

Let Us Walk by the Spirit

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes the importance of living by the Holy Spirit to cultivate godly desires and fulfill the law through love.

Duration: 37:52

Scripture: Galatians 5:1-25

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of acknowledging our helplessness and relying on the Holy Spirit to produce good within us. He emphasizes the need for a change in human nature, which can only be achieved through the new birth brought about by the Spirit of God. The speaker also highlights the fruit of the Spirit, particularly love, and how it encompasses other virtues such as goodness, kindness, and meekness. He encourages believers to use their freedom wisely and not as an opportunity for sinful behavior. Ultimately, the sermon emphasizes the importance of trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit, acting in accordance with God's will, and giving thanks for His grace and glory.

Transcript

Now, this is the second in a series on the Holy Spirit. Last week, we dealt with the cause of the new birth. I argued from John chapter 3, verses 5 to 8, that human nature, with which all of us are born, will not enter into the kingdom of God unless it experiences a change.

And that change is called, in John 3, new birth. And what that means is that the Spirit of God supernaturally creates something new in us. According to Ezekiel, God says, I'm going to give you a new heart, take out of you that heart of stone, give you a heart of flesh and a new spirit.

I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk according to my statutes. The heart of stone is the heart of rebellion and hostility, takes no pleasure in God. The heart of flesh, that new heart that's been born of God, loves God, trusts God, follows God.

Or to put it another way, the new birth is the Holy Spirit's establishing himself in us, taking up residence and being that living, governing principle of life. That which is begotten by the spirit has the nature of the spirit. That which is begotten by the spirit is permeated by the spirit, animated by the spirit.

That change, which we call new birth, is owing wholly to the spirit of God due to his grace prior to any act of saving faith on our part. The new birth is not caused by saving faith, just the reverse. Saving faith is enabled by this recreative, powerful act of new birth within us.

No man comes to the sun unless it is given to him by the father. Therefore, the life that we have in the spirit is from him. We live by the spirit.

Now, what? Turn to Galatians chapter five. The text is Galatians five, verse twenty five. And here we have stated just as clearly as you could ask, what comes next? Galatians five, twenty five.

If we live by the spirit. Let us also walk by the spirit. Paul is in full agreement with Jesus from John three, that our life as Christians is owing to the Holy Spirit.

He says in Ephesians two, even when we were dead through trespasses, God made us alive. Together with Christ or we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus, just as God once said, let there be light and there was light. So Paul draws the analogy in second Corinthians for God has shown into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God.

So Paul agrees with Jesus. The life we have is by the spirit. If we live by the spirit and we do something follows.

Now, Paul draws an inference from the way we have begun our new life. If we have begun by the spirit. If the life we have, we owe to the work of the spirit, then the ongoing life that we live must be by the spirit, must be done in the power of the spirit.

If it is by the free and sovereign work of the spirit that our newest spiritual life comes into being, then it is by the free and sovereign power of the spirit that we go on. Walking with God, so walking by the spirit means doing every day what you do by the spirit. Live your life from the time you wake up in the morning until the time you go to bed at night by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, I've heard that all my life, but to tell me practically nitty gritty, what does that mean? What do I do now? Having heard that, how do you live by the spirit that hasn't been as often made plain to me? And so I'd like to try to spend our time together making it as plain as I can this morning. Now, let's observe a few things in this context here in Galatians five, and then we'll draw in some other scriptures to try to get as full a picture as the time allows of what it means to walk by the spirit. Then I'll conclude with five very practical suggestions of what's involved in walking by the spirit.

Look back to verse 16, where our text began. There we have the phrase again, but I say walk by the spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. Now, there we see what the opposite of walking by the spirit is, namely giving in to the desires of the flesh.

Now, I'm just going to define flesh one time this morning. So I'm going to count on you to remember it. I'm going to use that word again and again and again.

And if you didn't remember the definition, you probably won't understand all those references. Here's what flesh means for Paul. I think it's the same as for Jesus in John three.

Flesh is that old, ordinary human nature that doesn't relish the things of God. It's not skin. Flesh is that old, ordinary human nature with which we were born that simply does not relish the things of God.

It prefers rather to get its satisfaction from independence, from God, power over men, prestige and praise from men, worldly pleasures. That's the flesh. We all have got remnants of it left, even if we're born again.

Now, when we walk by the spirit, Paul says we are not controlled by those desires that come from the flesh. This is what verse 17 is saying. I think I'll sum up verse 17 like this.

The flesh produces one kind of desires. One kind comes from our old nature. The spirit, the Holy Spirit, produces another kind of desires, and these are opposed to each other.

So that walking by the spirit is what you do when the desires produced by the spirit are stronger than the desires produced by the flesh. Now, I'll repeat that because I think that's a fundamental definition of what it means to walk by the spirit. Walking by the spirit is what you do when the desires produced by the Holy Spirit are stronger than the desires produced by the flesh.

This means that walking by the spirit is not something that we do in order to get the spirit's help. On the contrary, just as the phrase implies, it is something that we do by the enablement of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, all of our desires and preferences and longings for good, for right, are given to us by the Holy Spirit.

Apart from the spirit, we are mere flesh. And Paul said in Romans 7 14, I know that in me, that is, in my flesh dwells no good thing. Therefore, if we do any good thing, it is of the Holy Spirit, not the flesh.

Apart from the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit, none of our inclinations or desires is holy or good. For, as Paul said in Romans 8, the mind of the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to God.

Indeed, it cannot. Now, the new birth is the coming into our life of the Holy Spirit to create a whole new array of godly desires, longings, yearnings, and walking by the spirit is when those desires have the upper hand and are stronger than the desires of the flesh. Therefore, walking by the spirit is something that the Holy Spirit enables us to do by producing in us strong desires to do God's will.

This is what was prophesied for God's people in Ezekiel 36, 26 to 27. He said, a new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you. I will take out of you that heart of stone and I will give you a heart of flesh.

I will put my spirit in you and cause you to walk in my statutes. Thus, when we walk by the spirit, we experience the fulfillment of that prophecy. The Holy Spirit produces strong desires for God's way, stronger than those fleshly desires, and thus causes us to walk in his path because we always walk in accordance with our strongest desires.

This then explains the two parts of verse 18 of Galatians five. But if you are led by the spirit, you are not under the law. It's easy to understand, isn't it? In view of what we've seen so far, that Paul would shift from saying walk by the spirit over to saying be led by the spirit.

The phrase being led by the spirit simply makes more explicit the initiative of the Holy Spirit to draw us along by giving us those strong desires. We don't lead him. He leads us.

We are being led by him through the strong desires he creates within us. Walking by the spirit, being led by the spirit, therefore refer to the same thing. Only one, namely being led by the spirit, stresses the spirit's initiative and enablement to lead us.

And the other stresses our resulting behavior. We walk in accordance with these new desires that the spirit prompts. The spirit leads by creating strong desires.

We obey or fulfill these desires in action and thus walk according to the spirit. And that explains the second half of verse 18. We are not therefore under law.

If you are led by the spirit that is led by him to obey the law, then you are not under law in two senses. One, we are not under the condemnation of the law. Well, of course not, because we are now fulfilling the just requirement of the law.

That's what Paul said in Romans eight for what the law could not do because it was weak through the flesh. God did sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk by the spirit or according to the spirit. Therefore, when we are walking by the spirit, we are fulfilling the just requirement of the law.

And of course, then no condemnation from the law. We are not under it anymore. That's the first sense in which we're not under the law.

The second sense is we're not under the pinch or the burden of the law. It's a it's a pinch and a burden. When somebody tells you to do something you don't want to do.

It's not that way anymore. If we're walking by the spirit, the spirit produces desires that are contrary to the flesh, namely desires to obey God. Therefore, when the command comes, obey God.

It's no burden. It's no pinch. We're not under it anymore.

It's no burden to be told to do what you want to do. If you're walking by the spirit, you want to obey God. Therefore, we are not under the law in these two senses.

No condemnation, no burden where the spirit of the Lord is. There is freedom. Now, move a step further.

If we look at verses 19 to 24, which follow, we find one more expression involving the Holy Spirit, which I think confirms and expands what we've seen so far, namely the phrase. Fruit of the spirit. In these verses, 19 to 21, Paul contrasts two things is very familiar, the works of the flesh and the fruit of the spirit.

The first in verses 19 to 21, the second in verses 22 and 23. So the opposite of doing the works of the flesh is bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit. And that's exactly the same contrast we saw back in verse 16, walk by the spirit, do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

The works of the flesh are what you do when you give in to the desires of the flesh. And bearing the fruit of the spirit is what you do when you walk by the spirit. So what we have in these verses are three phrases that all mean basically the same thing.

Walk by the spirit, be led by the spirit, bear the fruits of the Holy Spirit in verses 16, 18 and 22. We should ask the question, though, why Paul uses the phrase fruit of the spirit instead of work of the spirit to match works of the flesh? In view of what we've seen so far, I think the reason is this. Paul wants to avoid like crazy saying anything that would cause us to think that the fruit of the spirit is simply something that we do by our own work or effort.

So he avoids that word work and says fruit of the spirit. It's not our work. It's his fruit.

What we do then when we walk by the spirit is simply fulfill the desires that the Holy Spirit is creating in us. And is there any better way to describe the ease with which we do what we want to do most than saying it's like fruit popping out in our attitudes and actions? When we walk by the Holy Spirit, we simply do what we want to do most, namely fulfill those desires that the Holy Spirit is creating. And it's just a beautiful picture of that, that our new attitudes, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness are just popping out like fruit on a tree.

No great effort. Therefore, just like the phrase led by the spirit, so also the phrase fruit of the spirit stresses the spirit's initiative, the spirit's enablement to fulfill the law. And now there's just one last thing that I want to notice from these verses about walking by the spirit, namely, when we walk by the spirit, we always do one thing.

There's only one kind of behavior that results from walking by the spirit, and that is loving behavior. You can see this in two places in verse twenty to the very first item in the list of the fruit of the spirit is love. The fruit of the spirit is basically love.

And many of those other things, goodness, kindness, meekness are subsumed under love. But this is even emphasized more back in verses 13 and 14. Look back there.

We haven't seen those verses yet. Verses 13 and 14. You are called to freedom, brethren.

Only do not use your freedom as an occasion for the flesh. But here's the contrary. Through love, be servants of one another, for the whole law is fulfilled in one word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, just as the works of the flesh and the fruit of the spirit are contrasted in verses 19 to 23.

You get a similar contrast here in verses 13 and 14, namely giving into the flesh is contrasted with serving one another through love. Which makes very clear that the fundamental, the essential thing about walking by the spirit is serving one another in love. That's the all encompassing way of stating what it means in real life to walk by the Holy Spirit.

It means to love one another. And I think this is confirmed by the reference to the law here. Verse 14 says, if you love your neighbor, you have fulfilled the whole law, which ties in with what I said earlier.

The reason you're not under the law when you are walking by the spirit is because the spirit moves you to love, which here it says is a fulfilling of the law. And therefore, of course, we are not under the law's condemnation if we're doing the basic thing the law required. So loving your neighbor and being led by the spirit are almost synonymous.

Almost, but there's a crucial distinction, and this distinction is very important to get a hold of. If all we were told in the New Testament was love your neighbor, you know what we do? We try because we'd be afraid not to. And it would become a work of the flesh.

We know that can happen. You can do what looks like love to the world and have it be worthless. First Corinthians 13, 3, Paul says, even though I give away all my goods to feed the poor.

And give my body to be burned. And have not love, I am nothing, it amounts to a moral zero before God. Now, that should shake us up.

That should cause our ears to perk up and say, wait a minute, wait a minute. You mean you can be a martyr and have it be worth nothing before God? This is utterly important for our lives. Listen very carefully, because this is not understood by many people.

And it, I think, is crucial to living the way God wants us to live. You can give away everything and lay down your life for a friend and have it be worth nothing before God. It is possible to be eulogized by the world as the greatest philanthropist and praised as the most devoted martyr and still not please God.

Why? How can that be? I think the answer is that what pleases God is walking by the spirit, being led by the spirit, bearing the fruit of the spirit, loving in the power of the spirit. The great problem in Christian living today is not trying to find out what the right things are to do, but how to do the right things. The problem is not discovering what love looks like, but how to love in the power of the spirit so that it's a supernatural event when we love and God is pleased.

For Paul, it's absolutely crucial to recognize the correlation between the way we're born again and the way we live. We were born again by the sovereign, prevenient, irresistible grace of God in our lives. And so we must always live or it's worth nothing before God.

Now, how can you go about living like that in view of the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit to lead us wherever he wills? Like the wind blows. By creating desires within us that are strongest, what practically can we do? To find ourselves walking by the spirit, and so I got five things to close with that I think come from the scriptures and I'll try to show our biblical five steps, which if we do them, we may be said to be walking by the spirit. Number one, we must first acknowledge from our hearts that we are helpless to do good apart from the Holy Spirit's enablement.

People who disagree with that can't even get started. Romans 7:18, I know that in me there is that is in my flesh is no good thing without the Holy Spirit, which is the opposite of the flesh. There's no good thing produced.

What did Jesus mean in John 15:5, when he said, without me, you can't do anything. Of course, we can do something. We can sin to beat the band, but that's all we can do without Jesus.

And so step number one in walking by the spirit is recognize that fact, all we can do is sin without Jesus, without him, you can't do anything good. And let it have its devastating effect on our pride and humble us before the cross. Second, since it's promised in Ezekiel 36:27, that God will put his spirit within us and cause us to walk in his statutes, we ought to pray that he do it by his almighty power.

So prayer is the second step. Many of you know the glorious, liberating experience of having what you felt to be an irresistible desire for sin overcome by the power of God, putting a new and stronger desire in your heart for righteousness. All Christians have experienced that at different levels.

When you look back on that, who gets the credit for that new desire? Who do you think it came from? The merciful Holy Spirit. And therefore, we ought to pray like Paul prayed going to give you two examples of the way to pray from Paul and from Hebrews. First Thessalonians 3:13.

Paul prays like this for somebody else, but we can pray it for ourselves. Now, may the Lord. Make you increase and abound in love.

That's the fruit of the spirit. So you could paraphrase it. Now, may the Lord cause the fruit of love to be born in your life.

He just calls it down on this church at Thessalonica and we ought to call it down on ourselves. Make me love. You know, we got a hymn that says that make me love thee as I ought to love.

You ever thought what you're singing when you say that? Make me love thee. Make me. I can't do it on my own.

And the other prayer is Hebrews 13:21. Here's what the writer prays, and now made the God of peace equip you with everything good that you may do his will working in you that which is pleasing in his sight. God works what is pleasing, and if we don't have God working it, we can't please him.

Because we're so ornery and dead in our trespasses and sins. If it is God alone who can work in us what is pleasing in his sight, then above all, we must pray, create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me so that I love to do what's right and walk by the spirit. Step number three, we must believe that since we have come under the sway of the Holy Spirit.

That sin will no longer have dominion over us, Romans 6, 14. Belief, faith is the next step. Now, I think this confidence that sin will no longer have dominion over us is what Paul meant when he said, reckon yourself dead to sin and alive to God, reckon it, reckon it.

So that means believe that God, the Holy Spirit, will produce desires that are stronger than the desires of the flesh. Trust him. You remember the sermon I preached on prayer way back January.

I said there are four things we could pray for with undoubting confidence, undoubting faith, and one of them was our sanctification. Now, sanctification is simply another way of saying being led by the Holy Spirit. If we are being led by the spirit, we are holy.

We are being sanctified. But we can be absolutely confident as believers that God will lead us by the Holy Spirit, will overcome our bent to sinning. And here's the way we can be absolutely sure we can have that confidence because God said he's going to do it the way we know he said it is by looking at Romans 8, 14, where he says only those who are led by the spirit are the sons of God.

If it is a qualification to be a son of God, that we are led by the spirit, then those who are the sons of God have absolute assurance that he will not let sin have dominion over them. As many as are led by the spirit of God, these are the sons of God. If you're a child of God, you have a solid, unshakable promise that God will give you victory.

Over those powerful desires of the flesh. Now, one word of caution here. Do not prejudge the timing of the Holy Spirit.

It is a mystery for which I have no answer, and I think since I see through a glass darkly, I can be content to wait for the answer. It is a mystery why God transforms one man overnight and the desires are gone. You've all heard the stories.

And with another. He brings them to victory through month after month of struggle up and down, up and down, do not prejudge the Holy Spirit saying since I have failed a few times, oh, there is no hope for me. If God is at work in you, you have hope.

Step number four. After you have acknowledged your helplessness to produce anything good on your own and after you have prayed for the enablement of God and after you have laid yourself confidently on the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit. To produce it within you by creating those strong desires.

Step number four is act. Do it, do what you know is right. Only after only after we have done these first three things, should we do that? Notice it's not step number one.

If it were step number one, that action would be a work of the flesh. In order for it to be a fruit of the spirit, we must have reckoned ourselves hopelessly helpless. We must have looked to God for enablement and trusted ourselves childlike into his care.

And then when we act, we know it's of God and not of ourselves. And Christians are trying to begin with step three all over the place. And legalism is rampant only when we act with the spiritual preparation of those first three steps.

Can we say with Paul, listen to this? This is beautiful. I hope every one of you are willing to say this in your mind and feel it in your heart. First Corinthians 15:10, by the grace of God, I am what I am and his grace towards me was not in vain.

On the contrary, listen, on the contrary, I worked harder than any of those other apostles. Nevertheless. It was not I. But the grace of God, which was with me.

Galatians 2:20, I've been crucified with Christ, I don't live anymore, but Christ lives in me. A person who has acknowledged his helplessness to do right, prayed for God's enablement to give him victory, yielded himself confidently to the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, has an astonishing incentive to do right in all circumstances. Namely, he has the confidence that whatever effort he makes to do right.

It is God who is working. That just thrills me to pieces. Any time I stand before a decision, sin or righteousness, it is a powerful incentive in me to say, if I go this way, it is not I, it is God who is at work and then act and believe.

I tell you, that'll get you off your pants in a hurry when you sit and wait for God. Well, someone might say now this is, I think, a very common and hasty prejudice. Well, if the spirit is sovereign and leads me wherever he wills, then I can't do any good without his enablement and I may as well just sit here and do nothing.

Now, there are two things wrong with that statement. Number one, it's a self-contradiction and number two, it's unbiblical. It is a contradiction to say, I'll just sit here and do nothing.

Sitting there is not doing nothing, it is doing something. If you choose to sit in your chair when the house burns down, you are choosing to do something just as much of the person who chooses to get up and save himself and help other people get out of the house, too. Why should you think that the choice to stay in the chair is any less inconsistent with the sovereignty of God than the choice to get out of the chair? It's a self-contradiction to say, I'll sit here and do nothing.

You are not doing nothing. You have made your choice what you will do. And I know that there are people in this church who are saying to themselves, well, if that's the way God is, I'll just do nothing.

And you are not doing nothing. You are doing something just as much as if you went to Jesus. But the second and more important reason is not the logical one, it's the biblical one.

All we want to be is biblical. Philippians 2, 12 and 13. Beloved, work, work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

Get out of the chair, get out of the house. It's on fire because listen to that connection. Because not in spite of because God is at work in you both to will and to do his good pleasure.

If you get out of that chair and get out of the house and take lots of people with you into heaven. It's because God was at work in you to will and to do his good pleasure, and that's an incentive for us to do it. If that doesn't make sense to you, you're not thinking biblically.

Paul says work because God's at work. He doesn't say stop working because God's going to do all the work. You work because he is at work.

But that won't be works in the fleshly sense if we are resting in him. It's a great incentive, not a discouragement that all our effort to do what's right. Is the work of almighty God within us, at least for me, I'm tremendously encouraged when the going gets tough.

To say, well, if I make the effort now, having prayed and relied on the Lord, it is not me. I can be confident it is God within me. Listen to this beautiful verse from First Peter 4:11.

Let him who serves serve in the power that God supplies in order that in everything God may get the glory to God, be the glory. Final step. When you have done these things.

Thank God for the virtue you have attained and the good deed you have performed, if without the spirit we can do no right, then we must not only ask for the enablement, but when we have done it, thank him that we have done it. Just one example from Scripture, Second Corinthians 8:16, Paul says, thanks be to God for what? Thanks be to God who puts the same earnest care for you, Corinthians, into the heart of Titus. Titus loved the Corinthians.

He would have died for the Corinthians. Where'd that come from? Where'd that love come from, Titus? Paul says, thank you, God, for putting that care for the Corinthians into the heart of Titus. Thanks be to God who puts love into our hearts and takes away every possible ground for boasting.

If we live by the spirit, let us also walk by the spirit. Let us acknowledge that we are helpless before him and can do no good apart from him. Let us pray that he will enable us to walk by the spirit.

Let us acknowledge that we are helpless before him and can do no good apart from him. Let us pray that he will enable us and give us all the strength we need to do right. Let us trust in the promise of the spirit to give us freedom from sin and let us act when we know the right and see it.

And when we have acted and done right, let us turn and give thanks. And then we can say we have walked by the spirit, having done all that we can do by the power of the spirit. We will turn and say, not I, but the grace of God, which is with me.

Thanks be to God. To him be the glory forever and ever.

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