

Gal. 5:16-18 (WCF 16:4-5) "What Holds You Back?"

For the Children: Have you ever tried to go a whole day without sinning? Even when we think we've been good, there are many thoughts, words or actions that God would not call 'good.' Why is it so hard for us to behave the way the Lord wants us to? It is because we have an old, sinful nature, as well as the part of us that wants to obey God. We can't get rid of that old nature. Only the Lord can remove it and He will not do so until we leave this world. But He will, in the meantime, help us to resist sin and make a start in doing good. He helps us by having sent His Son to stop the devil from controlling us; by sending His Spirit to change us; and by giving us His Word that tells us how He wants us to live. **Questions:** Why is it not possible for us to earn our way into heaven by the good things we do? What does it mean to "walk by the Spirit"? Is there anything we can do that will help us to do more good works?

Introduction:

First Point: Walking by the Flesh

- 1) **The Flesh:** In this case, the "flesh" refers to that part of us that is hostile to God – the old nature that clings to the believer and completely dominates the unbeliever. As a result, the unbeliever can only act out of hostility to God, whether consciously or subconsciously.
- 2) **The War:** Because the believer also has a new nature, created by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, there is a constant struggle within the life of the Christian. Flesh and Spirit are opposed to one another (v. 17). See Rom. 7:15f. As a result, we do not always do the good things that we want to do to please the Lord (v. 17 with Rom. 7:19). This is why, no matter how hard we try to be faithful to the Lord, we remain far from perfect in this life. The same is true of even the most godly believers.
- 3) **Against Works-Righteousness:** WCF 16:4-5 use this doctrine of sin against all forms of works-righteousness. Historic Roman Catholic doctrine and practice seem to be especially in view with the statement that even the most obedient believers are far from being able to do works of "supererogation" – works that do more than what God has asked of us (Art. 4). Romanism taught that some saints had an excess of merit, which could be drawn, by the church/pope, from a "treasury of merit," to lessen the time spent in purgatory. Art 5 insists that there is no merit in the works of men.
- 4) **Arguments against Man's Merit:** Art. 5 lists several reasons why we should not regard our works as meritorious. First, we would see the lack of merit if we could compare our works now with the ones we will be doing in the next life. Second, our failure to attain to God's standards in our works, as well as our active disobedience, have created a debt to God that we can never pay. Only the infinite value of Christ's work can bridge the infinite gulf between the Holy God and sinners. We are, at best, only "unprofitable servants" doing our duty (Lk. 17:10). Third, all the good that we do is moved by His Spirit and sanctified by His Son (WCF 16:3) – while all that comes from our side is tainted by sin. Fourth, if God would judge us only according to our own (de-)merits, we would not be able to endure.

Second Point: Walking by the Spirit

- 1) **A Command to All Believers:** All believers are commanded here to walk by the Spirit. This is not about a higher plane of Christian holiness for a select few. It can be commanded because every believer is given what he needs to walk in this way – the regenerating work of the Spirit, the gift of faith, the sanctifying work of the Spirit and behind that, the work of Christ. See Eph. 3:14-19.
- 2) **Not Carrying Out the Desires of the Flesh:** When we seek the Lord's help, receive the guidance and leading of His Spirit and follow that lead, we can resist the devil and the flesh, instead obeying the commands of the Lord. This does not mean that we will do so consistently. But it does leave us without excuse when we fail to resist temptation.
- 3) **Not under Law:** When v. 18 refers to those who are led by the Spirit not being "under the Law," it is referring to those who refuse to seek the ground of their justification in their own law-keeping. There is no salvation to be found in such an approach. The only way our good deeds can be found acceptable is through the merits of Jesus Christ. Vss. 19-21 list some of the deeds that come from walking in the flesh. Vss. 22-23 list some fruits of the Spirit's indwelling. Our text gives hope for

growth in grace, since it implies that we can begin to follow the Spirit's lead, with the Lord's help – a matter of grace, not our own merit.

Conclusion: