

Note: The following is an excerpt written by J. Paul Tanner for the BEE World course on Galatians, 3rd edition.

EXCURSUS:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “WALK BY THE SPIRIT”?

INTRODUCTION

Paul began the chapter by reminding the Galatian believers that they were no longer under the Mosaic Law. By virtue of Christ’s death on the cross, the era of the Mosaic Law had ended and a new era had begun. In this new era, Christians are now under the new covenant. Christ’s death had paid the debt of their sins, and their faith in Christ resulted in their justification and forgiveness before God. The question now was one of how they were to live out the Christian life. Paul emphatically pointed out in Galatians 5:1 that the Christian life did not involve trying to live according to the rules and regulations of the Mosaic Law. That was a “yoke of slavery” and was ineffective for living a holy life. Instead of living by the Law, Christians of the new covenant were to rely on and be led by the Holy Spirit.

The battle in the Christian life lies primarily in the heart of each believer. Despite becoming a Christian, each believer still possesses a sinful nature (what Paul calls “the flesh”). This sinful nature that each Christian has does not want to obey God but rather to go its own independent way in rebellion against God. That is why Christians experience a propensity to sin. There is a battle that takes place within us between the Holy Spirit and our “flesh” (i.e., our sinful nature). The Holy Spirit within us desires to do that which is pleasing to God, but the flesh desires to act differently or act from a selfish motive.

When a person puts his faith in Christ and becomes a Christian, he receives the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:13-14). The Holy Spirit then becomes something of a pledge or down payment until the day we finally receive our resurrection body and God’s salvation work in us is completed. The Bible is also clear that every Christian has the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9). But though every Christian has the Holy Spirit, not every Christian is filled with the Spirit and is walking by the Spirit.

Note: Being “filled with the Spirit” is taught in Ephesians 5:18. To be filled with the Spirit is basically to be under the control or influence of the Spirit as a result of being *Spirit-minded* (having one’s mind set on the things of the Spirit). Notice how the passage in Ephesians 5:15--6:9 parallels Colossians 3:16--4:1, and how the admonition in Eph 5:18 is paralleled by the admonition in Col 3:16 to “let the word of Christ richly dwell within you.” A Christian may or may not be filled with the Spirit, but if he stops being filled with the Spirit, this does not mean that he loses the Holy Spirit or loses his salvation. He simply needs to be filled again.

“WALKING BY THE SPIRIT” – A DEFINITION

Although Paul tells us that the solution to this conflict with the flesh is to be found in “walking by the Spirit” (Gal 5:16), he does not give us specific instructions on how we are to do that. Yet we can pick up hints from Galatians 5 as well as other related passages as to what he means by this.

The following, then, is a definition based on this context and related passages:

To “walk by the Spirit” is to rely on the grace and enabling power of the Holy Spirit (rather than self-effort), in order to live the Christian life by faith and serve others in love.

PREPARATION FOR ‘WALKING BY THE SPIRIT’

Since the Holy Spirit dwells in the “inner person” of the believer--and it is there that God’s renewal work takes place of transforming us into a new image in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 4:16-18; Col 3:10)--it makes sense that “walking by the Spirit” must stem from what goes on at the level of our “inner person.” The following, then, are suggestions based on a broad study of Scripture that relate to our inner relationship with God, our sensitivity to Him, and our response of faith.

1. Confess and repent of any known sin in your life.

Since sin in a Christian’s life *blocks* our fellowship with God and the work of the Holy Spirit, the starting point must be in confession and repentance of all known sin (1 John 1:9).

2. Take time to *be in God’s presence*.

It is impossible to walk by the Spirit apart from time spent with God. Primarily, this means time in the Word of God and in prayer, so that we become *Spirit-minded*.

Romans 8:6 – “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace” (NASB).

Colossians 3:16 – “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (NASB).

3. Make a check-up of your heart by asking yourself these questions:

- a. Am I yielded to God’s will? Do I really want Him to be the Lord of my life? As Jesus said to the Father, “Yet not my will but Yours be done (Lk 22:42).”
- b. Is there any pride in my heart? [Ask for humility].
- c. Am I bitter or ungrateful? [Ask for a thankful spirit].
- d. Am I thinking only of myself? [Ask for a loving heart to serve others].
- e. Is there anyone I need to forgive or ask for their forgiveness? [Ask to be a person of grace].

4. Ask God to fill you and empower you with the Holy Spirit (and believe that He will).

5. As you go about throughout the day, ask yourself “What would Jesus do in this situation to speak and act in love?” Then do that as an act of faith.