

How to Walk in the Spirit

Rich Nathan

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Galatians: Free At Last Series

Galatians 5:16-26

You probably have heard about the news regarding Congressman Mark Souder from Indiana. Representative Souder was well-known in Congress and an evangelical Christian. He was an outspoken advocate of abstinence education, a foe of gay marriage, and extremely tough on college students who have used marijuana but who still wanted to apply for federal student aid.

After a number of confrontations by his staff, Representative Souder was forced to confess that he had been carrying on an affair with a female staffer for some time. As a result, he has resigned from Congress in disgrace. What made the whole affair even more shocking is that he and this staffer had filmed a video together on abstinence education aimed at teenagers.

Everyone in the media has jumped on Representative Souder as an outrageous hypocrite. Editorial writers, radio talk show hosts, and late night TV hosts have had a field day with the Mark Souder story. And it is only the latest of a string of stories concerning Governors, Senators, and Congressmen who claim to be evangelical, Bible-believing Christians and who are discovered to have been carrying on affairs.

When I prayed for Representative Souder the other day after reading his confession in the newspaper, I had a picture in my mind's eye of what 21st century America is like especially if you are a leader in government, or business, or you are a well-known entertainer or professional athlete. The picture I had was of people walking on a very narrow bridge across a canyon, a bridge that had no guardrail on either side and had powerful gusts of wind blowing as these people walked over the canyon.

See on the one side of the bridge the cultural guardrail that used to protecting people from illicit sexual relationships has been entirely removed. 50 years ago, 75 years ago, it was very difficult to get a hotel room or a motel room in most major cities with someone who wasn't your spouse. You had to show the concierge your marriage license. You simply couldn't bring a woman or a man who wasn't your spouse up to your apartment without having your neighbors inquire. Dormitories were strictly sex segregated and you could not bring the opposite sex up to your dorm room without sneaking them in. There was strong cultural pressure that kept people's sexual impulses in check.

But not only has the cultural guardrail pulled down, but on the other side of the thin bridge, the Christian guardrail has been pulled down. Christianity in much of the evangelical world has been reduced to a belief system. So long as a person states their adherence to a set of correct beliefs, so long as a person is able to say that they believe

in Jesus' sinless life, his atoning death, his physical resurrection, and they affirm their belief in an infallible Bible, you are declared in by the evangelical community.

But does being a Christian simply mean that you have adopted a set of beliefs about what God did, or is the Christian faith also designed to change us? In other words, is Christianity merely a set of beliefs, or is it also the practice of certain virtues – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness? And more than that, it is the practice of a certain way of life? Is it a way of life of sexual purity and worship and generosity to the poor and prayer for those who are struggling? Can a person be said to be a Christian in the full biblical sense merely by adhering to a set of beliefs, or should we also anticipate in a real Christian's life the growth of practice of a set of virtues and the practice of a certain way of life?

As a pastor I've had the unfortunate experience over the years of having many spouses with tears in their eyes approach me saying, "He promised that he would stop drinking," or "He promised me that he would stop using pornography," or "He promised that the affair was over, but now I see that I was just being deceived. He's been living a double life. I just checked his cell phone and saw texts that he exchanged with this other woman." "I just checked the computer's history and I found more pornography on our computer."

I've spoken with dozens of parents who have been very distraught and told me, "I thought my teenager, my son or daughter in their 20's, was telling me the truth. I thought that they were no longer using drugs. Or they were no longer being sexually active. But now I come to find out that I was just being lied to. My child looked me in the eye and lied to my face.

A few years ago a friend, who was attending another church, put it plainly when he asked me the question: "Rich, how come the people I know who go to our church never seem to change? They're Christians, but they seem to struggle year after year with the same patterns of bitterness, anger and anxiety. They seem to have all of the same problems year after year in their marriages. How come the Christians I know never seem to change?"

Many Christians who are in church for years look at their lives and the lives of those around them and conclude that change is not possible. Maybe addictive behaviors, or being a gossip, or constantly feeling anxious or hopeless is just the way life is. Hey, we're all sinners. Maybe this side of heaven, most Christians, including many pastors and elders in the church, will always be grouchy and irritable and petty – judgmental and unforgiving. We rationalize what we see in our lives and what we see around us in the church and we say, "Well, after all, we're just human. You can't expect perfection. Doesn't the Bible itself teach us that the heart of man is desperately wicked and that sin will continue in us until we die? Maybe there are a few extraordinary people who learn how to be loving and kind and free from major addictive behaviors. Maybe there are a few people, we'll call them saints, who aren't perpetually irritable and petty and self-

pitying and nasty and lustful like most Christians. But real change is for the special saints – for the Mother Teresas’ and not for folks like us.”

It is the expectation of every New Testament writer that if you are a Christian you are a person who is in the process of being changed, of being transformed. Our Christian life is not merely reduced to a set of beliefs or propositions that you can accurately state. But that more and more you are practicing a set of virtues – things like love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. And in addition you are increasingly practicing a certain way of life – a life in which you are learning to worship God, a life in which you are increasingly obedient to God’s Word, a life of increasing sexual purity, a life of generosity regarding your money.

And the New Testament writers agreed that over time you and I ought not to continue to live at low levels of pettiness and anger, gossip, lust and jealousy. It is the expectation of every New Testament writer that if you are a Christian the Spirit of God is at work in your life changing you, transforming you. I want to talk about how the Holy Spirit’s transforming work occurs in our life. I’ve called today’s message, “How to Walk In the Spirit.” Let’s pray.

Galatians 5:16-26

16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.17 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 are not to do whatever you want.18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. 19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.24Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

When we talk about the process of being transformed, being changed; when we talk about Christianity being more than just a set of correct beliefs, but also the practice of certain virtues, we are talking about what the writers of the Bible term the process of sanctification where your whole person is gradually transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit so that you more and more look like Jesus.

As I’ve gone through the letter to the Galatians, we have mainly been focused on the term justification. We came upon that term in Galatians 2:15-16:

Galatians 2:15-16

15 We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles 16 know that a person is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

For just a moment I want to distinguish between justification and sanctification because this is really something important in your understanding of what being a Christian is all about.

Distinguishing the work of justification versus sanctification

Justification	Sanctification
1. Freed from the penalty of sin	1. Freed from the power of sin

To be a Christian is not merely being freed from the penalty of condemnation on the Day of Judgment. Being a Christian is more than receiving the verdict of acquittal over your life when you stand before Jesus Christ on Judgment Day. Being a Christian also includes progressively being freed from the power and grip of sin over your life. You are progressively not dominated by greed or envy or pride or lust.

Justification	Sanctification
1. Freed from the penalty of sin	1. Freed from the power of sin
2. Christ for us	2. The Holy Spirit in us

Justification focuses on what Christ has done for us on the cross in dying as our substitute and bearing our sins. Justification happens outside of us. Sanctification happens inside of us as the Holy Spirit progressively changes your heart and your attitudes.

Justification	Sanctification
1. Freed from the penalty of sin	1. Freed from the power of sin
2. Christ for us	2. The Holy Spirit in us
3. God's declaration of righteous status	3. We actually become righteous

Justification is a judicial decree. It is a legal decree. Through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and our trust in him God decrees us to be in the right with himself. Sanctification

is God actually changing you so that you become more and more right. It is not a legal decree. Sanctification means you are actually becoming more like Jesus.

Justification	Sanctification
1. Freed from the penalty of sin	1. Freed from the power of sin
2. Christ for us	2. The Holy Spirit in us
3. God's declaration of righteous status	3. We actually become righteous
4. Finished work	4. Continuing work

Justification is a once-for-all event. God declares us to be in the right with him because of the once-for-all death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is instantaneous. The moment we trust in Christ we are justified, declared in the right forever. But sanctification is an ongoing process which lasts from the time of initial conversion, to the time of our ultimate glorification when we receive our resurrection bodies.

Here's the deal. Salvation cannot be reduced to justification alone. Salvation includes sanctification. Virtually every great Christian writer in history, as they have looked at scripture, has said, "You need to hold both together – both justification and sanctification, if you are a real Christian." These works cannot be separated. Anyone who comes to Christ for justification is signing up for the Spirit's work of sanctification. And the problem in contemporary evangelical churches is that justification has been so stressed to the neglect of sanctification that I believe the guardrail of our lives has been taken down. Christians no longer expect to change – change, real change, has become extraordinary, unusual, the stuff of testimonials and books rather than the basic experience of being a Christian. And many, many evangelicals are walking out over the canyon without any sense of what God really wants to do is not only save us on the Day of Judgment, but to transform our lives right now.

How does sanctification happen?

We read in verse 16 of Galatians 5:

Galatians 5:16

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

The New International Version has the must weaker translation, "Live by the Spirit." But the better translation is "Walk by the Spirit."

Walk by the Spirit

“Walking” is Paul’s literal term here. And “walking” is the Apostle Paul’s most common word for the change that takes place in a Christian’s life when they are sanctified. It is Paul’s most common word for the practice of Christian virtues – love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. “Walking” is Paul’s most common word for the practice of Christian ethics and the practice of the Christian life. The Apostle Paul actually uses “walking” to describe the Christian life 17 times in his letters. Christians are people who more and more “walk” in the way of God.

Now, the Bible regularly describes our life with God as a walk. We see that in Genesis 5:22:

Genesis 5:22

After he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked faithfully with God.

We see it in Genesis 6:9:

Genesis 6:9

This is the account of Noah and his family. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked faithfully with God.

We also see it in Genesis 48:15:

Genesis 48:15

Then he blessed Joseph and said, “May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked faithfully, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day,

And finally we see it in Psalms 23:4:

Psalms 23:4

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Now, it is very helpful, I believe, to think about your Christian life as a walk because walking speaks to us about a journey with a destination. Being a Christian is not just lying down or sitting in a certain place. Being a Christian is a journey; it’s a walk towards a certain destination – the destination is, of course, the kingdom of God. Paul tells us this in verse 21:

Galatians 5:21

I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

As Christians we are going somewhere. We are going to the new creation. We’re going to be with God. And we’re going to live together with him and each other on a renewed

earth with a totally renewed culture and society. Why is walking such a great way to talk about the Christian life?

Walking is unspectacular

Almost everyone who is not disabled and is over the age of one can walk.

You know, I love hearing stories and testimonies of people who are instantly and miraculously set free from alcohol or drugs or sexual addiction. I remember several years ago of hearing the story of a man, who was part of our church for many years. He had lived in one of the homeless camps here in town – mean, angry and alienated from his family. He was constantly getting into fights. In his own words he was a drunk for several decades, living on the streets. He couldn't hold a job.

One night one of our teams went down to visit our homeless friends at one of the camps. During a prayer time with some of the men there he was prayed for and instantly delivered from his alcoholism. He stopped drinking right at that moment and experienced radical change. He was blasted out of his old way of life into a radically new life with Jesus and life of sobriety.

I love hearing stories of instantaneous change. A person is suddenly and immediately set free from heroin addiction, or an addiction to pornography is broken and never returns.

But you know, for every one of these stories of instantaneous miraculous transformation, there are nine or ninety-nine others who have to go through the unspectacular process of going into recovery, joining a support group, receiving weekly prayer in a small group. And sometimes in our sharing of testimonies, we do a disservice to the 99 of the rest of us who have rather ordinary, unspectacular stories of battling through our habits, our addictions and our over-desires day by day and moment by moment. Most of us are not instantly delivered which leads to the next thought. I think that the Bible writers use the word “walk” to describe life with God because,

Walking is slow

And change in our lives is typically a slow process. We find ourselves taking three steps forward, but then falling back two steps; battling depression, battling gluttony, battling anxiety or jealousy. The change in our lives seems to happen so slowly that we sometimes wonder are we changing at all. Is God doing anything at all?

But you know, for the Christian spiritual growth is very much like the physical growth of a child. You don't see your child grow as you stare at them for 3 hours. And if you don't see a child for 6 months or a year, your first response is often going to be, “my gosh, you've really grown.” My grandchildren were away for a couple of years in Tanzania. We got to see them once a year. But it is remarkable when we saw them after 6 months or a year how much they had grown. Over time, especially people who haven't

been around you every day – old friends who encounter you after a year or two years or ten years of walking with Christ – if you are a Christian, their reaction is going to be “my goodness, how much you have changed! You are not the same person that you were!”

If you are a person who is regularly going to God about an issue in your life, asking God to change you, exerting yourself in putting that issue to death – never say nothing is happening because you are not changing at the rate you think you should. I mentioned this in a prior sermon, but it is so helpful that the Bible describes the Christian life as a walk. It is not a pole vault or a long jump. We don’t leap into radical life change. We become more and more like Jesus as we walk “step by step, right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot.”

Folks are always coming up to pastors saying, “Pastor, listen, I’m sinking in debt. I’m about to be thrown out of my home. Do you have an answer for me to pay off all of my bills? I want to pole vault into a solution for my debt problem.”

The Bible says that that is not the way life works. There are these unspectacular, slow, boring, mundane, repeated actions – “left foot, right foot,” little things you do every day to change your purchasing habits. Spend a little less; earn a little more; spend a little less; earn a little more; cut up your credit cards as you walk “left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot.”

Pastor, my marriage is falling apart. My wife says she wants to leave. Do you have a quick fix for my wife? Maybe you will meet with her in a counseling session. Can you preach a sermon on why wives should not leave their husbands.

The Bible says that is not the way it works. If you want to have a great marriage, Monday morning wake up and be kind to your wife or husband. Tuesday morning wake up and be kind to your wife or husband. Wednesday morning wake up and be kind to your spouse:” Left foot, right foot, left foot.” Date night, serve each other; dinner together – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. And over time you will have a great marriage! You will get to the Promised Land!

And the same thing is true about your relationship with God. You don’t simply jump into intimacy with God. Jumping is not the answer. You can’t keep it up. Walking one foot in front of another every day waking up and thinking this morning I’m going to spend time with God. Tuesday morning I’m going to spend time with God. Wednesday morning I’m going to spend time with God. Wednesday night I’m going to go to a small group even though I’m really tired. Sunday I’m going to go to church. I’m going to take communion. Left foot, right foot, left foot. That’s how people grow in their relationship with God. That’s how you lose weight. Today I’m going to pass on dessert. Tomorrow and Monday I’ll pass on dessert. Tuesday, I’ll pass on dessert.

Walking is unspectacular. Walking is slow.

Walking requires perseverance

The Apostle Paul literally says in verse Galatians 5:16:

Galatians 5:16

So I say keep walking by the Spirit

One step is not walking. Keep walking by the Spirit. I talk with so many folks who say, “I tried counseling, it didn’t work. My wife didn’t change.” How many times did you go? Once, but my marriage wasn’t changed. I went to a small group, but I just didn’t connect. The people seemed cliquish. I didn’t feel any better. I tried your support and recovery ministry, it didn’t help. Paul says keep walking by the Spirit.

Look back at the Book of Exodus. In the Book of Exodus Moses receives a command from God to go to Pharaoh and say to Pharaoh, “let my people go.” So Moses finally reluctantly goes to Pharaoh and he says, “The Lord God of Israel says to you, ‘Let my people go.’” Now, for those of you who know the Bible, what did Pharaoh do? Did he immediately let the people go? How many times did Moses have to go to Pharaoh before Pharaoh agreed to let the people go? How many times? 12 times.

And there is nothing in the Bible that says God let Moses in on the little secret – that you are going to have to go 12 times. Moses didn’t know that at the beginning. God just said, “go to Pharaoh.” And after the first time when it didn’t work, God said, “Go to Pharaoh.” And when that didn’t work, God said, “Now go back to Pharaoh.” And go back, go back, and go back...12 times. And the only thing that Moses knew along the way was that God kept telling him to go to Pharaoh one more time.

I’ve met so many folks who believe that if God is telling them to engage in a mission or ministry, its going to work on the first occasion. And if they experience failure it must not have been God. 12 times Moses went.

So how many different counselors have you sought out for your problem? Have you gone to 12? How many different groups have you checked out before you found one that’s comfortable for you? How many debt counselors have you gone to? How many days in a row have you shut your TV off so you could open your Bible? How many times in a row have you tithed?

Walking requires perseverance.

Walking requires exertion

Now when I’m talking about exertion, I’m not in any way suggesting that a person earns their salvation by working hard for it. Remember that distinction between justification and sanctification. We are justified through faith in Christ plus nothing. No human exertion – no promise to be better, no commitment to clean up our lives, nothing. We come to Christ carrying only one thing in our hands, our sin. And because of the grace of God, God forgives us for the sake of his Son Jesus Christ. And we are instantly justified; declared to be in the right with God.

But sanctification, the process of being changed into Christ's likeness, taking on Christian virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness – adopting the Christian way of life requires exertion. That doesn't eliminate the need for grace. But the way that God has set up your transformation and my transformation is that God requires our participation in the process of our own change. I join with God and you join with God in the process of your own change.

We see this everywhere in scripture.

Philippians 3:12-14

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 25 Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. 26 Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. 27 No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

1 Timothy 4:7 - 8

7 Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. 8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

2 Peter 1:5

5 For this very reason make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; some people believe that any time we start talking about exertion we are denying the need for the grace of God. I like Richard Foster's helpful distinction between effort and works. Foster said: "Effort is not the *opposite* of grace, *works* are."

Works deal with merit or earning. Our exertion is simply our personal choice to allow God to transform us by his Holy Spirit. We cooperate with God's Spirit in the remaking and reshaping of ourselves by saying "yes" to God's will in our lives rather than "no." "Yes, God, I will submit to your tug on me." "Yes, God, I will listen to you."

Walking is by the Spirit

Galatians 5:16

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

You cannot continue “right foot, left foot, right foot,” in terms of your own transformation, overcoming your anxiety, beating back your pride, taking on the virtue of kindness or humility or gentleness in your own strength. “Right foot, left foot, right foot.” You cannot change your own heart by yourself any more than you can lift yourself up by your own hair. And particularly, as you recognize what you are up against. We have habits in our lives that have been formed over years, sometimes over decades. It is not enough to know what’s right. I shouldn’t be anxious. I shouldn’t worry. I shouldn’t fret. I shouldn’t be so easily irritated. I shouldn’t curse. Knowing what is right, knowing God’s law is not enough to change us. Our own habits, our own over-desire of our flesh, the enemy’s discouragement as we keep hearing this voice inside saying, “You will never change. Nothing is happening in your life. You will never fix this problem.”

Scripture is clear and our own experience is clear that we cannot change and be transformed to look like Jesus by our own power. We need the Spirit. The Spirit is like the engine in a car. Can you imagine getting outside of your mini-van or your Hummer as you approach a huge hill; turning off the engine and saying, “OK, I’m going to get behind this van and push it up the hill.” You might make it 10 feet before you have a heart attack. No, you rely on the engine.

When you see in your life a need for change that is way beyond you, that’s when you know you need the Spirit’s power. When you say, “I’ve tried and tried to break the power of anxiety in my life”, or” my habits of over-spending or lust or pride, and I can’t do it. I need the Spirit’s power.” Whenever you face a need that’s too big for you, that’s the time that you cry out for the Spirit’s power. I can’t bring healing to this other person. Nothing that I say or do will ever fix their body or heal their marriage or free them from the emotional pain of being abused. I need the Spirit’s power.

And the closer we get to this needy world, the more you are going to realize your need for the power of the Spirit. You see, all of us are like the story that Jesus told about the person who is awakened at midnight by a neighbor in need of bread. The neighbor comes knocking. I’ve got a guest staying at my house and I need some food. We are all like the person awakened by the neighbor. We look in our cupboards and we discover that we don’t have anything in our cupboards and so we go to someone who does – namely, God. And we knock and we knock and we knock until the door is opened. And we receive what we need.

And what you need, friend, to see change in your life is the power of the Spirit. I talk with people who say to me, “I’ve been trying to walk; I’ve asked God for the power of the Spirit, but you know the moment I really made a commitment to change in this area, everything got so much worse. I was immediately smacked in the face with temptation. I must be doing something wrong. The moment I said, ‘Let’s go to counseling,’ I insisted on it. It’s like my life has been a living hell.” It was easier before I confronted the

alcoholism, or before I challenged the verbal abuse, or before I made a commitment to stop having sex with my boyfriend or girlfriend. It was easier.

Friends, listen to me. The fact that the battle has heated up for you following your commitment to submit to God in some area of your life is a wonderful sign. Don't get discouraged when you have drawn the line and submitted yourself to an area in Christ that the battle has heated up. That's a sign that you are spiritually alive; that's the sign that you are doing what God wants. The reason the enemy is getting in your face is because you are finally waking up to your desperate condition and he wants to lull you back to sleep – make you apathetic again regarding where you are at with God.

Keep walking. We not only walk by the Spirit, that is being empowered by the Spirit, but we walk in the Spirit.

Walking is in the Spirit

The Greek in verse 16 can be translated either “walk by the Spirit” or “walk in the Spirit”.

Galatians 5:16

So I say, walk [in] the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

The Spirit is the sphere in which you and I are to walk out our Christian life. The Spirit is the atmosphere, the environment in which we walk out our Christian lives.

What does it mean to walk in the Spirit? The idea is that if you want to change you need to progressively learn to relate all of your life to God. Psalm 10:4 says about the wicked person:

Psalms 10:4

In their pride the wicked do not seek him; in all their thoughts there is no room for God.

What it is saying is for the person who is unconcerned about life transformation, the person who doesn't care about changing and becoming more like Jesus, the person who doesn't care about practicing Christian virtues – becoming more loving, becoming more joyful, becoming more patient, becoming more kind, gentle or generous – a person for whom those things are not even considerations, for that person there is no room for God in their thoughts. They never relate what is going on in their life to God. So when they make purchases they never ask God the question: Have I accumulated enough? What should I do with my money, God? How much should I give away? God is not even on this person's radar screen regarding their money, or their racial attitudes, or their attitudes towards immigrants. They never invite God into their thoughts about their schooling or their retirement plans or their home purchases or TV watching or politics.

The approach of the Christian who wants to walk in the Spirit is: God, I want to more and more have you on my radar screen in everything. When I am worried about my child, I want to more and more ask the question: where is God regarding my child? Do I believe that God is really in control? Does God answer prayer? Is God at work in my child's life just as he is in my life? Is God still good even though I've experienced this great disappointment? Can I learn to look at life through the lenses of God's activity and God's reality? Is there room in all of my thoughts for God?

God wants to change you. God wants to change me. Let's make a huge amount of room in your life for His Spirit and practice walking after him.

Walking in the Spirit is that I've learned to connect up life with God. Change happens as we walk by the Spirit. Change happens as we walk in the Spirit. Change happens by...

Being led by the Spirit

Galatians 5:18

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

You know in the gospels we see Jesus continually saying to the disciples, "Follow me." In fact, if you want just the simplest definition of what it means to be a Christian disciple, it would be "following after Jesus." Walking in his steps. Well, 2000 years ago the disciples had Jesus in front of them. They watched what he was doing and they imitated that. They saw where he was going and they went there. They heard his commands and they obeyed them. 2000 years later, what Jesus gives us is his Spirit. But we have the same instruction. If we want to be changed, if we want to be transformed, we have the same instructions – Follow me. Allow yourself to be led by the Holy Spirit.

Be led by the Holy Spirit

How do we do that? The Christian life is all about allowing yourself to be led by the Spirit. The Christian life begins by us responding to the tug of the Holy Spirit on our lives. If you have accepted Jesus as your Savior and Lord, what you really have done is you have yielded your will to his will. You responded to the Spirit's tug, the Spirit's initiative and you said yes to what the Holy Spirit wanted to do which was to regenerate you – make you born again.

Here is what Jesus said in John 3:5-8:

John 3:5-8

5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you

cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

The Apostle Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 12:3:

1 Corinthians 12:3

Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

And we discovered in the Book of Galatians that the Christian life is keeping on doing what got you started in the first place. You got started in the Christian life by responding to the tug of the Spirit. Being transformed into the likeness of Christ is continuing to respond to the tug of the Spirit.

What I mean is that in the morning you ask God to make you sensitive, to make you responsive to those little inklings where you feel that God’s Spirit is tugging you, putting his finger on a little matter in your life, or a big matter. You say, “Lord, make me sensitive to little departures from your will so that I don’t find myself making huge departures from your will.”

So, let’s say you have a problem with lying and you really want to be transformed so that you more and more are a truth teller. There is just complete integrity in your communication. You say, “Lord, make me sensitive to little inflations or exaggerations of the truth, or little deceptions.” And then you will experience, as I have, God’s tugging on your spirit. He will put his finger on your words and you can then immediately correct those exaggerations, those deceptions. No, that’s not quite right what I said. It really is more like this. I didn’t get in at 11:00 last night, I got in at midnight. No, I didn’t actually complete that report for work yet. I intended to complete it, but it is not completed. I will have it on your desk by noon tomorrow. No, I didn’t do the essay for school yet. Can I hand it in tomorrow?

Lord, make me sensitive to your tugs. I want to grow in my generosity. Make me sensitive to your press that I should give to this or that need. Lead me in being more generous in my giving to the church, my overall giving to the Kingdom.

I want to be more forgiving towards my spouse. Make me aware of times when I’m holding a grudge, or I’m allowing myself to become bitter.

Change happens by walking by the Spirit. Change happens by being led by the Spirit. And finally, change happens when you,

Live in the Spirit

Galatians 5:25

Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

You know, when I think about living in the Spirit, I think about having your whole life dominated by the Holy Spirit. We often find ourselves running on empty. You know, the moment you pull away from the filling station, you are already burning gasoline. And over time you burn more and more gas; the length of time from full to empty depends on how far you drive and how fast you drive, how much air conditioning or heat you use. But gradually your full indicator will go down, down, down to empty. And you know that you can't drive on empty. So there is an ongoing responsibility that you have, if you drive, to fill the tank up again.

And in the same way, as we do life in this world we get drained spiritually. And you cannot be transformed while you are running on empty. We can't change, we can't look more like Jesus, we can't become more loving, more joyful, more peaceful, more kind, and more generous in our own strength.

So, how do we live in the Holy Spirit? How do we fill ourselves up again?

Well, two things in closing:

Negatively: Do not grieve the Holy Spirit

Here is what it says in Ephesians 4.30,

Ephesians 4:30

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

What makes Christianity different than every other ethical system, every other philosophical system, every other system of virtues, every other system of change is the Holy Spirit. Many other ethical systems talk about being patient and kind. Many other ethical systems talk about truth-telling, though not so many systems talk about self-sacrifice, self-denial, or meekness or humility as much as Christianity does. But we find general agreement in many ethical systems about virtues. What is different about Christianity is that when we talk about virtues, we talk about the Holy Spirit. You are not a Christian unless the Holy Spirit lives in you.

So when a Christian sins we are not just sinning against an ethical system, a system of rules or laws or abstract philosophies. We have a relationship of love with God and so when we sin we are offending against love and we are causing hurt to the Holy Spirit. Now, grieving the Spirit is not just a matter of sinning. Grieving the Spirit, I think, is largely a matter of ignoring the tugs of the Spirit in your life – going about life as if the Holy Spirit is not there.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, a great preacher, talked about having the Holy Spirit in your life as having the most important guest in your home. You are entertaining the Pope, or the President, or a war hero, or your mother, father, or child who has been out of the country and who you haven't seen for several years. What would it mean to grieve this

important guest? It would mean that you ignored them. You just go about your business as if they weren't there instead of engaging your guest, talking with them, responding to their requests. You go about your life as if you don't have a house guest.

And I think so many times I just run through the day without paying attention to the Divine Guest who lives within me, the Holy Spirit. I'm dull to his promptings and insensitive to his tugs. That grieves the Spirit. That's the negative side of failing to live in the Spirit.

Positively: Practice spiritual disciplines

Now, I will talk more about this in the next few weeks. But if you want more of the Holy Spirit, God has designed ways for you to get more of the Spirit. One of the primary ways that God has for you to get more of the Spirit, to be more sensitive to the Spirit, is by taking in and responding to God's Word in the Bible. There is a close connection in the scripture between having God's Word in you and living in God's Spirit.

For example, Jesus says in John 14:15-17:

John 14:15-17

15 If you love me, keep my commands.

16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—

17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

And in...

John 14:23, 26

23 Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

Getting the scripture in your life. Opening the Bible on a daily basis, reading it and thinking about what you are reading; choosing to submit yourself to scripture – that's a vehicle for getting more of the Spirit in your life.

Worshipping God and opening your heart to God on a regular basis is a vehicle for getting more of the Spirit in your life.

Taking communion every week is a means by which the Holy Spirit will refill your tank and is a way to live in the Spirit.

Connecting with other Christians in a small group, a women's group, a coed group, a men's group; connecting with other Christians who can encourage you, pray for you,

challenge you, teach you, and mentor you is a way for you to get more of the Spirit in your life.

And serving, especially in areas of great need – volunteering at our food pantry, ministering in our homeless community, volunteering at our community center with immigrants – going where Jesus is – Jesus is with the poor; Jesus is with those in need; Jesus is with the stranger and the immigrant – going where Jesus is is a way, it's an open door for you to get your gas tank filled with the Holy Spirit.

Being a Christian is more than adhering to a set of beliefs. It is practicing a set of virtues and it is following a way of life. Let's pray.

How to Walk in the Spirit

Rich Nathan

May 23, 2010

Galatians: Free At Last Series

Galatians 5.16-26

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