

Walking By the Spirit: The Road of Discipleship

Romans 7:14—8:8; Galatians 5:16-25

April 18, 2021

This morning I'm going to do something a bit different. Rather than preaching a single text of scripture, I'm going to focus on a biblical theme and use two primary biblical texts to unpack it. The theme is walking by the Spirit which is one way of talking about the essence of living as a disciple of Jesus. Last week Lee reminded us from Matthew 28 that making disciples is the main mission of the church (and of individual believers). Ultimately discipleship is not a program but a way of life—learning to follow Jesus and helping others know and follow Jesus.

Discipleship is a lot like farming. It is a process of nurturing life unto fruitfulness. It may be helpful for us to think of discipleship in two aspects that are also essential to effective farming. The first is a what I would call an organic approach. I'm not using the term in the technical sense, but simply to refer to the natural growing process. For example, if a farmer accidentally spills some corn during harvest, in the spring there will be 'volunteer' corn coming up. Why? Because when seed has contact with the soil, its natural response to moisture and sun in the spring is to grow. But farmers would not be wise to simply rely on this kind of approach—just haphazardly spreading seed and then waiting for harvest. Good farmers employ a systematic approach to maximize the natural processes. They plant the seed systematically. They apply fertilizer to and nitrogen to the soil. They treat the crops for weed control and may even cultivate between rows. All of this to maximize the growing process for a high yield.

When it comes to discipleship, most Christians merely rely on an organic approach, assuming spiritual growth will happen somewhat naturally. And some growth happens this way. At the most basic level, a Christian goes to church or bible study and they should experience some level of growth as a result of their exposure to biblical truth. But the seed may be spread somewhat randomly depending on what the pastor is preaching on or what the small group is studying and how faithful the Christian is in attending. Add to that the variable conditions of the soil of people's hearts and how their perspective is impacted by current circumstances or culture and you have a pretty random growth process.

But what if we applied a more systematic approach to enhance organic spiritual growth? What if reading our Bibles and prayer were a daily source of nutrition and exercise of faith? What if the church was helping believers grow more consistently with fewer gaps in their understanding and application of truth by providing pathways of teaching? What if the church was helping parents be more effective with organic and systematic discipleship in their daily family life?

This is why we believe it would be so beneficial for our next associate pastor to not only minister to youth but to also help us be more intentional in church-wide discipleship. And certainly he will not be able to do it alone. It will take all of us working together to build a culture of intentional discipleship.

So let's pause today and simply ask, "what is a life of discipleship in the Bible?" There are several ways the Bible captures the concept of discipleship like following Christ, abiding in Christ, or as we will see today, "walking by the Spirit." A disciple is one who lives distinctively in the way of the Spirit (the way of Christ) rather than the way of the world. So let's take a closer look at this distinctive way of life from Romans and Galatians, but first let's ask God to open our hearts and minds to embrace His word.

[Prayer]

Most of our problems in life are the result of not walking by the Spirit, but rather simply doing what comes naturally to us in the flesh. Notice I said *most* of our problems, not *all* of our problems. A Christian will experience a certain range of affliction or trials because He walks by the Spirit. That is, following Christ may involve a degree of persecution or may include trials that God ordains for our growth in faith and obedience. Suffering is not foreign to a Spirit-filled life. This is the theme of 2Corinthians which we will embark on next week—the affliction that accompanies walking by the Spirit.

But most of our problems in life are the result of walking by the flesh and not following the Spirit's leading. So let's take a careful look, first at Romans 8 and then Galatians 5 to consider our discipleship pathway of walking by the Spirit.

Five steps to walking by the Spirit:

1. **Recognize the inner conflict between the Spirit and the flesh** (Rom 7:14-25).

When a person is born again through faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in one's life. We refer to this as the indwelling of the Spirit, whereby He is present to empower us to live godly lives that are pleasing to the Lord. However, we are also continuing to live in the flesh, meaning that we are influenced by the corruption of our sinful nature. And this produces an inner conflict within the believer. So, we must now make a choice (actually millions of choices) to either follow the influence of our sinful nature or to follow the Spirit and His enabling power to live God-honoring lives in our decisions and relationships.

Paul describes the inner struggle at the end of Romans 7. **[Rom 7:14-25]** Paul is saying that there are two powerful influences in his life. On the one hand, he wants to do the right thing out of his new life in Christ, yet he often finds himself still pulled into sin because of the powerful influence of his sin-corrupted flesh. Paul's experience is perhaps best summarized in Jesus' words to the disciples: *"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"* (Mt 26:41). In other words, we must always be alert to the reality that in this life, our default setting will be to live according to our flesh, that is according to our natural selfish and sinful inclinations that we have been accustomed to for so long. We will live according to our 'old ways' unless we intentionally choose to walk in the way of Christ, by the Spirit's power. This is not something we can merely do in our own strength. That's why Paul says in vs. 24-25, "wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Jesus gives new life in which the Spirit's power can override the default setting of our flesh so that we can live God-pleasing lives of faith and obedience.

So, the first step to walking by the Spirit is recognizing the inner conflict between the Spirit and the flesh. Passive living will mean living according to the sinful pattern of our flesh. This means that, while God gives us the Spirit's power to live contrary to our sinful flesh, in one sense it is the harder road because it requires constant effort and vigilance.

Illus: When we moved my dad to Kansas a year and a half ago, I drove a small U-Haul truck the first half of the way. Unfortunately, there were strong winds that day—wind gusts up to 60 miles and hour. With little

weight in the back of that box-truck, it required constant mental and physical exertion to keep the truck from being pushed off the road by powerful side-winds. The truck had all the necessary power to confront the winds—the engine was not lacking power—but as the driver, I had to make a constant choice between relaxing (and going straight into the ditch!) or exerting my will along with my mental focus to fight the wind with the indwelling strength of that powerful truck engine.

2. **Embrace the victory Christ has secured that makes walking by the Spirit possible** (Rom 8:1-4).

[Rom 8:1-2] Paul is using the term 'law' in vs. 2 with the sense of principle (like we mean when we talk of the laws of nature, the principles nature). The principle or way of the Spirit leads to life. The principle or way of the sin leads to death. Now in vs. 3 Paul uses 'law' in the technical sense to refer to the O.T. law, summarized in the 10 commandments. **[Rom 8:3-4]** The Law provides a clear standard of how we need to live to be righteous before God. Yet because of the weakness of our flesh, because of the gravitational pull of our sinful nature, we could never reach the law's standard of righteousness. But what the Law could not do for us, God Himself did. He sent His Son in human flesh to be the sin offering for us (to take our death sentence upon Himself). God brought condemnation against our sin on the flesh of Jesus through His death. Why? So that we could walk according to the Spirit instead of the flesh.

In essence, Paul is saying that the only way for us to be saved from the gravitational pull of our sinful nature into the ditch of judgment and condemnation (the ditch of death) is through Christ who paid for our sin and gives us new life and power in the Holy Spirit.

Take note: We embrace the victory Christ has secured for us, making it possible to walk by the Spirit, when we receive Christ and receive the new life of the Spirit. Yet every experienced Christian also understands, that receiving Christ is not just an event, but a relationship in which we must continue to stand day by day. Like marriage, it's not just an event that takes place on the wedding day, but an ongoing relationship that must be maintained and nurtured day by day. [men] This leads to the 3rd step...

3. **Choose to set your mind on the Spirit** (Rom 8:5-8)

You've got to think truthfully if you are going to live righteously.

[Rom 8: 5-8] The heart is a mysterious well of desires and motivations. But the way to shepherd your heart and is with your mind. To be clear, I believe Paul is describing the difference between believers and unbelievers in these verses. Yet even as believers, we know that when we resort to our old fleshly way of thinking, our lives smell of death. But when we are living according to the Spirit, with our minds in a God-ward direction, we have the aroma of life! There is an implicit exhortation here: Don't keep setting your mind on things of the flesh which oppose God and can only lead to discipline. Keep your mind aligned with the Spirit of truth that results in a God-pleasing life.

We choose to set our minds on the flesh in two ways: 1) we choose to set our minds on lustful things or envy, etc. 2) we choose to set our minds on the flesh by not choosing to set our minds on the truth—choosing our default setting.

Perhaps I can summarize the implication of Paul's teaching with **[vs. 12-13]**. *In Christ, you are no longer obligated to live according to your sinful nature.* You are free to love and obey God by Spirit's enabling power.

The reason I want to emphasize *choosing to set our minds* on the Spirit, is because we will not consistently walk in the freedom of Christ until we have taken our thoughts captive to the truth (2Cor 10:5). The truth secures our freedom (John 8:32). And this is why the N.T. repeatedly urges us to renew our minds with the truth.

- **Rom 12:2** – “do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”
- **Eph 4:23** – Paul describes our Christian walk in this way: “you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness, and holiness, and truth” (see also Col 3:10-11).

4. **Walk by the Spirit** (Gal 5:1, 16-17, 25) → Gal 5

This 3rd step is simply taking our position in Christ and our truth-thinking (from God's Word) and putting them into action in our daily life.

Galatians is written to a group of believers who resorted back to their old ways of trying to fulfill the O.T. law through mere human effort (Gal 3:3). Paul sets up the context of Gal 5 in vs. 1: “*It was for freedom that Christ set you free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to the yoke of slavery.*” In other words, the whole purpose of your salvation was so that you could be free from your obligation to the slavery of sin. You are free to obey God; you are free to not sin. So don't give up the freedom that leads to God's favor and blessing.

Illus: Imagine at the end of the Revolutionary War, the early Americans honoring their fallen soldiers and having great celebrations of their newfound freedom from the heavy-handed taxation of King George, and yet a few weeks later resorting back to paying taxes to England. That would be absurd. Yet we commemorate Jesus' death on Good Friday and lavishly celebrate our freedom from sin's bondage on Resurrection Sunday, only to go back to our old costly, sinful patterns of living.

So how do we maintain our freedom? **[Vs. 16-17]** Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. The word ‘walk’ in vs 16 refers to continuous action or habitual lifestyle. Most of our problems in life are the result of walking by the flesh rather than walking by the Spirit. Most of our problems in life are the result of just doing what comes naturally to us, rather than using God's power to steer against the wind.

In a very real sense, Paul is simply calling us to lives of integrity. In vs. 25 he says, “If we live by the Spirit [that is, if our life comes from the Spirit], let us also walk by the Spirit.” The word ‘walk’ in vs. 25 (a different Greek word than vs. 16) means ‘walk in line behind a leader.’ If your life comes from the Spirit, then follow the Spirit in the way of life, the way of Christ. You cannot serve to masters. You will either follow the flesh in opposition to God. Or you will follow the Spirit in a God-pleasing life.

So how do you know if you are walking by the Spirit or the flesh? Well, Paul gives us a sampling of the fruit of each in Galatians 5 which highlights the final step.

5. **Enjoy the fruit of the Spirit** (Gal 5:19-24).

[Gal 5:19-24]

Which list most resembles your life? Which road are you on today? Are you walking by the Spirit or are you walking according to the flesh? Are you walking in the way of Christ or are you simply doing what comes naturally to your sinful nature?

Let me conclude by attempting to summarize this call to walk by the Spirit:

Walking by the Spirit means living out our new life in Christ by walking in the way of Christ, contrary to our sinful inclinations, by renewing our minds with the truth of God's word and depending on the Spirit's power to obey and honor God in our choices, attitudes, and relationships so that the fruit of Spirit (the character of Christ) is the result of our daily living.

Church, if we are going to make disciples, we must walk the road of discipleship—we must walk by the Spirit. *Choose life!*

APT AT

A - ACKNOWLEDGE to God that you are a sinner and cannot do anything of eternal value apart from Christ.

P - PRAY to God that He would equip you to serve Him in the strength that He supplies by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that He gets the glory.

T - TRUST in God with all your heart for a few moments until you have a settled sense of peace that you actually are trusting in the Lord.

A - Act or Go. Do what it is you are trusting in God to do in you and through you. If you have sincerely worked your way through this process, there is no reason to believe that you are acting on your own strength -- at least not entirely on your own strength.

T - THANK God when you are done for His faithfulness to be your helper.