

September 18, 2022

Galatians 5:16-24

“Walk By the Spirit!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Paul writes in our epistle lesson (Gal. 5:17) that "... the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other ..." Luther explains: "From all this it is clear what the Christian life is, namely, a trial, warfare, and a struggle." Indeed. There are two people in us, and there is only one whole person. We are a new creation in Jesus Christ and we still carry around with us evil, sinful desires. So we fight against ourselves.

Some of you might recall the words of Steven A. Hein in his book titled *The Christian Life: Cross or Glory?* He writes:

Many Christians have reflected on their Christian Experience and confessed, with much bewilderment, that they really want to serve Christ, but then again they don't ... Duplicity, ambiguity, confusion, and often exasperation are commonly experienced. "I just do not feel in any way altogether in my Christian life," is often the unspoken confession of the Christian's heart. "There must be something terribly wrong with me." Well there is!

Again, we fight against ourselves. We want to serve Jesus, but then again we don't. We would like to think that we are fully done with a life of sin, but the truth is that we are in a constant battle. We want to be like Joseph who, when tempted to sexual immorality, said: "How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God (Gen. 39:9)?" And he ran away from it and suffered for doing right. Yes, we want to be like Joseph but we also know that there is the potential for us to be like David who saw a married woman bathing and took her from her husband and even indirectly killed him to cover up his crime.

Both Joseph and David were believers in the Savior. Their battle was real. One overcame and the other was overwhelmed and lost his faith, but was brought back by grace. If we would want to be like Joseph then we should deeply consider the words of Paul when he writes in our epistle lesson: "... I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh (Gal. 5:16)."

Isn't that one of the objectives of the Christian life - that we do not gratify the desires of the flesh and destroy our walk? **Walk By the Spirit!** That word "walk" depicts a way of life as a particular way or road that is to be followed. This particular word also stresses the idea of a continual action. We are to continually **Walk By the Spirit** all the time. Now, what should really peak our interest is that Paul adds the following to the command **Walk By the Spirit** - he writes: "... and you will not gratify [satisfy] the desires of the flesh." To **Walk By the Spirit** leads to an outcome like Joseph who overcame his sin.

What does it then mean to **Walk By the Spirit**? The answer to that question comes right before our epistle lesson in verses 5 and 13. It says in verse 5, "For through the Spirit, by *faith*, we ourselves eagerly wait for the *hope* of righteousness," and it says in verse 13, "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." If we can unpack these verses we will understand what it means to **Walk By the Spirit**. What is significant at this moment is to see that the way or road that is to be continually followed in this life can be summarized by

the words of Paul in another place (1 Cor. 13:13): “So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” So let’s unpack this the best we can in a short sermon.

Paul says to us that through the Spirit, “by *faith* we ourselves eagerly wait for the *hope* of righteousness.” Faith is promised and pledged to us in the gospel through the Spirit. We have received the Spirit not from our works, but rather through the preaching of faith (Gal. 3). Faith considers the promise and pledge of God to forgive our sins for the sake of Jesus. This faith is a gift that declares us righteous and good because it receives the righteousness and goodness of Jesus. In this declaration of forgiveness and the gift of a clean and peaceful conscience, we eagerly wait for the hope or anticipation that one day we will be completely righteous and good in the dwelling of our Lord God who loves us.

Hope springs from faith in Jesus - his life, cross, and empty tomb. We are joyfully hoping or anticipating all that he has promised and given. Hope is being established steadfast in divine mercy so that we remain courageous and bold in this hope to patiently wait for what Jesus has promised. The anticipation of what we have in Jesus confronts what we could have now if we were to follow our sinful desires. The anticipation of what is to come in Jesus becomes more desirous than satisfying evil wants. Hope that springs from faith, that ever grows in the Spirit and gospel, will also not allow anything to scare us away whether it be sins, death, the devil, hell, or our evil desires. It says in Psalm 26:3 “For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and *I walk in your faithfulness.*”

Luther writes: “So faith’s work and fruit is a happy conscience, a secure heart and a bold countenance before God. But hope tenaciously holds on and waits for what God has promised, come what may. Hope guards us especially in times of temptation and adversity.” Listen to what Paul writes in Romans 5:1-5,

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Hope, that springs from faith through the Spirit and the gospel, is nothing but abandoning one’s sinful self and waiting for that which is for now unseen. It is a certainty of what is coming in the future and it judges the future as being greater than any moment down here. Hope defends what the gospel promises and what faith trusts. It patiently waits for what is promised. It advances the truth to destroy the lie. It advances what is unseen over what is seen. It advances what is eternal over the momentary. It advances doing good over doing evil. It waits for things and is sure that they will come because of God’s love.

Now we come to love which flows from faith and hope. Again, it says in verse 13 before our epistle lesson: “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.” There is much here to understand. First, it is important for us to remember that we have come to know through faith how God has loved us by sending his Son into the flesh for our good and salvation. By dying for our sins he has helped us by keeping us from being eternally damned. Because of his love for us, we can defy and mock sins, death, devil and every trouble. We will naturally love him back and desire everything that he desires. As he sacrificed himself we will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving and will call on the name of the Lord in the presence of his people.

Since God does not need our good works, we praise and thank him. But this we do in the presence of others. This is what Paul means when he says that we do not use our freedom as an opportunity for the sinful flesh to do what it wants. Rather, we use our freedom in the gospel to busy ourselves with love that serves our neighbor. We preach the Gospel and see to it that our neighbor is freed from sins and cared for, whether it be in our family, among our friends, in the church or even those who hate us. We love our Lord God because he loved us. We cling to him, anticipate all that he has promised, and busy ourselves with others because we know that the down here is passing away and the only thing that matters is forever.

So, if we are finding that in our lives we are more often like David who unrepentantly chose sin rather than Joseph, who would not sin against his Lord God, then the problem lies in the realm of faith, hope, and love. The only cure for this is to grow in the Spirit, that is, in his testimony of Jesus. This will grow and strengthen faith, hope, and love that we may walk. While the truths given to us in our epistle lesson for this morning lay a foundation for our journey, I pray that you will grow in that foundation so that you will more and more overcome everything that seeks to destroy what you have in Jesus.

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott

Thoughts for this sermon came from Martin Luther, *Festival Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils: Sermons for the Main Festivals and Saints Days of the Church Year; Winter and Summer Selections*, trans. Joel R. Baseley (Dearborn, Mich.: Mark V Publications), 31–37.