

Keep in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:19–26)

Sin is a reality in the life of everyone including Christians. Christians must face the battle with the remnant of the sinful, fallen nature which remains within them. The Spirit of Christ who lives within every true believer opposes the “flesh” and it is only by the Spirit that the believer can produce Christ-like qualities. Paul clearly pictures the conflict and calls upon believers to keep in step with the Spirit.

I. *Two important contrasts (5:19–23)*

1. *An obvious contrast between the flesh and the Spirit*

- a. A life characterized by works of the flesh points to being in the flesh and points to the absence of the Spirit. This is a warning to professing Christians that true conversion is necessary, not merely a superficial confession.
- b. It is obvious (“evident”) that the items listed, and more like them, come from the fallen, human nature and not from God. They cover all kinds of sexual sins, religious sins, social sins, and sins arising from a lack of self-control.
- c. In contrast the Spirit of Christ produces qualities like Christ in the believer. (Cf. John 15:1–11.) These qualities are both products of the Spirit and qualities which are commanded of believers.
 - Love, for example, is a quality of God (1 John 4:8) and the mark of a true disciple (John 13:15). It is commanded of believers. Yet even when the right actions are done like helping those in need (1 John 3:17), it is possible not to do it in love (1 Corinthians 13:3). The Spirit must be leading and working throughout.
 - The same combination of it being a quality of Christ and a command to follow is true for the other fruit of the Spirit: joy (John 15:11, 17:13; Philippians 4:4; peace (John 15:27; 1 Peter 3:11); patience (1 Tim 1:16; Eph 4:2; Col 3:12); kindness (Eph 2:7; Col 3:12); etc.

2. *A less obvious contrast with regard to the law*

- a. The works of the flesh are condemned by the law, but against the fruit of the Spirit there is no law. The law is not needed to restrict the one who has the Spirit.
- b. The fruit of the Spirit fulfills in the believer the righteous requirements of the law (Romans 8:4), whereas the one who is in the flesh does not and cannot submit to God’s law (Romans 8:7).

II. *Two important human responsibilities (5:24–25)*

1. *Past human responsibility: to crucify the flesh*

- a. Those “who belong to Christ” is literally those “of Christ” and in the context of Galatians is much more than belonging. It includes deliverance by Christ (1:3), freedom in Christ (2:4; 5:1), justification in Christ through faith in Christ (2:16–17), redemption by Christ (3:13), in Christ sons of God and Abraham’s offspring (3:26, 29). Especially it is having been crucified with Christ (2:19–20) and having received the Spirit of Christ (3:14, 22).
- b. The action or responsibility “to crucify the flesh with its passions and desires” was done in the past and is therefore not the present putting to death the deeds of the body (Romans 8:13; cf. Col 3:5). It was an act of the believer and hence not directly the union with Christ in His death which God did (cf. Galatians 2:19–20; Romans 6:6). However, when people turn from the world and the flesh to God in Christ, they affirm the just condemnation of their flesh and the crucifixion of Christ as a substitute for them who deserved it. By turning to Christ the believer commits the fleshly attitudes and actions of this world to crucifixion (cf. Gal 6:14).

2. *Present human responsibility (5:25)*

True believers have a new life born of the Spirit. Their new life has begun by the Spirit (3:3). They live by the Spirit. Therefore, if the source of their life is the Spirit, then they should certainly follow the Spirit, that is, keep in step with Him.

III. *One final example*

In verse 26 Paul appears to pick up on his exhortation in verse 15. These were sinful actions and interactions, works of the flesh, which needed to stop. The answer was not law, but submitting to the Spirit and keeping step with Him.

The victory over sin and the flesh was won by Jesus on the cross. But skirmishes with the flesh continue until you meet Jesus face to face. Strive to win those skirmishes by the power of the Spirit, since keeping step with Him is the only way.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- Using the two contrasting lists —works versus fruit— evaluate your own thought life and interactions with others. Is the Spirit’s fruit increasing? Are there works of the flesh you are excusing? How can you better keep in step with the Spirit?
- In light of this passage why is repentance an important part of a person coming to saving faith in Christ?
- Why does the Christian battle with the flesh, if the flesh has been crucified?