

Third Person 4: Fruity Living

As we read the Bible, it can be very tempting just to focus on the parts we understand well and skip over those subjects that are mysterious and confusing. The Holy Spirit is certainly one of those subjects! But how is the church affected if the person and work of the Holy Spirit are not studied? More important, how is our own spiritual growth stunted if we don't understand the Spirit's transforming power within us?

That's why we're going through a series at the moment called "Third Person", which is looking at who the Holy Spirit is and what he does, and what the implications of that are for our lives.

- We've looked at how Jesus introduced the Holy Spirit to his followers, saying that the Spirit was going to come and be another comforter, or counsellor, or advocate, living inside them.
- We saw the first spectacular results of that in Jerusalem at Pentecost when thousands of people saw amazing miracles and transformed lives, and answered the call to believe in Jesus, and turn away from their sins, and be baptised as a public sign of that, and they received the gift of the Holy Spirit for themselves – a gift that is still available to everyone today.
- And last time we looked at how following the Holy Spirit gives us the power to put our old, sinful lives to death, and live no longer as slaves, but as children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus.

So this week I want us to turn to another passage where Paul talks again about being led by the Spirit, and the impact that doing that will have on our lives. It's a familiar passage to some of us, and as ever with passages like that I want us to be alert not only for reminders of things that we maybe already know but have slipped to the back of our minds; but also for brand new things that God wants us to see.

Turn with me in your Bibles, please, to Paul's letter to the Galatians. New Testament: four gospels, then Acts, then Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, and then Galatians. This is one of the earliest letters written – Paul wrote this probably around 15 – 20 years after Pentecost, to the

church in Galatia where he had first preached the gospel some years before. The church had started really well, but since then Paul has heard that some other people have come along and have tried to add something to his message. He calls them Judaisers – people who are saying that in order to get right with God, as well as accepting Jesus Christ you also have to keep the Jewish law, in particular the laws about circumcision and special foods.

So they weren't saying that Jesus was wrong – they were saying that you had to add something else as well – the law of Moses – or perhaps more accurately, the traditions of the Pharisees. It was actually a very nationalistic, racially or socially focussed issue. They were saying "you new converts must keep the same rules that we Jews have that separate us from the Gentile world." It's a bit like saying to a new Christian – you've also got to become a Baptist before your conversion experience is truly complete and acceptable to God. We could joke about that, but sometimes that sort of message actually gets communicated, and the gospel changes from "surrender to Christ" to "join our group".

And Paul's whole letter to the Galatians is about saying – "don't change what I taught you. Don't add to what I taught you. It's all about Jesus, and being led by the Spirit." And in chapter 3 verse 3 he says this:

"After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

"Who did the work to bring you back into relationship with God? God did, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Who gives you power to put your sinful nature to death? Jesus does, through his Holy Spirit. So don't add something in to the mix that is all about your own efforts to get right with God."

The whole basis of the fact that we are alive – and that we have been given *new life* – is because of the Holy Spirit. That's what Paul means by the phrase he uses in chapter 5 verse 25 – "we live by the Spirit."

So what are the implications of that for us? The rest of that verse explains what our next step should be:

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

If our new life began by the Spirit, then all our subsequent life ought to be carried out by the Spirit. If it was by the free and sovereign power of the Holy Spirit that our new spiritual life came into being, then the way that new life should be lived is by that same free and sovereign power. In other words, "walk by the Spirit" means do what you do each day by the Spirit; live your life in all its details from waking up in the morning until going to sleep at night by the enabling power of the Spirit.

But what does that mean, practically speaking? How do we "walk by the Spirit"?

Look back to verse 16, earlier in this section, and you'll see that Paul uses that phrase again:

¹⁶So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Ok, so we're getting some more clues here. The opposite of walking by the Spirit is giving in to the desires of the flesh. When Paul talks about "the flesh", here's what he means: our old, ordinary human nature that gets satisfaction from things like independence, power, prestige, and worldly pleasures. That's the flesh. It doesn't want to rely on God, and it doesn't want to do the things that God loves – it wants to do the opposite.

But when we "walk by the Spirit," we are not controlled by those drives. This is what verse 17 means: the flesh produces one kind of desires, and the Spirit produces another kind, and they are opposed to each other. Walking by the Spirit is what we do when the desires produced by the Spirit are stronger than the desires produced by the flesh. This means that "walking by the Spirit" is not something we do in order to get the Spirit's help, but rather, it is something that the Spirit enables us to do.

Do you remember a few weeks ago I said that the people that follow the Holy Spirit are going to be the ones that have power to follow the Holy Spirit? That's what this is about. It's not us doing the work here – it's the Holy Spirit. "Walking by the Spirit" is something the Holy Spirit enables us to do by producing in us strong desires that accord with God's will. This is what God said he would do in Ezekiel 36:26, 27:

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone... I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws".

So when we "walk by the Spirit," we're experiencing God's fulfilment of that prophecy. The Holy Spirit produces in us desires for God's way that are stronger than our fleshly desires.

Do you get the point here, that this isn't about things that *we* do? It's about things that *God* does in us. This isn't about us outwardly conforming to the law – it's about God changing our inner character.

Paul goes on to give some examples of what that actually looks like – verse 19:

¹⁹The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and 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.

Paul's not trying to give a comprehensive list of every possible sin here – he's saying "These are the sort of things that our human nature tends to do. This is what the "flesh" looks like. And anyone who thinks that freedom from the law means that they can do anything had better think again.

Because these things are wrong. The point though, is if you live like that, you're not living by the Spirit.

Because if you live by the Spirit, and you walk by the Spirit, and you allow God's Spirit to change your character and build your desire to live God's way, then you won't *want* to do things like that.

Instead, you'll be allowing the Spirit to grow fruit in you. Verse 22:

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Now we could easily spend a whole sermon looking at the things in that list – in fact we could do a whole sermon series on them, and one day we might do just that. It can be really helpful to understand and explore these virtues in detail.

But - just to mess with the heads of all of you who've learnt that list of virtues – I don't think Paul meant that series to be a complete listing of ways in which the Spirit changes us, any more than the previous list was a comprehensive list of sins. What about holiness, for example? What about justice? Or righteousness? Or mercy?

Paul is writing to a specific church in a specific contextual situation. So the examples he gives are relevant to their situation. But the point isn't the specifics of the list he gives – as soon as we try to do that, we run the risk of getting trapped by legalism again. Because these aren't things that we are supposed to be doing for ourselves. That's absolutely key to understanding this. As soon as you start thinking "I've just got to try harder to be more patient... I've really got to work on my gentleness..." ... as soon as you start thinking along those lines, you've missed the point.

Because these aren't things that we do. These are things that the *Holy Spirit* does *in us*. So if you want to challenge yourself about something – and I *do* think you should – ask yourself not "how can I be more joyful", or "how can I be more peaceful" – ask yourself "how can I allow the Spirit to change me more?" Or to use Paul's phrase: "how can I walk more in step with the Spirit?"

That's the big question for us. And if you get up every morning and look at yourself in the mirror and think "I want to walk more in step with the Spirit today", then you're taking a major step along the path of Christian discipleship and maturity.

But if you're anything like me you'll want to know very practically what is actually involved in obeying the command to walk by the Spirit. So here are five suggestions of things that we can and must do.

1. Acknowledge.

We start off by acknowledging in our hearts and minds that we are helpless to do good except by the Holy Spirit's enabling. Paul says this in Romans 7:18:

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

Or Jesus says this in John 15 verse 5:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

The very first step of walking by the Spirit is to admit this fact. Despite what our pride tells us, we cannot do anything pleasing to God without the constant enablement of the Spirit.

2. Ask.

(These aren't all going to begin with the letter "A" by the way! You can have "pray" if you prefer...) We heard that prophecy from Ezekiel 36 earlier, that God will put his Spirit within us and cause us to keep his decrees. So ask God to do that for you! Ask God to grow the desire for his ways in your life.

Incidentally, you remember a couple of months ago in the Bib-L series we were looking at the power of God's word to help us grow and change and deal with things in our lives? And I suggested that sometimes we just pray for power to deal with temptation, and ignore the other tool that God has given us for that which is the Bible? Well, here's a great opportunity to use both prayer *and* the Bible. How about praying like Paul did in 1 Thessalonians 3:12:

"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else."

Or pray like the writer to the Hebrews did in Hebrews 13:21:

"May the God of peace . . . equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ."

Or like the Psalmist in Psalm 51 verse 10:

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me"

3. Trust.

Walking in step with the Spirit involves *faith*. We must believe that since we came under the Lordship of Christ, sin is no longer our master. This is what we were talking about last time

when we looked at Romans 8 – Jesus has beaten sin, and has put it to death. And because we have the Spirit of Jesus, we too can put our old sinful nature to death. That’s God’s promise to you.

4. Act.

After you have acknowledged your helplessness without the Spirit; after you have asked God for his enabling, transforming power; and after you have trusted God for his deliverance from slavery to sin; *then* step 4 is to act the way you know is right. If this were step number one, all our actions would be works of the flesh, not fruit of the Spirit. It’s only after all that spiritual preparation, after we’ve thrown ourselves on God’s promise and power to work in our lives, that we can say with Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:10

By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

All through today’s message I’ve been saying “it’s not what *you* do – it’s what the Spirit does in you”. But that doesn’t mean that you sit back and do nothing! Listen to this – this is Philippians 2:12-13

“Therefore my dear friends... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.”

Finally:

5. Thank.

If we can do nothing right without the Spirit, then we must not only ask him to enable us to do it, but also thank him whenever we do it. This isn’t about a self-righteous “thank you father that I am not like that sinner over there!”. This is about saying “Father – I managed to get that right, and it’s because of what you did in my life! And that’s so exciting! And I want to do it again! Thank you!”

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