

When the Spirit makes us alive, we truly live! Galatians 5:16-6:10

I came Poland in the 1980's with Campus Crusade for Christ. In 1986, after 6 years in Krakow, I was asked to move to Warsaw to try and rescue the student ministry there, which had gone from 250 students to 70 in one year. The problem was the leaders, who were all gifted, experienced individuals. But instead of working together, each thought their gift and their vision for ministry was better than the gifts and vision of the others.

When we attended seminary, one of our professors was a well-known Christian counselor. He specialized in working with men caught in sexual addiction. Imagine our shock when we learned he had fallen into the same sin. How could this happen? Can we prevent sin from happening in our lives and the lives of others? How should we respond if it does? Paul speaks of this and much more in the passage we will read today. **READ 6:16-25**

5:16 The key verse of this passage is 5:16: *So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*

"But I say" ties this passage to 5:13-15, where Paul says we are to serve one another through love. To walk by the Spirit, two things must be present: love and community! We cannot walk by the Spirit without love! Neither can we walk by the Spirit alone! We must work together to fulfill this command.

"To walk" means "to live, to conduct one's self". In the Old Testament, *halak* (Hebrew = to walk) refers to one's ethical actions and lifestyle. Paul's emphasis here is on ethical conduct. But he does not give us rules to follow, nor urge us to deny our desires. Instead, he calls us to live according to the Spirit's desires.

Walking in the Spirit is an ongoing progress. The Galatians were to continue to experience the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, like they did

when they first came to know Christ. Some had fallen into legalism. Others became indulgent, living like they did prior to knowing Christ, when they fulfilled their own desires without seeking His will for their lives.

5:17 Paul describes the “Spirit” and the “flesh” as two forces that seek to control us: the personal Spirit of God, and the personalized desires of our fallen human nature. As Christians we desire to do God’s will. Yet we cannot accomplish this by our own moral strength and ethical compass.

The flesh “makes us” want to do things we would not do if we were led by the Spirit. And although the Spirit causes us to desire the things of the Spirit, we often carry out our fleshly desires. In Romans 5 Paul describes what happens when we try to live by our own resources; we are torn between the desire to do good and our inability to do it. What’s the solution?

5:18 In verse 18, “to be under the law” means to accept the legalistic lifestyle taught by the Judaizers. They believed our choice was between a life guided by the Law or a life subject to sinful desires. Paul says there is a third way, which brings freedom from both. “To be led by the Spirit” implies following the one who leads. This results in a new quality of life that draws its strength and direction from the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 5:19-25 Earlier in Galatians Paul argued that we cannot earn “credit” with God by observing the Law. Now he focuses on the “works of the flesh”. What these vices share in common is our human trait of self-centeredness. It is our desire to live life according to the rules we choose to follow which separates us from God.

Paul doesn’t counter these vices with a list of virtues. Instead he speaks of the fruit of the Spirit. That’s because the alternative to legalism is not

license but love. The Spirit's fruit describes the character of Christ. Love, the first virtue listed, is the most important. We recall Paul's command to serve one another through love. The remaining virtues describe what love looks like in practice. We are transformed into Christ's image by the Spirit's work in us. But we are not passive. The Spirit produces these qualities in us, we must practice them in our lives. `

In Christ we found a new direction for life that reflects God's self-giving love. Living by the Spirit frees us from egoism and self-centeredness. And the fruit of the Spirit will be expressed in our lives in ways that benefit others.

Paul stresses the positive and negative results of these opposing lifestyles. Paul warns us that who practice the works of the flesh will not inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. In contrast, living by the Spirit has positive results, both now and for eternity. As Paul says, "against such things there is no law". So Paul draws two conclusions:

(1) *"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires"* (v 24). Though is inconceivable for someone who belongs to Christ to live for themselves, we continue to struggle. But there is hope, because the Spirit does what the Law cannot do. The Law can limit the outward expressions of the flesh. The Spirit deals with the inward desires of the flesh, by progressively putting them to death.

(2) *"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit"* (v 25). As we read in Gal. 2:20, Christ now lives in us. When we died with Christ, the demands of the law and the desires of the flesh lost their power over us.

Galatians 5:26 - 6:10 Paul now declares, *"Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying one another"*. There were conceited, boastful people

in the Galatian church, whose actions provoked anger and envy among the believers there. Paul hints at this in 5:15: “But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.” And he tells the Galatians how to apply his teaching to their situation. By living in the Spirit they can overcome the pride and dissension threatening their community. Paul’s instructions here include both personal and corporate responsibility.

READ 6:1-10

6:1-2 The Galatians had sinned, they had seen others sin, and they had experienced the tragic effects of sin. Paul had good reason to believe sin would happen again. It is no different today. As the self-proclaimed “chief of sinners”, Paul knew that none of us is immune to temptation. He teaches us how to respond when members of our church community are caught in sin.

Paul says the goal is the full restoration of the sinner. This task is given to those who are “spiritual”. But who is a sinner and who is spiritual? How do we tell them apart? According to Paul, both the libertines and the legalists were guilty of pride, self-interest and envy. Even today, these remain three of humanity’s favorite sins. Among the Galatians, some were proud of their misused freedom. But the legalists sin was greater, for they were proud of their perceived moral superiority.

What is shocking is that Paul includes the members of both groups among those who are spiritual! “Those who are spiritual” refers to all who are in Christ. And like the believers in Galatia, we have died with Christ, we have crucified the flesh, we have received the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit works in our lives to produce Christ-like character. We are the spiritual ones, called to keep in step with the Spirit. As fellow sinners, we called to restore those who are caught in sin.

As we seek to restore others, Paul warns us to avoid temptation ourselves. But we cannot overcome sinful desires through legalism. Instead, the Holy spirit gives us new desires and produces godly character in us.

When someone confesses their sin to us, we hear their confession as fellow sinners. When we confront others with their sin, we do so as fellow sinners. The community of saints is a community of sinners. It is not our sin or the lack of it that makes us members of Christ's body. The Holy Spirit brought us to faith and gave us new life in Christ. The gentle way we restore each other to fellowship is an expression of the Spirit's fruit in our lives.

When Paul says we are to bear one another's burdens, the word he uses refers to a "oppressive weight". We could picture this as a burden so heavy it breaks the back of the one who carries it. There are many burdens we bear. The Galatians bore the burden of sin and its consequences. Nothing does more damage in our lives than sin. Yet Paul says that by restoring our fellow Christians to fellowship, we fulfill the law of Christ.

The law of Christ embodies the good news that Christ taught. When we are led by the Spirit, our actions become practical applications of the Gospel. When we fall into the pride of legalism, we set ourselves apart from others and above them. It is when we come alongside to bear one another's burdens that we are living as Christ's true disciples.

6:3-5 Paul now describes the attitudes we need to bear one other's burdens. Knowing that we are at once spiritual and sinful keeps us from both pride and despair. If we consider ourselves better than others, we become unwilling to share their burdens. By testing our own actions, we become free from the need to compare ourselves to others. Our fulfillment comes from pleasing God, not competing with each other.

When Paul declares that everyone must bear their own load, he means a normal load a person might carry. Carrying such loads does not break our back, it makes us stronger. In assuming responsibility for our actions, we become better able to share the heavy burdens others bear.

6:6-10 Verse 6 bears no obvious connection to Paul's flow of thought. But we can summarize his intent. He doesn't ask the Galatians to support his ministry, but to support their own teachers, the ones who taught the same Gospel as Paul. Such support had been lacking, so Paul speaks on behalf of those who are worthy of such support.

In verse 8 Paul explains his claim that God is not mocked, for we will reap what we sow. He describes again sin's destructive effects and the life-giving results of being led by the Spirit. He encourages us as well as the Galatians: Don't get tired! Don't give up! If we persevere we will experience God's blessing, in this life and in the life to come. The fruit of the Spirit is among the blessings we will reap.

Paul's summary command is, "do good to everyone". Doing good is what Christians are supposed to do, that is live by the Spirit and serve one another in love. Here it specifically means to restore those trapped in sin, to bear each other's burdens, to please Christ not others, to take responsibility for our own lives, and to share in the support of those who teach us the Gospel.

Doing good is more than avoiding sin; it is living to please Christ and to bless others. But who are we to bless? Or as others have asked, "who is my brother?" Paul gives the same answer as Jesus. We are to do good to all people, regardless of ethnic, national, cultural, or religious distinctions. Why then should we demonstrate special concern for fellow believers? Remember Jesus' words. Did he say, "Everyone will know you are my

followers by your pride, envy and self-centeredness. No! He said, “Everyone will know you are my followers by the way you love one another.”

Conclusion:

We are all responsible for our own actions. But there are those among us who are being crushed beneath heavy burdens. They have fallen into sin or been the victim of sin. They are sick or have lost loved ones to death. They have lost their jobs. Their family has been shattered by divorce. They feel abandoned and alone after months of isolation. We are all spiritual and we all sinners. Paul calls US to participate in the Holy Spirit’s work by restoring those who have fallen, and by bearing the burdens of those crushed by guilt, by sorrow, and loneliness.

Working with the leaders of the ministry in Warsaw was one of the most challenging and rewarding times in my ministry. I had no clue how to help them, but I felt led and empowered by the Holy Spirit to restore my brothers and sisters to fellowship with each other. We met individually and in groups. We read the Bible and prayed together. We served together in ministry. The breakthrough came 6 months later. I was about to give up on them, and follow my dream of attending seminary. At a staff retreat the Holy Spirit spoke to each of us. They came to me and asked if I would stay for two more years, to help them learn to serve one another in love. Within a year the ministry was back to 250 students. They were all using their gifts and the vision for ministry God had given them to work together instead of to compete with each other.

You remember that Christian counselor caught in sexual addiction? His wife was also a counselor, and she also taught at the seminary. If we were

shocked by his actions, you can imagine the pain of betrayal she felt. Despite the depth of his sin and the depth of her pain, their story has a happy ending.

When his sin became known, several close friends including colleagues at the seminary confronted him. After he confessed his sin, they asked if that was all. He said yes. But the next day he came back and said, no, there is more. Over the following months and years he worked with those who came alongside to bear his burden of sin and to restore him to fellowship.

Throughout this whole process, his wife made the difficult decision to stay with him. I was at a faculty meeting three years later when she shared with us how they were doing, and talked about a trip that had recently taken together. One of her friends said, “It sounds like you are falling in love with him again.” She smiled and said, “Yes, I am.”

We may never have seen sexual sin in our church. We may never have allowed pride, dissension or competition to divide us. But if such things were ever to take place, Paul told us what to do. Christ sent the Holy Spirit, to come alongside us, so that we in turn can come alongside each other.

When the Spirit makes us alive, we truly live! And the Spirit who gave us life enables us to follow Christ, to live to please God and to be a blessing to others. He gives us strength to bear one another’s burdens, the burdens of pain, of loss and of sin. So then, let us serve another through love. Let us walk by the Spirit. And as we have opportunity let us do good to everyone, especially to those who are of the household of faith.