

“In Step with the Spirit”
 (Sanctification)
 Galatians 5:16-22
 Dr. Jerry Nelson
 July 27, 2003

Today’s subject is holiness.

I might have just as effectively begun the message by saying,
 “Today’s message is on root canals.”

“Holiness” sounds painful if not irrelevant.

Some, maybe many, of us operate day to day in or between two spiritual conditions: Uneasiness and apathy.

Some of the time we live with a low-grade uneasiness about God – feeling that we aren’t quite measuring up and sometimes feeling that maybe we aren’t even Christians.

When we are in this **uneasiness mode** of thinking or feeling about God, we attempt to correct the uneasiness by **doing** more.

We believe in God just enough to fear that if we don’t measure up or at least “get saved” we will be in trouble after death.

So we pray a prayer asking Jesus to forgive us and take us to heaven when we die.

And then we try to live good enough lives that he won’t back out on the deal when death comes.

And we believe enough in God that when life isn’t going the way we want it to, we get more consistent about doing the right things so that God will “weigh-in” on our side and make things turn out better for us here and now.

Other times and maybe much of the time we live in **the Apathetic mode** – not even thinking about our relationship with God, indifferent to what he might think, working hard on our own to make life what we want it to be.

And we do just enough of what we consider our religious obligations to keep from slipping into the uneasiness mode.

As long as life is going relatively okay, we try to maintain it by staying on God’s good side.

So where's the relevance of holiness? We're managing!
Who needs it?

Listen carefully to this statement from Hebrews 12:14:

“Without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

What do you think God means by that?

Listen to the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul make similar statements:

- Matthew 5:20 “I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of... the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.
- Matthew 7:21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.
- Ephesians 5:5 “No immoral, impure or greedy person...has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ...”

And then from the passage of Scripture we will focus on today: Galatians 5:19 “I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this (sexual immorality... hatred, discord, jealousy... selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness...and the like) will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

I suspect that by quoting these verses I have created some spiritual dis-equilibrium (for those verses certainly put some responsibility on us) so again I ask, is holiness relevant?

Now having asked that, I want to bring holiness into sharper focus.

The Apostle Peter quotes God from the Old Testament:

1 Peter 1:16 “Be holy, because I am holy.”

God was not telling us to be God – he did not say “be holy **as** I am holy”.

That would be impossible. Only God can be God.

But he did say “be holy **because** I am holy.”

We are to be holy because we are made in the image of God.

We were created to reflect the character of God.

We are most fully human when we think and act as we were created to think and act.
So holiness is both an ethical obligation and an exciting possibility.

By an exciting possibility I mean that we were created to live in relationship with God and each other.

Jesus said it this way in John 17:3 “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

“Eternal life” is not just about the length of life but about the quality of that life – real life, true life, life as God designed us to live it in communion with him and each other.

Some people think they “know” God because they believe he exists or because they are very religious.

John Wesley wrote, “Right opinion (or knowledge) is, at best, a very slender part of religion. Though (a right heart) cannot exist without right (knowledge), yet right knowledge may exist without (a right heart). There may be right (knowledge) of God without either love or right (attitude) toward him. Satan is proof of this.” (In Tozer, The Pursuit of God, 8-9)

The exciting possibility of holiness is that we might actually get to know God.

The Westminster Catechism affirms this:

“The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

A.W. Tozer said it this way: “Religion, so far as it is genuine, is in essence the response of created personalities to the creating personality – God.” (Tozer, The Pursuit of God, 13).

If we have the God-enabled sense to see past today, to think beyond a mere 80 or 90 years, we realize that life is about God.

And a relationship with that God is not only relevant it is at the very heart of life.

We are called to holiness because therein is true life as God created it to be.

- John 10:10 I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.
- John 15:9-11 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”
Jesus is not saying obey God so you stay on his good side – he is saying enjoy the relationship.
- Psalm 16:11 “You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

So holiness is not just about measuring up to some standard of right and wrong, it is about a relationship.

Oh we will increasingly live by God's holy standards, but that is not the goal – the goal is relationships unfettered by the sins that separate and destroy.

It is about living as we were designed by God to live in relationship with him and each other.

Most of us are emotional recluses – never getting close to each other and much less to God!

Is holiness relevant? “Without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

You might say, “Well Jesus has made me holy.

“He forgave all my sin and I accepted his righteousness as my own when I became a Christian and therefore in God's eyes I am holy.”

That is absolutely correct **as far as it goes.**

But to leave it there and to think of practical day to day holiness as optional is not only dangerous to your soul, it is also sad – sad for us to miss so much of what God has to offer in this life.

So how do we grow in holiness?

How do we become more like what God created us to be?

Here is the way the Bible describes it:

- Galatians 4:19 “Until Christ is formed in you” (leading some to call it “spiritual formation”)
- Ephesians 4:13 “Become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (leading some to refer to it as “spiritual growth”)
- 2 Corinthians 3:18 “And we... are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”
- And Romans 8:29 “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, (leading some to call it “Christlike-ness”)
- And 1 Thessalonians 4:3 “It is God's will that you should be sanctified.” (leading to the older term, ‘sanctification’.)

And what is that action of “spiritual formation” or “sanctification” or growth in holiness?

The Westminster Catechism answers the question this way: Sanctification is that “work of God’s free grace whereby we are renewed in the whole (person) after the image of God and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness.” (Answer 35 in the Westminster Shorter Catechism”

Theologian John Owen writing several hundred years ago defined it as follows: “Sanctification is an immediate work of the Spirit of God on...believers, purifying and cleansing their natures from the pollution of sin, renewing in them the image of God, and thereby enabling them, (by)...grace, to yield obedience unto God...by virtue of the life and death of Jesus Christ...” (John Owen, Works, 3:386)

Now I want you to open your Bible to a text wherein God explains this so well.

Galatians 5:16-26

“So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

^{GAL 5:19} The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

^{GAL 5:22} But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

I want us to look first at verse 17 because it describes the setting of what the Apostle is teaching.

In verse 17 Paul writes, “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature.”

Paul refers to a “sinful nature” and elsewhere the Bible teaches that we are sinners from conception.

A sinful propensity or inclination, a predisposition to sin is part of our spiritual DNA by virtue of being part of a fallen human race.

Adam’s sinfulness and consequently God’s condemnation transferred to all of us.

Romans 5:12-18 “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned... For... the many died by the trespass of the one man... The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation... For... by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man... Consequently... the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men...”

You may not like that truth but the Bible declares it – we are born sinners.

Not only are we born as sinners, but as Dallas Willard in his book Renovation of the Heart reminds us, we are also born into a world that takes our evil nature and further shapes us in sin.

If sanctification is about reshaping us, re-forming us, transforming us, it is because we are first of all misshapen and malformed by sin.

Selfishness, greed, envy, revenge, lust, jealousy, and the like are all around us, influencing us, shaping us.

They are in the commercials we see, the programs and movies we watch, the people we live around.

And our sinful nature agrees with the sinful influences around us. And the result is a sinful self-centeredness that manifests itself in all kinds of relationship-destroying behavior.

But when we are “born again”, when we become Christians, a powerful new person and influence are introduced - the Spirit of God takes up residence with us.

Jesus said, John 14:16-17 “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever-- the Spirit of truth...for he lives with you and will be in you.”

So close, so intimate is the Spirit’s relationship with us that Jesus and the NT writers speak of him as “in” us.

He is a personal, ever-present, powerful influence.

Romans 8:9 “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.

The old sin nature with its evil inclinations is not gone but by the Spirit, a new more powerful inclination comes and begins to work in us to conquer the old.

Romans 6:3-4 “Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

The death-grip that those old sinful inclinations had on us has been broken through our relationship with Jesus’ death and resurrection.

But even after we become Christ-followers (Christians) those old sinful influences (from within and without) are still there.

Or again as Paul says it in verse 17: “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.”

My old bent toward selfishness didn’t just disappear when I became a Christian.

And the influences around me urging me toward self-protection and self-promotion didn’t stop being influences.

Instead, the Spirit’s entrance into my life set up a bitter battle – a battle between my old sinful inclinations and what sin shaped me into and new desires and what the Spirit of God desires to reshape me into.

And if you have any self-awareness as a Christian, you know something of that battle.

It is not just new Christians who struggle with a conflict of desires – wanting to live in a way that is pleasing to Jesus but also wanting to live in the old ways that seem pleasing to us.

Even Christians of many years know that the struggle between the old selfish desires and the new way of the Spirit can be intense at times.

The Apostle Paul, long into his spiritual formation, described how intense that struggle could sometimes be.

Romans 7:15-24 “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing... When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my... I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.”

Jerome, an early church leader tried to escape temptation by entering a monastery in the desert but found it was no cure.

“O how often I imagined that was in the midst of the pleasures of Rome while I was stationed in the desert... I, who because of the fear of hell had condemned myself to such a hell and who had not but scorpions and wild animals for company, often thought that I was dancing in a chorus with girls. My face was pale from fasting, but I burned with passionate desires within my freezing body...” Luther’s Works (LW 27:68-69)

Paul writes that the conflict is so intense, Galatians 5:17_“**that you do not do what you want.**”

When I want to do right, my old sinful disposition blocks me and when I want to do wrong, the Spirit within me blocks me.

On my own I don’t achieve either.

Even sin brings no ultimate pleasure (or as Clarence Jordan put it in his Cotton Patch Bible, “That is why you can’t run wild, doing as you please.”) and I can’t seem to do the good I sometimes want to do.

So what is the answer to this conflict that, on our own, results in, at best, a stalemate?

Paul responds, Galatians 5:16, 25 “**So I say, live by the Spirit...Keep in step with the Spirit.**”

What does he mean?

Last week we looked at the idea of being filled with the Spirit.

This week we deal, in essence, with the same idea.

Recent evangelicalism has made so much of the “filling of the Spirit” that it has been put into a class of its own as an event or a series of events that we must seek in order to live successful Christianity.

But it is instructive to me that, with one possible exception, the metaphor of being “filled” or “full” of the Spirit is used only in the narrative passages of Luke/Acts.

I am not suggesting that being filled with the Spirit is not a biblical phrase – it clearly is.

But I am saying that being “filled” is not a special category all of its own.

The New Testament uses many metaphors and analogies to describe the way of holiness.

The following phrases are expressive of one idea:

John 21:22 (Jesus said) “follow me”

Galatians 5:25 “live by the Spirit”

Galatians 5:25 “keep in step with the Spirit,”

Galatians 5:18 and Romans 8 “led by the Spirit

Romans 8:6 “controlled by the Spirit”

Romans 8:6 “live in accordance with the Spirit”

Romans 7:6 “serve in the new way of the Spirit”

Ephesians 5:18 “be filled with the Spirit”

1 John 1:7 “walk in the light as he is in the light.”

1 John 2:6 “Walk as Jesus did.”

In all these figures of speech we have the same idea declared by Paul here in Galatians 5:16 **“Live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”**

Choose to live life under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

The dominant influence in our lives, the influence that trumps all other influences, is the Holy Spirit.

When there are conflicting values, conflicting desires, our new desires, enabled by the Spirit can win.

When sinful desires influence me, the more powerful influence of the Spirit enables me to do the right thing instead of the wrong.

Even as I say that I realize that in my own experience that is not always the outcome.

Many times I have struggled with the right and wrong and even though I am a Christian, indwelled by the Spirit, I have chosen the wrong.

How did that happen if the Spirit is the stronger influence?

How it happens is the same way it was happening to the Galatians to whom Paul was writing.

The Galatian Christians thought that once they were saved by grace through faith they had to live the Christian life by their own efforts at doing the right things.

We fall into the same thinking: “I’m saved by grace but now I have to live up to my new status as a child of God.”

And so we set out to do what a Christian ought to do – we read our Bibles and we pray and we go to church and all the other things good Christians are supposed to do.

But it is not long before our good intentions are overwhelmed by our old desires.

But then we get convicted for not living like a Christian should live and so we double our efforts at doing it right.

We join a Bible study group, we get into a Scripture memorization program, we pick up a “read-through the Bible in a year” brochure, we get into an accountability group – all in an effort to keep doing the right things.

But after several cycles of partial success ending in mostly failure, we get discouraged and largely give up and live in that state of uneasiness toward God that I spoke of earlier.

Some even get cynical, thinking to themselves that holiness may be talked about but no one really does it.

And they take secret delight in some “do-goody two-shoes” finally having his feet of clay exposed – thinking, “See, they couldn’t do it either!”

And they fall into that twilight zone between apathy and uneasiness.

Earlier in this letter, Paul wrote, Galatians 3:3 “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?”

And here in Galatians 5 Paul reminds them, Galatians 5:18 “If you are led by the Spirit, **you are not under law.**”

To the Galatians and the Romans Paul makes it very clear that while the law (God’s rules for life) are good – those rules in and of themselves have no ability to help you follow them.

The law and any list of good things to do can show us what to do but they can't help us do it.

The ability to obey the law, to do the will of God, to live as Christ lived, to relate to God and each other, as God lovingly desires for us – that ability is from the Spirit.

The Spirit with us, in us, influencing us, enabling us is why we are able to choose and do the right.

“Living by the Spirit” or being “led by the Spirit” or being “filled with the Spirit” is a day-to-day, moment by moment, relationship with him.

It is an awareness that on my own I can't live up to the possibilities of holiness – I consciously depend on the Spirit within me to enable me.

I won't be re-formed into the likeness of Jesus by simply trying to do the right things.

I will be re-shaped into Jesus' likeness by the Spirit.

The Spirit will do the reshaping and he will use my trusting obedience to accomplish it.

In Romans 6, which we saw earlier, Paul tells us how it is possible for us to do right.

Romans 6:3-4 “Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

“So in practice we should be constantly reminding ourselves of who we are. We need to learn to talk to ourselves, and ask ourselves questions: ‘Don't you know? Don't you know the meaning of your conversion and baptism? Don't you know that you have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection? Don't you know that you have been enslaved to God and have committed yourself to his obedience? Don't you know these things? Don't you know who you are? We must go on pressing ourselves with these questions, until we reply to ourselves: ‘Yes, I DO know who I am, a new person in Christ, and by the grace of God I shall live accordingly.’” (Stott, Romans, 187)

Why doesn't that work every time?

If I recognize the choice before me and I want to do the right and I ask the Spirit to enable me and believe that he will – why don't I always do the right thing?

I suppose there are at least a couple of possibilities.

- Maybe we want to do the right thing, but fail to also recognize how strong our desires are to do the wrong – we don't take seriously how powerful the old sin nature really is.
And so even though we ask the Spirit to enable us, truthfully we think we can handle this ourselves and step out on our own.
- Or we **say** we want to do the right thing but inside we are actually yielding to the wrong thing.

What I know from Scripture and experience is that this conflict Paul speaks of is a fierce battle and even the best Christians fight it.

I love Dallas Willard's comment: "The greatest saints are not those who need less grace but those who consume the most grace, who indeed are most in need of grace – those who are saturated by grace in every dimension of their being. Grace to them is like breath." (Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 94)

We don't just do right things but we live in a conscious dependence on the Spirit within us – we call out to Jesus to help us and we trust him to do so and we act in faith.

And it is only as we choose the Spirit's way time and time again over a long time, that in one area of life and then another we begin to build a habit of doing right.

Maybe it is in our speech first, then in our actions, then even in our thoughts and attitudes.

Spiritual maturity is not built in a day but over a lifetime.

J.I. Packer writes, "Holiness teaching that skips over disciplined persistence in the well-doing that forms holy habits is thus weak; habit-forming is the Spirit's ordinary way of leading us on in holiness. The fruit of the Spirit is, from one standpoint, a series of habits of action and reaction: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control are all of them habitual

dispositions, that is, accustomed ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. Habits are all important in holy life..." (Packer, Keep in Step..., 109)
Holiness is not about praying a prayer to be filled with the Spirit; it is not about disciplining ourselves more rigorously to do the right things.

Holiness is about a relationship with God; it is about relating to the Spirit of God who resides in us.

Holiness is moment-by-moment active, conscious dependence on Spirit to enable us to do what is right.

It is also a lifetime of growing more and more to get it right in conquering those old sinful desires by choosing with the Spirit's help to do it right.

Will we fail a lot? Of course!

Are we satisfied with failure, willing to stay there? Of course not!

And with each failing, we ask the Lord's forgiveness and next time we invite the Spirit to enable us as we choose to obey.

It's not magic folks, it's not rocket-science but it is supernatural.
"Without holiness, no one will see the Lord."

"Keep in step with the Spirit!"