

Living by the Spirit

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

If we want to experience Christ’s life, we must learn how to live by the Spirit. The Bible says that if we live by the Spirit, we overcome sin and are the sons of God. We may be born again, but if we do not practice living by the Spirit, then Christ will not be revealed in us and through us. What does it mean to “live by the Spirit?” To live by the Spirit means we practice a lifestyle of being governed by the Spirit. How can we do that? The answer is found in Christ’s death on the cross. The Bible says that, before we were saved, we were all *in Adam* (1 Corinthians 15:22). This means we had all inherited Adam’s sinful nature, which led to spiritual death (Romans 5:19). However, when we were born again, God put us *in Christ* (Romans 6:3; 1 Corinthians 1:30). This means God spiritually immersed us into Christ’s death and, by the divine operation of the cross, He removed our sinful Adam nature and replaced it with Christ’s nature (Romans 6:4-11).

Then what can prevent us from living by the Spirit? It certainly is not the sinful Adam nature. That issue has already been settled by Christ’s death on the cross. Now that we are born again, we do not have a sinful nature (Colossians 2:11). The question then is no longer whether we are in Adam or in Christ. Now that we are in Christ, the question is whether we will be governed by the Spirit or by the flesh (our unconverted soul). The chief obstacle to our living by the Spirit is no longer our old Adam nature but our Adam way of thinking (our unrenewed mind), which needs to be transformed by the truth of God’s Word. The apostle Paul said, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is... (Romans 12:2).” When we believe and act on this central New Covenant provision of Christ’s death on the cross (*our sinful nature no longer lives, but Christ lives in us*), then we will live by the Spirit (Galatians 2:20). However, if we do

not believe and act on the truth of Christ’s death on the cross, we have no alternative than to vainly struggle to live the Christian life by the best of our natural or carnal (*fleshly*) ability and mistake our self-effort for faith. It may surprise you that carnal Christian behavior (what the Bible calls “deeds of the flesh”) can be expressed in two very different ways. The first way is obvious. “Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are immorality, impurity, sensuality... (Galatians 5:19).” But the second way is more disguised. “No wonder, for Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore, is it not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (1 Corinthians 12:14-15).” The carnal lifestyle of a Christian is obvious if they are practicing immorality; however, if they are practicing *outward* morality even while they are *inwardly* lawless and unsubmitted to Christ, it can be more difficult to discern their carnality.

There is a great difference between a Christian who overcomes sin by believing and acting on what Christ has accomplished by His death on the cross and a Christian who tries to “overcome” sin by faith in his own natural ability and willpower. The apostle Paul described people who practice this kind of outward moral behavior as “those who take pride in appearance (2 Corinthians 5:12)” and “want to make a good impression outwardly (Galatians 6:12).” Jesus described them as “hypocrites” and “people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous (Luke 13:15; 18:9).” Any religious morality that is derived apart from faith in the power of Christ’s crucifixion is a bastard holiness that is the offspring of the flesh (man’s strength) and not the fruit of the Spirit. If a professed Christian persists in habitually practicing this kind of false religious morality, it is not harmless. It is hypocritical and hostile to God because it is not of true faith (Romans 14:23; Galatians 5:17).

Although most Bible translations confusingly use the term “flesh” for both the sinful nature and the unconverted soul (the unrenewed mind), there is a crucial difference. Our unrenewed

mind is not like the sinful nature, which was a powerful entity - a “sin factory” within us that continuously produced sinful attitudes and actions and, therefore, had to be destroyed by Christ’s death on the cross. Now that we no longer have a sinful nature, we are not captive to sin and our unrenewed mind can be transformed and submitted to Christ’s sovereignty by believing the Word of God. Since Christ’s death on the cross has already dealt with our sinful nature, we do not have to put it to death every day over and over again. Instead, we now have the obligation and privilege as Christ’s disciples to carry our own cross and “put to death” our old sinful way of thinking (the unrenewed mind or unconverted soul). This means we are able *by faith* to put off our old way of thinking and put on the mind of Christ (Ephesians 4:22-24; 1 Corinthians 2:26). By faith in Christ’s completed work on the cross, we are able to exchange our carnal attitudes and affections for Christ’s attitudes and affections. This is what the apostle Paul called “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).” Paul taught the first century believers, “If you are living according to the flesh (*the unconverted soul-life*), you will die; but if by the Spirit, you are putting to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live... now all those who belong to Christ Jesus have put to death on the cross the flesh (*the unconverted soul-life*) with its passions and desires (Romans 8:13; Galatians 5:24).”

Living by the Spirit is not some emotional or mystical experience. It means we are living by faith in the truth of what Christ has accomplished on the cross (Christ died for us and included us in His death so He might sovereignly live in us). Our faith will be genuine and our fruit evident if we take up our own cross, putting to death the carnal desires and deeds of our unconverted soul-life for Christ’s sake and His body’s sake. Then the fullness of Christ’s life will be revealed in us.

“For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.” Romans 8:14