

Basic Christianity
From An Urban Perspective Unit 2
Week 2: Walking By the Spirit

Introduction

To grow spiritually, we have to know who we are. As we grow to appreciate who we are in Christ and focus on our new identity, our actions begin to change.

But what kinds of action are we to take? What does God want us to do?

Most Christians want to resist the pull of their sin nature and follow God. They try their best to stop doing what is wrong and start doing what is right – like keeping God’s laws and commandments. But when we try to do this on our own, the result is always *failure*. Trying to follow God in your own strength will *never* work.

Legalism

Definition: Legalism is the attitude or belief that our *acceptance* is based on performance. Legalists are usually focused on following the rules and motivated by guilt. They believe that they will succeed if they just try a little harder. You’ve probably heard people say:

“I’m just going to quit thinking those evil thoughts.”

“From now on I’m going to quit drinking so much, stop smoking weed, and quit losing my temper with my kids.”

“I’m really going to try to be a better person.”

As noble as these goals may sound, they are destined for failure. **Efforts at self-reform and following *rules* won't work. In fact, this can actually cut you off from God’s life-changing power. Consider some of the most common effects of legalism:**

***Self-punishment:* Punish yourself by doing good things to make up for sins.**

Legalists make vows not to sin. Then, when the vow is broken, they are plagued with guilt. Guilt drives them to go to church on Sunday to make it up to God. Then they blow it again and feel guilty. This makes them feel worse and even further from God. The cycle goes on like this until either the sin is rationalized away ("I guess it's not really all that bad"), or the legalists concludes, "There's no hope for me. That's just the way I am. I'll never be able to grow with God."

***Duty focus:* The Christian life is driven by a sense of obligation.** Going to church or helping other people is viewed as something we have to do to be “good Christians.” Once people like this have done their duty (gone to church, given a little money) the rest of their life is their time to do what they want.

Condemning others:* Legalists are sin-focused. They are preoccupied with their own sin and everyone else’s. If they can knock their neighbor down a few notches, they can **look down their nose at others to feel better about themselves.*

So if legalism is bad, how are we supposed to relate to all of the commands in Scripture? God has given us his Law, his rules for life, because he loves us. The Law is good and serves a useful purpose.

“Is the law of God evil? Of course not! The law is not sinful, but it was the law that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet.’” – Romans 7:7

Like an X-ray, the Law shows us where we have a problem. But you can't rub an X-ray image on your broken bone to heal it! An X-ray reveals the fracture, **but can do *nothing* to fix it.** That's how the Law works.

The Spirit-led life.

God doesn't want you to *focus* on a list of rules. He wants to give you the guidance and power you need to follow him.

“But now we have been released from the law, for we died with Christ, and we are no longer captive to its power. Now we can really serve God, not in the old way by obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way, by the Spirit.” – Romans 7:5, 6

“If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.” – Galatians 5:18.

To be “led by the Spirit,” or to “walk by the Spirit” means that we *depend* on God both for our life *direction*...

“If we are living now by the Holy Spirit, let us follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.” – Galatians 5:25

... and the *power* to follow his plan.

“By his mighty power at work within us, he is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope.” – Ephesians 3:20

How to walk by the Spirit

Walking by the Spirit is a command.

“But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.” – Galatians 5:16

This means that we have a choice to make. We do not naturally turn to God for direction and power. We are used to following our own path in our own strength. Every day, every moment, we need to tell God, “Lord, I really want you to take control of my life today. Help me see things through your eyes. Give me your heart of love for others.”

Are you ready to try living this way? If so, here are three ways to invite the Spirit to guide and empower you.

1. **Set your mind on the things of the Spirit (Romans 8:5-7 NASB):** What influences the way you think? The Bible says, “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think” (Romans 12:2). What we choose to dwell on is important. **The most important thing we can focus on is “the things of the Spirit,” who we are in Christ (Col. 3:1-3). See handout.** Discussion: When we're not focusing on who we are in Christ, what fills our minds? How does that affect our actions?

2. **Keep in *step* with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25): Keeping in step with the Spirit means responding to the conviction and promptings of the Spirit.** You can speak to God in prayer, but he wants to speak to you as well. God will use conviction to guide you away from what is wrong and toward what is right. He will also prompt you to serve and love the people around you in specific ways. This often happens as you are prayerfully reading your Word.

3. **Sow to the Spirit (Galatians 6:7, 8 NASB): God has given us his Word to teach us, Christian fellowship to encourage us, and prayer to communicate with us. Sowing to the Spirit is choosing to take advantage of these provisions.** As we participate in these activities, we are more likely to come under the influence of the Spirit. Just remember, we don’t participate in fellowship, read the Bible, and pray to score points with God. He has given each of these provisions to us for our benefit. We eat when our body tells us we need food. We sow to the Spirit because only the Spirit can transform us.

The outcome:

A willingness to *serve* (Galatians 5:13): Since God is love, those who are led by him are characterized by love. Love is the true measure of Christian maturity and clear evidence that the Spirit is at work.

Moral transformation (Galatians 5:22-23): People who walk by the Spirit change! It’s a miracle. If you’ve ever been with someone who has lived a Spirit-led life for many years, you can sense the life of God in them. God wants to purge us of our worldly and selfish thinking and behaviors. But, thankfully, he doesn’t show us all of our problems at the same time. He graciously shows us the issues he’s concerned about as we step out to serve others.

Memory Verse: Galatians 5:16