

Introduction

Last week, I had a lot to say about trains. We were exploring Paul's exhortation that the Galatians enjoy their freedom in Christ. Yet they needed to understand the nature of that freedom. It does not mean the freedom to indulge in fleshly desires. It is the freedom to obey God, the freedom to do what we were made to do, and the freedom to enjoy what real freedom is. So we compared our freedom in Christ to the freedom of a train as long as it remains on the tracks. I hope we have a good understanding then of what it means to be free in Christ. The NEED to stay on the rails is apparent, but we are left with another issue. Now that we know we need to STAY on track, we need to consider HOW it is we may do just that. This is exactly where Paul takes us in the succeeding verses.

[Read text and Pray]

We talked last time about the freedom in which Christ's followers are to live. Looking carefully at Galatians 5:13-15, we said freedom is not permission to live in the fulfillment of selfish fleshly desires and inclinations. True freedom is the release from bondage to fleshly lusts to live for God's purpose in our lives, and that purpose is love—serving one another in love. As a train is free when it remains on the rails, so Christ's followers live out true freedom as we hold fast to the rails of God's will and through love we serve one another.

But living out this freedom, holding fast to the rails, is actually beyond what we ourselves can do. There is stout opposition. And we are weak. But God has provided for us the means by which we can stay on track. So Paul moves from verses 13-15 forward to verses 16 and following to teach believers in Christ how to hold fast to the rails. Here are four key truths the knowledge of which can enable Christ's followers to avoid being derailed from the freedom in which we are intended to live.

First, we are told that ...

I. The Flesh Opposes.

I am actually skipping over verse 16 and saving it for the last point because it comes down to what we should DO. Instead of starting there, I am starting with Paul's point in verse 17 in which he sets forth what it is like to live as a Christian in this world in this age. It is to experience conflict. He says, "For 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, to keep you from doing the things you want to do."

The follower of Christ—the true believer—has been justified before God. He or she has experienced the new birth. They are united with Christ, and the power of sin over them has been removed. However, there remains a battle. There remains a conflict within. Fleshly desires have not been removed. Followers of Christ are assaulted by ungodly desires and inclinations. Giving in to them is not we WANT to do, but it is what the FLESH wants to do. And sometimes followers of Christ give in to the flesh.

It can be demoralizing. Most Christians wonder why they experience all sorts of desires and inclinations for that which is ungodly. They protest, "but I repented and trusted in Jesus Christ; how can I still experience fleshly desires for that which Christ hates?" No Christian should be surprised by the sinful inclinations and desires of the flesh. It is a reality of life in the present age. Never take

those inclinations and desires lightly, but do not be distraught, thinking maybe you are not a Christian because you experience this conflict within.

The flesh opposes the Spirit and the Spirit opposes the flesh to keep you from doing the things you want to do. Here is the explanation for why followers of Christ are not yet perfect. Sanctification is a stage of life wherein the believer engages in battle against fleshly desires and progresses more and more in overcoming them. But if there is one thing we learn from verse 17, it is that there IS a battle; there is a conflict. The flesh opposes. Living the Christian life is not gliding down a slide. It is climbing a mountain. It is not reclining in an easy chair. It is an aggressive daily pursuit of godliness.

If we return to the illustration of freedom as a train being on the rails, what Paul says in verse 17 is an indication that there are forces at work seeking to bring you and me to a spiritual derailment—namely those forces are the desires of the flesh. The first thing we must know as we travel down the tracks of freedom is that we will face opponents whose intent is to get us off track. We need to be wary of the desires of the flesh so that we will not be caught off-guard. It is dangerous to proceed down a path naively oblivious to the fact that enemies stalk around every corner. Fleshly desires are tools of the devil who prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. Of first importance, we need to be on guard. In verse 13, Paul warned the believers not to use their freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. Here he reiterates that the desires of the flesh pose a danger. God's people need to be on guard in order that they are not derailed by them.

Getting down to the nitty gritty in your life and mine, what Paul is teaching here is incredibly important information. It is always shameful when we sin. It is always cosmic treason against God. Sin should never be taken lightly, should never be down-played. At the same time it should not shock us when we experience the desires of the flesh and it should not drive us to insanity when on occasion, we give in to them. We are in a battle. There is a conflict. And there are times when the desires of the flesh keep us from doing the things we want to do. It is no excuse. It is no justification. It is no rationalization. But it will help us in our failures to remember we are in a conflict and when we do sin, not all is lost. It is not totally shocking. We can remain hopeful if we will repent and be restored.

The flesh opposes, but ...

II. The Spirit Leads

There is opposition from the desires of the flesh, yes, but the Spirit of God is a superior power. Those who belong to Christ are led by the Spirit. In verse 18, Paul contrasts the opposition of the flesh with the leadership of the Spirit. He says, "But if you are led by the Spirit." We need to answer two questions here: who is led by the Spirit and what does it mean to be led by the Spirit.

Who is led by the Spirit? All true believers are being led by the Spirit. This is not a super-class of saints or an on-and-off group sometimes led and sometimes not, but everyone who follows the Lord Jesus Christ. It is clear from the path of reasoning that Paul follows in this letter. Those who are being led by the Spirit are those who walk by the Spirit (5:16). Those who walk by the Spirit are those who are called to freedom. It is those who according Galatians 3:29 are Christ's and Abraham's offspring, and they are the people of faith. This is a point Paul made in the Great Romans 8 as well. In verse 14 of that chapter, Paul states, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."

So what does it mean to be led by the Spirit? Leading is what the Spirit of God does in the lives of those who belong to him. It is God at work in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. If you are in Christ, if you are a true believer in Jesus, then the Spirit of God is leading you. You might compare it to God's leading of the children of Israel out of Egypt to the land of Promise. They were led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. They did not need a map. They followed where Yahweh led. They were not completely cooperative with the leading of the Lord, but they were led nevertheless. Even so when it pleases God to reveal himself in the life of a man or woman, he brings them from death to life by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in their life. The Holy Spirit takes the initiative. He began a good work in us and he will complete it through leading us along by working in us the writing of the law of God on our hearts and in intensifying our desires for God and that which accords with his holiness.

Ezekiel prophesied what it means to be led by the Spirit. The Lord spoke through him in chapter 36 verses 26-27, saying, "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." Rightly, then, does William Hendriksen define the leading of the Holy Spirit in this way: "It means sanctification. It is that constant, effective, and beneficent influence which the Holy Spirit exercises within the hearts of God's children whereby they are being directed and enabled more and more to crush the power of indwelling sin and to walk in the way of God's commandments, freely and cheerfully."

The leading of the Holy Spirit is not something Christians experience on an occasion now and then or only when they are being good. Rather it is the course of our lives. It is a gracious work of God. Psalm 23 sets forth a sweet picture of what this means in a spiritual sense. The Spirit is our shepherd who leads us to green pastures and quiet waters and restores our souls and guides us in the paths of righteousness for his namesake. His rod and staff keep us in check and protect us from the enemy. If you are a believer in Christ you are led by the Spirit. You may not always be cooperative but he is leading you. It is an incredible gift of mercy that God leads his dear children along. And the evidence of the Spirit's leading and working is that his fruit will be produced in your life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. So the leading of the Spirit is more than merely pointing out the way. He actually becomes a controlling influence in our lives. Praise God!

The flesh opposes, but the Spirit leads, and next ...

III. The Truth Sustains

Here is a truth that gives hope to the one who recognizes the strength of the desires of the flesh, who is saddened by the battle within, who just can't wait until the day when there will be no more battling, when we are glorified: (verse 18) "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." If you are led by the Spirit you have been set free. But if you are under the law, you are under a lot. According to Paul in this letter, if you are under the law, you are under a curse (3:10), under sin (3:22), and under a guardian. If you are under the law, you are enslaved; you are in need of redemption. To be under the law is to be under its tyranny and under the yoke of having to keep it all, and under the punishment it demands for disobeying it.

But if you are led by the Spirit, none of that applies to you. You may be in a conflict and you may bear battle scars. You may be weary. You may be saddened by the slowness of your progress; you may feel discouraged at your sin. But you can still hope in God. And this can encourage you to gird up your loins and run with endurance and fight with gratitude and determination. The Holy Spirit can use this truth to encourage your heart and enflame your desires for godliness.

The flesh opposes, but the Spirit leads; meanwhile the truth sustains, and here is the key ...

IV. The Christian Prevails

Now we come back to the first verse in this text. Here is the key to stay on the rails of freedom in Christ—the key to living in freedom but not using your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. Here is how NOT to gratify the desires of the flesh. Paul exhorts, “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16).

Walk by the Spirit. It is a reference to how we are to live one moment at a time. Our walk is how we progress forward through time. Each step must be taken by the Spirit. Each moment of our lives must be lived out in submission to the Spirit of God if we are to avoid gratifying the desires of the flesh.

Here is what you need to know. The stress here is on the power and work of the Holy Spirit. It is not a matter of me but he. Remember, it is the Holy Spirit who is leading the believer. “Walking by the Spirit,” then, is not something I do in order to obtain the power of the Spirit. I have the Spirit and his power is at work in me if I am in Christ. It is even by the power of the Spirit that I am able to “walk by the Spirit.” It is as Jesus said in John 15: apart from you me you can do . . . nothing. It is as Paul tells the Philippians, “that it is God who works in you both to WILL and to WORK for his good pleasure.”

So then how does one “walk by the Spirit”? It is a matter of faith. Paul says to the Colossians, “As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (2:6). How did you receive Jesus? By faith, and that’s how you walk in him. It is a matter of submission. It follows where the Spirit leads. Walking by the Spirit is when I am living in accord with the leading of the Spirit by the power of the Spirit. And all that tells me is I am supposed to do something only the Spirit of God can bring about. Well it is the same way with believing, is it not. We preach the gospel and urge people to repent and believe knowing that they will do no such thing unless God is at work to bring it about in them. Yes, but when the Spirit is at work, what do they do? They believe in Christ.

So knowing that we are completely dependent upon the Spirit to produce in us what we need to do, do we just sit there and wait? No. We do what we are told to do. We submit. We obey. We line up our desires with the desires of the Spirit. And then there is this promise. When I walk by the Spirit I will not carry out the desires of the flesh.

All this in my mind can seem confusing. At the end of the day you may well be saying, “but what exactly am I supposed to be doing?” So I am going to give you a set of five practical to-do’s that express as best one can how to walk by the free and sovereign work of the Spirit. These five are not original with me. They are hand-me-downs from John Piper.

First, acknowledge that we are helpless to do good. It is the confession of Paul from Romans 7:18: “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.” The same is true of you and me. Nothing good dwells in our flesh. We lack the ability to do what is right. We need to acknowledge that—that any good that comes out of the Christian’s life comes through the work of God the Holy Spirit.

Second, pray for God to work in me what I cannot. The benedictory prayer that concludes the book of Hebrews is such a prayer. Listen: “Now may the God of peace ... equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ.” This is a prayer that GOD might work in us what it takes to do his will and please him. We should pray

the same way—day-by-day and moment by moment. “God, YOU work in me through your Holy Spirit what I cannot do myself, that I may do your will.” Psalm 51:10 is just such a prayer as well: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” So, pray. First, admit. Second, pray for divine work.

Third, trust the Lord. Believe what he has said. Sin will no longer have dominion over you. Desires within do not equal dominion. By grace you can say, “NO” to fleshly desires. That’s all they are once you are in Christ. They are just desires. They have no power over you. I think faith overcomes sin in part because it truly embraces what God says about the desires of the flesh. Believers are free from such bondage. Trust God by believing what he has said and behaving accordingly.

Fourth, act the way you know is right. Obey. The flesh is sluggish. Don’t let it slow you down. Remember God not only is at work within us to work for his good pleasure but also to will for his good pleasure. When you will to obey God with the right spirit, to do the right thing with the right motive, guess who is at work in you? It is God!

Fifth, render thanks to God for any good works that flow through your life. They are actually not your works; they are the Spirit’s fruit. What is good and godly that flows from your life is the fruit of the Spirit. It is what ultimately the Spirit of God produces through you. Paul recognized good in the life of Titus. But he didn’t run to Titus to exclaim how great a guy he was. This is what he said (2 Corinthians 8:16), “But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you.” If it is God who is at work in us, then it should be God who gets the glory for any and every good fruit that is produced.

Now, I am adding one more item to this list. It is really general, but we must not overlook its role in the leading and working and fruit-producing work of the Spirit of God. Here it is. We should make every effort to attend to the means of grace that God has set before us. He prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies. That table is set with the precious word of God. We should attend to its preaching, teaching, and reading. We should study it, memorize it, and meditate upon it. That table is set with Christian fellowship and accountability, with the observance of the Lord’s Supper, with the strength-imparting sacrifice of worship both personal and corporate. Never let us fail to see the importance of each of these means of grace and the connection between them and the work of God’s Spirit in our hearts and lives.

Conclusion

John Owen, puritan pastor who lived 1616-1683, famously inscribed these words: “be killing sin or sin will be killing you.” In connection with our text we could also say, “hold fast to the rails or the desires of the flesh will be derailing you.” We mortify sin the same way that we pursue righteousness. We must walk by the Spirit. We live with the tension that we must do what we cannot. But if we are in Christ, we are led by the Spirit. It is by his power at work in us that we mortify the flesh and overflow with the fruit of the Spirit. It is by his work that we stay on the rails of Christian freedom. So what do we do? Yield to the desires produced in your heart by the Holy Spirit. Acknowledge your inability. Pray for his ability to work in you. Trust and obey him. And give him the praise for what he is doing through you.