

## THREATS TO CHRISTIAN FREEDOM: LICENSE

### Part 2

TEXT: GALATIANS 5:13-24

January 29, 2012

#### INTRODUCTION/REVIEW:

Freedom is the basic theological concept that underlies Paul's argument throughout this letter. For example, in 4:12-20, Paul exhorts the Galatians to follow his example and live in freedom from the Mosaic Law. In 4:21-5:1, Paul exhorts the Galatians to stand firm in their freedom. And now in 5:2-24, he warns the Galatians of two dangerous threats to their life of freedom (i.e., legalism, vv. 2-12 and license, vv. 13-24).

Paul knew that the freedom to which we have been called is constantly under attack. He begins his letter expressing astonishment at how quickly the Galatians deserted God and turned to a different gospel (1:6). So, we see from Galatians how believers are continually faced with the dual threats of diminishing the law (legalism, vv. 2-12) or dismissing the law (license- vv. 13-24).

Having thoroughly refuted legalism and defended the Christian's freedom, Paul recognizes the fact this freedom can be abused. He anticipates a possible overreaction by believers to his teaching on Christian Freedom. If not properly understood, Christian freedom could be turned into an occasion/opportunity (ἄφορμὴν) for the flesh (i.e, license; dismissing the law instead of serving one another in love and fulfilling the law). Therefore, to guard believers against misunderstanding Christian freedom and thereby falling prey to the threat of license, Paul, in vv. 13-24, discusses four aspects of Christian freedom.

First, we saw in vv. 13-15:

- I. PAUL DEFINES THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM. VV. 13-15
  - A. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM ISN'T A LICENSE TO INDULGE THE FLESH. V. 13A
  - B. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM FULFILLS THE LAW RATHER THAN DISMISSES IT. VV. 13B-14
  - C. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM DOESN'T DESTROY BUT RATHER BUILDS THE CHURCH. V. 15

In short, Christian freedom manifests itself in love rather than license. We have been freed in order to serve one another in love and thus fulfill the law rather than dismiss it. However, from v. 15, Paul recognizes that believers will and often do experience a great struggle/conflict with their flesh, which leads to license rather than love. This leads us to a second aspect of Christian Freedom.

## LESSON:

### II. PAUL DESCRIBES THE CONFLICT OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM. vv. 16-18

In vv. 16-18, Paul describes the conflict of Christian freedom. He will give four insights into the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. These insights further clarify the nature of Christian Freedom (Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 343). A great conflict between the Holy Spirit and the flesh rages in the hearts of all true believers. The desires of the flesh constantly seek to drive us to license. In contrast, the desires of the Spirit constantly drive us to love. Thus, it is only as believers yield to the desires of the Spirit rather than the desires of the flesh that they are compelled to love one another and fulfill the law rather than dismiss the law and fall prey to license. So, in vv. 16-18, Paul unpacks what it means to serve one another through love (cf. 5:13-15, see Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 342). In v. 16 Paul issues a command and gives a promise.

#### A. THE COMMAND, v. 16A

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

Having just stated in v. 15 that Christian Freedom doesn't destroy but rather protects and builds the church, the question arises, “Where does the power to fulfill the law (love your neighbor) rather than dismiss the law (consume your neighbor) come from?” Paul gives us the answer here in v. 16.

The remedy for license (conquering the unloving, destructive nature of the flesh) is to walk by the Holy Spirit. In fact, 5:13-6:10 reveals a life of freedom lived out by the direction of the Spirit. Paul is arguing that a Spirit-directed life fulfills the law rather than dismisses it (cf. v. 14, i.e., leads us to love our neighbor rather than consume them!).

The Galatians' slanderous, destructive speech (v. 15) proceeded from their being directed by the desires of the flesh rather than the Holy Spirit. If we are to love our neighbor (fulfill the law) rather than consume our neighbor (dismiss the law), we must walk by the Spirit. If believers want to conquer their selfish fleshly desires (v. 15, not fall prey to the threat of license)—they must continually yield to the Holy Spirit day by day. Only the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit rather than the external demands of law can enable the believer to love his neighbor and thereby fulfill the law (Gal. 5:16-18). It is the Holy Spirit who has freed us from sin (Gal. 3:1-3, 14) and it is the Holy Spirit who empowers and directs us to live in obedience to God's law.

What then does it mean to “walk by the Spirit”? The command, “walk by the Spirit” means “let your daily conduct/lifestyle be directed by the Spirit” (in contrast to being directed by the desires of the flesh). Paul uses 4 different verbs in vv. 13-24 to describe the Spirit-directed life. These 4 verbs are approximately equivalent in

meaning: “walk by the Spirit,” v. 16; “led by the Spirit,” v. 18; “live by the Spirit,” v. 25a; “keep in step with the Spirit,” v. 25b

How does one walk by the Spirit? In other words, how is your daily life controlled/directed by the Spirit rather than the flesh? The answer is we walk by the Spirit the same way we initially received the Spirit (by hearing the gospel with faith). In Galatians 3:1-5, Paul reminds the Galatians of how they first received the Holy Spirit (i.e., by hearing Paul preach the gospel! Note: Paul says he preached the gospel in such a vivid, unforgettable way it was as if the Galatians were actual eyewitnesses of Christ being crucified at Calvary!).

By this command, Paul is simply exhorting us to continue walking the way we began (to always keep before us a clear unforgettable view of Christ as given to us in the gospel). We walk by the Spirit (i.e., our conduct is controlled/directed by the Spirit) as we continually hear the gospel with faith (Gal. 3:2; Rom. 10:17; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:16). The gospel is the ministry of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 3:8). In Colossians 3:16, Paul exhorts the Colossian Christians, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...” The “word of Christ” is the gospel. The same results that flow from a heart where the gospel dwells richly (Col. 3:16b) are the same results in Ephesians 5:18-19 that flow from a heart filled with the Holy Spirit.

To be clear, such a life of faith doesn’t suggest inaction/passivity (i.e., “let go and let God”). We will come back to this when we come to v. 18, where Paul speaks of being “led by the Spirit.” For now, it is sufficient to note that a life of faith directed by the Spirit is marked by action (fulfillment of the law, v. 14) rather than inaction/passivity (license/dismissing the law, cf. 5:13-6:10).

#### B. THE PROMISE, v. 16B

The promise (v. 16b) to all who walk by the Spirit is that they will not carry out the desires of the flesh—give into license. When we walk by the Spirit we will not live lives enslaved to our own selfish, fleshly desires (i.e., we will not be unloving as depicted in v. 15—break/dismiss God’s law). Instead, when we our daily conduct is directed by the Spirit we will fulfill God’s law (i.e., love one’s neighbor rather than destroy/consume them, cf. v. 14).

It is important to understand that such a Spirit-directed life—which leads to fulfillment of the law—doesn’t mean perfection. Those who walk by the Spirit will be frequently assaulted by the desires of the flesh. This leads us to v. 17 where Paul explains the reason why believers are to walk by the Spirit.

#### C. THE CONFLICT, v. 17

Paul writes, “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”

“For” (γὰρ) is explanatory. The reason why it is vital for believers to walk by the Spirit is because the desires of the flesh and the Spirit are in continual conflict with one another. In one sense, a life of Christian freedom is characterized by continual, unending conflict. John Calvin notes that a life of Christian freedom will not be maintained without a struggle (*Galatians*, p. 162).

There is a struggle that rages in the heart of every believer who is free in Christ. This struggle originates from the opposing desires of the flesh and Spirit. The desires of the flesh are relentlessly opposed to the desires of the Holy Spirit. Paul says the flesh continually sets its desires (ἐπιθυμῶ, pres, act, indic; i.e., dismiss the law; license) in opposition to the Spirit and His desires (i.e., fulfill the law; love).

License (dismissing of the law) permeates the flesh whereas love (fulfillment of the law) permeates the Spirit and is the chief fruit of the Spirit (5:22). In Romans 8:7, Paul writes, “The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.” Regarding the flesh, Calvin writes, “It is without debate that there is not a drop of goodness in man’s free will unless the Spirit of God first regenerates him (*Galatians*, p. 163). The “flesh” will never choose to submit to God’s law. The “flesh” has no desire to fulfill the law. The “flesh” rebels against God’s law and dismisses it.

Even though believers are no longer “in the flesh” but rather “in Christ” our salvation is not yet consummated (perfected). The licentious desires of the flesh remain a reality and they relentlessly oppose the desires of the Spirit. Therefore, we are daily assaulted by the desires of the flesh (tempted to license/dismiss God’s law).

This is why believers to some degree groan under the burden of the flesh. This is why our lives are at times marked by frustration regarding doing the will of God (i.e., obeying His law). Have you ever wondered and asked yourself in great frustration, “What is wrong with me? Why am I kept from doing the things I want to do?”

Galatians 5:17 provides the answer! Our frustration and groaning comes from the fact that we often find ourselves enduring a great conflict “so that you do not do the things you want to do” (v. 17c). The phrase, “the things you want to do” doesn’t refer to the desires of the flesh (dismiss the law/license/unloving, v. 15). Rather, this phrase refers to the desires created by the Holy Spirit (love, fulfillment of the law, v. 14).

(*Note:* This latter view is more persuasive than the approach that understands “what you want” as referring to sinful indulgence, from which the Spirit restrains us.

There are two problems with the view that understands “what you want” as evil rather than as godly: (1) The following statement (5:18), “but if you are being led by the Spirit, you are not under law,” is most naturally understood as qualifying the frustrating situation described in 5:17: though you do not obey as you want to, because of the resistance of the flesh, nonetheless because the Spirit is leading you, you need no longer fear the law’s condemnation for your violation of its holy commands. (2) In general, Paul views believers’ desire now, in view of our resurrection with Christ and new creation nature, as oriented toward holiness (Rom. 6), not toward sin...though of course Paul also knows realistically that we do not lived consistently with who we are now in Christ, cf. v. 17, \*These insights are taken from a private conversation with Dennis Johnson, Westminster Seminary, CA.)

The “you” in this phrase is the new “you” that has been created and brought to life by the Holy Spirit’s gracious work of regeneration. Calvin describes the phrase “the things you want to do” as “the holy affections which God bestows upon us by His grace” (*Galatians*, p. 163).

The Greek word ἵνα (“so that”) denotes the result of the conflict between the desires of the flesh and Spirit. The opposing desires of the flesh war against the desires of the Spirit, which results in keeping believers from achieving the full obedience that they desire to offer. Full obedience to the whole law (πᾶς νόμος, cf. 5:14) is the ultimate purpose of the Holy Spirit.

In fulfillment of the OT prophets’ promises of the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26-27), believers now desire to fulfill the whole law rather than dismiss it. Yet, because of the relentless opposing desires of the flesh, our reach constantly exceeds our grasp. Our desire to fulfill the law—implanted by the Holy Spirit—is often frustrated by the opposing desires of our flesh to dismiss the law.

This is why the believer continually experiences the conflict between willing and doing, which Paul expounds on in more detail in Romans 7:7-25. In Romans 7:14-25, Paul—as a believer who is now in union Christ and indwelt by the Spirit (6:1-7:6)—delights in God’s law and wants to keep it. But, at the same time, he finds that he cannot do it perfectly and often falls short. The reason is because sin, though dethroned, (ch. 6) still dwells in his flesh (cf. vv. 18, 20, 23, 25) continually exerting desires contrary to His new nature. Distressed by this fact, Paul cries out in v. 24, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Then in his very next breath, he preaches the gospel to himself and answers, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul framed his question in the future tense, so his answer should also be in the future tense, “Thanks be to God! He will deliver me through Jesus Christ” (see J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p. 128)! The Christian’s present conflict and frustration will one day give way through the victory he has through Christ (i.e., the

resurrection, 8:23). The good news is that even though at times it seems that our flesh has the upper hand, it will not have the final word in our lives.

In a similar manner here in Galatians 5:18, Paul doesn't leave the Christian in a hopeless and constant state of frustration regarding obedience to and fulfillment of the law. This constant struggle and tension does not mean that a believer never achieves righteousness in any measure at all! Paul is not setting forth a Christian life that is marked only by constant defeat, frustration and inability. This leads us to Paul's fourth insight into the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit.

#### D. THE POWER, v. 18

Paul writes these hope-giving words, "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law."

"But" (δέ) is adversative, which means verse 18 provides the remedy/answer to the conflict in v. 17. In v. 16, Paul gave the command to walk by the Spirit and the promise of doing so. In v. 17, he reveals the conflict that prevents the believer from giving the full obedience he wants to. Now in v. 18, Paul reveals the power that enables the believer to obey the command and overcome the conflict in order to enjoy the reality of the promise.

The Holy Spirit's empowering presence enables the Christian to conquer the flesh. In contrast to the frustrating conflict of being kept from "doing the things you want to do," Paul leaves us with good news and hope. If (εἰ) we allow the Spirit to direct our daily conduct (which implies a choice thus refuting any notion of passivity), the flesh will be conquered (Note: Paul may have in mind Isa. 63:11-15, which refers to God's end-time leading of His people by His Spirit, cf. Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 345). If we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit, we will make progress and advance forward in the formation of godly habits and the practice of loving our neighbors.

Note that in vv. 16-17, Paul has spoken of the believer's conflict in terms of the Spirit and flesh. So in v. 18 you might expect Paul to say, "you are not under the flesh." But, he says instead, "you are not under law." There are two important reasons why Paul uses "law" rather than "flesh" (see Fung, *Galatians*, p. 252).

First, Paul still has in mind his opponents—the Judaizers—and the issue of returning under law. To be under law, as Paul has already previously shown, is to be under the law's curse (1:8-9; 3:13), bondage (3:22, 25), spiritual death and inability (3:21), enslaved to demonic idolatry (4:8) and the elementary principles of the world, which operate by the principle, "Do this and live" (4:3, 9).

But, when we receive the Spirit of adoption (3:1-5, 15; 4:1-7), we are united to Christ and set free from these things. By virtue of our union with Christ everything that Christ is before God, He is FOR US. Graeme Goldsworthy commenting on the meaning of Colossians 3:4—"Christ, who is our life" writes, "He is the sinless Son

FOR US. He is the true covenant partner FOR US. He is the Beloved FOR US. He is the righteous and holy one, the judged sinner, the new life, the Spirit-filled man, the perfect worshipper of God—all FOR US” (*The Lamb and the Lion: The Gospel in Revelation*, p. 27).

This unbelievable good news means even though you do not obey, as you want to—because of the resistance of the flesh—nevertheless because the Holy Spirit has freed you and brought you into union with Christ, you no longer have to fear the law’s condemnation when you break its holy commands! For those who are being led by the Spirit, the law only acts only as an adviser and no longer a condemner! Calvin writes,

...let them not be discouraged, because they are unable to satisfy the demands of the law. Let them listen to the consolatory declaration of the apostle, which is also found in other parts of his writings (Rom. Vi. 14) ye are not under the law. Hence it follows, that the performance of their duties is not rejected on account of their personal defects, but is accepted in the sight of God, as if it had been in every respect perfect and complete (*Galatians*, p. 164).

What joy! What consolation! What hope! What power! What motivation to know that all our duties are not rejected on account of their personal defects but rather accepted in the sight of God as if they are in every respect perfect and complete!

Second, by using the phrase, “under the law” Paul is emphasizing the inability or powerlessness of law to overcome the flesh. Paul is not downplaying the demand of the law by using the term “law” instead of “flesh” (the context is refuting license and fulfilling the law! cf. v. 14). The issue is the strength/power necessary for fulfilling the law. The safeguard against the flesh is not to return back under law because to be under law is to be in a defenseless and powerless position against the desires of the flesh (cf. Gal. 3:21).

Negatively speaking, Paul is telling us that the desires of the flesh cannot be overcome by the Christian remaining under law. Far from restraining and conquering the flesh, the law provokes and increases sin (i.e., license, dismissing of God’s law). Listen to Paul in Romans 7:5, 8, “<sup>5</sup> For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death... <sup>8</sup> But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.” The more a person tries to keep God’s law by his own effort (legalism), the more occasions he gives for license (i.e., for his conduct to be led/directed by the flesh). Legalism stirs up the flesh and thus leads to license. Thus, the law and flesh lead to identical results (see Fung, *Galatians*, p. 252).

In contrast, when a believer allows himself to be led by the Spirit, he avoids giving occasion for the flesh. Positively speaking then the desires of the flesh can only be overcome in being led by the Holy Spirit. Paul writes in Romans 8:2-4,

“<sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. <sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, <sup>4</sup> in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

Paul then leaves us with this hope-giving message of the gospel.

Before concluding, it needs to be noted that some have mistaken the phrase, “led by the Spirit,” as suggesting passivity. However, the phrase “if you are led by the Spirit” does not teach that believers are passive. The word “if” (εἰ) should be understood as conditional and not translated “since” (cf. Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 345). Herman Ridderbos remarks, “The *if ye are led* does not imply that believers are passive; it is at the same time a matter of letting themselves be led (cf. v. 16). The thing does not happen without regard to their will” (*Galatians*, p. 204). Precisely because believers are free, they now have the choice of yielding to/being directed by the desires of the flesh or the Holy Spirit. J.I. Packer writes, “The desires of the Spirit, felt in the believer’s own spirit...are to be followed, but the desires of the flesh are not to be indulged” (*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p. 37). This is possible because the believer is now and no longer a slave in bondage under the law.

Consequently, to be “led by the Spirit” doesn’t mean we simply do nothing until we feel an inner prompting to act (e.g., I don’t feel like being faithful to my marriage vows so I will not be faithful until I feel like it!). Such a way of thinking is what is known as quietism. Quietism is the idea that all initiative on our part is the energy of the flesh and that we only act in accordance with inner promptings that are recognizably not our own thoughts and impulses; see Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p. 155).

Regarding a “let go and let God” quietistic mentality, J.I. Packer writes, “Passivity, which quietists think liberates the Spirit, actually resists and quenches him. Souls that cultivate passivity do not thrive, but waste away. The Christian’s motto should not be “Let go and let God” but “Trust God and get going” (*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p. 157)!

The Christian life of faith is marked by vigorous activity (i.e., ongoing self-denial, confession, repentance and obedience—fulfillment of the law; 5:13-6:10). Calvin writes, “If we would obey the Spirit, we must labour, and fight, and apply our utmost energy; and we must begin with self-denial” (*Galatians*, p. 163). Paul is arguing that love for God and one’s neighbor finds expression through obeying God’s Law—as interpreted for Christians in the New Testament—rather than dismissing it (i.e.,



license). For example, in Galatians 6:2, Paul exhorts, “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” The gospel-driven life finds expression in the loving service to others—especially God’s people (cf. Gal. 6:10).

We have not been rescued from this present evil age (1:4), justified by faith in Christ (2:16), brought into union with Christ (2:20), granted the gift of the Spirit (3:1-5, 14), redeemed from the curse of the law (3:13), adopted as sons (3:26-4:7), known by God (4:9) and granted a glorious freedom (5:1) in order to live a life of passivity and license. In brief, we have been liberated to love (i.e., keep God’s commandments, which is expressed in action not passivity or license).

Now, because of who the believer is “in Christ” God’s law says, “Be what you are!” As we noted previously, God’s law acts as an adviser to those who are “in Christ” rather than as a condemner to those who are “under law.” God’s law in Christ to the believer is really telling us to be what we are!

Paul says you are free. You are no longer under law. Realize who you are and be that! Because you are free, you can now choose to live as one who is free! Stop thinking like a slave. Stop living like a slave. Stop behaving like a slave. You are free! By faith, believe who you are in Christ and then act on it all the while trusting that the Holy Spirit will empower you every step of the way in your walk! J.I. Packer writes,

The life of holiness is supernatural, not only because of the Spirit’s secret work in our hearts, but also because help from Christ is constantly known in it. In this sense it is a life of constant, conscious, expectant faith. The Spirit stirs us to look to Christ for the moral strength we need—gentleness, compassion, willingness to share and forgive; patience, tenacity, consistency; courage, fair-mindedness, forbearance, the capacity to keep sweet, and so forth. And as, having prayed and praying still, we seek to practice these virtues, we find that we are enabled to do so (*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p. 168).

#### **REFLECTION:**

As we reflect on Paul’s description of the conflict of Christian freedom, keep in mind the following two points:

1. THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE FLESH AND SPIRIT IS THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE.

The conflict we experience is to be a source of comfort rather than discouragement. Paul’s words are addressed to believers. Unbelievers do not experience this internal conflict with fallen desires of the flesh. So long as you are in this life, you will experience this conflict between the desires of the flesh and Spirit. Tom Schreiner writes, “If the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit is strong in our life, we should not become discouraged and think that we aren’t Christians if we are engaged in a

struggle against sin. The opposition between the flesh and the Spirit is the normal Christian life, which is not marked by perfection but by war” (*Galatians*, pp. 351-352).

If your life is marked by struggle against sin and frustration over your inability to do the will of God as you want (i.e., keep God’s law), take heart! No matter how intense the conflict rages, no matter how hopeless the battle may seem at times, because you are no longer under law, you can now yield to the desires of the Spirit and say no to the sinful desires of the flesh.

You are no longer a slave to the flesh. You are no longer defined by the flesh. You are now “in Christ” and therefore are free to obey. You have received the promised Holy Spirit who is enabling you by His power to fulfill the law rather than dismiss it. The Holy Spirit will conquer your flesh and empower you to love your neighbor rather than remain enslaved to your selfish, fleshly, destructive desires. One day, we will be perfectly conformed to every requirement of God’s law (i.e., we will perfectly love God and our neighbor). Until then, we can press on in the conflict confident that the Holy Spirit is empowering us every step of the way. Thus, with Paul we confess,

<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. <sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:12-14).

## 2. TO BE SPIRIT-DIRECTED YOU MUST BE SELF-CONSCIOUSLY GOSPEL-CENTERED.

In v. 17, Paul tells us that we will not achieve as much in the way of obedience to the law as we want to. The Christian who walks by the Spirit will continually discover that nothing in his life is as good as it should be. Because every believer experiences the conflicting desires of the flesh and Spirit—one holding him back and the other drawing him forward—he finds that his heart is never absolutely pure. J.I. Packer writes,

...the Christian finds that his heart is never absolutely pure, nor does he ever do anything that is absolutely right, even though his constant goal is perfect service of God...In this sense he is being prevented every moment from doing what he wants to do. He lives with the knowledge that everything he had done might and should have been better: not only the lapses into which pride, weakness, and folly have betrayed him, but also his attempts to do what was right and good. After each such attempt and each particular action, he regularly sees specific ways in which it could have been improved, both motivationally and in performance. What felt at that time like the best he could do does not appear so in retrospect. He spends his life reaching after

perfection and finding that his reach always exceeds his grasp (*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p. 36).

Such a reality is the reason why we must continually keep Christ ever before us by means of a gospel-driven life. Because our daily walk is at best mixed with sinful defilements, the holiest Christian would tell you “that he has to depend every moment on God’s pardoning mercy in Christ, or he would be lost; and that he needs to keep asking, in the light of his own felt weakness and inconstancy of heart, that the Spirit will energize him to the end to maintain the inward struggle” (*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p. 37).

Gospel-centeredness keeps us from succumbing to a defeated, discouraged and depressed mentality because of our frequent failures and sin. Gospel-centeredness constantly reminds us that we are no longer under law. Gospel-centeredness reminds us that because we are “in Christ” all of our obedience—though imperfect and defiled—is accepted in the sight of God as if it is perfect and complete in every respect of the law because of Christ alone! Gospel-centeredness provides us with the motivation and continual desire to walk by the Spirit (love our neighbor) and not indulge in the desires of the flesh (license). Gospel-centeredness is the basis for Spirit-directedness. Gospel-centeredness is the means by which the Holy Spirit enables and leads us to fulfill the law rather than dismissing the law.

The chief ministry of the Holy Spirit is to lead us to Christ. To be gospel-centered then is to be Christ-focused. J.I. Packer writes, “The holiest Christians are not those most concerned about holiness as such, but those whose minds and hearts and goals and purposes and love and hope are most fully focused on our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p. 165). To live by faith is to live by the gospel. To live by the gospel is to be led by the Spirit. To be led by the Spirit is to trust in the living, dying and rising of Jesus for us. The Spirit’s chief work is to empower our faith to trust in Christ alone and thereby fulfill the whole law.

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