

Keeping in step with God

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Date: 19 January 2020

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- [0 : 00] Well, if you'd please turn to Galatians, Galatians chapter 5.
So Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Acts and Romans follow on.
1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians. And then you have the vows, apart from when you get to Thessalonians, because there's no AEI, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, AEI, Thessalonians.
Colossians, sorry. Thanks, Susan. Paul dressing me. Susan correcting my Bible order. And she had a rush to write the sermon this week as well.
Actually, Stuart, please tell me that's not recorded, because if that gets down to some of my Reformed friends, they're never going to let me back. Colossians, Thessalonians, thank you.
- [1 : 32] Oh, no, you. Well, Galatians chapter 5, verses 16 and 17 only. I will be looking at, of course, the rest of the passage, but the focus is really on these two verses.
So I'll pick it up in verse 13, actually, just to set it in its context of freedom.
For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.
For the whole law is fulfilled in one word. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.
But I say, walk by 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.
- [2 : 37] For these are opposed to each other to keep you from doing the things that you want to do. Well, may God bless, it's a short reading, but may God bless that to our hearts this morning.
We'll come back to it after this next hymn. Oh, it's okay.
Okay, if you find your way back to Galatians 5, and we can begin.
Well, it's another Sunday, and there's another week ahead of us. And what's to stop next week looking like the week before, or the week before that, or the week before that?
What's going to stop that from happening? We know that in the Christian life, there's plenty of routine, there's plenty of pattern. Things take a long time to change.
- [4 : 09] People take even longer. People take even longer. And so we expect there to be change on a small scale. But we always expect change.
When a person walks with God, they change. And what that means is this, that if what is important to God is also important to you, then you'll do something about it.
If what is important to God is also important to you, you will do something about it. And those who do nothing about anything in the Christian life, are simply don't consider the things that are important to God, important to them.

And therefore, they're not walking or keeping in step with God. The idea behind these couple of verses is a very simple idea.

That if what is important to God is important to you, then you'll do something about it. You will, in other words, keep in step with the Spirit.

[5 : 23] It's really as simple as that. And there's not much more I can perhaps say that will improve upon that very basic idea.

I can say a whole sermon, but at the end of the day, what you're going to be led to is one very simple question that you need to ask yourself, which is, is what that is important to God important to me also?

And if it is, what am I going to do about it? It's really that simple. Now, when it comes to guidance, because most people associate guidance with God the Holy Spirit, and that would be a good connection to make, a lot of Christians are often confused when what they feel like doing is what they think they ought to be doing.

Because I feel that I ought to do this, I therefore must do this. But the Spirit is given here, as you can see, to actually stop us from doing the things that we want to do.

Again, that's not complicated at all, is it? That Paul's adamant that you want to do something different than what God wants you to do.

[6 : 39] And God, knowing that you want to do something different than what God wants you to do, gives you His Spirit so that you don't do it. It's really not that complicated.

So God gives His Spirit to those who do what they feel like doing to stop them doing what they feel like doing. That's how simple it is.

That's what it means to keep in step with the Spirit. We consider what is important to God, important to us. We do something about it. We keep in step with the Spirit as a means of keeping in step with God's guidance over all things, not just our lives, but all things that we are involved in.

And so apart from the Spirit of God being in our lives, we can't help but be bent towards, we live a life of compulsion. It's not a life of freedom, it's a life of compulsion. We were followers, but we're not followers of Christ.

We have been set free by Christ alone to follow Him. And that's why the command comes now to walk and keep in step with the Spirit. There is no freedom outside of Christ.

[7 : 53] And what that means is something really very simple. That people outside of Christ live a life of compulsion. They are compelled to do the things that they do by desires.

They are compelled to do the things that they do even by the desires of other people that they desire were true of themselves. They live a life of compulsion, not freedom.

The whole idea of mimetic rivalry is what, believe it or not, built Facebook. Peter Thiel, who was one of the chief financial backers to Facebook, studied mimetic rivalry.

And mimetic rivalry simply teaches this, that you get one person doing something and lots of other people will do the same because no one's a leader, they're all followers.

So everyone follows everyone else and no one really knows where they're going. And what better model is there to build a multi-million dollar platform that will bring in huge amounts of profit than selling adverts on spaces like that where people are not going anywhere but they're following everyone.

[9 : 07] Even he knows that people live a life of compulsion. I'm not saying anything against Facebook or positive or negative.

I'm simply saying that the principle of people living a life of compulsion is easy to spot. And the life of freedom is to be free from being compelled in that way.

And so God has given us his spirit that we keep in step with him in a world that's following everyone else but going nowhere. I'm sure they think they are but they're really going nowhere.

And the other issue here is the matter of assurance. You've heard me teach hopefully enough that a person saved by Christ on the cross through his death and resurrection cannot do anything to unsave themselves.

That I'm cautious about using the phrase once saved always saved but at the end of the day that's what I'm saying. That I'm saying that the accomplishment of Christ in saving you means that you cannot overturn that by anything that you do after Christ has saved you.

[10 : 27] If indeed that is Christ has saved you. And therefore the assurance of having that eternal security means that we have a life worth living.

Now it's worth bothering about. Now the things that are important to God are important to me because look at what God has given to me in order for me to have the freedom that I have.

So the freedom that we have is an eternal freedom within an eternal security. And the spirit of God is given to us so that we don't live in the old ways in the new life.

Because Paul is saying you can, you shouldn't, God doesn't want you to but it is possible for you to. So God gives you his spirit to stop you from doing the things that you want to do.

And the reason why that's so important when it comes to assurance is this. That when you sin you doubt. That when you sin you doubt.

[11 : 36] You doubt whether or not you truly belong to God. As John says no one who continues in sin is born of God. So if you're continuing sin there's no assurance that you're born of God.

There's no assurance that what Christ did he did for you. Sin causes doubt. If however on the other hand you keep in step with the spirit and you do all that you can to reject sin and repent of sin and walk with God rather than in those ways then you have the assurance.

Now assurance is a feeling. It can come and go. Salvation can. Once you have it you have it for good. It is something that God has given you. But the measure of assurance is important.

Because if you're saved and you don't feel assured of your salvation you don't bother. You just don't care. You can be really saved but if you've lost that sense of assurance that you're saved you sort of play around with other things because you're not quite sure if it's worth living God's way.

How do I know I'm really his? Well I'll just do what I want to do. How do I know I really? Well I'll just do. So the idea of assurance being assured that what Christ has done he's done for you is super important for living the life that God has given you.

[13 : 01] Just like a child who says well I might as well carry on doing it because I'm going to be told off anyway. Okay. There's a pattern to when you think something is going to happen or something is what it is then there's a pattern that follows.

Well I'll just carry on this way anyway. So the idea of assurance in the Christian life is really important in order for you to keep in step with the Spirit. You need to know that what is important to God is also important to you because God has made it important.

So here's the summary of these two verses and of course a fairly short summary. The basic distinction here is between the Spirit and the desires of the flesh.

they are opposed to each other and they are opposed to each other verse 17 to stop you from doing the things that you want to do. In other words this is like you have an internal person that's just bent on living the old life that's been built up of an old pattern that doesn't want to get out of bed in the morning and be like Jesus.

You just want to get out of the bed in the morning and live your own way. And so we're told that we are to walk verse 16 and verse 25 by keeping in step with the Spirit.

[14 : 21] And so it follows that if you're to walk with someone you have to know a couple of things. One, who are they? Two, where are they going? How do I keep in step with God when He's not exactly walking next to me?

How do I know where He's going in order that I can go in the same direction? Now we could spend a lot of time this morning focusing on the desires of the flesh but you'll notice that not even Paul does that.

He mentions it as to say this is what they are. You know, sexual immorality, drunkenness, there's a whole list of things and we could mention all of them and we could feel really good about ourselves because we perhaps don't commit at least 60 or 70% of them.

But that's not how Paul focuses their attention. His focus is keep in step with the Spirit and then you almost don't even have to worry about those things because the Spirit will keep you away from the edge.

The Spirit will keep you away from falling in to those things. Now every now and then when a person drifts from God, when a person has their close and clean walk with God broken by something, some perhaps painful event, sorrowful event, whatever it may be, then the sins start creeping in.

[15 : 48] And then all of a sudden you get the conviction of the Holy Spirit to bring you back home to God and as you're brought back home to God you sort of why did that have to happen?

And it does happen. Okay? In simple terms, sin in your life wants to destroy everything about you.

Everything about you. It wants to take it all away but it wants to take it all away in a way where you don't really notice that that's what's happening.

So God gives you his Spirit so that you're able to tell the difference between a life of compulsion and a life of freedom. A life where you have always opposition you're always going to wake up in the morning and some mornings go I don't know if I want to be like Jesus today.

Okay? That's the opposition that is being spoken of here. And Paul's attention is to draw our attention to the fact that those who carry on in that kind of way without any kind of repentance without any kind of considering the things that are important to God important to them those who carry on that way well they will not enter the kingdom of God.

[17 : 04] No joke. There's no messing around here. The idea of us realising that God's standards are much higher than we think is to realise that we all are to live according to the same standard.

It's a terrible thing when one Christian looks at another Christian and simply says well their standards are just higher than me and I can't live up to their standards. Well that's an unfair criticism when the standards that they're trying to live up to is God's.

It's an unfair criticism to say well they have higher standards and they're just making it bad for the rest of us. Now the point is there is only one standard and some Christians make all the effort they can to keep in step with the spirit to live up to those standards and still fail and others not so much.

And so the difference within Christians when it comes to the standards that they live by really comes down to whether or not they consider what is important to God important to them.

And if they really consider that what is important to God important to them then they begin to keep in step with the spirit. It's really not that difficult. The other thing to notice here is that we are led by a person.

[18 : 29] It's God the Holy Spirit who is a person of the Trinity. We believe in the triune God of Scripture God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is God himself within our life and we are to keep in step with a person, a very important person. The person is God himself.

God the God the God the God the God the God the God the God the God the God the Spirit the Spirit so that we don't do the things that we want to do.

We are not to grieve the Holy Spirit we are not to grieve God which means we can but we are not to. Whenever you are commanded by the way in Scripture not to do something it is because it is your nature to do it.

Do not steal. It is because in your nature in some way I haven't taken anything. Okay but maybe you have been late for work consistently. You are stealing. You are stealing time that someone else has paid you for.

[19 : 34] These simple things are the standards of God that we live by. Being led by the Spirit means that we simultaneously are led away from the things that entrap us and led into freedom.

That we are led away from the things that will actually promote the desires of the flesh and led into the things that actually produce the fruitfulness of God within our lives. What's important to God becomes important to you.

And the person who prospers is the person who keeps in step. The person who has the fruits that he mentions later on is the person who first keeps in step with God.

He keeps a close and a clean life. And the benefit of this is we read just before you get into verse 16, verses 13 and 14, is what we read in Psalm 1, verse 3, or Psalm 1, verse 3, which trees don't eat their own fruit.

The man, the faithful man who meditates on the law of God day and night is like a tree planted by streams of water, bringing forth fruit in its season. Trees don't eat their own fruit.

[20 : 48] fruit. In other words, that the fruitfulness that you produce is for the benefit of those around you. The reason why a father needs to stay faithful is so that he produces fruit for his whole family.

A mother, a wife, husband, the same for their whole family. And the reason why your individual commitment to God is important is because you're either producing fruit for the people around you or you're simply taking theirs.

And that's stealing. if it's a case of, you know, in Thessalonians the principle is very simple. That a person who doesn't contribute doesn't get to eat.

If you were to eat without any contribution, you're stealing. You're taking what you're not allowed to. The principle of being able to have what's on the table is when you have contributed to the table.

It seems quite a, I mean, it would be great if the whole social system was based on that one principle. No contribution, no benefit. That is the way that God works.

[21 : 57] And the reason is is because we are meant to understand that our personal contribution actually benefits the people around us. And when we do not contribute, then we're actually robbing the people around us.

Because we have nothing to give ourselves, we have to take what others have to benefit from. That's true physically, that's also true spiritually.

So we keep in step with the Spirit, not only to produce the qualities in our life that we need, but so that we can help others out when they need help, so that we can be the spiritually, so we can have like this spiritual fruit basket that we can say, here, let me help you at this time.

Because the idea of everyone maintaining a good, healthy spiritual life all the time is just not true. Okay, none of us run on full power every day of the week.

We just cannot keep up with that kind of standard. So we have ups and we have downs, but we are to keep in step with God, the Holy Spirit. That's how it works.

[23 : 10] So the question that you're faced with is a simple one. Is what is important to God important to you? And if it is, you'll do something about it.

The next thing then is the actual guidance of being led by God. Now I want to say, because of where I stand and how I understand scripture, that revelation has ceased, but it's not ceased in the way you might think it has.

We, according to the confession of faith, believe that the former ways have ceased, that the way God revealed himself in the past has ceased.

Those former ways, Hebrews 1, have come to an end. But God does continue to reveal himself today, but he chooses to do it through his word. So we're still led by the apostles and prophets, but we are only led by the apostles and prophets in the word of God, not outside, that there's no continuation outside the word of God.

They are within the scriptures themselves. So God has made it very easy for us by writing it all down, simply for us to learn, to follow, and to pray, and ask God by his spirit that we would be able to fulfill his word.

[24 : 27] God has written it down for us. So if you're a Christian who has to deal with a particular situation currently, or it's on the horizon, the storm clouds are coming, and you recognize that you've got to have an answer ready, what are you going to do when this comes?

And you go to the storehouse of what you need, and you find that it's empty. Where are your provisions to cope with what's coming? Well, if we keep in step with the spirit, what's happening is God is keeping the storehouse full.

That when those difficult time comes, we have the resources that we need to tackle them. And that's God's grace. God's grace is sufficient all the time, every day.

It's always going to be there for us. So what a person does when they don't have their storehouse full, and by the storehouse being full, I mean constantly being in the word of God and prayer, is that they default to the only thing that they can default to, and that is their feelings.

If they're not walking in the spirit, they're defaulting to an internal desire. Because I feel that this is what I should do, I'm going to do it. Because I feel that this is the thing that I should be doing, I'm going to do it.

[25 : 49] But God has quite clearly told us that he has given us his spirit so that we don't do the things that we want to do. Not that we don't do the things that we're thinking about doing.

But that we don't do the things that we want to do. And I know what you're thinking. Well, what's wrong with what I want to do? What's wrong with what I want to do?

Well, if it's keeping in step with the spirit, nothing. But if it's anything other than keeping in step with the spirit, it is the desires of the flesh that are going to lead you away, spiritually, decline, whatever else you want to put there.

There are two things then to realize. Don't live in the dark when you know what is true in the light. When a person sins, what they're doing is they're pulling the curtain so no one else can see.

When a person sins and stays away from the word of God in prayer, what they're doing is they're turning the light off. They're going into the shade. They're doing things in the dark that they know they cannot do in the light because they'll be exposed for what they are.

[27 : 03] That comes straight out of John 3, 16, 17 and following. We go into those areas because we know that the light exposes the things that we ought not to be doing.

On the other hand, if you're a Christian who is in a spiritual dark place and that does happen and that can happen for a long time and it can be incredibly difficult, then the encouragement here is don't doubt in the dark what you knew to be true in the light.

And Jim Wilson is, well it wasn't Jim Wilson who told me, it was his son who told me. Because I asked him a very simple question when I said, well how do I know what I am to do now?

I won't tell you what the situation is because it was between a young minister, I think I'm 44 but I'm still a lot younger than him. And him, and I said, what do I do?

And his answer was this, I can only tell you what my father told me when I asked the same question. And that is, don't doubt in the dark what you knew to be true in the light.

[28 : 13] If you know that you're saved, if you know that you belong to God, if you know that God has given you his son, given you his spirit, given you his blessing, and now you're in a dark place where you're questioning all of that, don't question in the dark what you knew to be true in the light.

Because it's the light that will get you out of the darkness. Psalm 23, that even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil. Why not? Well because you cannot have a valley of shadow without a valley where light is coming into it.

Shadows are produced by light. It would just be a tunnel of darkness if there are no light. So the way out of the valley of the shadow is by following the light.

It's by heading towards the light. So if you are a Christian who is struggling at this point with assurance and that lack of assurance is causing you to not really bother with your Christian walk in faith, then the answer is simple.

Don't doubt in the dark what you knew to be true in the light. Or what you know is true in the light. that God has given you all of these blessings for you to keep in step with.

[29 : 28] So here's the conviction before we come to the exhortations we close. Donald Gray Barnhouse said this, and I sat there puzzling over it for quite some time, but this is his quote.

He said, I can say from experience that 95% of knowing the will of God consists of being prepared to do it even before I know what it is.

I'm going to read it again because it is just brilliant. I can say from experience that 95% of knowing the will of God consists of being prepared to do it even before I know what it is.

And what he's saying is this, that if it's God's will, and it's God's will that we are called to do, who cares if we know what it is? We've got to do it anyway.

If it's God's will, then we should be prepared to do it even before we know what God is actually calling us to do. If what is important to God is important to me, I will be prepared to do the will of God even before I know what the will of God is.

[30 : 42] God is important to do it. However, what do you do with a person who says, well, let me see what it is first. What do you do with a person who says, well, you let me know first and then I'll decide whether or not I will.

That's not keeping in step with the Spirit. So Donald Gray Barnhouse is absolutely right. That your internal attitude, your internal desire, keeping in step with the Spirit, that what is important to God becomes important to you, is 95% of the way of actually being guided and walking in the will of God.

That's all that it is. Because it's God's anyway, you're prepared to do it, whatever it is, because it comes from God.

When a Christian then begins to transgress, when they begin to pursue their own desire, they're as they pursue, they begin to go their own way, we recognize that to be lost is not necessarily to be lost from a particular location.

When God looks at you this morning and perhaps the Spirit convicts you that you're actually lost, he's not telling you that you don't know where you are. He's not telling you what he's saying is not anything to do with your geographical location.

[32 : 10] And so a lost person can turn up in church, a backslidden Christian, the one who's drifting further and further away from God, a person who could even be apostate.

That is for their whole life, they thought that they were truly someone who belonged and then over time the apostasy sets in and they begin to realize it's what's true is not true of me.

And here's something that I've realized simply by reading a lot of books by other ministers, is that whenever there is consistent preaching over a long period of time in a church, there is a consistent sifting.

And so what was hidden several years ago, that if the teaching is consistent, then the apostasy soon works its way out. And you begin to see people just drift.

And then all of a sudden they're gone altogether. And the reason we don't spot it immediately is because we don't think that a person can be lost when they're in church singing and praying.

[33 : 20] We don't think that they're far from God. But to be lost and to be far from God has nothing to do with your location. It has to do with where you are spiritually before him.

And so God is constantly sifting, constantly seeing whether or not his people are keeping in step with his spirit because, indeed, his people do keep in step. They recognize that there is an internal opposition.

We still want to do everything that everyone else is doing, but we don't. And we don't because God has given us his spirit to stop us from doing it.

It's not that we don't want to go out and have lots of nice holidays a year. It's not that we, I don't want to have what my, my literally multi-million pound brother has.

Big company, big house, nice cars. It's not that I wouldn't like some of that to say, pass some of it here this way. Do you not remember how good I was to you as an older brother?

[34 : 22] You know, I lay it on thick. It's not that I think that wouldn't be nice. But what stops someone pursuing that?

Well, not the person. Because the person wants to do it. It's the spirit of God who is given to oppose those desires in us.

So this isn't about bigging me up because I've not gone after it. This isn't, this isn't about how great I am because I've not pursued those things. No, I want to. But I don't.

And neither do you because the spirit of God is given to you empowering you not to do it. All glory goes to God. Not to me.

Not to you. And that's the assurance. That's the assurance of God that I belong. That I want to but I don't. And even though I want to I don't because God doesn't allow it.

[35 : 25] Right, here's the exhortation as we close. When God commands us he does so because we need commanding. When God guides us in the spirit he does so because this is his way of opposing the things that we actually want to do.

God doesn't just give us direction he gives us the power to go in that direction. God doesn't just give us a sense of direction a feeling but he gives us clear guidance in accordance with his word.

And the main difference between the work of Christ and the work of the spirit is a very simple one but a really important one. The work of Christ is vicarious where we get the word vicar from if any of you came out of a church of England like me.

The word vicarious means that Christ did what he did on my behalf. I add nothing to it. I don't have to do anything to save myself. Christ saved me.

It was a vicarious work. He did it on my behalf. But the work of the spirit is something or someone rather that we cooperate with.

[36 : 37] So Paul says in Romans if you by the spirit put to death the deeds of the body you will live. In other words cooperate with God. Walk a life where you are cooperating with God.

Not rebelling but cooperating. Christ has done this for you redeeming you setting you free now cooperate. Now keep in step with the spirit.

Well as we think this through and as we think through what God has done we recognize that this isn't just about direction and this isn't just about God empowering us which he does it's about both but it's also about your effort and your effort will be determined largely to the answer to that very simple question.

Is what is important to God also important to you? Because if it is you will do something about it. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.