

You Don't Have to Fight Your Flesh Alone

The Spirit of Christ

Think about the last time you made yourself a promise. Not a New Year's resolution, something smaller and more specific. You were going to stop losing your temper with your kids. You were going to stop gossiping about people the moment they left the room. You were going to stop going back to the thing you knew wasn't good for you. And for a day, maybe a week, it worked. And then it didn't. And you made the promise again. And it broke again.

If you've lived that cycle, you already know what Paul is talking about in Galatians 5. Most of us read this chapter as one more command to try harder. Walk by the Spirit. Don't gratify the flesh. It sounds like a new item on the list of things we're failing at. But that is not what Paul is doing here, and if we read it that way we miss the actual weight of what he is saying.

So let's slow down and look at this carefully.

Paul writes:

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

GALATIANS 5:16-18

Now here's the first thing worth catching. When Paul says flesh, he is not talking about your body. He's not saying your physical desires are the enemy and your soul is the good part. That's a very old idea, and it shows up in a lot of Christian thinking over the centuries, but it's not Paul's idea. For Paul, flesh means something bigger than skin and appetite. It means the whole way of living that belongs to the old order. It's humanity trying to run its own life apart from God, whether that shows up as obvious sin or as quiet, respectable self-reliance. Flesh is the operating system of a world that hasn't yet been made new. And Spirit, in this same sentence, is the power of the new world, the one that has already broken into the present through Christ.

So when Paul says walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh, notice the shape of that sentence. It's not only a command. It's a promise. Walk by the Spirit, and this will happen. Paul is telling you that the fight you've been fighting alone doesn't have to stay a solo fight. There's another power in the field now, and it's already yours if you belong to Christ.

That's not a new idea that showed up out of nowhere in Paul's letter to the Galatians. It's the fulfillment of something God had already promised centuries earlier. Listen to Ezekiel:

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”

EZEKIEL 36:26-27

Do you hear what God is promising there? He doesn't say, I will give you clearer rules so you can finally keep them on your own. He says, I will put my own Spirit inside you, and that Spirit will cause you to walk in obedience. The walking is the fruit of

something God does first. That's exactly the pattern Paul is drawing on in Galatians. This was always the plan. Not willpower religion. Not a better set of instructions. A new heart with God's own Spirit living inside it, causing the walk to actually happen.

So what does Paul mean by walking. In the ancient world, and in Paul's own thinking, walking wasn't a single dramatic decision. It was the ordinary, repeated motion of daily life. Step after step after step. Walking by the Spirit isn't a one-time altar moment you look back on. It's a thousand small yieldings, morning after morning, choice after choice. And that's actually good news, because it means the failure of yesterday doesn't disqualify you from walking today. You get to take the next step.

Paul goes on to describe what each way of living actually produces.

“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 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. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

GALATIANS 5:19-23

I want you to notice something about how these two lists are built. The first one is called works. Plural. A pile of separate actions, each one something you did or chose. The second one is called fruit. Singular. Not nine separate fruits you pick and choose from depending on your personality, but one fruit with many facets, growing from a single root. That difference matters. The flesh

produces a scattered mess of individual acts. The Spirit produces one coherent life, love expressing itself as joy and peace and patience and all the rest, because it's all coming from the same source.

And this is where the Kingdom comes into view, because Paul doesn't just say the works of the flesh are unfortunate. He says those who make a practice of them will not inherit the kingdom of God. That's a serious statement, and it only makes sense in light of everything we've already said in this series about Jesus as King. The kingdom isn't only a future reward you're waiting to inherit someday. It's the present reign of Christ, already active, already claiming territory in the ordinary decisions of your life. When you walk by the Spirit, you are not merely avoiding a list of sins. You are living now under the authority of the King whose kingdom is still on its way to being fully revealed. The fruit of the Spirit is what the King's reign looks like when it shows up in a human life, today, before everything is finished. Walking by the Spirit is Kingdom living ahead of schedule.

Paul makes the same case from a different angle in Romans.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

ROMANS 8:1-4

Notice what Paul says the law could never do. It could tell you what righteousness looks like, but it never had the power to produce it in you. That took God sending his own Son, and it takes God's own Spirit living in you now. The righteous requirement of the law gets fulfilled in us, Paul says, not by us gritting our teeth and trying harder, but by walking according to the Spirit who is already at work.

Now here's where I want to be clear about something, because it would be easy to walk away from this thinking that once you have the Spirit, the fight is basically over. Paul doesn't let anyone believe that, not even people he had personally led to Christ. Look at what he says to the Corinthians, in his first letter:

“But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?”

1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-3

These are believers. They have the Spirit. And Paul still tells them, plainly, that they are walking in a way that betrays the flesh, not the Spirit, because of the jealousy and strife running through their community. Having the Spirit doesn't erase the possibility of walking fleshly. It means you now have a real alternative available in every single moment, a Person to walk in step with instead of drifting back into the old pattern on autopilot.

So let's bring this all the way down to where you actually live.

You already know what your flesh reaches for when it wants comfort or control or relief. You don't need me to name it for you, because you know it better than anyone else does. Maybe it's the way you talk to yourself when you fail. Maybe it's the anger that flares up faster than you'd like to admit. Maybe it's the numbing thing you turn to when the day gets too heavy. Whatever it is, here's the actual, concrete move Paul is asking you to make. Not white-knuckling your way through willpower alone. Not waiting until you feel strong enough to resist on your own. Right now, today, name that thing honestly before God, and bring it to the Spirit who already lives in you. That's what walking by the Spirit looks like on an ordinary Tuesday. It's small. It's specific. And it's available to you the next time that pull shows up, not someday, but the next time.

This isn't a session about trying harder. It's about who is already at work in you. Paul closes out this same argument later in his letter to the Philippians with a line I want to leave you with. He's writing to people being pressured to prove their standing with God through an outward mark, physical circumcision, and he tells them that real belonging was never about that.

“For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”

PHILIPPIANS 3:3

Put no confidence in the flesh. Not because the flesh is uniquely wicked and you are uniquely weak, but because you have something better than confidence in yourself. You have the Spirit of the living God, already given, already present, already causing you to walk. The fruit will grow. Not from gritted teeth, but from walking in step with the One who is already walking with you.

Group Discussion Questions

- 1 When you hear the word “flesh,” what did you assume it meant before today, and how does Paul’s meaning (the old way of living apart from God) change how you read Galatians 5?
- 2 Why do you think Paul describes the works of the flesh as a pile of separate acts but the fruit of the Spirit as one life growing from a single source?
- 3 Paul told believers in Corinth they were still behaving in a fleshly way. What does that tell us about how to encourage one another without shaming each other?

Self-Reflection Questions

- 1 What is the one recurring pull of the flesh you already know by name, and what would it look like to bring that specific thing to the Spirit the next time it shows up?
- 2 Where have you been treating walking by the Spirit as a standard to meet by willpower rather than a promise God is already keeping in you?
- 3 Which part of the fruit of the Spirit do you most want to see grow, and what does yielding to the Spirit look like in your ordinary routine this season?

REFERENCES

Fee, G. D. (1994). *God’s empowering presence: The Holy Spirit in the letters of Paul*. Hendrickson Publishers.