

The Way of the Spirit

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[0:00] As we turn to God's Word this morning, will you pray with me?! Oh, Lord, we pray that You would be our help as we listen to Your Word, as we sit under it, receive it from You.

Lord, will You make our hearts soft and our minds alert and our hands willing to hear and obey Your Word.

Lord, help me that I might speak the words that You would have me say this morning, and that I might preach Your Word faithfully. Oh, Lord, we need You by Your Spirit this morning. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. I did it again. I lied to my roommate about borrowing his towel without asking. I know I shouldn't. I don't want to lie, but it's second nature to me because I don't want him to be mad at me. So I lie rather than telling the truth. How can I be a Christian if I do this stuff? I did it again. I blew up at some little thing at work. It's not a big deal, but I know it's a sin.

[1:12] But nobody's perfect, right? I mean, Jesus forgives all my sins. I know I shouldn't, but I'm probably going to keep doing it. It's just the way it is. Do you ever identify with these thoughts?

Does your soul ever have these conversations in yourself? Is this really the way of following Jesus? This is the question that our passage will address this morning. Last week, Pastor Nick talked about the Christian life is like walking on a ridge with two dangers, one on one side and one on the other. As we seek to follow Jesus on one side, we seek to control by doing good things, thinking that that's going to make us right with God. And on the other hand, we just give up or we give in and think, because I'm free in Christ, I can do whatever I want to use my freedom as an opportunity to serve the flesh, as Paul says. But this morning, the question we want to answer is, if the life as a follower of a Christian is meant to be a life of freedom in the grace of God, if Jesus really has done it all and nothing can separate us from His love, why is it so hard for Christians to live in this freedom? That's what we're going to answer this morning. We're in Galatians, continuing in our passage, our series in the book of Galatians. We're in chapter 5, verses 15...I'm sorry, verses 16 through 26.

That's on page 916 of your Pew Bible. If you want to pull it up there, we're going to be looking at it together in detail, so it'd be great if you pulled it out and looked at it as we walked through it. And in this section, Paul has shifted in chapter 5 to talking about how do we live out the good news of the freedom of the gospel in practical...and we're actually going to spend two weeks on this passage. So, I'm going to preach this week on most of the passage, and so that we have a deep understanding of what it says, and an understanding of the framework that it lays out. And then, after Easter, we're going to come back and look at this passage again, and really dig into practically how do we do this. So, come back the week after Easter. Actually, come back next week for Easter.

[3:44] Celebrate Easter with us, and then come back the week after, so that you will get the fullness of what this passage has to say. So, with that, let's read the passage together, chapter 5, starting in verse 16 of the book of Galatians.

But I say, walk in the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh. For these are opposed to each other to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now, the works of the flesh are evident. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. And those who belong to the Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. Friends, this is the good news. What this passage is telling us this morning is that God has given us His Spirit to enable us to overcome our sinful desires and live in the godly freedom of the gospel. So, we're going to ask three questions of this text this morning. The first question is, why do we need this enabling power? The second question is, how do we discern what way we're walking in, in the way of the Spirit or the way of the flesh? And then third what is our hope that we actually can walk in the way of the Spirit? All right? So, that's what we're going to look at this morning. The first question then is, why do we need this enabling power? And verses 16 through 18 is very clear. We need this power because we experience a war in our souls. There is a battle between flesh and spirit, and we have these two choices that are placed before us, and we feel this internal tension, do we not? On one side is the work of the Spirit of God in the believer, and we want to remind ourselves that God promises that every believer in Christ, everyone who is a son of God or a daughter of God, a child of God, has received the Holy Spirit. So, Ephesians chapter 1 verses 13 and 14 reminds us that in Him that is in Christ, you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of His glory. So, this reminds us that every Christian has the Holy Spirit. We don't need an extra dose somewhere. That's not what Galatians 5 is about. We all have the Holy Spirit with us, right? So, we have that Spirit, on one hand, pulling us towards following Christ and being godly, and then we have this other side that is called the flesh. Now, we need to be really careful of this. The flesh does not simply mean the body. Paul was not a Greek who thought that the body was bad, and the spirit was good, and somehow we need to divest ourselves from our physical body in order to find some moral purity. No, no, no. What he is saying, though, is that we have an unerring nature because of our fleshly communion with Adam and our sinful nature. You'll see that, like, some Bible actually translate this word, the sinful nature rather than the flesh, because that's the idea behind it. It refers to our human nature apart from Christ. And Paul says, these two things are warring in us. You know, though, in the cartoons, and I looked it up, you can see, Kronk in Emperor's New Groove has an angel and a devil on his shoulders. It also happens to Homer Simpson and to Donald Duck, and a few other cartoons, right? We all have this, don't we? These two voices in our ear. And when someone cuts us off in traffic, the angel is saying, well, he's probably in a hurry. And the devil says, honk your horn. As a matter of fact, you should probably road rage against him because of what he just did, right? Or other circumstances. When you receive criticism at work, how do you respond? Are you critical in response? Are you defensive? Do you want to excuse your failures? When you're a parent at the end of a long day and you're tired, do you find it easy to either give up on discipline altogether and just stick them in front of a screen? Or do you become short and harsh with your kids? How easy this pull? Or when you're late at night looking at your computer and thinking about that link and wondering, am I going to click on it again or not? We feel these tensions, and we live in a battle that is real in our lives. And the nature of temptation is that we have both external prompts and internal desires, right? And the external prompts do not cause us to sin or to follow the flesh, but there are circumstances that can arouse or connect with. But ultimately, it's our internal desires that Paul is talking about here. Remember what James chapter 1 says about temptation. He says this, but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire, then desire, when it is conceived, gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death.

[10:27] So again, we want to recognize that there's a distinction between the external temptations, which we may have, and even the internal desires that we sense in our mind that we want to do something wrong, and sin itself, right? There's a famous quote, Martin Luther, I found this, and it's actually, he's writing about it in the Lord's Prayer, and he writes this about temptation. It's such a great quote, so listen to this. Thus you see that temptation can be avoided by no one, but resistance may be made, and with prayer and recourse to divine aid, we can put ourselves in readiness to meet such designs. In the book of an old father, we read that a young brother expressed a desire to be rid of his thoughts, and

what he means is like, I don't even want to feel a desire for those fleshly things.

Thereupon the old father said, dear brother, you cannot prevent the birds from flying in the air over your head, but you can prevent them from building a nest in your hair. Did you get that? Do you see the distinction? We may feel the impulse. We may have the external prompts, but the choices are, do we choose to embrace these fleshly desires, or do by the Spirit we choose godly desires instead? Do we let those sinful impulses take residence in our life, nest in our hair, or not? So this is the battle that Paul is describing, and friends, if we are honest, we all know this battle, don't we? But let's look more carefully so that we can distinguish in what way are we walking, right? In verses 19 through 23, we see portraits. He paints a picture. Here's what the desires of the flesh look like. Over here, here's what the desires of the Spirit look like. And I want to look at them carefully, because it might be thought, having read the rest of the book of Galatians, where he's been saying, you don't have to follow the law, you don't have to follow the law, you don't have to follow the law, that finally it's like, well, I can do whatever I want, right? No, not at all. Paul is saying there is a pattern of godly living. There are right and wrong things, and he gets specific about it to say these are the good ways, walk in them, because they reflect God and His character and what is good in the world, and recognize all the other things that are not good, that God has said these things are not good for us. And so, He wants us to paint these pictures with more specificity, not so that we can return to a legalistic approach to these things, but so that we can see how God wants to change and drive our desires towards that which is right and good. So, in verses 19 through 21, the works of the flesh are evident. And friends, I want to frame all of these things. When you go back to the Garden of

Eden, when sin entered into humanity and the world, what was at the core of it? Rather than living under God's provision and reign and receiving that and worshipping Him in response, Adam and Eve listened to the temptation to be like God themselves, to exalt their self, to be co-equal or independent of God and like God in those ways. And so, this radical exaltation, this self-orientation, this self-centeredness, I think is at the root of this whole portrait of the desires of the flesh. All right, let's get specific.

This may be uncomfortable. Here we go. He starts with sexuality. Three words here that cover the breath of selfish sex. Some of us in this world are allergic to this conversation because the church has been so prudish and dealt with sexuality so badly that we just don't want to hear it anymore. And yet, we need to recognize we live in a world that is saturated with ungodly sexual understanding, right? It's not actually different from the first century. Greco-Roman culture was just as bad. Pedophilia, temple prostitution, I could go on and on and on. It was just as bad in many ways.

[15:19] In these three words, Paul says, there is in the desires of the flesh a desire for sex outside of God's good plan for this to happen within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman.

And if I were just going to summarize in application what those three words mean for us today, it means don't have sex with your boyfriend or your girlfriend or your fiancé. Don't have sex alone in your room.

Don't have sex with someone of the same gender. Don't have sex by viewing something on a computer or on your phone. Don't have sex with anyone who is not your spouse if you are married. Don't have sex with your friends or for experimentation or just to explore because you think you need to know something more than you do. All of these are ultimately self-centered expressions where you are gaining something for yourself at the expense of violating the good confines in which God has given us the gift of sex.

Our society tells us that if you don't sexually explore, you are not flourishing as a human being. And I will simply say Jesus Christ was the most fully flourishing human being that ever lived.

And you know what? He never had sex. So it can't be that the lie that the world tells us is true about this. So, rather than sex being a reflection of the intimacy between a husband and wife that reflects the intimacy, not sexual intimacy, but true intimacy of the Godhead, of the tripartic God, instead we turn it to be a selfish thing. And we end up ultimately using others for our own selfish desires. Paul then goes on. That's not the only thing he says. That's just the start.

[17:22] He goes on. He says, idolatry is a fleshly desire. That is, the things that we rely on or trust in for life, for salvation, for rightness

with God, right? It obviously can mean, just like it did in the first century, worshiping other gods other than the God of the Scriptures who says, I alone am God in the world and in the universe. All other gods are actually not true gods, right? But in our world, which is more secular, we don't tend to gravitate towards particular other religions.

Instead, we make our human lives our idols. And so our careers and our spouses and our families and our accolades and our hobbies and our successes become our gods. Sorcery refers to...actually, it's a complicated word that has to do with poison and use of different things. But I think ultimately, what it's talking about is a kind of alternative spirituality today. That's how I would apply it.

How many in our culture want a self-determined religion? I get to decide what's spiritual. I want to search out the spiritual experience that I'm longing for. And if I find it somewhere in any religion or even in my own made-up thing, that's great. Do you see how these are self-centered things where we don't want God to be God, we want to make our own gods and choose our own gods to worship? Paul then goes on in this portrait of self-centered fleshly desires to talk about relationships.

He talks about enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy. Do you see how they're all self-oriented emotion? We have enmity with others because we want to promote and protect ourselves by hating others. We have strife with others because our will is not...is thwarted by them not doing what we want. We are jealous because they have something that we want and don't have. We become angry because we want to control others to serve us, and they don't do that, and that's very frustrating. We have rivalries because we crave to be seen as better than others, and so we put ourselves up by putting other people down.

We have dissensions and divisions because we insist that we are the locus of all knowledge and all right thinking, and we exalt that, and then everyone else is wrong, and we have a divisive spirit.

[20:08] Friends, do any of these pull on your soul? I do when I load the dishwasher, all right? Because I know how the dishwasher needs to be loaded, and I know where everything should go, and I want to be angry when it's not done that way, to control it so that it's done right, and to criticize those who don't know how to load the dishwasher as well as I do. The desires of the flesh are real, right?

Paul goes on. He talks about one last category, drunkenness and orgy. The picture here is those like unmitigated, ongoing Mardi Gras where you surrender yourself to the party. You surrender yourself to the pleasures and to the numbing effects and to the immediate returns of orgies, drunkenness, drunkenness, and the like, right? We might do these sorts of things on a spring break trip. We might do these things on the sort of thing like a bachelor party, but friends, we might do this a lot more on every day. We might binge on media, or we might binge on food, or we might decide that smoking weed on a regular basis just to escape and just for the pleasure of it is a good thing. Or when the glass of wine after work becomes a bottle after work every day, right? We feel the pull for these things because they numb us, because they dull us, right? And here's the thing, when we abandon ourselves to these things, when we want to escape by using them, we can no longer actually follow God because we give up control to these things in our lives, and that's not how God intended us to live. All right, and here's the most scary part of this entire list. Paul says, and the like, right? This is not an exhaustive list. This is a representative list. There are more things, and the whole of the Scriptures will tell us about the holiness of God and His righteous ways, and we will continue to learn as we read through all of it the challenge of how much of the world is fallen and in rebellion against God and living according to the desires of the flesh, and how prone we are to be like that. So this is the picture of the desires of the flesh, and at the center of it is this self. And that's the most important thing about it, because to pursue God is to put God in the center of things, because God Himself deserves the glory, and because God Himself has the right to say what is good and right in the world, because God Himself is met...we were made to put Him in the middle of our heart, and when we reject that and make ourself the center, all of these desires then are driven, right? Now, I need to be really clear on this, right? Because Paul goes on, he says, the stakes here are very high. When you do these things, when this is characteristic of your life, you cannot inherit the kingdom of God, because God is not in the center of it. You are living outside of what He has for you.

Okay, I want to be really clear. We got time. All right, hang on. So, 1 John chapter 1. Christians are not perfect. We are not sinless people. So, 1 John reminds us in chapter 1 verse 8, if we say that we have no sin...this is writing to believers...if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him, that is God, a liar, and His Word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is their propitiation for our sins, not only for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. So, what Paul is presenting here as we think about this is it is not that we are going to be perfectly sinless, but what it does mean is that when we sin, we recognize it as such, we confess it as such, we repent from it, we do not justify it, we do not excuse it, but we hate it the way God hates it. When we live in...when we give in to the desires of the flesh, because we have a Savior who has saved us from this and saved us to something much better, a set of desires that we all know and want and love, right? This is, as Paul said in chapter 4, verse 12, this is Christ being formed in us when the fruit of the Spirit are on display in our lives, right? And this fruit of the Spirit, because we are children of God through faith in Christ, by His Spirit, we become like Him, and our character reflects the character of God. And so, we love because God has first shown us love, and He has shown us a sacrificial love that is oriented towards the good of another at great cost to self, so that our love might be characterized by that sacrificial other-centered at great cost to ourselves love. So, we have joy because we have come to know that we serve a God who rejoices in all that is good and right in the world, and we are caught up in His joy. We have peace because Christ has accomplished through His death on our behalf peace with God. And because we have peace with God, we are able then to interact with one another in a more peaceably way because we're not fighting for ourselves, but we know who we are, and we can then be other-centered even at the expense of strife and enmity and jealousy and the other things we saw. We are patient because God is patient with us, because God has not treated us as our sins deserve today, but because in His grace, but because in His grace, He has called us to repentance. So, we can be patient with others in the same way. We can be kind to others, especially those who are undeserving of grace, because we know that we are undeserving of grace, and yet God has shown us His kindness, and His kindness has led us to repentance and faith in Christ. Goodness, because God Himself has shown us what is actually good, and allowing us to take interest in the good of others, because God has shown His goodness to us.

[27:44] Gentleness, not being self-promoting and self-proud, but being humble and meek and lowly, because Jesus is such. He said, I am gentle and lowly, and I ask you to come and bring your burdens to me, and I will give you rest. Faithfulness, the ability to persevere in trusting obedience and hope, because God has been faithful to us, because Christ was faithful even unto death on the cross for our salvation. And now we are able to be faithful to God in pursuing all these things, and ultimately self-control, because when we are in, as Romans 6 says, when we are under sin, when we do not have the power of Christ in our lives, we are in fact enslaved to sin.

The sinful desires, the desires of the flesh that Paul's talked about, we don't have a choice to do something else. We are fundamentally self-centered people, and we will always be that way. But when Christ comes into our life, He uproots that and transforms it so that we might live a different life. And we have the ability now to make the choices and to be self-controlled, to forsake things, our fleshly desires, and to take on and to grab hold of things that are good.

So because we have God's Spirit in us, this is the fruit. Like an apple tree bears apples, and strawberry plants bear strawberries. So we want to bear the fruit of God in our lives, of godliness in our lives. Not as a work so we can parade it around and say, look at how righteous we are, but because God has shown us all of these things. Friends, it is for our good that God calls us to godliness. Because this is the way He has made us as a grand designer. To live in line with Him and His kingdom, to put Him at the center of our lives, is the way we were made. And so it is good for us. But far more importantly than that, though that is important, it is for His glory, and it is right and good that we who claim to follow Christ would display the character of Christ in our lives. Right? Now, if you're sitting here this morning and you are going, okay, Pastor Matt, I think I failed.

Completely. Utterly. Or if that's the call, maybe I didn't fail today, but I'm going to fail tomorrow. Right? We sometimes feel like the battle is like the dark side and the light side in Anakin Skywalker. Right? They're vying for control back and forth, back and forth, and they're equal powers. Right? And we just think, I don't know who's going to win, and it's terrifying for us. But that is not how Paul sees it. Because Paul began with it, and he ends with it. Look back and see how he began this. Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. The Spirit is more powerful than the desires of the flesh in our life. And not that we will do it perfectly, but we know that he has given us this most important thing. And so, this is the hope. Right? And we're going to start tasting this today. I'm already over time. We're going to come back to it in two weeks and really dig into the practicalities of this.

But here's the thing. Right? The reason why we have hope is because of verse 24. Therefore, those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Right? Do you remember what we saw in chapter 2, verse 20? Paul says, I've been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me in the life that I now live in the flesh. I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me.

[31:51] Right? So, this is the basis of our hope. Right? That when we are joined with Christ by faith, we have crucified our flesh. We have died to our sinful desires because Christ died for us to defeat the powers of sin and death. Right? And though we live in this now and not yet with the ongoing presence of these fleshly desires, they no longer control us.

I've been crucified with Christ and it's no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. That is, God's Spirit lives in me. Paul weaves the Spirit and Christ together in these beautiful ways. And how do we live this? We live it out, not by white knuckling, trying really hard to pull up our bootstraps to be a little better than we were before, but by continuing in the patterns of faith that we began in. Right? By being dependent. Just like we came to Christ knowing my sin is overwhelming. I cannot do anything to forgive it. Christ, you have done everything for me. All I can do is throw myself in dependent neediness on your mercy and receive the fullness of your grace. So, we continue in this battle with the fleshly desires. God, I can't defeat this, but God, you have given me your Spirit. You have made me able to do these things. And I go back and I say, this sin is not what you have given me now to do, but you have given me a new life through your Spirit. I am born again to a new Spirit where I am able to choose to pursue righteousness and godliness and goodness. And so, we trust in Him for this transformation.

We trust in Him for moment-by-moment choices, willful choices, but also the trajectory of our lives.

Right? That we will grow in godliness with a confidence that Christ, because He has defeated sin and death on the cross, will defeat it in our lives as we cling to Him. You guys know this metaphor, but the cross and the resurrection was D-Day in the spiritual warfare of the whole world.

Right? God came and the decisive victory was won, but it's going to take a while to play it out. And one day, there will be a VE day for us, a victory in Europe day, and then a VJ day. Anyway, but you know what? You get that? The analogy breaks down at some point. We know that there's a future time when this body of sin will be done away with forever. But now, He has given us this enabling power of the Holy Spirit that we walk with by faith to put aside the desires of the flesh, and to take hold of, and to live in, inhabit the desires, the fruit of the Spirit, so that we might reflect God, so that we might live in the freedom of the gospel that God has called us to in Christ. A freedom to love and to pursue godliness because it's good and right, and because it is the place of human flourishing, and because it is the place where

[35:27] God's glory is displayed in the world. This is the battle that we're in, and the stakes are high, but the outcome is sure. So let's pray together.

Lord, we pray for your help this morning. We pray for your help because we all experienced this battle. Oh, Lord, help us to live by faith, to walk in the Spirit, and keep in step in the Spirit.

Lord, this week as we meditate on your loving sacrifice, going to the cross for our salvation, and rising from the dead for our justification, for our regeneration, and for our ultimate hope and glory.

Lord, I pray that you would capture our hearts, do transforming work, Lord, to free us increasingly from the fleshly desires, and to bear in us more and more the fruit of your Spirit.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.