

# Living in Freedom: Walking by the Spirit, Not the Flesh

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## THE TWO WAYS OF LIVING

### INTRODUCTION

The theologian Augustine famously observed that humanity consistently succumbs to sin by seeking satisfaction and the fulfillment of promises not in God, but in His creation. In Galatians 5:13-26, the Apostle Paul addresses this universal human issue by outlining two opposing ways of living: one of the world, where an individual indulges in the temptations of the flesh, and the other guided by God, allowing oneself to be transformed by the Holy Spirit.

Paul draws a sharp distinction between walking by the Spirit and gratifying the desires of the flesh. This scriptural framework reveals three core realities:

God has freed us.

God's way is contrary to the world's way.

God has transformed us.

As the English slave abolitionist and hymnwriter John Newton famously stated: "I am not what I ought to be. I am not what I want to be. I am not what I hope to be in another world. But still, I am not what I once used to be. And by the grace of God, I am what I am."

### GOD HAS FREED US

Paul begins this passage with a fundamental message: "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free" (Galatians 5:13). God has called believers to a genuine, spiritual freedom. Because this freedom is a gift of divine grace, it must never be neglected or taken for granted.

#### The Nature of Spiritual Freedom

Freedom is not immediate perfection: As John Newton's quote highlights, being set free does not mean believers instantly become perfect, nor does it mean that living as a Christian is easy.

Freedom requires wisdom: Freedom is extended to humanity as an act of grace, and God desires that it be used wisely rather than as a license for self-indulgence.

#### The Reality of Prior Enslavement

To comprehend the magnitude of this liberation, one must recognize that to be freed means one was

previously enslaved. By nature, humanity is drawn to the temptations of the flesh and is naturally enslaved by them. Paul commands believers not to use their freedom to indulge the flesh. This restriction is not because God is overbearing or wishes to impose ironic limitations, but because He knows that true freedom is only found by living in a righteous way.

#### The Illusion of Control in Sin

The cycle of sin often manifests through powerful emotions like anger. When an individual expresses intense anger, it is rarely out of genuine care for the person involved or because it is the wisest decision; it is done simply because the emotion is overwhelming. In that moment, those emotions control the individual. Enslavement does not mean the absence of choice; rather, it means the choices made end up controlling the person.

John Chrysostom, a prolific 4th-century church leader and theologian, confronted this dynamic in his homilies: "What gives you the right to put yourselves back under the authority of your previous master? Did you save yourself? No, it was another who redeemed you, another who paid your ransom."

#### The Call to Community Accountability

Without God, humanity is completely empty, left to selfish desires that offer no true fulfillment, leading only to an abyss of constantly chasing temporary pleasures. Therefore, God's call to freedom is not merely an individual mandate to make right choices, but a corporate encouragement to support the body of Christ.

As Proverbs 27:17 states: "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."

Believers must remember exactly who freed them, ensuring all glory is directed back to God.

True freedom is maximized not by neglecting God's standard, but by trusting that He knows what is best for human flourishing.

#### GOD'S WAY IS CONTRARY TO THE WORLD'S WAY

In Galatians 5:17, Paul writes: "For the flesh desires what is contrary to the spirit, and the spirit what is contrary to the flesh." This dynamic represents a simple yet deeply significant reality of the Christian walk: the life God wills for humanity directly contradicts the life the world promotes.

#### The Principle of Undivided Loyalty

This tension directly echoes the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:24: "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

It is impossible to maintain undivided loyalty to two masters who possess polar opposite value systems.

Paul explicitly commands believers to avoid actions such as sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery because these behaviors oppose God's values and force individuals to prioritize selfish desires over spiritual needs.

Following the way of the world cannot coexist with following God, regardless of how dedicated a person claims to be. Eventually, one system will displace the other. Attempting to walk both paths results in a compromised faith and a divided heart.

#### The Danger of a Peacetime Mindset

Theologian John Piper beautifully articulated the subtle danger of drifting toward the world:

"I am wired by nature to love the same toys the world loves. I start to fit in. I start to love what others love. I start to call earth home. Before you know it, I'm calling luxuries needs and using my money just the way unbelievers do. I begin to forget the war. I don't think much about people perishing. Missions and unreached people drop out of my mind. I stop dreaming about the triumphs of grace. I sink into a secular mindset that looks first to what man can do, not what God can do. It is a terrible sickness and I thank God for those who have forced me again and again toward a wartime mindset."

### The Reality of Spiritual Warfare

Piper's reflection emphasizes that the Christian life exists within a state of active spiritual warfare. When believers succumb to the temptations of the flesh and the patterns of the world, they lose sight of the mission God has established. They cease to care for those perishing, stop prioritizing global missions, and begin relying entirely on human effort. To remain strong against sin, believers must stay firmly on the path God has set, preserving their divine purpose over materialistic ambitions.

### GOD HAS TRANSFORMED US

Galatians 5:22-23 states: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

While these nine virtues are highly familiar within the church, they represent much more than a moral checklist; they are the tangible evidence of the Holy Spirit's ongoing transformation in the life of a believer.

### The Source of Spiritual Fruit

Spiritual fruit is the natural byproduct of recognizing God's authority, embracing His liberation, and acknowledging that His righteous way stands opposed to the world.

**The Vine and the Branches:** Humanity cannot produce these virtues independently. Believers merely participate in their cultivation. Christ Jesus is the vine, and believers are the branches (cf. John 15:5). Apart from Him, individuals are nothing more than dead, withered branches.

**The Invitation to Cooperate:** Paul invites believers to actively cooperate with the internal work of the Holy Spirit. This requires submitting to God's divinity and recognizing that life cannot be navigated successfully by human wisdom.

### Active Transformation over Nominal Faith

True transformation means accepting the gifts of freedom and salvation and intentionally extending the same love to others that God first showed to us. Authentic Christianity is never defined by verbal professions, specific church attendance, or denominational identity. Instead, it is revealed through outward actions and an inward heart that fully submits to God's intentions.

### CONCLUSION

To close, consider this sobering question from the British evangelist Leonard Ravenhill:

"Are the things you are living for worth Christ dying for?"