

## Walk in the Spirit

In Ancient times mariners would find their way across the oceans by paying close attention to the stars. Among all the stars there was one which was particularly important because it was fixed and reliable as a source for direction. It was called the North Star or Polaris. It offered the benefit that while the whole sky would be changing through the seasons, this star could always be relied upon to point out North so that one could know in what direction one was moving. It would happen that whenever you had a storm, or a condition of clouds covering the stars mariners would find themselves lost at sea; They would have to watch continually over the night in hope of catching the glimpse of the stars in the hope of being able to find their way again.

We live in turbulent times. In a sense we are in the midst of a storm. It is as if that North Star has been hidden away and people are confused, especially, in terms of what morality requires and what is the difference between right and wrong. Things that had been for a long time considered as obviously wrong are not so anymore. People are confused hearing many voices and diverse opinions concerning what is the right course of action.

The main question we face then is: what shall we do? How can we find a reliable guide for our lives in the midst of these turbulent times?

In today's epistle lesson the apostle Paul provides for us a clear and definite answer. He identifies two differing principles lying at the root of everyone's conduct. Once we understand these principles we may be able to find the right course for our lives.

These two principles are opposed one to the other. They are polar opposites. The Christian must choose which one of these he will follow, leading to forms of conduct diametrically opposed.

One he calls "walking in the Spirit", the other he identifies as walking according to the flesh.

"Spirit" and "Flesh" here are the two key concepts we must understand.

First, notice that the apostle is not talking about the body as opposed to the mind in this opposition between the spirit and the flesh. It is a common error to think that when the Bible speaks about the corruption of the flesh it is only referring to the corruption of our bodies, or to our material nature as the

source of all evil. This is not a Christian idea, it is rather Greek and Gnostic.

The “flesh” in Paul’s language involves the whole corruption of our human nature, body and spirit. The flesh is our natural inclination to sin. There is a tendency present in each and every living human being which finds satisfaction in doing what God forbids. It is the reason why we are so easily tempted to do evil, and not do good. This inclination is present in all individuals and in all communities, and finds more or less open expression in the life of individuals as well as in society and culture.

When life is organized in such a way that the flesh may have free course, we observe what the Scripture describes as worldliness. It is a system of degradation in which the Word of God is ignored and human self-will is affirmed.

The world, zealous in its service to the flesh, affirms this ability to disobey God’s commandments as a source of pride and glory. It delights in the idea that it can defy God, and mocks the prospects of judgment. It calls this service to the flesh “freedom”; and resists anyone curtailing its desire for more power to exercise its will completely unbounded.

Yet, Paul rightly identifies this walk of life as a form of slavery. This “freedom” to do whatever we please is really slavery to Satan and sin. Man adorns its slavery to sin, leading to corruption and death, in order to deceive himself and others concerning the truth of his condition.

On the other hand, the apostle strongly asserts the calling of a Christian as a calling to live in true freedom. This walk of life characterized by true freedom he identifies as “walking according to the Spirit”.

But, here we must correct another misunderstanding of this language. When we hear the word “spirit” we often are tempted to think about mystic experiences or ghosts; Many people restrict the life of the spirit to that which lies in the realm of the unknown, and the direction of the Spirit becomes some source of subjective force, which works like an intuition or an unreasoning, unexplainable, inclination towards one choice instead of another. Some called it intuition, others call it “feeling the Spirit's direction”.

But the apostle does not speak in this way. When he says “walk in the Spirit” he has something definite in mind. He is not inviting us to have astral disembodied mystic experiences, or to be lead by our intuitions or our personal feelings, as if

any strong feeling or inclination we experienced was to be considered the fact the leading voice of the Spirit in us.

This is a delicate subject. Yes, I believe that the Spirit of God leads the children of God and, that it is our duty to seek that spiritual guidance to walk sensitively to his spiritual direction which also involves subjective and even ineffable aspects, lying beyond human understanding. But, we should not ignore that when the apostle speaks about spiritual direction he emphatically includes the mind of the Christian and the understanding as a prominent and indispensable factor.

Our mind matters in the things of the Spirit.

His exhortation to the Galatians is full of facts, arguments, explanations and sound reasoning. He calls them to think about these facts, and evaluate the choices of their conduct and consider the implications of their decisions. These exhortations are all related to the life of the Spirit. There is no opposition between faith and reason. There is no distinction in the apostle's teaching between being lead by the Spirit and discerning that which is true, right, and pleasing to God through sound reasoning, through the building of a sound Christian mind, based upon the truth.

It is very unfortunate that in our current environment the Spirit is often divorced from the mind and reason; People often assume that faith must be crazy and all reasoning suspect of infidelity.

No. The commandment to love God stresses that we must love him with all our being, including the mind. But not only that, the life of the mind is spiritual by definition. There is no separation between mind and spirit.

We were created in the image of God. God is a Spirit, what “spirit” is, is something which is ultimately incomprehensible to us; but we partake of the life of the spirit in virtue of our creation; and also in virtue of our redemption. Our reasoning capacity, limited as it is, is an integral part of our spiritual nature. We have a mind, because God has a mind. In other words we think because God thinks. Of course his thoughts are infinitely higher, perfect and inscrutable for us, but yet we still think, like he does, and we still love like he does, and make choices like he does.

In other words we are spiritual beings and this is reflected in the intimate life of the mind and the heart which is invisible to others except indirectly by our words and actions.

So, let's get back to the meaning of the expression "walk in the Spirit" as opposed to walking in the flesh; Walk in the spirit means a walk of life according to the nature of God. It is the kind of walk which pleases God. Therefore, it is a walk characterized by the principles revealed in the Gospel. In other words it is a walk of life following and imitating Christ.

There has never been a more "spiritual" human being upon this earth than Jesus Christ. If you want to contemplate what godliness is, what a heavenly walk and heavenly values mean in practice in this fallen world think about the actions, teaching and choices of our Lord. His life is the life of the Spirit.

This is a very helpful correction to the errors mentioned earlier, for the life of Christ was not characterized by a dualistic separation between the body and the spirit; nor did he ever dismiss the mind as unimportant. Jesus was not led by intuition, hunches or subjective impulses, rather he exhibited a careful determination to occupy himself with knowing and doing the will of the Father as it had been revealed in the Scriptures.

"It is written" was the principle upon which Christ ruled his whole life and ministry. The spiritual walk is therefore a walk according to God's Word. It is therefore, a walk according to

the truth and the commandments of God, and especially a walk motivated by love.

As St. Paul clearly states a few verses before in the same chapter 5 of Galatians:

**14** For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” **15** But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

The commandments are nothing else than an objective expression of the way love acts; an objective expression of the will of God. The law sets the boundaries of our conduct to promote the well being of others. There is no contradiction between the law, truth and love.

The law, love and truth support each other, and this support is reasonable. It is something that can be understood. It is only a deceptive trick when love is identified with passion and emotion and opposed to the life of the mind in obedience to the commandments, as if love could live without boundaries. Unbounded love, love that has no objective limits, love that does what it pleases is a perversion of love, is the love according to the flesh wish leads to slavery and death.

So, the walk according to the Spirit is a walk in love, truth and obedience. We are called to grow in this walk of life, a walk which is truly a life of freedom.

Paul warned the Galatians about the danger they were facing by compromising the freedom Christ had bought for them; He said:

**5:1** For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Jesus bought us for freedom; Therefore, any walk of life leading us to any form of slavery is contrary to the Gospel. Can you imagine a prisoner remaining in the cell after someone has paid the bail? Christ wants us to live in freedom, to be truly free in him, to love one another and to live with the hope of attaining eternal righteousness at the end, as Paul continues to stress:

**2** Look: I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. **3** I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. **4** You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. **5** For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of

righteousness. **6** For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Paul knew the slavery brought by a doctrine of justification by obedience to the works of the law. He had been a Pharisee. He knew what that righteousness meant and he saw the danger facing the Galatians of changing their freedom in Christ for the slavery of self-righteousness, represented in their willingness to submit to the external demand of those who required that they be circumcised in order to become Christians. Paul would not compromise one bit the liberty of the Galatians. And that is why he stresses instead what it is really important: Faith working through love is the only thing that counts; In other words walking in the spirit is the same as our faith acting in love, and nothing else should matter.

These two different walks of life, the walk of the spirit or the walk of the flesh, which roots lie deep in our hearts, become manifest in our external conduct; one leading to destruction and death the other leading to fullness of life:

**19** Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, **20** idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, **21** envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like

these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The works of the flesh are clearly condemned by the law.

**22** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

The fruit of the Spirit is the fulfillment of the law. Christ came to fulfill the law.

**24** And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

It is therefore an error of self-deception when Christians outwardly profess to follow Christ while inwardly are committed to supporting the desires of the flesh. It is impossible to claim Christ as Saviour and not honor him as Lord by living in obedience to his commandments. We cannot walk according to the Spirit and the flesh at the same time.

These two principles oppose each other by definition so whenever one is nurtured the other decreases in proportion. These two as, said before, are polar opposites; we can only walk towards one of them at any given time. North or South, one or the other, one cannot have it both ways.

So, today's lesson calls us to self-examination; as the apostle exhorted the Galatians so many centuries ago, we must examine our walk of life, to avoid, self-righteousness, self deception and the deception by others. To see if the kind of life we are living is the kind of life which pleases God, according to the Scriptures, which exhibit the life of Christ, which exhibit the love of Jesus; so that our actions be in agreement with our profession.

Let us therefore examine ourselves this day. We must look at our own conduct and find in the light of Scripture the truth of our condition. What direction I am moving towards? North or South? The Spirit or the Flesh? Will determine our lives for eternity.

The good news to all believers is that Christ bought us to be free. He is always willing and able to receive and forgive those who have erred and come to him in repentance. He wants us out of prison for good. That is why he died for us. He welcomes repentant sinners because he loves us and wants to save us. He gives his Holy Spirit freely to all who ask. He is also able to finish the work he has begun in each one of us. But, we must draw near to him; we must trust him, we must believe his word; pray and obey; we must continually renew our commitment to follow him, to live in communion with

him, so that as time passes the life of the Spirit may become more and more the predominant characteristic of our lives. May God grant us his mercy and grace this day to walk in the Spirit and not according to the flesh. *Amen.*

### **Let us Pray**

Almighty and everlasting God, give unto us the increase of faith, hope, and love, and that we may obtain that which thou dost promise, make us to love that which thou dost command; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*