

# KNOWING & DOING

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## Being Led and Transformed by the Holy Spirit

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**B**eing led by the Holy Spirit is at the heart of the Christian life. This is clear in the Bible and in the history of the church. If we let the Spirit lead us, our lives will blossom and flourish. But if we neglect or refuse His leading, our lives will languish. Strangely, many believers today seem to misunderstand the Spirit's leading and how it relates to personal transformation. A clearer grasp of what the Bible teaches about this vital truth will help us all as we seek to grow in grace.

This leads us to ask, what does the New Testament mean by the phrase *led by the Spirit*? What is the fruit of His leading in one's life? These are questions we will explore in this article. As it unfolds, we will gain clarity, encouragement, and practical help in our walk with God.

First, some clarity. The phrase *led by the Spirit* occurs only twice in the New Testament, and both instances are frequently misused today. The first is in Romans 8:14, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."<sup>1</sup> The immediate context is the believer's battle with the flesh through the empowerment of the Spirit. The second usage occurs in Galatians 5:18, "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." Again, the immediate context is the believer's battle with sin. In both instances, the larger concern is to show us how to live joyful, obedient lives that produce the beauty of holiness and glorify God.

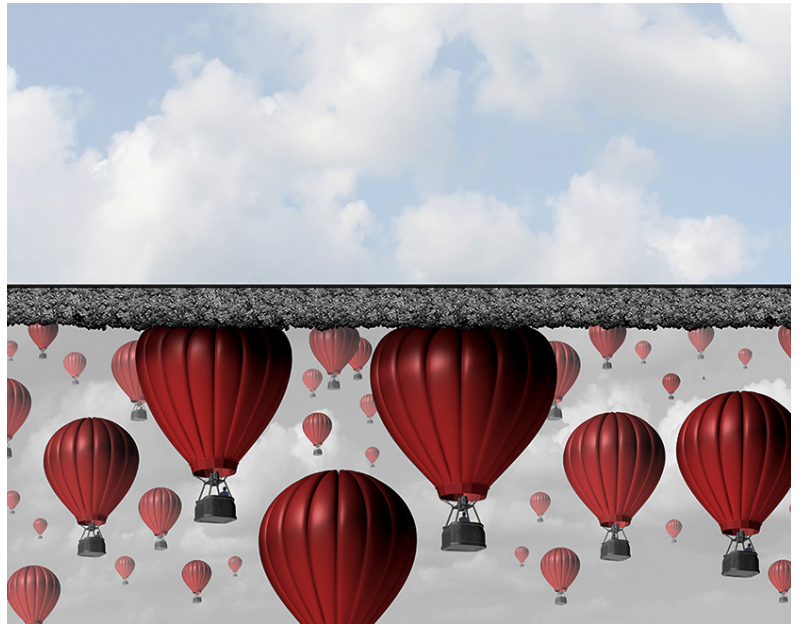
Let's explore this more deeply by focusing on Galatians 5:16–25, a passage filled with great riches for anyone who is hungry for God and wants to please Him. In this passage Paul addresses two problems that plagued the Galatian church and has plagued the church universal up to the present day: legalism and licentiousness. Some people in the Galatian church urged observance of parts of the Mosaic Law, and others were disregarding moral constraints. Paul doesn't look for Aristotle's Golden Mean and take a mediating position between the two; rather, as one writer has said, he builds a highway above both.<sup>2</sup> He does this by giving a command and a promise: "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (v. 16). The word *Spirit* refers to the Holy Spirit, who dwells in those who have been born again. The word *flesh* is Paul's term to describe fallen human nature and its self-centered attitudes, desires, and behaviors. The word *walk* is commonly used in Scripture to refer to one's daily conduct. Thus, to walk by the Spirit means to live one's daily life by the Holy Spirit's guidance and empowerment. To walk in the flesh is to live a life characterized by various sins and selfish behaviors.

Paul goes on to talk about how the flesh and the Spirit oppose and contend against each other, something every believer can identify with. This struggle is a part of our lifelong battle against the world, the flesh, and the Devil, as the Holy Spirit works to make us progressively more like Jesus. Sometimes we can grow weary and discouraged with this struggle and even doubt our salvation, but actually it is a sign of life. Walking by the Spirit is the pathway to overcoming the desires of the flesh and living a holy life. What a great encouragement—to know that we don't have to stay trapped in our sins, in an endless demoralizing cycle of defeat after defeat with no way out!

Practically speaking, how do we walk by the Spirit and overcome the desires of the flesh? We must allow ourselves to be “*led by the Spirit*” (emphasis added; v. 18). The word *led* is a present-passive verb, indicating that we should continuously surrender and yield ourselves to the desires of the Spirit, whose leading is always diametrically opposed to the desires of our sinful flesh (our old self). Our surrender to the Spirit’s leading is an act of the will, a choice we must make; it is saying *yes* to the Spirit’s leading and *no* to the desires of the flesh. We will say more about that ahead. But for now, let’s be clear that as we allow the Spirit to influence, direct, and empower us, we *can* overcome the flesh. Certainty about this is crucial, and uncertainty is self-defeating.

At this point some concrete examples might help us better understand the struggle between the Spirit and the flesh and where surrender to each leads. In Galatians 5:19–21, Paul says, “Now the works of the flesh are evident.” In what follows, he gives a list of various works of the flesh, the self-centered life, that were common in Paul’s day (and in ours). It provides a representative sample and is by no means exhaustive. For clarity, I have given the meaning of each word, drawing from the work of two highly acclaimed New Testament scholars.<sup>3</sup>

- *Sexual immorality* has been a perennial problem in human societies since the fall because it is rooted in one of our strongest drives. The Greek word used here, *porneia* (from which we get pornography), encompasses a variety of sexual sins, including using prostitutes, committing adultery, engaging in premarital sex, homosexual acts, and incest.
- *Impurity* is an even broader term covering any inappropriate sexual activity, that is, sexual activities that make a person unclean and unfit for approaching God. One example would be viewing pornography, which has a long history and was part of Greco-Roman culture.
- *Sensuality* refers to throwing restraint to the wind and indulging oneself without regard for normal moral standards. It denotes being so consumed by the pursuit of sexual pleasure that public opinion no longer matters. *Wild living* is a modern term for it.
- *Idolatry*, the worship of idols, was a major problem in the Old Testament and was common in the Greco-Roman culture of Paul’s day. However, idolatry was not limited to material objects of wood or stone. When Paul describes covetousness (greed) as idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5), he shows that idolatry can take nonmaterial forms. Money, possessions, career, reputation, and ambitions of various sorts can all be forms of idolatry—and much else besides. As John Calvin observed, “The human heart is an idol factory.”<sup>4</sup>
- *Sorcery* is the English translation of the Greek word *pharmaka*, from which we get the words *pharmacy* and *pharmaceutical*. It means “using drugs.” In Paul’s day, it was applied ominously to drugs used in witchcraft and used for poisoning people. Today sorcery would include astrology, fortune telling, and other occult practices. It would also include using drugs (legal or illegal) not for medical purposes but for their mind-altering effects (getting high).
- *Enmity* includes negative attitudes and feelings and hostile actions toward other people, either individuals or groups. On an individual level, examples would include refusing to forgive, holding grudges, and working mischief against someone. At the group or community level today, enmity would encompass dislike and prejudice toward people of other races and religions, as well as hatred of political figures and parties.



- *Strife* is the relational discord and animosity resulting from a quarrelsome, argumentative attitude that takes pleasure in self-assertion and confrontation.
- *Jealousy* refers to the selfish resentment of another's success or achievement.
- *Fits of anger*, often called temper tantrums, are explosive outbursts of anger against other people.
- *Rivalries* denote selfish ambition and putting oneself and one's interests above those of others.
- *Dissensions* refer to unbiblical, divisive teaching that is disruptive of church unity.
- *Divisions* are a party (partisan) spirit or cliques around particular people or teachings.
- *Envy* is not merely begrudging the good fortune of others, but also maliciously resenting it and wanting to spoil it or deprive them of it.
- *Drunkenness* speaks of revelry where alcohol impairs moral judgment and inhibitions and possibly leads to immoral actions.
- *Orgies* are closely connected with drunkenness and denote wild partying behavior.

"And things like these" (v. 21) indicates that the list is only a sampling.

The sins in this list were common and no doubt characterized some of the people in the Galatian church before they professed faith in Christ. True saving faith in Christ involves repentance, a turning away from one's sins, and a daily battle against them in the power of the Holy Spirit. Apparently some in the church were continuing in their sins and not seeking to forsake them. Whether from ignorance of biblical teaching, backsliding, or lack of true conversion, this was a serious issue. This is why Paul, in the sentence immediately following this list, delivered a sober comment on these behaviors: "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (v. 21).

In Galatians 5:22–23, Paul shifts to happier thoughts, saying, "But the fruit of the Spirit is ..."

In what follows he gives nine characteristics of the Holy Spirit's work in the life of a born again believer. Unlike the word *works* (of the flesh), *fruit* is singular, indicating that the nine characteristics are part of a unified whole and are not separable. In other words, a believer doesn't have some and not others, though their relative strength may vary.

- *Love*, by which Paul means the love of God poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). The Greek word is *agape*. This is a responsive love that evokes in us a love for God and a desire to please Him. Worship, wholehearted surrender, and obedience are at the heart of pleasing Him. God's love also produces in us a love for our neighbor, a servant love that is rooted primarily in the will and acts for our neighbor's best interest and highest good. As Paul says in Galatians 5:6, the only thing that matters in the Christian life is "faith working through love," and in Galatians 5:13, "through love serve one another." This humble, servant love was the dominant characteristic of Jesus' life and is to be so for His followers. In a very real sense, the other eight characteristics of the Spirit are expressions of this *agape* love.
- *Joy* flows out of the awareness of God's gracious favor to us and the hope of living with Him and His Son and all His children in the world to come. Hope for the future is a key part of joy and is an anchor that keeps us from being blown to and fro by the many and varied circumstances of life and the hard times that sometimes overtake us. Unlike happiness, its worldly and elusive equivalent, joy does not depend on favorable circumstances.
- *Peace* is not simply the absence of conflict, but the deep abiding peace of God, the sovereign and almighty King of creation. It is grounded in the assurance of God's rich mercy and personal love for us, shown supremely in His saving us by grace alone, through Christ alone and not by our works. This produces a tranquil heart that is at rest in God. And it impels and enables us to be peacemakers, to pursue peace with others, including those in our family, community, church, and beyond, and across all ethnic, racial, political, and other barriers that separate and divide people.

- *Patience*, also translated as long-suffering, is chiefly a matter of forbearance with other people and of not being easily offended. This particularly includes people who displease, irritate, provoke, or mistreat us—including those who persecute us. Steadfast endurance with difficult people and circumstances is the idea. Such patience illustrates the patience of God and is a powerful witness to others.
- *Kindness* is an attitude of graciousness and goodwill toward others, especially those who do not deserve it. Kindness is an expression of love that goes above and beyond what is warranted and demonstrates the kindness of God. It resists all harshness and coldness toward others.
- *Goodness* is love and kindness in action, an expression of moral excellence. It gives generously and spends itself to help others, without any expectation of return.
- *Faithfulness* is a matter of being trustworthy and reliable to God and to others, being dependable and true to one's word and commitments, someone in whom others can have confidence.
- *Gentleness* is not weakness but strength under control, rooted in humility. Jesus was gentle yet capable of expressing righteous indignation, when appropriate. Gentleness is not arrogant, doesn't bully or force others, but is considerate and exercises mildness in dealing with them.
- *Self-control* engages both mind and body in the business of properly regulating one's life in all its parts. The scope of self-control ranges from such mundane matters as food and drink to material possessions, to one's thought life, to speech, to the expression of emotions and much more, but with special attention to sexual matters and the mastery of our passions.

Though not an exhaustive list, these nine characteristic traits that are the fruit of the Holy Spirit, taken together, form a beautiful portrait of Jesus as we see Him in the Gospels. In their Christ-centered selflessness, they stand in stark contrast to the self-centered life of the flesh. They are supernatural in nature and not a human attainment, though we have an essential role in their blossoming. They do not appear piecemeal but all together. Nor do they appear in full bloom but mature over time as we continue to walk in the Spirit and put sin to death. Not only do they have a personal dimension; they also have a community dimension that blesses and edifies fellow believers and strengthens the unity of the church.

What part do we play in the blossoming of the Spirit's fruit in our lives? After listing the fruit of the Spirit, Paul reminds the believers that they "have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (v. 24). This is his way of describing their original turning to Christ from their sin. As he said in Romans, "We know that our old self was crucified with him [Christ] in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6:6). The image of "crucifixion" depicts our turning from sin in repentance and to Christ in faith—dying to the old life and coming alive to the new. The effect of this is that the bondage and enslavement of our will to sin has been broken, and we are now liberated and able to say no to sin. This does not mean that we cannot sin anymore; rather, it means we have been set free to obey God. However, we must choose to yield ourselves, body and soul, to Him (Rom. 6:12–14). If we don't, we will remain mired in sin. That is why Paul goes on to say to the Galatians, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by [keep in step with] the Spirit" (v. 25). The Spirit leads and empowers us to walk in obedience to God.

How does this work in practice? Being led by the Spirit, walking by the Spirit, keeping in step with the Spirit, is predicated on our having previously surrendered ourselves wholeheartedly to God in response to His grace. This surrender is an act of the will, a choice we make; it is saying yes to God and the Spirit's leading and no to the desires of the flesh. However, it is precisely here that many of us have a problem. Research has shown that the vast majority of professing believers in the American church have never made such a surrender of themselves to God. They have never taken a decisive stand against the flesh—their old sinful self and its desires—and put God first in their lives.

But as Paul makes clear in Romans 6 and 12, putting God first is the only appropriate response to God for the completely undeserved grace and mercy He has lavished upon us, and it is essential for living the Christian life. In Romans 12:1, for example, Paul exhorts the church, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." If

we haven't done this, it means we still have a divided heart; we have one foot in the kingdom and one foot in the world. We are of two minds. We want the blessings of God but refuse His conditions. We will say no to sin only so far as we find it agreeable. We rationalize and make excuses about our sins, saying we can't resist, or that we will sin only a little or only occasionally. Then we deceive ourselves into thinking that God understands we are weak and will be satisfied if we do the best we can—which is to assume He will be satisfied with our compromise, our partial obedience, and our halfhearted commitment. But He won't.

God knows that we are weak; He knows it far better than we do. And He has made a provision for it. That is precisely why He gave us the Holy Spirit! But as I mentioned in the article "Holiness" (*Knowing & Doing*, Fall 2016), there is a big difference between the Spirit *residing* in us (which is true of all born again believers), and the Spirit *reigning* in us (which is true of only some). The Spirit is ready and willing and eager to reign in us, but His power is blocked until we surrender fully to God. Once we surrender to God and ask the Spirit to fill us, He will begin to change our lives.

In ways that will amaze and delight you, the Holy Spirit will actively carry forward the process of transforming you through the renewing of your mind. The process works from the inside out. It is not simply the changing of external behaviors but the changing of their source. Renewed minds produce renewed thinking, values, attitudes, desires, motives, and behaviors. At the deepest level, we will begin to experience "the expulsive power of a new affection."<sup>5</sup> Our hearts will increasingly appreciate God's grace to us, and our minds will increasingly desire God and His will more than our sin and its pleasure, thus weakening its hold on us.

The Scriptures are the Holy Spirit's chief instrument in renewing our minds, and His primary focus is Jesus—glorifying Jesus to us (John 16:14). He does this through illuminating our minds and hearts to grasp ever more deeply the love of God and of Jesus for us and to focus our attention on Jesus' life, His works, His teachings, His death, resurrection, and ascension to glory. This highlights the great importance of being immersed in the Scriptures and praying that God will "grant us so to hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them" (*Book of Common Prayer*) that we are truly transformed. One of our main responsibilities in this process is to sit under good preaching and teaching and also read, study, memorize, and meditate on Scripture—the Gospels, the Epistles, and the rest of the Bible. As we behold the glory of the Lord Jesus over time, pondering and deeply reflecting upon Him and all He has done, our love for Him will grow and with it our desire to please Him and be like Him. These holy desires in turn will propel our daily obedience, which the Spirit will help us render by calling to our minds the teachings and the example of Jesus that apply to the circumstances we face each day—in areas of personal temptation, family relations, friendships, church life, the workplace, community affairs, and ministry opportunities, among others.

By immersing ourselves in the Scriptures, consistently walking in the Spirit, asking Him to reveal the transforming glory of Christ to us, and obediently following as He leads us, we will see the fruit of the Spirit maturing in our lives; we will find ourselves being transformed from one level of glory to another by the Spirit—transformed into the image of Jesus Himself (2 Cor. 3:18). It isn't easy; it involves challenge and discipline, may lead to hardship or persecution, and takes a lifetime, but the rewards are infinitely greater than anything this world can offer.■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.

<sup>2</sup> Richard N. Longnecker, Galatians, Word Biblical Commentary, vol.41 (Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 247

<sup>3</sup> Summarized from Richard Longnecker, *ibid*, 252-264; F.F. Bruce, New International Greek Commentary, Galatians (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982), 246-248; William Barclay, Daily Study Bible, Revised (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1976), 46-52

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1.11.8

<sup>5</sup> The Explosive power of a New Affection, Thomas Chalmers. Christianity.com.

If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a . . . dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright, stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness.

*C.S. Lewis*

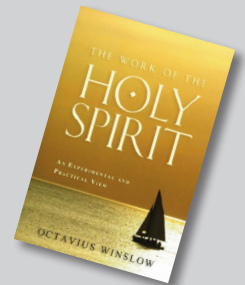


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## RECOMMENDED READING

Octavius Winslow, *The Work of the Holy Spirit: An Experimental and Practical View* (Banner of Truth, 2013)

This classic book on the work of the Holy Spirit was written by one of the most prominent evangelical preachers of the nineteenth century, Octavius Winslow. From the author's preface: "To the subject discussed in the following pages, the author earnestly bespeaks the prayerful consideration of the Christian reader. It cannot occupy a position too prominent in our Christianity, nor can it be a theme presented too frequently for our contemplation. All that we spiritually know of ourselves, all that we know of God, and of Jesus, and his Word, we owe to the teaching of the Holy Spirit; and all the real light, sanctification, strength and comfort we are made to possess on our way to glory, we must ascribe to Him. To be richly anointed with the Spirit is to be led into all truth; and to be filled with the Spirit is to be filled with love to God and man."



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