

Galatians: No Other Gospel

Part 11. Walking by the Spirit

As we look at Galatians 5:13-26, we find Paul explaining what it means to live out the freedom we have in Christ by walking in the Spirit. He contrasts the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit and provides practical guidance for living a life that reflects the character of Christ. This message is crucial for us today as we seek to live out our faith in a world that often pulls us in conflicting directions. Let us read the passage together:

Galatians 5:13-26 *“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So, I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*

The acts of the flesh 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. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”

1. The Call to Freedom (Verses 13-15)

Paul begins this section by emphasizing the purpose of our calling to freedom in Christ.

Called to Be Free

Paul states, *“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.”* This declaration highlights the essence of the Christian life: freedom. This freedom is a fundamental aspect of the gospel, given to us through Christ’s redemptive work. It is a freedom from the law, sin, and death, allowing us to live in the fullness of God’s grace and love.

The call to freedom is a call to live as God intended, unburdened by the demands and condemnation of the law. It is a call to experience the abundant life that Jesus promised, characterized by joy, peace, and righteousness. This freedom is an end in itself, but also a means to live out God’s purposes in our lives.

Freedom Misused

Paul warns, *“But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”* Freedom in Christ is not a license to sin or to live selfishly. It is an opportunity to serve others and to live out the love that Christ has shown us.

Using freedom to indulge the flesh leads to self-centeredness and destructive behaviour. It undermines the very purpose of our freedom and damages our relationships with others. Paul's warning reminds us that true freedom is expressed in love and service, not in self-indulgence.

Fulfillment of the Law

Paul continues, *"For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"* Love is the fulfillment of the law. When we love others as ourselves, we naturally fulfill the requirements of the law, because love seeks the well-being of others and avoids harm. The command to love our neighbour as ourselves is central to the Christian ethic. It encapsulates the essence of the law and the teachings of Jesus. By focusing on love, we fulfill the law's demands and live in a way that reflects the character of Christ. This love is not a mere feeling but a deliberate action that seeks the good of others.

Warning Against Destructive Behavior

Paul warns, *"If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."* Conflict, division, and destructive behaviour are contrary to the freedom we have in Christ. They harm the community and hinder our witness to the world. The warning against biting and devouring each other underscores the importance of unity and love within the body of Christ. Destructive behaviour harms individuals and also damages the community as a whole. By avoiding such behaviour and cultivating love and unity, we can build a strong and healthy community that reflects the love of Christ.

2. Walking by the Spirit (Verses 16-18)

Paul transitions to the practical implications of living out our freedom by walking in the Spirit.

Walking by the Spirit

Paul exhorts, *"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh."* Walking by the Spirit is the key to living out our freedom in Christ. It involves living in step with the Holy Spirit, allowing Him to guide and empower us in our daily lives. Walking by the Spirit is a dynamic and ongoing process. It requires attentiveness to the Spirit's leading and a willingness to follow His guidance. By walking by the Spirit, we can overcome the desires of the flesh and live in a way that pleases God.

Conflict Between Flesh and Spirit

Paul explains, *"For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want."* The flesh and the Spirit are in opposition to each other, creating a conflict within us.

This conflict is a normal part of the Christian experience. The flesh represents our old, sinful nature, while the Spirit represents our new, redeemed nature in Christ. This internal struggle highlights the need for reliance on the Spirit's power to overcome the desires of the flesh.

Led by the Spirit

Paul reassures, *"But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."* Being led by the Spirit frees us from the constraints and condemnation of the law. The Spirit empowers us to live in a way that fulfills the law's requirements through love and grace. Being led by the Spirit involves a daily surrender to His guidance and an openness to His work in our lives. It means trusting that the Spirit will lead us in the right direction and enable us to live according to God's will. This reliance on the Spirit frees us from the burden of trying to achieve righteousness through our efforts.

3. The Works of the Flesh (Verses 19-21)

Paul provides a detailed list of the works of the flesh, contrasting them with the fruit of the Spirit.

Obvious Acts of the Flesh

Paul states, *“The acts of the flesh 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.”* These acts are manifestations of our sinful nature and are contrary to the Spirit’s work. The list of the acts of the flesh is comprehensive and includes both obvious and subtle sins. It highlights the destructive nature of the flesh and its tendency to lead us away from God’s will. These acts damage our relationship with God and others and hinder our spiritual growth.

Consequences of Living by the Flesh

Paul warns, *“I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* Living according to the flesh has serious consequences, including exclusion from the kingdom of God. This warning underscores the importance of living by the Spirit and rejecting the desires of the flesh. The warning against living by the flesh emphasizes the incompatibility of such a lifestyle with the values of God’s kingdom. It calls us to examine our lives and to turn away from behaviors that are contrary to God’s will. By living by the Spirit, we can inherit the kingdom of God and experience the fullness of life that He offers.

4. The Fruit of the Spirit (Verses 22-23)

Paul contrasts the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit, highlighting the characteristics of a life led by the Spirit.

Characteristics of the Fruit of the Spirit

Paul declares, *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”* The fruit of the Spirit represents the qualities that the Spirit produces in the life of a believer. The list of the fruit of the Spirit includes both inward and outward qualities. These qualities reflect the character of Christ and are the evidence of the Spirit’s work in our lives. They stand in stark contrast to the works of the flesh and demonstrate the transformative power of the Spirit.

No Law Against the Fruit of the Spirit

Paul emphasizes, *“Against such things there is no law.”* The qualities produced by the Spirit are in harmony with God’s will and are not subject to the condemnation of the law. They fulfill the law’s requirements through love and grace. The absence of a law against the fruit of the Spirit highlights the positive and affirming nature of these qualities. They are the natural outworking of a life led by the Spirit and are pleasing to God. By cultivating the fruit of the Spirit, we can live in a way that honors God and blesses others.

5. Crucifying the Flesh (Verses 24-25)

Paul explains the process of overcoming the flesh by crucifying it and living by the Spirit.

Crucified with Christ

Paul states, *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”* Belonging to Christ involves a decisive break with our old, sinful nature. By faith, we have crucified the flesh and its desires, identifying with Christ’s life, death and resurrection.

Crucifying the flesh is an ongoing process that requires daily commitment and surrender. It involves rejecting the desires of the flesh and choosing to live by the Spirit. This process is empowered by the Spirit and is a vital aspect of our sanctification.

Living by the Spirit

Paul exhorts, “*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*” Living by the Spirit involves a continuous and dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit. It requires attentiveness to His guidance and a willingness to follow His lead. Keeping in step with the Spirit means aligning our lives with His direction and allowing Him to shape our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. It involves a daily surrender to His work and a commitment to live according to His will. By keeping in step with the Spirit, we can experience the fullness of life that He offers.

6. Avoiding Conceit and Provocation (Verse 26)

Paul concludes with a warning against attitudes and behaviors that undermine the unity and love within the body of Christ.

Avoiding Conceit

Paul warns, “*Let us not become conceited.*” Conceit is an attitude of self-importance and superiority that undermines relationships and community. It leads to pride and division, hindering the work of the Spirit in our lives. Avoiding conceit involves cultivating humility and recognizing our dependence on God’s grace. It means valuing others and their contributions and avoiding attitudes of superiority. By embracing humility, we can build a strong and healthy community that reflects the love of Christ.

Avoiding Provocation and Envy

Paul continues, “*provoking and envying each other.*” Provocation and envy are destructive behaviors that damage relationships and hinder the unity of the body of Christ. They create conflict and division, undermining the work of the Spirit. Avoiding provocation and envy involves cultivating love and respect for others. It means celebrating their successes and supporting them in their struggles. By embracing love and unity, we can build a community that reflects the character of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit.

7. Practical Applications for Our Lives

As we reflect on Galatians 5:13-26, several practical applications emerge for our lives today.

Embrace the Call to Freedom

Paul’s teaching challenges us to embrace the freedom we have in Christ. This freedom is not a license to sin but an opportunity to serve others and to live out the love of Christ. We must use our freedom to build up others and to reflect the character of Christ in our lives. Embracing the call to freedom involves a daily commitment to live according to God’s will and to serve others in love. It means rejecting self-centeredness and embracing the selfless love that Christ has shown us. By living in this freedom, we can experience the fullness of life that God intends for us.

Walk by the Spirit

Paul’s exhortation to walk by the Spirit challenges us to rely on the Holy Spirit for guidance and empowerment. We must cultivate a dynamic and ongoing relationship with the Spirit, allowing Him to lead and shape our lives. Walking by the Spirit involves a daily surrender to His guidance and a willingness to follow His lead. It means being attentive to His promptings and open to His work in our lives. By walking by the Spirit, we can overcome the desires of the flesh and glorify God.

Cultivate the Fruit of the Spirit

Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit challenges us to cultivate these qualities in our lives. We must allow the Spirit to work in us and through us, producing love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Cultivating the fruit of the Spirit involves a daily commitment to live according to God's will and to reflect His character. It means allowing the Spirit to transform our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. By cultivating the fruit of the Spirit, we can live in a way that honors God and blesses others.

Crucify the Flesh

Paul's teaching on crucifying the flesh challenges us to reject the desires of our old, sinful nature. We must identify with Christ's death and resurrection, allowing Him to transform us and to empower us to live according to His will. Crucifying the flesh involves a daily commitment to reject sin and to live according to God's will. It means recognizing the destructive nature of the flesh and choosing to live by the Spirit. By crucifying the flesh, we can experience the freedom and transformation that come from living in Christ.

Conclusion

In Galatians 5:13-26, Paul reminds the Galatian believers, and us, that we are called to be free in Christ, but this freedom should not be used to indulge in sinful desires. Instead, we are to serve one another in love, fulfilling the law through the command to "love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul warns against behaviors driven by selfishness, which can lead to destructive conflicts, and urges them to "*walk by the Spirit*" to avoid gratifying the desires of the flesh. He lists the "*acts of the flesh*" and warns that those who live in this way will not inherit the kingdom of God.

In contrast, Paul describes the "*fruit of the Spirit*" as qualities like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He emphasizes that there is no law against these virtues. Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires and are called to live by the Spirit. Paul concludes by encouraging believers to stay in step with the Spirit, cultivating the virtues that reflect their new life in Christ.

This letter may have been addressed to believers on the other side of the world nearly 2,000 years ago, but the Holy Spirit has preserved this text for us today and I really encourage you to reflect on these verses some more in the coming days as the Spirit reminds us of the incredible freedom which is ours in Christ.