

In Step With the Spirit  
Galatians 5:16-25  
Newton Bible Church  
October 14, 2018

A daredevil racoon, searching for bird eggs, kept animal lovers on edge earlier this year when it scaled a 25-story skyscraper in St. Paul, Minnesota, and became stuck near the top. Television cameras followed the drama closely. Workers finally rescued the creature when it reached the roof and released it safely. One racoon behavior expert said, "Racoons don't think ahead very much, so racoons don't have very good impulse control. I don't think the racoon realized when it started climbing what it was in for." While referencing this story in his devotional last Tuesday, David Jeremiah commented, "That sounds like a lot of humans, doesn't it?"

Last Sunday, in our two weeks break from our studies in 2 Peter while Pastor Matt and Clyde Johnson are away on a mission trip, we considered the Scriptural command to continually be filled with the Spirit. That command is an imperative in the passive mode; which means that we are commanded to do something that is being done to us! We found that the key to obeying this command was in surrendering to the Holy Spirit and to His Word.

While we were considering that command found in Ephesians 5, we reflected upon the fact that many believers are experiencing brokenness in multiple relationships because they are exhibiting the desires of the flesh rather than the fruit of the Spirit. They are like that racoon, following the impulses of their fallen nature, endangering themselves and harming those whose lives they touch. They may have surrendered to the Spirit at one time but are failing to obey the command to "be being kept filled" by the Spirit. Today's text addresses this very problem, telling us that there is power available that can help us overcome our fallen nature and enable us to allow the fruit of the Spirit to be produced in our lives. That text is Galatians 5:16-25:

Galatians 5:16-25 (ESV)

<sup>16</sup> But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.<sup>17</sup> For 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. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.<sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,<sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup> envy, 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. <sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

There is a word found at the beginning of this text that alerts us that something has preceded that needs to be kept in mind; the preposition "but." This tells us that the command to walk by the Spirit is meant to turn us away from one path and to start us on another. In order to fully understand the thrust of this passage we need to identify the path we ought to reject.

Verses 7-8 of this same chapter are helpful:

Galatians 5:7-8 (ESV)

<sup>7</sup>You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? <sup>8</sup>This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

The Galatians had been on the right path and had allowed themselves to be persuaded to start down another. This was far more serious than they realized:

Galatians 1:6-7 (ESV)

<sup>6</sup>I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— <sup>7</sup>not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

What was this different gospel? Chapter 3 provides the key to answering that question:

Galatians 3:1-3 (ESV)

**3** O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. <sup>2</sup>Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? <sup>3</sup>Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

The Galatians had started well, trusting in Christ alone for their salvation, wrought through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit – the “Him who called you in the grace of Christ.” But, somewhere along the way, instead of continuing to live in that grace of trusting Christ and His Spirit, they had allowed themselves to be convinced by the Judaizers that they needed to follow the law. This appealed to what Paul called the flesh – instead of following the Spirit’s lead, they were trying to live the Christian life their own way by keeping a set of rules. The result of following this path was predictable and tragic, as evidenced by the verse immediately preceding today’s text:

Galatians 5:15 (ESV)

<sup>15</sup>But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

They had started on the path of following the Spirit’s lead but had veered off course and were now following the flesh’s lead. This is the framework into which our text is placed. Knowing this helps us understand the urgency of Paul’s command. Unlike last week’s text with its strings of imperatives and participles, this text has one significant imperative, found right at the beginning: “walk by the Spirit.” As we consider this text the first thing we notice is that it is:

1. A command with a promise (v. 16)
  - Verse 16 begins with a command. The verb Paul used was *peripateite*; a second person plural present indicative imperative. The verb form tells us that this is a command issued to all believers and that it is something we are to continually be doing.

a. The command: walk by the Spirit

- This verb is a derivative of *peripateo*, whose general use is simply “walk” but it is used figuratively of the walk of life.
- It is modified by *pneumati*, the dative singular of *pneuma* – spirit. The dative in Greek expresses the idea of means or agent, indicating that by which the action of the verb was performed.
- The instrumental dative has two additional flavors: the dative of means which portrays the means by which an action is performed; and the dative of agency which identifies the personal agent by whom the action is performed. Both of these flavors are translated by the word “by.”
- So, our English translation of the beginning of verse 16 is accurate: the command is to walk by the Spirit.
- What does that mean? John MacArthur explains: “The word “walk” is a progressive present tense command with continuity that could be translated “keep on continually walking,” . . . The idea here is that the life of a Christian unfolds . . . one step at a time. Walking then is a very picturesque metaphor. One step at a time under the control of the Holy Spirit, that's how we are to live. It is a habitual thing. It is a constant pattern.”
- Last week we considered the command to be filled with the Spirit. You may be wondering whether there is any difference between that command and the one we are looking at today.
- The commands are obviously related, and you cannot do one without the other, but there are important differences.
  - The filling of the Spirit initiates and helps maintain the Spirit’s control through submission.
  - Walking by the Spirit maintains the Spirit’s control through step-by-step dependence.
  - In filling, we surrender or yield to the Spirit
  - In walking we depend upon the Spirit
  - “be filled” is in the passive voice; the passive voice suggests the concept of submission or being yielded
  - “Walk by” is in the active voice; the active voice suggests the concept of dependence upon
- The life we are called to is to walk by the Spirit. It's a daily step-by-step, moment-by-moment yielding to the Spirit of God. “Walk” is also the general term by which our Christian life is defined.
  - Ephesians 4:2-3 says, “Walk in humility.”
  - Romans 13:13 says, “Walk in purity.”
  - 1 Corinthians 7:17 says, “Walk in contentment.”
  - 2 Corinthians 5:7 says, “Walk in faith.”
  - Ephesians 2:10 says, “Walk in good works.”

- Ephesians 4:17 says, "Walk differently than the world."
  - 2 Thessalonians 3:6 says, "Walk separated from sin."
  - Ephesians 5:2-3 says, "Walk in love."
  - Ephesians 5:8-9 says, "Walk in light."
  - Ephesians 5:15-16 says, "Walk in wisdom."
  - 3 John 3-4 says, "Walk in truth."
- We know that we cannot do this ourselves – we must have help. Only in walking by the Spirit are we able to live the life to which we are called. This command also contains a promise:
    - b. The promise: your flesh will not win!
      - The verb that is used together with a negative is *telesthe*, also a second person plural, but instead of being a present indicative imperative, it is an aorist indicative active.
      - An aorist describes an action in a particular point in time. Aorist verbs simply state that an action has happened, giving no information on how long it took or whether the results are still in effect.
      - *Telesthe* is a derivative of *teleo*, which means to bring to an end, to complete, to carry out the demands of.
      - The promise is that when we walk by the Spirit the demands of something identified as *sarkos* will not be carried out. *Sarkos* is the Greek word that is translated as flesh in this and all of the other passages in which we have encountered that term.
      - What is the flesh? MacArthur explains, "It can refer to the physical body and it can refer to human effort or human works. But its primary significance for us is that it refers to our unredeemed nature, our fallenness, that part of us that hasn't yet been redeemed . . . It's not just your body, it's your mind, too . . . it's your feelings and your thoughts, your mind, all of that is tainted by the flesh. The flesh is your unredeemed humanness that waits the glorification of the body when you get a new body and thus a new kind of humanity which knows no sin."
      - The difference in the two verbs in this command is informative. The imperative, "walk by the Spirit" could be compared to a continuous loop that is going now and must keep on going. The verb modifying the demands of the flesh is an aorist, which could be compared to a snap shot. This tells us that the victory over the flesh is assured as long as the loop of walking by the Spirit is uninterrupted, but if that walk is interrupted, the victory over the demands of the flesh is as well. That is exactly what we experience, and the next thing our text addresses. It tells us that we are in:
2. A conflict we cannot escape (vv. 17-18)
    - For a conflict to take place there must be at least two contestants. Those contestants are identified immediately in verse 17.
      - a. On one side: our flesh
        - We have seen already that our flesh is the unredeemed part of us that we will not be rid of until we are at home with the Lord. It is unalterably, constantly

opposed to God and to His desires. Because it is a part of us from birth, we are so accustomed to it that we have become numbed to the fact that it constantly wars against the Spirit. This is why the Bible is unflinching in its description of the evil nature of our flesh.

Romans 8:7-8 (ESV)

<sup>7</sup> For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

This is deadly, because:

Romans 8:5-6 (ESV)

<sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

- Our flesh tries to convince us that it is offering us life, but it is out to kill us!

Romans 8:13 (ESV)

<sup>13</sup> For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

- This is why Peter warned us:

1 Peter 2:11 (ESV)

<sup>11</sup> Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

- Paul correctly described the dilemma this places us in:

Romans 7:18 (ESV)

<sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

- There is a conflict going on within us that will not end this side of heaven. But this conflict is not one-sided!
- b. On the opposing side: The Spirit
  - Our text is quick to note that just as the flesh is opposed to the Spirit, the Spirit is opposed to the flesh.
  - If it was just up to the Spirit, this would not even be a contest! The power of the Spirit is the unlimited power of the God of the universe. The flesh has absolutely no chance to do anything when we are walking by the Spirit!

- But God, in His manifold wisdom has allowed our unredeemed flesh to remain this side of heaven and has given us the freedom to choose moment by moment whose lead we will follow – the flesh or the Spirit.
- This is why Paul could so confidently say that when we walk by the Spirit the flesh cannot win. But he also recognized that none of us achieve perfection this side of heaven, which leads to the conflict we detest.
- The good news is that there wouldn't even be a conflict if we were not redeemed! John MacArthur illustrated this with a conversation he had with a friend. He said; I talked to a friend of mine, a professional athlete. I asked him, "Since you've become a Christian how has your life changed in terms of what you do?" He said, "Oh, my former life before I was a Christian was the worst. It was the scum." He said, "I was a sinner of the worst order, into every sin imaginable." I said, "Let me ask you a question." I said, "Did it bother you to live like that?" He said, "Bother me? No. I enjoyed it." He said, "I loved it." He said, "Man, I was really into that." I said, "Did you feel guilt?" He said, "No." "Did you feel at all restrained when you would start to engage in that?" He said, "No." MacArthur noted, you see, there was no battle because he didn't have the Holy Spirit. So, it was the flesh and the flesh and the flesh and the flesh, there's no conflict. I said, "What happened when you became a Christian?" He said, "All those things began to be the things I hated, and a conflict was engaged."
- Listen to Paul's vivid description of that conflict:

Romans 7:14-25 (ESV)

<sup>14</sup> For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. <sup>15</sup> For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. <sup>17</sup> So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, <sup>23</sup> but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. <sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

- We will return to that cry of triumph in a few minutes, but first we must consider the stakes of this conflict described in the next part of our text:

### 3. A contrast we dare not ignore (vv. 19-23)

➤ In verses 19-21 we are informed in graphic detail of the tragic results of allowing the flesh to have free reign. They remind us that:

#### a. The products of the flesh are life-destroying

- The list that Paul gives us as the works of the flesh is not a pleasant one to consider but consider it we must. This list contains at least four categories.
- The first category is sexual behavior – sexual immorality, impurity, and sensuality. The flesh tells us that engaging in these is life giving, but it lies! These result in killing relationships, killing marriages, and more often than we are willing to admit, even snuffing out physical life.
- The second category is self-effort in religion – idolatry and sorcery. In Western culture we pride ourselves on being above bowing down to physical idols. What we fail to recognize is that all idolatry is trying to manipulate the so-called gods or the true God through self-effort. Sadly, there are many today who think that they are right with God because they keep a particular set of rules, or they do particular good deeds. They think that these efforts will produce eternal life, but they are the path to death. People choose this because this is what the flesh prefers. But it is a killer!
- The third category is human relationships – enmity, strife, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy. The flesh screams, “Be assertive!” claiming that it is the only way to really live. We have seen ample examples of the flesh running uncontrolled in the recent hearings to seat a Supreme Court Justice and the damage that has caused not only to the accused and the accuser, but to the entire political process. This havoc in the political system pales in comparison to the havoc created in homes and families when the flesh produces these foul fruits. Homes and churches have been destroyed by fleshly attitudes, accusations and actions.
- The fourth category is pleasure in excess – drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. The flesh always screams more, more, more! It tells us that if a little is good, more is better. We in the United States have a culture that invites us to excess in pleasure in multiple ways, from extravagant vacations to over-indulgence in hobbies to being consumed by sports. This is a silent killer; it seems so harmless, and then all of a sudden, we realize that we have damaged our ability to provide for our family, or we have traded the relationships in our family for participation in our pleasure of choice.
- If the products of the flesh do not kill you physically, they will kill you spiritually! This is more critical than we realize! That’s the bad news, now the good:

#### b. The products of the Spirit are life-giving

- As depressing as the list of the works of the flesh is, the list of the product of the Holy Spirit is equally encouraging! Let’s not let familiarity keep us from recognizing the contrast we dare not ignore.
- While the list includes a variety of attributes, we are told at the outset that it is a singular “fruit.” This singular fruit is what the Holy Spirit produces in our lives

when we walk by the Spirit, following His lead in complete dependence upon Him.

- When we consider the articulated attributes; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; we recognize that these are all qualities or attributes of God. This ought not surprise us, for the Holy Spirit is God.
  - What we should never get over is the wonder that God would give us the priceless gift of His ongoing presence in our lives (that is what the indwelling of the Spirit imparts). As He walks with us moment by moment pouring His life into us, what flows out of us is true life.
  - We must not ignore this contrast! We must recognize that when we give in to the flesh and let it have its way, we are choosing death rather than life. When we depend on the Spirit to pour His life through us we have chosen life and avoided death!
  - There is one more consideration in our text, and it informs us how it is possible to experience this life-giving flow. It informs us of:
4. A conquest we must accept (vv. 24-25)
- Verse 24 in our text may be one of the most misunderstood verses in Scripture. Because the conflict with the flesh is difficult, many have read this verse as a command rather than what it actually is; a statement of fact!
    - a. Our flesh has been crucified (v. 24)
      - Once again, the verb tense is very specific and very helpful. The verb is *estaurōsan*, which is a 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural aorist indicative active. The tense and the mood tell us that they (believers) have crucified (past tense at a specific moment in time) the flesh.
      - The questions that immediately spring to mind are “When did this happen?” and “How did this happen?”
      - The “How?” question is actually answered earlier in the book of Galatians:

Galatians 2:20 (ESV)

<sup>20</sup>I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

- This happened because we have been crucified with Christ. The Holy Spirit has joined us to Christ’s crucifixion and applied that crucifixion to the flesh. The “When?” question is addressed in Romans 6:

Romans 6:3-11 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup>Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup>We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

<sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. <sup>7</sup> For one who has died has been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. <sup>10</sup> For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

- This baptism into Christ referred to in this text is what is referred to elsewhere as the baptism of the Holy Spirit that takes place at the moment of regeneration. That is the moment when the old self (the flesh) was crucified. We didn't do it, nor are we commanded to do it!
- The verb used in our original text is helpful here – it tells us that the flesh has been crucified (dealt a mortal blow) in the past (and we have seen that this took place when the Holy Spirit regenerated us). It does not say that the flesh is dead, but that it is dying. It may scream bloody murder, but its power is severely limited. This is why elsewhere we are commanded to consider it dead and to ignore it! This is possible because:
  - b. The Spirit is present to lead (v. 25)
    - When you compare the power of the indwelling Spirit to the limited power of our dying flesh, there is no comparison. This is why the beginning of our text asserts confidently that when we walk by the Spirit we will not follow the lead of the flesh.
    - Verse 25 reminds us that if we have been made alive by the Spirit we ought to keep in step with the Spirit.
    - He is both present and leading. Our responsibility is to shut our ears to the dying demands of the flesh and to depend upon His power to help us follow His lead. And we do this one step at a time.
    - When we do cave in to the demands of the flesh, the Spirit is eager to help us repent and be restored. He will not leave because we temporarily wander off. As soon as we place our dependence in Him by confessing sin and trusting Him to help He will once again take the lead and give us the ability to follow.

D. J. DeHaan gave an illustration of how this often works in our lives. He wrote, "Some beautiful oak trees stand behind our home. Every fall I notice that some of them retain their crisp dried leaves long after the basswood, maples, elms, and walnuts become bare. Even the strong winds of winter and the early spring rains do not completely strip their boughs. But as springtime progresses, the scene changes. Small buds appear at the tips of the twigs. Soon the dried remnants of the preceding season drop away because of the surging forces of new life from within.

The Holy Spirit graciously works like that in Christians. Old habits cling to our lives with tenacity. Even trial and adversity do not remove all the lifeless leftovers of our fallen human nature. But Christ continually seeks expression from within us. As we confess our sin, pray, meditate on the Word of God,

obey, and fellowship with our blessed Lord, the dead works of the flesh gradually drop away.

When all our efforts to turn over a new leaf or pluck off the old ones meet defeat, we can take a lesson from the mighty oak. Then we can thank God for the wonder-working power of the Holy Spirit within us. As we yield to His gentle urgings to be kind, loving, honest, and faithful, the Holy Spirit will take care of those "old leaves."

There are multiple applications of the truths we have considered this morning, but we only have time to consider one. That application is focused for us in the chapter following our text:

Galatians 6:8 (ESV)

<sup>8</sup>For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

Because God is glorified when His children choose to follow Him, He has allowed the flesh to remain unredeemed. It is in constant conflict with the Spirit, even though it is deeply wounded, and the Spirit is all powerful. The flesh can only operate when we "sow" to it (choose to follow its ill-advised urges). The Holy Spirit is powerfully present in the lives of all the redeemed. The question before those of us who have tasted that sweet salvation is to whom we will sow. The stakes are life and death. When we choose to follow the Spirit's lead one step at a time, we choose life. May God help us to choose a right!