devotions, conforming the individual and the community into the image of Christ and the triune God. Thus, devoting oneself to these will result in an "ever-increasing walk" intoxicated with the Spirit of God. As a result there will indeed be an "ever-decreasing fulfillment" of the desires of the flesh.<sup>17</sup>

In his book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald S. Whitney has noted:

Discipline without direction is drudgery. But the Spiritual Disciplines are never drudgery as long as we practice them with the goal of Godliness. If your picture of a disciplined Christian is one of a grim tight-lipped, joyless half-robot, then you've missed the point. Jesus was the most disciplined Man who ever lived and yet the most joyful and passionately alive. He is our Example of discipline.<sup>18</sup>

As we seek to walk by the Spirit, we must not lose sight of the ultimate goal. The goal is not to focus on the devotional disciplines themselves, but rather *through them* be brought into a deeper relationship with our Savior. The ultimate goal is to be conformed into His

image, for His glory. While we walk by the Spirit, "let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2 NIV).

Issue 60 - September/October 2000

---

## End Notes

1. Stanley J. Greutz, David Guretzki, Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 107.
2. To "master" sin in this context means to "bring it under submission."
3. R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1998) 84.
4. Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, (Nashville: Word, 1995) 119.
5. In 1 Corinthians 9:27 Paul is most probably using hyperbole when he states, "I beat my body" (NIV). He does this to demonstrate the seriousness of bringing the desires of the flesh under control.
6. Paul implicitly teaches against such a practice in 1 Corinthians 5:9, where he admonishes: "I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world for then you would have to go out of the world.
7. See Romans 3:8.
8. Timothy George, *NAC Galatians*, (Nashville, Broadman & Holman, 1994) 386.
9. Ibid 377.
10. Ibid 386.
11. Here the "apostles' teaching" is surely equivalent to the "word of God" as they are fulfilling the Great Commission: "teaching people to observe all Jesus commanded them" (Matthew 28:20). Also, the "breaking of bread" is most probably a subheading of fellowship. However, it also could refer to observing the Lord's Supper. Either way, these can be seen as a part of devotion to Christian fellowship.
12. Charles Spurgeon, *What the Holy Spirit Does in a Believers Life*, (Lynwood:Emerald, 1993) 35.
13. R. Kent Hughes, *John*, (Wheaton:Crossway, 1999) 381-382.
14. Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 115.
15. In the passage at hand, it is proclaimed that the Spirit Himself has given us a spirit that cries out "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:14-16)
16. Paul uses this terminology in 1 Corinthians 5:5 and 1 Timothy 1:20.
17. In my estimation, it is clear that the Scriptures affirm *progressive* sanctification, where absolute perfection is not obtained until glorification. This is germane to

- note as it relates to this issue and particular passage. However, a defense of this position is beyond the scope of this work.
18. Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, (Colorado Springs:NavPress, 1991) 24.
- 

Published by Twin City Fellowship

Critical Issues Commentary  
P.O. Box 26127  
St. Louis Park, MN 55426  
952-935-3100  
[pastorbob@twincityfellowship.com](mailto:pastorbob@twincityfellowship.com)

Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures taken from the New American Standard Bible, © Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995 The Lockman Foundation.