

Live in freedom by the Spirit of Christ (Galatians 5:16–18)

The apostle Paul has proclaimed to the Galatians that it is for freedom that Christ has set believers free (5:1), but that freedom is not to be used as an opportunity for the flesh (5:13). Restricting contact with the world has not been a solution to this challenge, because the lure of temptations follows a person, arising from the desires that lie within each person. But by the Spirit of God who indwells every true believer you can live the Christian life of freedom, submitting to Him, reckoning with the inward spiritual conflict, and appreciating the freedom granted from bondage to the law.

I. *Submit to the Holy Spirit (5:16).*

1. *The command* to walk by the Spirit, that is the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Christ, is intentional, purposeful, and observable. Under the new covenant the Spirit is given to every believer along with a heart desiring to obey, Who also cleanses the heart by the Word (Ezekiel 36:25–27; Jeremiah 31:31; Titus 3:5; Ephesians 5:26; John 15:3; 16:8; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12).
2. *The result* of walking by the Spirit is that you will not fulfil the desires of the flesh. The “flesh” in believers, who have been given a new nature, is that which remains of the fallen nature with its wrong, sinful desires. Emphatically Paul declares that to walk by the Spirit means that the believer will not give in to what the remnant of the old, rebellious nature wants.

Obedience is a choice for the regenerate person who, because of the new heart which God has given, will want to do what is right (Romans 7:18). As you submit to the Spirit, you will not fulfil the desires of the flesh.

II. *Reckon with an internal conflict arising from the presence of the Spirit (5:17).*

1. Two contrary desires pull the believer in opposite directions.
2. Two contrary sources for these desires explain the reason. The flesh and the Spirit are so opposite one another that they are mutually exclusive. Without the Spirit a person is solely of the flesh and spiritually dead (cf. Romans 7:5).
3. Two contrary results become evident: in the believer’s new nature by the Spirit the intent is to do right, but the believer ends of failing, just as Paul struggled having the right desires but failing to carry them out (Romans 7:18–19).

But like Paul the believer can thank God for deliverance in Jesus Christ (Romans 7:24–8:4) and put on Christ making no provision for the flesh (Romans 13:14). By the indwelling Spirit fight against the flesh.

III. *Appreciate the release from being under the law which the Spirit brought (5:18).*

1. *The condition* for concluding that there is freedom from the law is being led by the Spirit. Being led by the Spirit is neither mere feeling nor extra-biblical revelation but is an experience for every child of God (Romans 8:14) as the Spirit applies revealed truth to the believer’s life.
2. *The conclusion* which you can safely draw, if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The flesh foils good purposes of the law (cf. Romans 8:3–4) and reduces the law to that which condemns, restricts, and even stirs up further sinful desires. Being led by the Spirit does not eliminate the battle, but it does indicate that the believer is a child of God and thus no longer under law. The child of God has a soft heart and will desire what God has desired and will not need the restraints of the law. They rest in a freedom from condemnation (Romans 8:1), but appreciate the profit in training in godliness (1 Timothy 4:7–10).

To walk by the Spirit embraces both the work of God and the responsibility of the believer (cf. Philippians 2:12–13). It is your choice, action, and responsibility, yet done by the direction and by power of the Spirit. Live out your freedom in Christ by submitting to the Spirit of Christ.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- In Romans 7:13–23 Paul describes his conflict of doing what he didn’t intend to do and failing to do what he knew he should. How have you faced similar struggles recently?
- Since the Spirit of Christ uses the Word of God to lead and defeat the desires of the flesh, what should you be doing with the Word? Are you doing what you need to be doing?
- Are you more attracted to strictly holding to rules, thinking it will attain holiness, or to just letting God do His work without your involvement? Why do you think that is your inclination? What can you do to guard against falling into error?