

FPFWC Christian Development



Liberating Letters

May 2022

Spring Quarter

May 28, 2022

Lesson #4 – The Fruit of Freedom

SCRIPTURE TEXT – Galatians 5:16-26

Key Verse - If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.—Galatians 5:25

ICE BREAKER –

1. *What can a believer do to promote the growth of godly character in his or her life?*

LESSON BACKGROUND

Central to Paul's argument in this lesson is the nature of "the flesh." However, the nature and implications of the flesh are not static in the New Testament. Even the dozens of uses of the word in Paul's writings indicate slight differences and nuances. To claim a singular understanding of "Paul's view of the flesh" would be mistaken.

Paul uses the word to speak of physical matter of living creatures generally (1 Corinthians 15:39) and the human body specifically (6:16). In other instances, flesh is regarded negatively. Paul referred to it in the context of circumcision (Galatians 6:12; Philippians 3:3), rebellious human nature and desires (Romans 8:3–12; Ephesians 2:3), and temporal lineage in contrast to an eternal one (Romans 4:1; Galatians 4:23, 29).

As used in today's Scripture text, flesh refers to the carnal, unredeemed self and its rebellious nature and desires (see Romans 13:13–14). In order for believers to live fully as children of God, the ways of the flesh must die (see Galatians 2:19–21).

The entire epistle to the Galatians has been building to this lesson's Scripture text. With a proper understanding of God's law and promises (Galatians 3:1–22) and true freedom in God's Spirit (4:21–5:14), Paul puts all the pieces together.

LESSON COMMENTARY

5:16–17. Paul explained further: since God's **Spirit** and the sinful nature (**flesh**) are opposed, following (walking by) the **Spirit** will ensure that one avoids sinful **desire**, however imperfect that avoidance might be. As in Gl 3:3, there is not a third option. Thus, 5:17c parallels Mt 6:24: one cannot serve two masters. Paul often used the verb **walk**, similar to OT idiom (e.g., Gn 5:24; 2Kg 20:3; Ps 1:1), to

refer to a lifestyle (Rm 8:4; 1Co 3:3; Col 2:6; 1Th 2:12). **Walk by the Spirit** is an imperative with a promise. If one walks by the Spirit, then what logically follows from this is that one is not fulfilling the desires of the flesh. The imperative **walk by the Spirit** is based on the fact that “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Rm 8:14, NIV 1984) and “if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law” (Gl 5:18). Believers can walk in the Spirit and not fulfill the lusts of the flesh precisely because of the fact that they have the Spirit. **You will not carry out** is actually an aorist-tense verb, and would be better translated “you are not ever going to carry out” **the desire of the flesh**. The verb indicates that Paul does not expect the child of God to be characterized by the **flesh** as an unbeliever is, because the Spirit is present and working in the believer’s life.

There are many spiritual realities that are “now and not yet” for the believer. We are adopted as God’s children (Rm 8:15) but await adoption as God’s children (Rm 8:23). We are dead to sin (Rm 6:2, 7) but must reckon that it is so (Rm 6:11). Likewise, Christians are led by and walk in the Spirit so that they are not typified by carrying out the desires of the flesh, but neither are they sinlessly perfect since they await the “not yet” of their full and future redemption and the “present evil age” is still exerting its influence. So, indeed, one could say the past (aorist) **you will not carry out** indicates that the believer’s life will not be typified, in any kind of a complete, undefined, global way, by fulfilling the lusts of the flesh.

Flesh in 5:17–24 refers to a conglomeration of human traits that contribute to one’s disposition to sin, also known as “the old sin nature,” traits that even a believer still has as a result of one’s descent from Adam, including culpable weakness and also rebellion. For the unbeliever, living according to the flesh is the only option. Both believers and unbelievers have the flesh, and both believers and unbelievers can do the kinds of things in 5:19–21. But if Paul does not expect the child of God to be characterized persistently by the flesh because the Spirit is present and is leading him, then there is a difference between a Christian *sometimes doing* these acts and an unbeliever *practicing* them (see v. 21b).

For (v. 17) provides the basis for Paul’s command in v. 16. There is an eschatological battle between the flesh and the Spirit. The believer must take sides on a daily basis (“walk by the Spirit,” v. 16). One cannot serve two masters. And these two—the flesh and the Spirit—battle with this purpose in mind: **so that you may not do the things that you please**. That is, if the believer wants to walk in and be led by the Spirit, the flesh battles against this wish. If the believer wants to follow the flesh, the Spirit battles against this wish. But Paul makes it clear in this passage that the fight does not come to a draw. The Spirit does produce His fruit in believers.

5:18. But signals that there is hope in the midst of the conflict between the Spirit and the flesh. If believers are now part of the new covenant—and they are since they have the Spirit—then they are not under the enslaving, unhelpful law (see the comments on Rm 7:7–25, which deals with the powerlessness of the law to help an unbeliever defeat the power of sin). Since believers have divine resources available to them that the law did not provide, they can enter this conflict with considerable optimism. They walk in the Spirit, not under the law, so the flesh

is at a disadvantage. And the Spirit leads, i.e., He takes the initiative in empowering and equipping the believer (**you are led by the Spirit**).

Verse 18 does not mean that following the **Spirit** will, at some point, result in being free from all law. Paul has made it clear that Christians are not under the law of Moses (see Rm 7:1–4; Gl 3:23–4:3). However, the NT believer is under the “law of Christ” (1Co 9:21; Gl 6:2; see comment on 6:1–2). Here **law** and **Spirit** denote the two covenantal options under which one might live and be governed, either the Mosaic **Law** or the new covenant grounded in the **Spirit**. The leading of the Spirit is an objective entailment of being converted, as is having one’s flesh crucified in 5:24 and being made alive by the Spirit in 5:25. The subjective side of this is the believer following the Spirit’s leading away from sin (5:18) and walking in the power of the Spirit (5:16). The law cannot provide such power and motivation for godly living.

C. Works of the Flesh (5:19–21)

5:19–21a. Now (v. 19) introduces practical considerations to assist the believer in fulfilling the command of 5:16. Paul was saying, “Let’s be clear: To fulfill this command, you need good theological, ethical, objective input. Walking by the Spirit means avoiding certain things, things that characterize the flesh. In case you wonder what they are, here is a representative list.” The list contains matters bearing upon sexual morality (e.g., **impurity**: the defilement brought on by sexual sin; **sensuality**: unrestrained passion); spirituality (**idolatry, sorcery** [Gk. *pharmakeia*]: using magic in an attempt to manipulate people, demonic beings, perhaps even God, or drugs to induce euphoric religious experiences); relationships (e.g., **enmities**: various types of hostility; **strife**: contentiousness that causes divisions); and social sins (i.e., **drunkenness, carousing**: being on the prowl for sinful pleasure). **Immorality** (Gk. *porneia*) is a general term for any aberrant sexual activity including adultery, fornication, bestiality, and homosexuality (cf. Mt 5:32; Ac 15:20; 1Co 6:18). For other vice lists see Rm 1:29–31; 1Co 6:9–10. Paul’s inclusion of the phrase, **and things like these**, indicates he likely intended the list to be representative, not exhaustive.

5:21b. Paul repeated a solemn forewarning that he previously gave while with them: Those with a persistently ungodly lifestyle (**practice**) demonstrate that they are not currently in the present mystery form of the **kingdom** (Col 1:13; see the comments on Mt 13:10–17) and so will not **inherit** the future **kingdom**—that is, a place in the millennial kingdom and afterward eternal life (cf. 1Co 6:9–10; 15:50; Eph 5:5).

D. Walking by the Spirit (5:22–26)

5:22–23a. The **fruit** image often refers to good works (Pr 8:19; Is 5:1–7; Jn 15:1–8), and does not imply passivity. Virtues can and should be actively pursued (e.g., 1Co 14:1; 2Tm 2:22; 1Pt 3:11). Paul used fruit imagery, however, to emphasize the Spirit’s role in the production of these virtues in a believer’s life. As we are active in following the Spirit, He, not the law, produces these and other virtues.

Paul's list stresses character (e.g., **patience**: bearing with difficult people or situations while still maintaining one's composure; **self-control**: being restrained, holding oneself back from acting on evil desires) and relationships (e.g., **kindness**: being gracious or generous; **gentleness**: using the least amount of force or power needed when dealing with people). As with 5:19–21, Paul likely intended the list to be representative, not exhaustive (cf. Col 3:12–15). Paul is not espousing works salvation here. These fruit(s) are expressed, however imperfectly, by every believer who has the Spirit indwelling him, and as such testify that the believer in question is destined for the kingdom.

5:23b. This phrase is rhetorical. As Paul said elsewhere (1Tm 1:8–9), law is needed to regulate the ungodly life. The virtuous—those described by vv. 22–23—go above requirements of **law**, and so are not obligated to live by it.

5:24. Flesh (see the comments on 5:16–18) belongs to the believer's past (3:3; 5:17; cf. also Rm 7:5–6; 8:9–13). Although Paul often spoke of being crucified (passive) with Christ (e.g., Rm 6:6; 8:13; Gl 2:19; Col 3:5), the active verb here implies that the phrase **crucified the flesh** is a reference to repentance by a believer—i.e., forsaking the old life. Crucifying the flesh happens at conversion. Jesus was crucified, and believers are crucified with Him (see the comments on Rm 6:2–10). Therefore, in a sense, they have crucified the flesh. Though conversion is a one-time event, there is still the daily need for God's people to consider themselves dead to sin (Rm 6:11). If there is a tension here—and there is—then it is similar to Rm 6. We have died with Christ (Rm 6:2) (a statement of fact) *and* we are to consider ourselves dead (Rm 6:11, a command). The crucifixion of the flesh in Gl 5 is the theological equivalent of dying to sin in Rm 6. The flesh was crucified (that is, we died to sin) when we were converted. Paul used the active verb **have crucified** because he wanted the readers to see that this was a real part of their salvation, that their faith in Christ resulted in this crucifixion. The absolute power of the flesh was broken when they trusted Christ for salvation. This should provide great encouragement in the conflict against the flesh.

5:25–26. To **live by the Spirit** is to have new life—the equivalent of salvation. We could paraphrase 25a this way: "Since the Spirit has made us alive...." It naturally follows that if the Spirit gave life, we should follow (**walk by**) Him. To follow Him entails forsaking fleshly habits (e.g., being **boastful, envying**).

LESSON NUGGET – Are you walking in the Spirit? Life, not law, changes behavior; and as you yield to the Spirit, Christ's life is manifest in the fruit of the Spirit. Law works by compulsion from without, but grace works by compassion from within.

Sources: Moody Bible Commentary, Standard Lesson Commentary, and The Essential Everyday Bible Commentary