

WALKING BY THE SPIRIT

Galatians 5v16-25

We are continuing our series 'One God: Father, Son and Spirit' with three studies looking at the Holy Spirit. Recently it was 'Receiving the Spirit'. Now we move on to 'Walking by the Spirit.' Our text is Galatians 5v16. **So I say live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.**

Although the NIV translates this verse as **live** by the Spirit it can be translated as **walk** by the Spirit. This is a word for the physical activity of walking.

Walking **by** the Spirit can mean either **walk in the sphere of the Spirit** i.e. keep close to the Spirit; walk in His Presence; or it can be **walk by means of the Spirit** i.e. live your life by the power of God's Spirit. The two are interwoven. Paul is saying walk by "God's empowering Presence".

There are two other references to walking by the Spirit in this section of Paul's letter. In v18 he speaks of being **led by the Spirit** and in v25, **keep in step with the Spirit.**

So what is this "Walking by the Spirit"?

1. Walking by the Spirit is about a relationship

I remember my first walk with Liz vividly. This year we are celebrating our 35th wedding anniversary but I still remember that first walk. We still enjoy walking, especially in Northumberland, and this past week we have walked many a mile in beautiful Venice. But you could say we have "walked" together for 35 years. "Walking" is another way of describing a very close relationship.

So too, "Walking by the Spirit" is about a relationship. You and I can *know* the Holy Spirit because the Spirit is a Person. He is God the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament we read that the Spirit hears, He speaks, witnesses, convinces, guides, teaches, commands, forbids, desires, helps and intercedes. The Spirit can be lied to and grieved. You can have a relationship with the Spirit. You can know Him as a Person. This is surely the greatest adventure imaginable, that we can walk with God by the Spirit!

Let me read one woman's account of how she embarked on this adventure. The early chapters of the classic 'I Dared to Call Him Father' (Kingsway Publications. 1978) tell of how Bilquis Sheikh, a Pakistani lady of noble birth and a Muslim, came to faith in Jesus Christ. She tells of her discovery of God as a Father, of opening the door of her life to Jesus, and of her baptism in the Holy Spirit. Next she found herself on a new adventure: the adventure of walking with the Spirit.

Chapter 6 in the book is called 'Learning to find His Presence', and in it she describes how she learned to be guided by the Holy Spirit. At that time she had begun to attend a regular weekly evening at the home of couple called

Ken & Mary Old. There would be about a dozen Christians there drawn from different nations. They would sing, read the Bible and pray for each other's needs. She says *"It quickly became the high point of my week. Then one Sunday I didn't particularly feel like going. So I rang up the Olds and gave some excuse. It seemed a little thing, but almost instantly I began to feel uneasy. What was it? I walked through the house restlessly checking on the servants' work. Everything was in order, yet everything seemed out of order.*

Then I went to my own room and knelt down to pray. After a while Mahmud (her grandson) crept in, so quietly that I didn't know he was there until I felt his little soft hand in mine. "Mum, are you all right?" he asked. "You look funny." I smiled and assured him that, yes, I was all right. "Well you keep walking around looking as if you'd lost something." Then he was gone, skipping out of the door and down the hall. I looked as if I had lost something? Mahmud was right. And I knew right then what I had lost. I had lost the sense of God's glory. It was gone! Why? Did it have something to do with my not going to that meeting at the Olds? With my not having fellowship when I needed it? With a sense of urgency I phoned Ken and said that I'd be there after all. What a difference. Immediately I felt, actually felt, the return of warmth to my soul. I did go to the meeting as I promised. Nothing unusual took place there, yet again I knew I was walking in His glory.

As I drew a little closer to God, here a step, there a step, I found myself hungering even more for His word through the Bible. Everyday, as soon as I awoke, I would begin reading it with a never-failing sense of oneness. The Bible became alive to me, illuminating my day, shedding its light on every step I would take. It was, in fact, my lovely perfume. But here too I found a strange thing. One day Mahmud and I were to go to see his mother for the day. I was late getting to bed the night before and I really didn't feel like getting up at dawn to have an hour with the Bible, so I told Raisham (a servant) to wake me with my tea just before we were supposed to set off. I didn't sleep at all well that night. I tossed and twisted and had bad dreams. When Raisham came in, I was exhausted. And I noticed that the entire day didn't go right. Strange! What was the Lord saying to me? That He expected me to read my Bible every day?

That was the second time when I seemed to be stepping out of the glory of the Lord's Presence. But the experience left me with a strange sense of excitement. For I had the feeling that I was sitting on an important truth without realizing it. There were times when I was in the Presence and experienced that deep sense of joy and peace of mind, and there were times when I lost the sense of His Presence. What was the key? What could I do to stay close to Him? I thought back over the times when He had seemed unusually close... and I thought about the opposite times too, moments when I had lost the sense of His nearness. How did the Bible put it? "And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God?" (Ephesians 4v30 KJV) Is that what happened when I scolded the servants? Or when I failed to nourish my spirit with regular Bible reading? Or when I just didn't go the Olds?"

An exciting journey had just started. This lady was beginning to get to know the Spirit as a Person. She had begun to walk by the Spirit. She was learning to be led by the Spirit; to keep in step with the Spirit.

This morning ask yourself: “*Do I know the Spirit as a Person?*” You may have put your faith in Christ and truly be born again. But are you, and am I, walking by the Spirit?

2. Walking by the Spirit is about the way you live.

Although the metaphor of “walking” speaks of relationship, here it also emphasises the way we are to live; our conduct, our behaviour.

So I say live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (v16) We are presented with two ways of living; two opposite and utterly contradictory ways. v17. “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want”. At one time we were dominated by the values and cravings of this sinful nature. The conduct listed in v19-21 is in total conflict with Christian conduct. The time for “walking” in these old ways is over.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”. (v22, 23) Living by the Spirit is a completely different way of living.

When Paul writes **so I say, live/walk by the Spirit** he is not offering casual advice. This is an imperative. This is something you *must do* if you want your character to be shaped more like Jesus. We can only live like this with God’s supernatural help. It is not as if we had a choice of living by the Spirit or some other way. No, it is imperative that we live by God’s empowering Presence – the Holy Spirit.

There is a glorious promise in our text. **Live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.** The RSV translates this is a command (“walk by the Spirit, and *do not* gratify the desires of the flesh”), but it is more likely to be a conditional clause. *If you follow in Jesus’ footsteps by the power of the Spirit then you will not* gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

This is not saying that you become perfect overnight; that you can never sin again! (See 6v1) It is saying that even though you and I are far from perfect we will not be dominated by sin and our lives will be increasingly characterised by the fruit of the Spirit. When we walk by the Spirit we can expect these qualities to grow in our lives. This is sanctification – the process of change that takes place in us as we walk by the Spirit.

But how does this work if there is no Holy Spirit button to bring us instant perfection? Again, our relationship with the Spirit is the key. As we walk by the

Spirit we learn to recognise His Presence and His Voice. This comes across in Bilquis Sheikh's story. Here is another example.

She writes, "I had never got used to those times when the Lord seemed to speak so directly to my mind. Who else but the Lord would have asked me to forgive my husband? Love your former husband, Bilquis. Forgive him. For a moment I sat in shock. Feeling His love for people in general was one thing, but to love this man who had hurt me so much?"

"Father, I just can't do it. I don't want to bless Khalid or forgive him." I recalled how once I had childishly even asked the Lord not ever to convert my husband because then he would have the same joy that I had. And now God was asking me to love this same man? I could feel anger rising within me as I thought of Khalid, and quickly put him out of my mind. "Maybe I could just forget him, Lord. Wouldn't that be enough?"

Was it my imagination or did the glow of the Lord's Presence seem to cool? "I can't forgive my husband, Lord. I have no capacity to do so." "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11v30) "Lord I can't forgive him!" I cried. Then I listed all the terrible things he had done to me. As I did, other wounds surfaced, hurts that I had pushed into the back of my mind as too humiliating to think about. Hate welled within me and now I felt totally separated from God. Frightened, I cried out like a little lost child.

And quickly, miraculously, He was there, with me in my room. Flinging myself at His feet, I confessed my hate and my inability to forgive. "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Slowly, deliberately, I swung my terrible burden over to Him. I let go of my resentment, my hurt, and the festering outrage, placing it all in his hands. Suddenly I sensed a light rising within me, like the glow of dawn. Breathing freely, I hurried to my dresser and took out the silver framed picture and looked down at Khalid's face. I prayed: "O Father, take away my resentment and fill me with Your love for Khalid in the name of my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ."

I stood there for a long time, looking at the picture. Slowly the negative feeling within me began to fade. In its place came an unexpected love, a sense of caring for the man in the photo. I couldn't believe it. I was actually wishing my former husband well. "Oh, bless him Lord, give him joy, let him be happy in his new life." As I willed this, a dark cloud lifted from me. A weight was removed from my soul. I felt peaceful, relaxed. Once again I found myself living in His glory. And once again I found myself never wanting to leave His company. It would take me a long time, I was sure, to learn the skill of living in the glow of His Presence, but it was a training time I welcomed with immense excitement."

Walking by the Spirit is a completely different way of life from one of obeying rules or living by sheer will power. In v18 we read: **If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.** The key to our new way of living is walking by the Holy Spirit. Rules result in bondage. We have been set free from bondage. *"It is for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not*

let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5v1) It is the truth that sets you free. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth.

Of course this has its dangers. Some have a marvellous capacity for getting carried away into silliness. They suffer from “felt-led poisoning”. Perhaps this is why so many settle for rules after all. It seems safer. But the answer is not to retreat back into rules and regulations.

Nor is it to throw our Bible away! Instead we need to get familiar with the Word of God as we learn to walk by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit has not made the Bible obsolete. The two go hand in hand: Word and Spirit. More often than not it will be by the Scriptures that the Spirit will speak to you and give you direction. This is why we all need to spend time with both our Bible *and* our hearts open. You can be certain the Spirit will not lead you to do something which contradicts what you find in your Bible.

Finally

This text of ours is in the present (continuous) tense; so literally, this can be **keep on walking by the Spirit**. Walking by the Spirit is not something we do from time to time; it is for the rest of your life.

In Genesis 5v22-24 Enoch is portrayed as the great example of walking with God like this. *“After he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived 365 years. Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.”* This was what defined him. *“Enoch walked with God.”*

The great nineteenth century pastor/theologian, evangelist, and church planter Charles Haddon Spurgeon preached about Enoch walking with God one day after burying the youngest of his fellow church elders. He pointed out that Enoch was so special that God “took him” at the early age of 365! This sounds ancient but it is the briefest lifespan recorded of the antediluvians. He was a relative youngster, in the prime of life, the equivalent of 33-35 today. Spurgeon said *“This man did his work so well and kept so close to God that his day’s work was done at noon, and the Lord said, “Come home Enoch, there is no need for you to be out of heaven any longer...” To walk with God for three centuries was so sweet that the Patriarch kept on with his walk until he walked beyond time and space, and walked into Paradise, where he is still marching on in the same divine society.”*

John Wilthew. May 2007.