

## Message #18

## Galatians 5:16-18

Years ago I was doing a lecture series at a Bible Institute in South Dakota, and before the evening session, there was a very skilled cellist who played a beautiful hymn. After the lecture was over, I had an opportunity to talk with the musician and told her how beautifully she played. She told me that one of the reasons is that the cello wood conforms to sound. I asked her what that meant. She said if a person plays beautifully, the cello will sound better than if a person plays harshly. She said the wood actually conforms to the way the person plays. So you could give the same cello to two people and have them play the same notes and one would sound like a beautiful instrument and the other would sound sour.

It is the same way when it comes to the Christian life. You can take two believers in Jesus Christ, and one develops and ends up beautiful and the other does not develop and ends up miserable. Each believer has been given the Holy Spirit, and one ends up joyful and the other ends up sour. One believer ends up spiritual and the other believer does not. The difference between the two is that one lives life by depending on the Spirit and the other lives life depending on his own flesh. One operates by grace and the other by legal law.

As believers, there are two ways we may live life. We may live our lives by the direction and power of our own flesh, or we may live our lives by direction and power of the Holy Spirit. The truth is we are living our life right now habitually controlled by one or the other.

It is possible to be a believer who goes to church to hear the Word of God. It is possible to sing and give and even serve and yet not be yielded to the Holy Spirit. The reason for this is because a believer can live life depending on the Holy Spirit or by his or her own flesh. What Paul says to these Galatians is this:

**BELIEVERS IN JESUS CHRIST CAN LIVE THEIR LIVES ONE OF TWO WAYS—EITHER BY THE DIRECTION AND POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, OR BY THE DIRECTION AND POWER OF THEIR OWN FLESH.**

Now people who are focused on the O.T. Law miss out on an intimate and personal relationship with the Holy Spirit because they depend on their flesh obedience to a few laws and traditions to make them spiritual. Those focused on grace depend on their relationship with the Holy Spirit to make them spiritual.

Now the verb “walk” is present tense so what that means is this is referring to the habitual and continual walk or life that a person lives. So a person either continually lives life controlled by the Spirit or he continually lives life controlled by his flesh. This is not referring to momentary slips or struggles. This is talking about that which continually dominates a person’s life—the Spirit of God or the flesh of the person.

In these three powerful verses, there are three independent theological ideas communicated by Paul:

**INDEPENDENT THEOLOGICAL IDEA #1** – God commands us to live our lives continually controlled by the Holy Spirit. **5:16**

Now notice how this verse begins “but I say.” Paul says in sharp contrast to what you people have been verbally doing, biting and devouring each other, my advice to you is “walk by the Spirit.”

That verb “walk” is a present imperative, which means we have been commanded by God to continually live our lives controlled by the Spirit of God. This is not a casual, part-time relationship we are to have with the Holy Spirit yielding ourselves to Him every now and then; this is to be the continual habit of our lives.

Now this idea of walking is the idea of living our lives in a spiritual way. Metaphorically it pictures the way we move forward in life and the manner in which we conduct ourselves (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 356).

Now walking naturally implies forward movement and progress. What God is commanding here is that we progress and move forward in our spiritual life yielding to the Holy Spirit. God wants us to have moment by moment contact and guidance by the Holy Spirit right down to daily decisions and actions of our lives.

That Holy Spirit was made available in Acts 2 to everyone who believes. The moment you believe, you receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit begins your Christian experience (Eph. 1:13-14). If you don’t have the Holy Spirit, you are not a Christian (Rom. 8:9). The Holy Spirit is the one who provides power for living. It is one thing to have the Holy Spirit, it is quite another to have such a relationship with the Holy Spirit that He controls your life.

Now one result of living life in a way that is controlled by the Holy Spirit is that “you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (**verse 16**). This is a great way to determine whether or not you are living life controlled by the Spirit.

When we believe on Jesus Christ, we still have our flesh and we still have our sin nature. That sin nature will be with us until we get out of this world and go home to be with the Lord. Now one of the objective things we may look for to determine whether or not we are living life in control of the Spirit is that we will “not carry out the desire of the flesh.”

The Greek word “desire” (epithumia) is a word that doesn’t always refer to that which is evil. But the context here is passionate desires or longings for that which is forbidden (*Ibid.*, p. 170). This does not just have to do with that which is sexual, although that is certainly applicable, but also it has to do contextually with a flesh desire to keep the Law (Gal. 5:3, 4).

The noun “flesh” refers to the old Adamic nature that still exists within the believer after one is saved. Now you always have this nature and that is why when a person prays “Lord, take this lust away,” he is praying the wrong thing. In order for God to take the lust away, the believer would have to be dead or raptured because he will always have the flesh until that occurs.

The key to not fulfilling the lust is not that the lust is gone; it is that one is walking in the power of the Holy Spirit. God never asks believers to kill their flesh; He asks them to subdue it. In Romans 6, Paul says prior to faith we were slaves to sin, that is our flesh led to sin; but after faith we may become slaves to righteousness and sanctification through the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we believe on Jesus Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit, but we also still have our old nature and we will have that nature until we are home to be with the Lord. Our flesh is like a guerilla force that attacks you when you least expect it. When you attempt to yield to the Spirit, you will soon see how fierce the war is.

Now the contextual point of this is that no one can become spiritual by continually yielding to the flesh and if you are trying to keep the O.T. Law, you will never become spiritual because it is a flesh thing. Moving forward in a relationship with God comes by the Holy Spirit.

One way to determine who is winning this war is to take an honest look at your own life and ask this question—do I continually carry out the evil desires of my flesh? Is the habitual pattern of my life that of yielding to my flesh or God’s Spirit? Who is winning my war?

**INDEPENDENT THEOLOGICAL IDEA #2 – God’s Spirit and our flesh are in a war of opposites. 5:17**

The positive point of this war is that it proves you are a child of God indwelt by the Spirit of God. If you do not find yourself in a struggle at times and that you lose at times and feel bad, then you have every right to question whether or not the Holy Spirit is actually in you. An unsaved person does not struggle or feel bad about flesh victories.

Our flesh, our old nature is continually in war against what the Holy Spirit wants to do in us and with us. The Holy Spirit is continually against what our old nature continually wants us to do. The two are opposites. It is interesting that Paul’s emphasis here is not on our war with Satan, it is on our war with ourselves.

Satan gets too much credit for victory when in all reality it is our own flesh that is the problem. Some people want to blame Satan rather than blame themselves. Now Satan does know how to approach each person’s flesh; but the real war we have with the Holy Spirit is not due to Satan, but to us.

If you are a believer, you are in war with yourself. If you do not sense any war or conflict, then there is good reason for you to assess whether or not the Holy Spirit resides in you. The Holy Spirit is perfectly Holy and there has to be conflict with us at times because we are not.

The desire of the flesh, in any context, is totally opposite to the desire of the Holy Spirit. So whatever the Spirit wants, the flesh doesn’t want. This war is relentless and real. It is impossible for one who is Spirit-indwelt to perfectly follow God all the time without some hindrance of the flesh. There is no point dodging this because this is reality.

Now the Holy Spirit does not want you under the Law. The Holy Spirit does not want you to be a legalist. Your flesh wants you under the Law and your flesh wants you to become a legalist. There is real conflict in you becoming spiritual. The less you are willing to surrender to the Holy Spirit, the greater the conflict.

**INDEPENDENT THEOLOGICAL IDEA #3** – The believer who is led by the Holy Spirit is not under the Law. **5:18**

There is another way to say this—if you are putting yourself back under the Law, you are not being led by the Holy Spirit. To be led by the Holy Spirit involves an eagerness to be free and not locked into the O.T. Law.

The “if” clause of **verse 18** is a first class conditional if clause. What this means is reality is assumed.

We may understand this as meaning you are not under the Law since you are led by the Holy Spirit. The conditional element is whether or not you are being led by the Holy Spirit. If you are led by the Holy Spirit, you are not under the Law and you will sense that and know that. If you are not being led by the Holy Spirit, you will try to put your flesh and yourself back under the O.T. Law.

Two simple questions:

- 1) Do you sense a struggle between you and the Holy Spirit at times?
- 2) Who habitually wins the struggle, you or the Holy Spirit?