

Galatians 5:1-26
Romans 7:1-6

WALK BY THE SPIRIT

There are a great many different opinions about what the Christian church is really supposed to be about. Without attempting to name all of them, let me name a few, just to remind you.

1.) Some say the major function and purpose of the Christian church is to help save souls – keep people out of Hell. It is assumed that this will get them into Heaven, but keeping people out of Hell seems to be the major focus. There may also be a benefit to earthly behavior, but that also is not the major focus. EVANGELISM – by which is meant getting people to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior (that is, make a decision for Christ) – is the reason for being ... because this keeps people out of Hell. Faithful church members train to become effective toward this end. Programs are designed with this in mind. Success or failure is measured in how many people come forward to make this decision. Most members know the date and time they themselves made this decision for Christ. It is the high moment of their lives, and this is what they want for others. It would be silly to pretend that no good comes from this approach and effort on the part of many Christian churches. There are endless stories to the contrary, and sincere people by the thousands can recount – bear witness – to the difference it has made in their lives.

It would be equally silly to imagine that no harm comes from this approach. But I will not get into that today.

2.) Some say the major function and purpose of the Christian church is to help others – by which they mean right here on earth – who have physical problems: feed the hungry; help the poor; heal the sick; visit the discouraged, the outsiders, the prisoners, whoever is weak, weary, or powerless. It is assumed that people who do this will please God and no doubt go to Heaven. But there is not much focus on Heaven, or on Hell either. LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR is the focus, and “neighbor” means anybody who is in more need than you are. The greater their need, the more they fit the category of “neighbor.” The rhetoric and the programs of many churches are all designed toward this end. Success or failure is measured by how many people are “helped” – that is, how many have received physical aid in some way. There is little or no interest in their relationship with God, or with Jesus. There is, strangely, little interest in whether their situation in this life is changed or improved. The focus is

on giving them the *things* they seem to need at this moment. *“Inasmuch as ye have done it to one of the least of these my brethren”*

It would be silly to pretend that no good comes from this approach and effort on the part of many Christian churches. It is impressive that so many people give time, energy, money, and caring toward this end. And there are many stories of gratitude from those who have been helped.

It would be equally silly to imagine that no harm comes from this approach. But I will not get into that today.

3.) There are significant variations on these major approaches. Sometimes a church or denomination that takes the first approach puts enormous emphasis on mutual support and building strong community bonds. They often help individuals in trouble, even as a way to help those individuals make “a decision for Christ.” They frequently send missionaries to carry the Message to all parts of the world, even to some very dangerous places.

Sometimes a church or denomination that takes the second approach will put greater emphasis on changing the structures of society that get people into trouble in the first place. They will lobby Washington, write letters, carry signs, even run for office themselves. And they hope to stop injustice, improve the ecology, change the laws, stop racial prejudice, defend gay rights, stop pornography, or take care of homeless children. If they could, some of them would even control your diet and pass a law against obesity. There is seldom anything wrong with their logic. On the other hand, they seldom have much understanding of human nature, and usually have no concept at all of “The Adversary.”

There are exceptions and endless variations, and all general statements are questionable. But in general: Conservative and evangelical churches take the first approach. Liberal and mainline churches take the second approach. I did not mention the churches that have lost all purpose except survival; there are always too many of those, in every camp. “We have no purpose except to pay our bills, so we will never spend money unless we absolutely have to, and our greatest joy is to find some place to cut the budget further.” Guess where that’s leading? A dangerous number of your leaders had that approach when I came here. It’s hard not to go there when things get difficult. Most of them have changed their minds, or are gone, or are pretty discouraged about what’s happening here.

4.) In any case, you are in a church that takes a third approach: Walk by the Spirit. Only, we don't think religion is just for other people. We want to Walk by the Spirit ourselves. Of course we are happy when others want to come do that with us. We think Jesus wants all people to Walk by His Spirit, and that He will send people to places where that is the focus. Nevertheless, we do not forget our own pilgrimage, our own Walk, our own relationship with the Spirit and the ways the Spirit is directing us. That annoys some people greatly because it sounds so self-centered. It is self-centered – and we have no need for apology. If we do not live the LIFE, how can we know anything about it or talk about it with others?

There are more of us than you might think. There have been since the dawn of the Christian church. Of course, all churches quote Scripture and claim connection to the early church and its Message. And most any church will claim, “We do it all.” But if you live in a church for a while, you find out where the real focus and emphasis is. And that is what guides the choices, shapes the budgets and programs, and defines the quality of LIFE within that congregation.

The emphasis in this church is on each and every individual's personal relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus. We believe that the Resurrected Lord has already returned and is with us, offering to guide and direct and design our lives – every one of them. We also know that we do not always allow that or cooperate with it, which is our major problem (sin = alienation or separation = unwillingness to let the Holy Spirit direct our lives). More and more of us have caught on and realized that this is the core and essence of our life together, indeed the core and essence of the Christian Life itself. Once seen, it is hard not to see this as the Message of Pentecost – and the culmination and purpose behind Jesus' coming, the reason Jesus was willing to go through all that He did, and indeed the common denominator of all He taught and proclaimed.

In short, we try to recapture the truth that Jesus is the HEAD (*kafale*) – the Leader and Guide – of His church, and that the church is *ecclesia*: the people, each one of us. Therefore, we do not follow any other leader. We cannot simply turn our efforts over to some ecclesiastical hierarchy or institutional program. We no longer see the “church” or the Christian Life as being particularly “religious.” That is, the Holy Spirit has at least as much interest in Monday as in Sunday; at least as much interest in recreation as in good deeds; and far more interest in

vocation than in groups or organizations that we belong to “on the side” or in our spare time.

So we cannot have “programs” in the same manner that other churches do. We can have them, but unless they come out of the Spirit’s inspiration and guidance for us as a faith family, we must sit very loose to them. It is very trying and takes great patience, but we have to trust the Spirit to organize and direct both our individual lives and our life together as a church. So we keep inviting the Spirit into our choices – at every level, every day. That means we have to say NO to more and more of the voices and interests that want to claim our time and life, in order to have a greater and greater YES to say when the Spirit calls us. More and more of you are realizing that the Spirit does not just “call” us to big, flashy, startling, earth-shaking affairs. The Spirit is constantly calling us in the common moments of our everyday, putting new meaning and purpose into the details of our normal lives. And in fact, this is really what it means to “Walk by the Spirit.”

Whatever people say, whatever the churches preach, most people do not *believe* that the Holy Spirit can direct their lives better than they can themselves. Most people sitting on church boards and committees across the land do not believe that the Holy Spirit can really “own and direct” the church, or that the Holy Spirit has greater wisdom and vision than they do and should therefore be allowed to outrank their own opinions and ideas. Christ is not allowed TO BE “the head of the church” – not very often, and not in very many places. This ends up giving Him a bad reputation, of course – one He does not deserve. As Paul complained: *“The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”* (Romans 2:24)

And the strangest thing of all is that most churches and many Christians don’t even realize that this is an issue. They think they are supposed to run the churches they belong to – and even their own lives – to the best of their own abilities and according to their own best opinions. They will even tell you so point-blank. Why did Jesus bother to come at all, if we’re just going to go on doing it our own way?! “Well, I’m doing the best I can.” Yes, well, lots of us have tried that; some of us didn’t like it very much.

Some very fine people take that approach. I know and admire some of them quite a lot. But the Christian Life begins way beyond that. And that’s what Paul is talking about in the passage we read today.

“For freedom Christ has set us free.” We have to get free from all the other structures and people that try to control our lives, or we cannot let the Holy Spirit of Jesus direct our course. After that, we have to *stay* free. I have been in trouble over and over again in this church for making this claim and insisting that we not allow other purposes or causes to overshadow our real purpose here. We belong to Christ, and Christ has a right to control and direct our lives. But He will not – unless we invite Him to do so. And more and more of us are inviting Him to do so.

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So Paul lines it out for us yet again. Circumcision cannot save us. Circumcision stands as the mark and sign that we will obey the Law – the precepts and teachings of Judaism or, in our case, of the culture around us. Over and over Paul reminds us that there is nothing wrong with the Law. It is good not to steal, lie, cheat, rape, pillage. But since there are so many possibilities, we have to keep making more and more rules to cover more and more situations. And besides, Paul insists, focusing on the Law only makes us realize more and more how much we still break its precepts. It leads to guilt and judgment and inevitable nit-picking. Instead of the peace and joy and delight in Christ’s presence, we end up thinking more and more about what we are still doing wrong, what we need to change about ourselves, and inevitably what we don’t like about how others are living, since concentrating on the faults of others is the only way to take some of the heat off ourselves.

Paul does not mince words. We all came here the same way – born of the flesh and into the flesh. And often he is misunderstood, which is, after all, another way to try and take some of the heat off. The way of “the flesh” does not mean flesh is bad. Paul is trying to compare and contrast our human nature to our spiritual selves. He thinks we are born with both, but that we do not start out obedient to our spiritual selves. The spiritual side of us operates, sometimes in surprising and beautiful ways, but it is not in charge of our lives. We obey our natural selves – we do, we decide, and we go after what our physical nature wants, or thinks it wants. Most of us spend a good many years defending and pretending that there is no harm in this.

“Let’s have another drink and we’ll talk about it.” “Hey, she wanted it – there was no harm in it.” “So I figure, what they don’t know can’t hurt ’em.” “Hey, a guy’s gotta have a little fun.” And on and on and on ...

The easiest way to understand what Paul means by “the way of the flesh” is to ponder the Seven Deadly Sins. It is not the physical side of us, *per se*, that is our problem. It is the physical side of us *controlled by the desires of nature*, rather than by the desires of the Spirit. *That* is our problem. And in Paul’s view, Satan is always at work to keep us enslaved to the passions and desires of our physical nature, knowing that they will betray us in the end. And in the end, they always do.

It’s hard for our culture to understand Paul at first. We think he doesn’t want us to have any fun. Except Paul doesn’t think that the sins which derive from our SIN (our alienation from God) will *ever* be any fun, at least not for very long. He thinks “*the wages of sin is death.*” He thinks that tracking our unenlightened physical nature, living to satisfy the desires of the flesh, and staying unawakened to the call of the Spirit will never be any real fun. It should be so obvious. Yet right around the time we truly figure it out, we die, and the next generation has to learn it all over again.

How many happy alcoholics do you know? Some of them pretend to be happy, but it is false advertising. They are not happy; they are in denial. Underneath, they are miserable, depressed, and estranged from themselves – and everyone else, and more and more. You cannot fool us once we have been there. How many smokers do you know who are proud of their smoking? How many happy gambling addicts have you known? The truth is that greed, lust, envy, anger, gluttony, and sloth do not bring happiness! I left out one of the seven. Do you want to rush out and try it? God help us, that one we are all still trying. Lord have mercy.

How are these foils – these destroyers of all joy and happiness on earth – able to stay in business, when they have no satisfied customers? They stay in business because they trap us. Humans do not know a way out. Paul knows a way out. *Paul* is not the WAY; he stumbled into it, by the sheer grace and mercy of Christ Jesus. But he does not mind telling others about it.

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“*So I say, walk by the Spirit.*” Please note that Paul commends being servants of one another. He quotes: “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*” – including the part about how this fulfills the whole Law (although in fact it fulfills only the last six of the Ten Commandments). It was a well-known teaching of the Pharisees, and Paul was a Pharisee.

Nevertheless, he is saying: “Dear friends, you were called to freedom far greater and more powerful than the Law.”

Therefore you are called to freedom far greater than the command to love your neighbor! This is not Paul’s meaning at the moment, though it still matches his larger message. The Way of the Cross does not trade pleasing yourself for pleasing your neighbor. That is the big lie in careless Christendom. Trading slavery to your natural self for slavery to your neighbor’s natural self is not freedom! Some of you think I have never tried it, but you are very much mistaken. There is a huge difference between loving your neighbor to please your neighbor and loving your neighbor to please God. We serve from gratitude to our Lord – never on demand from our neighbor, or even on demand from each other.

That is why I put no demands on you. You have never had a pastor who required so little of you. Some of you hear suggestions as commands, but it’s not true. I set it before you. I tell you about more disciplines than most of you have ever heard of before, and I try to persuade you to try them. That’s because I actually think you will like them – love them even – if you ever try them. But I require nothing of you except that you tell us if you want to be part of this faith family. We serve from gratitude to our Lord – never on demand from our neighbor, or even on demand from each other.

“So I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Not your own, not your neighbor’s, and not your culture’s. Do not gratify the desires of the flesh no matter where you find them, and no matter what organization or company or preacher or teacher or church tries to get you to serve them. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit – they do not want to listen, obey the Spirit, or turn will and life and choices over to the Spirit. Is it possible that anybody here has lived this long and not noticed this struggle? The desires of the Spirit are against the flesh. Your *prayers* will not lead you into greed, lust, envy, gluttony, or the rest. Why do you think so many people spend so little time in prayer? Most of the human race cannot be bothered with spending any quality time in dialogue with the Creator of the Universe, who longs for relationship with us, and invites us constantly into friendship. You think this is an accident?! You think there is no reason for our reticence? It is a dark and alienated planet, in rebellion against its God – and in bondage to The Adversary. The trouble with waking up spiritually is that we start to see this more and more clearly, in our own lives and all around us.

Every day, in every decision we make, in every task we take on, and in every relationship we are in, we try constantly to give the lead and control to the Holy Spirit. This is a full-time enterprise. This is not something we do and then, having done it, move on to more important things, like saving the world or pleasing others or pleasing ourselves. Walking by the Spirit is the core and center of everything – the context and new reality of everything – every day. And we know this because the “old life” is constantly trying to creep back in. Every time it does, we feel the quality and joy and peace of our lives going back to where they were before.

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Which brings me to a personal comment. It’s not very important; I hope it will not distract you from the scriptural message, which is huge and endlessly important. But I am in a position to hear a lot of your comments when you are not “on your guard,” so to speak. And I certainly don’t want you to have to be on your guard when you talk with me in more casual conversation. Nevertheless, a great many times I hear comments and remarks about surrendering our lives to Christ – praying, turning will and life over (whatever the phrases) – and the facial expressions, the tone of voice, and even the comments being made make this sound like the most grievous, difficult, unfair, punitive experience a poor human being could ever have to endure.

It is partly my fault, no doubt. I talk about how nobody comes to the Cross easily, and that is true. The “grace of point zero” is my phrase. We come broken, having given up on our own efforts to make our lives right. We do not give God a chance until we have pretty much used up all the chances we can think of. But dear friends, that is the doorway in – the so-called “narrow gate.” That is us coming up to the threshold, fighting the decision, and wondering if we are making a huge mistake because we don’t really trust God or his love yet – maybe in theory, but not for our own lives on a personal basis – not a bit of it.

But what about on the other side of the door? Is your life grievous after you have given it to Jesus – after you have broken the bonds to Satan (and to your natural passions and desires)? Are you sad and grieving once you choose the New Life and actually WALK BY THE SPIRIT? Is that what you say to your neighbors when you talk about this faith family? “Come and be miserable with me”?

I don't think Jesus has very many dissatisfied customers. Paul's life may look difficult from the outside looking in, but he himself is singing and rejoicing. This has been true down through the ages. The followers do not live for the purposes and goals of the life going on around them. But they are not complaining – they are rejoicing. And that does not cease even in those instances when they get caught in the maelstrom of this world's issues and evil. That is, even if they go to prison or to death, they wouldn't trade Walking by the Spirit for anything this world has to offer. There are occasional exceptions – for instance, individuals who claim to have died to the old and been born to the new, but a closer look reveals that they have confused theory with practice, and verbiage with faithfulness. That is, they have tried to “accept Christ” like they go at pretty much everything else – the “buy now, pay later” plan: Give me the joy now, and I will turn my will and my life over later. Solve my problems now, and I will Walk by the Spirit later. That means change my outer circumstances but do not change me. These people do frequently make bitter and caustic remarks about the Christian Faith. If they said good things about us, it would be an insult.

Walking by the Spirit is the greatest privilege and highest joy there is. Some of us feel like we were dragged kicking and screaming into the Christian Life. Actually, the spiritual side of us wanted it, or we would not have come. God never coerces. Nevertheless, once in, we may be concerned about our choices and responses – feeling so grateful and wanting so badly to be faithful – but we are no longer kicking and screaming. We are dumbfounded by the gifts, the guidance, the reassurance, the grace – the sheer array of opportunities and joys we would never have imagined were possible.

I never again want to get too attached to anything in this world. Whether *you* think so or not, I haven't been for quite some time now. Yet I am aware of enormous blessings surrounding my life, and they are not dependent on this world even though some of them are in this world. Like Mariana. Like so many of you. Like what we get to learn and strive for together. We try to be “in but not of this world.” A lot of our blessings are too.

In any case, Walking by the Spirit is the greatest joy and privilege there is. Everything I truly care about came from Him. All the rest is fickle, temporary – and when I stop to think about it, it doesn't much matter whether I have it or I don't. I am sometimes disappointed in this world, and often disappointed that I cannot achieve and accomplish

more for my Lord. But I am never disappointed in Jesus, and never sad about Walking by the Spirit. Only sad when I forget, or start to go back to my old ways.

I just thought I would ask if it is really so very different with you. Do you want to be a Christian? Does it surprise and delight you, or is it some kind of duty or obligation? Do you walk the Path, follow the guidance, cut things out to give more opportunities to the Spirit – in joy and delight? Or is it some kind of trial – some hard and harsh discipline you endure in the hope of staying out of some future Hell?

Paul sets before us what he thinks (and what I think, and hope you *know*) is the most incredible, blessed, delightful, amazing, satisfying life possible on this planet. If it challenges and leads us into new places that require thinking, choosing, risking, and working – that’s part of it. It’s part of the joy, unless we trade our faith back in for fear. Some people are afraid to be joyful or thankful, or at least to say so, for fear it might stop some of the goodies from coming. But not us. We know God loves us.

“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”