

Galatians 3:1-3, 5:16-25; 6:7-8
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First Baptist Church, Vancouver
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**A New Life and a New Way to Live It [Part II]
(series: Making Maturing Disciples of Jesus)**

“Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.”

In his letter to the Galatians – one of the first letters he wrote – the apostle Paul wants us to realize that when Jesus Christ intersects our lives, says to us, “Come, follow Me,” He is calling us into a new life and a new way to live it. The Lord of life, the Bringer of the Kingdom of God calls us into a qualitatively different kind of life ... and into a qualitatively different way to live it.

We experience the newness of the new life as we learn to live the new way. We experience the vitality of the new life, the fruitfulness of the new life as we live the new way. Which is to say that the reason more of us who belong to Jesus Christ do not more regularly experience the vitality and fruitfulness of the new life is that we are trying to live the new life the way we lived before Jesus got a hold of us!

“You foolish Galatians,” says Paul, “who has bewitched you?” (Galatians 3:1). Who is messing with your minds? “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected [are you now going to become mature] by the flesh?” Foolishness! Entering into a new life ... and trying to live it the way we lived the old life. It will not work. It cannot work. New life ... and a whole new way to live it.

“Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). As I suggested last Sunday, this one line, this one sentence, is the apostle Paul’s fundamental discipleship text. For Paul – a maturing disciple of Jesus if there ever was one – it all comes down to: “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.”

One command. Only one! Not two commands, as some versions of the New Testament wrongly translate it. Paul does not say, “Walk by the Spirit and do not carry out the desire of the flesh.” Paul says, “Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.”

As we observed last Sunday, we can rearrange the key terms of Galatians 5:16 and come up with other equally true statements. So,

“Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.”

But also:

“Walk by the flesh and you will not carry out the desires of the Spirit.”

And:

“Walk by the flesh and you will carry out the desires of the flesh.”

And:

“Walk by the Spirit and you will carry out the desires of the Spirit.”

O foolish Vancouverites, who has bewitched you? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now going to grow into maturity in Jesus Christ by the flesh?

Review with me what the key terms “flesh” and “Spirit” mean.

“Flesh.” Not flesh as in the phrase “flesh and blood.” There is nothing wrong with “flesh” in the “flesh and blood” sense. Its only problem is that it decays! Paul is using “flesh” in a special, theological sense. Flesh is human nature as it is apart from God. Flesh is human nature as it became because of the sin of Adam and Eve. Flesh is the human condition shaped by the fall. Flesh is the human condition as it is because of sin.

“Spirit.” Not as in the phrase “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak,” not the human spirit. Galatians 5:16 is not about the so-called “higher” and “lower” aspects of our humanity. Paul is not referring to our spirit, but to God’s Spirit – to God the Spirit, to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit Who filled and animated the body of Jesus of Nazareth. That is, Paul is referring to a Person, to the third Person of the Holy Trinity, Who comes to live with and in the disciples of Jesus.

We can, therefore, paraphrase Galatians 5:16: “Walk in relationship with a powerful Divine Person and you will not carry out the desire of human nature under the reign of sin.”

“Walk by the Spirit.” We all know how to “walk by the flesh.” We have done it most of our lives! And nearly everything around us encourages us to keep doing it! “Walk by the Spirit” is the new way, the qualitatively different way to live the new life.

“Walk.” It is a command, not just friendly advice for people who want a better life. Not just an invitation – a command. Since it is a command, I wonder if Paul, or more to the point, if Jesus through Paul is saying that “walking by the flesh” is going to come more naturally to us than “walking by the Spirit.” I wonder if Paul is not saying that this side of the new heavens and the new earth, we will always be in a place where we have to be told again and again and again, “Walk by the Spirit.”

This suggests to me that helping one another obey the command, helping one another actually do it, is one of the most important roles we play in one another’s lives. We are in this “discipleship thing” together. And we are to do whatever we can for each other so we actually do it ... we actually “walk by the Spirit.”

Would it not also be right to say that helping our children do it is one of the major roles of being a father, of being a mother? Would it not be right to say that parenting means mentoring, coaching our children to actually do it – to “walk by the Spirit.” Children already know how to walk by the flesh, and nearly everything around them encourages them to do it! Our role as father and mother, as grandfather and grandmother, is to somehow, some way, help them live the new life in Jesus ... the new way.

“Walk by the Spirit.” What does this mean 24/7, 365? What does it mean at home, at the office, at school, on the soccer field or in the hockey rink?

I find it helpful to periodically compare and contrast “walking by the Spirit” and “walking by the flesh” as we did last Sunday. Each walk, each way of living, can be described by five propositions.

Number one. Walking by the flesh involves the human body, our material existence. So too, walking by the Spirit – it too takes place in the human body. It involves employing the capacities and skills of the human body. Body is not the problem – flesh is the problem. God loves the body. God made it ... with all its skills and capacities. In Jesus, God takes on a body! God finds great delight in what the human body can do. It is the flesh that is the problem. Which means that walking by the Spirit is not a call to transcend our bodies. It does not mean despising our creatureliness. It does not mean turning off our brains. It does not mean ignoring our emotions. Like walking in the flesh, walking in the Spirit involves the body, with all its capacities – especially the mind and the needs.

Number two. Walking by the flesh means living with the ego, the self, at the centre. Flesh is, as Martin Luther rendered it, the self turned in on itself. “I, Me, Mine, Myself are the dominant words that come from the mouth of the flesh. Walking by the Spirit means living with the Triune God at the centre. A radical shift takes place. The ego has moved out of the centre, where it never belonged, and the living God has moved in, to where He always belonged. This is why when we walk by the Spirit we see things differently: we are literally seeing things from a new position, a new location.

Number three. Walking by the flesh means living self-oriented, self-directed, self-governed, self-empowered. Walking by the Spirit means living God-oriented, God-directed, God-governed, God-empowered. Walk by the flesh, involves me facing life in my own power and wisdom. Walking by the Spirit involves me facing life in God’s power and wisdom.

Number four: Walking by the flesh means living for our own plans, our own reputations, our own kingdoms. The great desire of the flesh is to see my name in the lights. Walking by the Spirit means living for God’s plans, God’s reputation, God’s kingdom. The great desire of the Spirit is to see Jesus’ name in the lights.

Number five. Walking by the flesh is all about control. Because the flesh says “I am the centre,” and because the flesh says “it is all up to me,” the flesh has to try to control the world around it. Control the kids, control the spouse, control co-workers, control the church, control the political realm. Walking by the Spirit is all about letting go of control. Because I am no longer at the centre, because it is not all up to me, I can dare to rest in the sovereign, wise, gracious control of God. The God who regularly – daily – says to us, “Be still and know that I am God.” “Let go and know that I am God.” “Drop it and know that I am God.”

Now, as we would expect, these two very different ways of living issue in two very different qualities of life. Walking by the flesh, says Paul, produces what he calls “the deeds of the flesh.” Walking by the flesh issues in immorality, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, jealousy, fits of rage, drunkenness ... greed, violence, injustice, addiction, and all the consequent wreckage.

Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul’s list in painfully contemporary images:

repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. (Message)

All counter-human, counter-kingdom of God, counter-life.

Walking by the Spirit, says Paul, produces what he calls the “fruit of the Spirit.” Walking by the Spirit issues in the virtues that marked Jesus’ earthly life: love, joy, peace. Walking by the Spirit issues in the way Jesus treats people: patience, kindness, goodness (generosity). Walking by the Spirit issues in living Jesus’ own inner maturity: faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

“Fruit,” says Paul, “of the Spirit.” That is, we do not make it happen. Flesh cannot make it happen. “Having begun by the Spirit, are you going to be perfected by the flesh?” No. The best the flesh can produce is artificial fruit – plastic love, plastic joy, plastic peace – the kind that melts under the heat of real life circumstances. Oh, it can look like the real deal, but under stress or disappointment it withers and dies.

The Spirit of God produces “fruit that lasts,” as Jesus puts it (John 15:16). It lasts because it is the life of Jesus Himself ... Who lasts! From deep within the wellspring of our very being, the indwelling Spirit of Jesus overcomes our flesh and brings forth the life of Jesus in us.

So how? How do we “walk by the Spirit?” It involves intentionality, great intentionality. It involves adopting a proper posture. As the verb “walk” suggests, we walk well as we adopt a proper posture. We walk by the Spirit as we adopt a proper posture toward the flesh on the one hand, and as we adopt a proper posture toward the Spirit on the other.

Consider first the proper posture toward the flesh. One word: Crucifixion. “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24). Have crucified, active voice, past tense. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh.” We have? We did? How? When?

At the beginning of the journey with Jesus, when we said, “You, Jesus are Lord.” For when we said, “You Jesus are Lord,” we also said, “and I am not.” We may not have used those exact words, nor fully owned what we were saying, but it happened – the crucifixion of the flesh. “You Jesus are Lord, and You can only be Lord if I am no longer lord.”

As I see it, most of us did not really grasp the implications of saying “yes” to Jesus’ claim on our lives. We were invited to “receive Christ” and we did – and experienced new life! But few of us were told that in doing so, “Lord Darrell” died, “Lord Sharon” died, “Lord Steve” died, “Lord Anna” died. When we said “yes” to the crucified Jesus, our flesh, our ego-centric self, was nailed to a cross.

And we walk in the newness of the new life by leaving the flesh on the cross, by letting crucifixion have its full force. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passion and desires.” Remember Jesus’ words to the first band of disciples? Judy preached them two Sundays ago: “If any wish to follow Me ...” and given Who He is, who would not want to follow? “If any wish to follow Me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow” (Mark 8:34).

To deny oneself is to say “no” to the self as lord; what Peter said about Jesus, “I do not know the man.” “I do not know Lord Darrell.” To take up the cross is to accept the place of a condemned criminal and to have done to the flesh what was done to Jesus.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his *The Cost of Discipleship*, “When Jesus calls a man, He bids him come and die.” “When Jesus calls a woman, He bids her come and die.” As we sing with passion, “Oh the wonderful cross, oh the wonderful cross, bids me come and die, that I might truly live.” When I said “yes” to Jesus as Lord, I nailed the flesh to the cross. As David Wenham of England once said, to follow Jesus as a disciple is to join a funeral procession ... and discover it is your own!

Strong language, I know. Offensive, even repulsive language. Crucifixion in the first century was a horrible and horrifying way to die. As New Testament scholar James Dunn says, “to use crucifixion as a metaphor was unheard of” in Paul’s day (*Galatians*, 3:14). To use crucifixion as a metaphor for a new way of life was especially unheard of. It would have felt obscene. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh ...”

Then, why is the flesh still so alive? It is, is it not? Are you not appalled at how alive the flesh can be? Why? Why still alive?

Ah, here is the rub. Death by crucifixion is a slow death. Criminals nailed to a cross never survived. But many died slowly, some hanging there for two or three days. When we decided to follow Jesus, we decided the flesh must die. We nailed it to the cross. And now we must leave it there ... to die.

Which is why, I think, Jesus said to the first disciples, “you must take up your cross daily.” Daily. We need to daily say to self-oriented, self-governed, self-empowered living, “you are finished ... you have been crucified.” Daily accepting the Spirit’s attitude toward the flesh, all-out crucifixion.

But that is not what most of us do. Instead, in the words of John Stott, we “keep wistfully returning to the scene of the execution. We begin to fondle the flesh, to caress it, to long for its release, even to try to take it down again from the cross” (*Galatians*, 151-152). Ghastly! And just about everything around us encourages us to do it ... to let the flesh live again!

Walking by the Spirit in a way that results in the emergence of the delicious fruit of the Spirit involves adopting and maintaining a posture of ruthless renunciation, “mortification” as it used to be expressed. Leaving the flesh on the cross ... letting it die.

This is not masochism, taking pleasure in inflicting pain on oneself. This is not “worm theology,” saying we are no good. It is simply realizing that the flesh is getting us nowhere, that it is ruining life, and that it simply must die.

The good news is the Holy Spirit helps us; He helps the flesh die! Paul says in his letter to the Romans: “if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). We can count on the Spirit of life to help us die ... so we can live. The Spirit is eager for the flesh to die!

The Spirit invites us to cooperate with Him in His desire. He calls us to do the kinds of things that help the flesh die. He calls us to exercise spiritual disciplines that foster the dying. They are what Dallas Willard calls “Disciplines of Abstinence.” Abstinence? There’s a word we seldom hear in our day!

The Spirit calls us to rearrange our life style so that we can periodically give ourselves to disciplines like: solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, sacrifice (*The Spirit of Disciplines*, 158). Through these concrete, measurable bodily actions, involving the full use of our minds, the flesh is kept on the cross, moving closer to final death.

I experience the death-dealing power of such disciplines whenever I try to fast. I find the disciplines very hard! As Dallas Willard says, “this discipline teaches us a lot about ourselves very quickly” (166). The Holy Spirit shows me just how much my sense of well-being has become dependent on the pleasure of eating. There’s nothing wrong with eating! Nor with experiencing pleasure! What is wrong is allowing my sense of peace to be determined by the pleasures of eating. Through fasting the Spirit shows me that I have been feeding not my body but the flesh. Through fasting, by the power of the Spirit, another nail is driving into the flesh.

I commend Dallas Willard’s *The Spirit of the Disciplines* wherein he shows us how to exercise these redemptive “disciplines of abstinence.” And I suggest that we need to periodically fast from our cell phones, fast from the Internet, and fast from the news.

Walking by the Spirit involves intentionally adopting a proper posture toward the flesh. And it involves intentionally adopting a proper posture towards the Spirit. Four words: attentiveness, receptivity, yield, cooperation.

Attentiveness: Pay attention. The Holy Spirit is always present ... always. Always present with us, in us, for us. He is always at work ... always. One of C.S. Lewis’ poems says it well:

We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade the presence of God.
The world is crowded with Him.
He walks everywhere incognito.
And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate.
The real labour is to attend.
In fact, to come awake.
still more, to remain awake.

Receptivity. Paul says “If we live by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). The point being, it is the Spirit who gives us life. Always. “Having begun by the Spirit” (Galatians 3:3). It is the Spirit Who brought us out of death into life, and who keeps us in life.

It is the Holy Spirit who softens our hearts, who opens our eyes, who unstops our ears, who breathes life into us. In Romans 8, Paul calls Him “the Spirit of life” who gives life to our mortal bodies (Romans 8:2, 11). We walk by the Spirit by adopting a posture of receptivity, praying the way St. John of the Cross did:

Welcome, Holy Spirit.
Come and set us free!
Let each one catch the living flame,
and be ravished by Your love!
Let our souls glow with Your fire.

Yield. Paul says “If you are led by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:18). Literally it is, “if you allow yourselves to be led.” Are we willing to be led? The Spirit of God is the Wind of God and as Jesus told Nicodemus, we cannot control the wind (John 3:8). If we are going to experience the work of the Spirit we have to yield to His leading. Daily. Hourly. It is scary, humbling, and vulnerable, to be, as Jim Houston puts it, “abandoned to Divine Providence.” The fact is, we are going to yield to a spirit ... we do all the time. Which spirit will it be? “Only You give me life I yield myself to You.”

Cooperation, a word we have already used a lot. Paul says “if we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). He uses a different word here for “walk” than in 5:16. In 5:25 he uses a military term (*stoicheo*). It means to “draw up in a line,” to “agree,” to “get in step with.” The word suggests the picture of soldiers marching together in a line. It also suggests the picture of dancers moving in step with the music. I like that! Walking by the Spirit means saying “Yes” to the Spirit’s invitation to dance! It means getting up from my seat, stepping out on the dance floor, and moving in sync with the music of His Holiness.

We do this by exercising another set of spiritual disciplines, which Dallas Willard calls “Disciplines of Engagement” (ibid). We get in line with the Spirit, we dance with the Spirit, by rearranging our schedules so we can give ourselves to: study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, submission. Not that doing these exercises brings forth the fruit. It is simply that doing these puts us in a place where the Spirit can bring forth His fruit.

So, walking by the Spirit involves intentionally incorporating into our daily and weekly rhythm both kinds of disciplines. Abstinence to cooperate with the Spirit’s aim of crucifying the flesh. Engagement to cooperate with the Spirit’s desire to draw us more deeply into the inner life of the Trinity, where we are shaped into the image of Jesus Christ. As Dr. Willard put it, “Abstinence and engagement are the outbreathing and inbreathing of our spiritual lives” (175).

Outbreathing:

- Solitude – breathing out over-dependence on people.
- Silence – breathing out overload of noise.
- Fasting – breathing out hyper-dependence on food.
- Frugality – breathing out captivity to things.
- Chastity – breathing out the tendency to turn intimacy into lust.

... on it goes.

Inbreathing:

- Study – breathing in God’s living Word, the Bread of life.
- Worship – breathing in the glory of God.
- Celebration – breathing in the joy of the Lord.
- Service – breathing in the love of the Lord
- Prayer – breathing in the Face and grace of God.
- Fellowship – breathing in the embrace of the Trinity.
- Confession – breathing in the forgiveness and cleansing of God.

... on it goes.

Here is where it would be ideal to sit down, and work through all this one-on-one. Alas, not possible right now! So, in a moment I am going to invite you to simply be still before the Lord. Being still causes us to stop walking in the flesh, and prepares us to then walk in the Spirit. In a moment, I am going to invite you to be still ... pay attention ... always a good first step! What is the Spirit saying to you today? Where is He calling you to cooperate with Him? This afternoon? Before you go to bed tonight? When you wake up in the morning? That is the key – what is He calling you to do tomorrow morning at the first act of the day?

A new life and a new way to live it. New life – in the Spirit of God. New way – by the Spirit of God!
The Spirit of God who gladly overcomes in us the anti-human lusts of the flesh, and who gladly reproduces in us the life of the only truly mature human who ever lived, Immanuel, God with us.

“Be still ... and know that I am God.”