

GALATIANS

Lesson 18

Dependence Upon the Holy Spirit Galatians 5:16-18

INTRODUCTION

Often Christians come to me and say something like this, “I really feel awkward about telling you this, but I have certain evil desires that keep cropping up in my life. Why do I have these desires? Is there something wrong with me? When these evil desires raise their ugly heads, I remember God’s moral law and I vow not to think these thoughts again, but no matter how much I vow, they still keep coming back. Sometimes I give in to the desires and I later feel miserable. Sometimes I get so discouraged about the evil in me that I seriously think about giving up Christianity and living like the unsaved world where people give into their base desires whenever they can. Can you help me, Dr. Arnold?” I immediately take these people to Galatians 5 to explain to them about the sin nature and the Holy Spirit.

In Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul has made the bold statement that the Christian is not under the Mosaic Law for sanctification (Christian living). The Christian, however, is not free from all law because he is under the eternal moral law of God as it is reflected in the Law of Christ. The Law of Christ is a higher law than that of the Mosaic Law. A Christian is responsible to keep the Law of Christ, and he can only keep this law by the power of the Holy Spirit who permanently indwells every Christian.

The legalist who does not understand grace would say, “If the Christian is not under the Mosaic Law as a rule of life, then he can live as he pleases and go out and sin as much as he pleases and still be saved.” The legalist, however, does not understand about grace in Christian living, for he is so bound up in rules, regulations, traditions and taboos that he loses sight of real Christian liberty in Christ. Paul’s whole argument is that Christian liberty does not mean lawlessness and license to sin, but it does mean to be restrained and controlled by the Holy Spirit. The Christian who is free from the Mosaic Law has the Holy Spirit living in him and the Holy Spirit is carrying out a work of progressive sanctification. The Holy Spirit works internally in every Christian and this is a far greater deterrent to sin than obedience to an external law.

The Bible teaches that every Christian still has the flesh (sin principle, sin nature) residing in him. Before conversion to Christ, a person is a slave to sin and lives only for himself. The unsaved man is free to make choices but he always chooses for self and against God because he is in bondage to his own sinful nature. However, at conversion, the Holy Spirit regenerates the true believer in Christ, shooting spiritual life into him, so the believer can now, as a new creation in Christ, make choices for God. However, the Christian is still hampered by the sin nature even though he has a new spiritual capacity (new nature) and the Holy Spirit indwelling him. The sin nature can only be controlled by the Holy Spirit.

In Galatians 5:16-18, the Apostle Paul will show how the Christian can experience the work of the Holy Spirit in his life and have progressive victory over sin. He will also show what the believer will experience as he seeks to be controlled by the Spirit.

THE PROMISE 5:16

“So I say,”

This statement in Gal. 5:16 is given to counteract the false teaching held by the Judaizers or legalists in Galatia who said that without the restraining influence of the Mosaic Law the Christian will fall

into sin. This verse makes it very clear that the secret to restraining sin in the Christian life is found not in keeping the Mosaic Law but by being in subjection to a divine person, the Holy Spirit.

This verse is also connected with 5:15 where Paul points out how the Galatian Christians were biting and devouring each other. They had given in to the sin nature and were demonstrating bitter spirits and gossiping. They needed a work of the Holy Spirit.

“Live...”

This really says, “walk” not “live.” This is a command in the present tense in the Greek and means “keep on constantly walking.” The word “walk” means “to walk about” and refers to the whole pattern of one’s life or one’s entire behavior. The only way to control the sin nature is to be walking in the Spirit in every phase of life.

This is a command and a command is given to the human will to be obeyed. A choice has to be made by the Christian as to whether he will walk in the Spirit. Under the Mosaic Law, a person’s whole life was regulated by the Lord and there was not much room for freedom of choice. But under grace, the responsibility is placed squarely upon the believer to willingly and voluntarily place himself under the Spirit of God. The Christian does not have to serve the sin nature as he did in his unsaved state because the power of the sin nature has been broken in every Christian’s life. Every time a Christian sins, he does so because he deliberately chooses this course of action.

The command to walk in the Spirit is to be kept by the Christian and it is something in which he is actively involved. When we walk we are acting, moving, responding, so the Christian by faith is to actively and positively walk by the Spirit. It is not a life of passive dependence upon the Holy Spirit, resulting in activity and quietism. It is a life of action lived by positive faith and dependence on the Spirit.

When I was a very young Christian and had all this teaching on the Holy Spirit, I somehow got the idea that all I had to do in the Christian life was submit to the Holy Spirit and He would live the Christian life for me. I remember how I used to submit and submit and submit, and wait for the Spirit to move. What I didn’t understand was that when one submits to the Holy Spirit this is a positive act of faith, and faith always results in actions.

“By the Spirit.”

The Christian is commanded to be constantly walking by means of the Spirit. To walk by means of the Spirit is to be dependent upon the Holy Spirit by faith and this involves having one’s will in submission to the Spirit’s divine will. The Christian’s only source of power in the restraint of sin is the Holy Spirit and the Christian must be yielded to Him to experience progressive victory over the flesh. This same truth is taught in Ephesians 5:18: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled (controlled) with (by) the Spirit.” To be filled by the Spirit is to be controlled by the Spirit, and one can only be controlled by the Holy Spirit when he is in submission by faith to the person and will of the Spirit.

“And you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

The “sin nature” literally says “flesh,” which refers to the fallen nature in man and it is often called the sin principle, the sin nature or the Adamic nature. The sin nature is that sin capacity or principle inside of every person whether they are saved or unsaved. The sin nature gives off evil impulses or desires such as envy, strife, gossip, sexual lusts, pride, hatred, impatience, laziness, anger or whatever sinful desires men can have. The sin nature always wants what we should not have.

“The things most forbidden we always desire;
The things most denied we seek to acquire.”

Here is an absolute promise that the Christian who is walking by means of the Holy Spirit shall not (*ou mai*) gratify, fulfill, and perform the desires of the sin nature. Paul does not say the Christian will not have the desires (lusts) of the sin nature, but that he will not perform, execute or bring them to fulfillment when he is dependent upon the Holy Spirit. The sin nature is constantly enticing the Christian to do evil, but if he is walking in dependence upon the Spirit he will not yield to the temptations of the flesh when they raise their ugly heads.

It is very important you understand what this verse does not teach. It does not teach eradication of the sin nature or sinless perfection. It does not teach that the Christian will not have temptations, evil desires and conflicts with sin. It does not teach that a Christian can get above or out of conflict with sin. This verse does teach that the Christian can put down the desires of the sin nature (flesh) by means of the Holy Spirit. Progressive victory over the sin nature becomes possible as we are walking by the Spirit. When we stop walking by the Spirit, the flesh (sin nature) takes over.

THE CONFLICT WITH SIN 5:17

“For the sinful nature (flesh, sin principle) desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature.”

The “for” tells the reason the Christian needs to be walking by means of the Holy Spirit. The Christian is in the midst of a spiritual warfare. The flesh and the Holy Spirit are constantly warring, opposing and protesting against one another.

When the Christian walks by the Spirit, there will be conflict. It is inevitable. Conflict is normal Christian experience.

While there is continual conflict, the Christian often experiences this conflict in degrees. Sometimes it is very strong and sometimes it is minimal but it is always there.

“They are in conflict with each other.”

The sin nature and the Spirit are two mutually antagonistic forces. These two forces are continually battling one another and it is a ceaseless conflict as long as the sin nature is present in the Christian and it will be present as long as the Christian lives.

Yet, take heart, dear Christian. This conflict is an evidence of true salvation, for before conversion to Christ we knew nothing of this kind of conflict. This is a special Christian conflict. Non-Christians may experience some kind of moral conflict but they know nothing of this unique Christian conflict between the Holy Spirit and the sin nature. This is a fierce struggle between two irreconcilable antagonists, and this warfare will never stop as long as we are in this sinful body. This conflict should cause the Christian to rejoice for it is evidence of true salvation taking place within the believer. Therefore, we can conclude that for a person to profess Christ and not have this conflict would mean that no sanctification was taking place at all and the person would be unsaved.

We may take comfort about our souls if we know anything of an inward fight and conflict. It is the invariable companion of genuine holiness. . . Do we find in our heart of hearts a struggle? Do we feel anything of the flesh lusting against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh, so that we cannot do things that we would? Are we conscious of two principles within us contending for the master? Do we feel anything of war in our inward man? Well, let us thank God for it! It is a good sign. It is strongly probable evidence of the great work of sanctification . . . anything is better than apathy, stagnation, deadness and indifference.”
(J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*)

“So that you do not do what you want.”

This could be translated, “So that you may not do what you want.” In this conflict the aim of the sin nature is to prevent the Christian from doing what the Holy Spirit would have him to do. The sin nature opposes the Spirit that men may not do what they will in accordance with the mind of the Spirit, and the

Spirit opposes the flesh that men may not do what they will after the flesh. When a man chooses to sin, the Spirit opposes him. When he chooses to obey God, the flesh hinders him. A Christian can will a certain course of action, but when he begins to act he always finds a conflict in thoughts, works and deeds. This verse does not say, “You cannot do what you want,” but “you may not do what you want.” Either victory or defeat is possible. The difference is whether one is depending on the Holy Spirit. This verse does not say the Christian always suffers defeat, for many times he experiences real victory, but he is always in the battle of conflict.

Many sincere Christians have let their minds or made shipwreck of their lives because they failed to understand this mighty conflict that takes place in every child of God. Conflict is normal Christian experience, but abnormal, and it is the greatest evidence that one is a true child of God.

When I was a monk I thought I was lost forever whenever I felt an evil emotion, carnal lust, wrath, hatred, or envy. I tried to quiet my conscience in many ways, but it did not work, because lust would always come back and give me no rest. I told myself: “You have permitted this and that sin, envy, impatience, and the like. Your joining this holy order has been in vain, and all your good works are good for nothing!” If at that time I had understood this passage, “The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh,” I could have spared myself many a day of self-torment. I would have said to myself, “Martin, you will never be without sin, for you have flesh. Despair not, but resist the flesh.” (Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*)

THE NEW RESTRAINER 5:18

“But if (since) you are led by the Spirit.”

Every true Christian is being led by the Spirit (Rom. 8:14 “. . . **because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.**”). This verse is strictly looking at the Christian life from the divine side, not taking into consideration the human factors. The leading of the Spirit is an objective fact that characterizes every Christian, distinguishing him from the unsaved world.

The Spirit of God leads the Christian but the Christian is to submit to the Holy Spirit for divine leading. Both of these facts are true and a mystery to the human mind.

“You are not under law.”

Because the Christian is being led by the Spirit, he is free forever from the Mosaic Law as a way of life. In ignorance, a Christian can put himself back under the Mosaic Law, but this will result in frustration and defeat.

The Christian has been created by God to keep a new kind of law—the Law of Christ and the power for keeping that law has been provided in the Holy Spirit. Those who yield and submit themselves to the Holy Spirit in faith will fulfill the Law of Christ. The Christian has a new and better way of life in the gospel age.

The words, “If ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law,” are replete with comfort. It happens at times that anger, hatred, impatience, carnal desire, fear, sorrow, or some other lust of the flesh so overwhelms a man that he cannot shake them off, though he try ever so hard. What should he do? Should he despair? God forbid. Let him say to himself: “My flesh seems to be on a warpath against the Spirit again. Go to it, flesh, and rage all you want to. But you are not going to have your way. I follow the leading of the Spirit.” (Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*)

CONCLUSION

As I close this message I want to leave you with four thoughts that will help you with this spiritual conflict.

All Christians have a sin nature and within that sin nature are definite weaknesses toward specific sins. A person may have little problem with sexual lust but is overwhelmed with fear of the future. Another may not have many problems with worry but is constantly angry. Find the weak areas in your sin nature and ask the Holy Spirit to help you control them.

An evil impulse is not an act of sin. Evil impulses come to all Christians and we call these evil impulses temptations. It is only sin when we yield to the temptations and act out the sin. Evil desire is not a sin unless it is cherished. Nor is it true that desire is as evil as the act in which it results. It is one thing to sexually lust after a man or woman, it is quite another to bring that lust to fruition. If we are depending on the Spirit, we will not perform the lusts (desires) of the sin nature.

In the struggle with sinful desires, we best not fix our attention on the temptation or we will be saying, "Why do I have these desires and what is wrong with me?" Nor should we fix our attention on the moral law or we will be saying, "I'm so sinful; I can't live up to the standard for the Christian life; maybe I'm not even saved." To put our attention on the temptation or the law will invite defeat. In the conflict, we must focus our attention upon the Holy Spirit, yielding and submitting to Him who in turn takes us to Christ, who is full of grace and love for His people.

The closer we walk with God and the more mature we become in Christ, the greater will be this conflict with sin, because the flesh (sin nature) hates holiness.

No man is to despair of salvation just because he is aware of the lust of the flesh. Let him be aware of it so long as he does not yield to it. The passion of lust, wrath and other vices may shake him, but they are not to get him down. Sin may assail him, but he is not to welcome it. Yet, the better Christian a man is, the more he will experience the heart of the conflict. (Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*).

Take heart, dear Christian, this mighty conflict with sin going on inside of you is one of the great evidences that you are truly saved and a child of God!