

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Operation Liberation!

A Gracious WARNING!

(Galatians 5:16-21)

Study #11

Introduction: Warnings we have known and loved...

We are so frequently warned to “Be careful!” these days we may be tempted to not take any warning seriously.

Search the Web and you’ll find dozens of sites that catalogue ludicrous warnings found on electrical appliances and toys, tools and trinkets. Here are a few of my favorites:

- Warning: May cause drowsiness.” -- *found on a bottle of Nytol, a brand of sleeping pills.*
- Warning: May contain nuts. -- *found on a package of peanuts.*
- Warning: The contents of this bottle should not be fed to fish. -- *found on a bottle of shampoo for dogs.*
- Warning: Do not drive with sunshield in place. -- *found on a cardboard sunshield that keeps the sun off the dashboard.*
- Warning: This product is not to be used in bathrooms. -- *found on a Holmes bathroom heater.*
- Warning: Shoots rubber bands. -- *found on a product called “Rubber Band Shooter”*
- Warning: May contain small parts. -- *found on a Frisbee*
- Warning: has been found to cause cancer in laboratory mice. -- *found on a box of rat poison.*

And, last but not least...

- Warning: Do not turn upside down. -- *found on the bottom of a supermarket dessert box.*

How silly. And we could list hundreds more that are just as silly or even sillier.

However, just because some warnings are silly, we shouldn’t think that all warnings can be ignored. Some warnings should be heeded.

When you arrive at the beach and see a “*Warning: Dangerous Currents*” sign, you know to pay attention. When those living on Galveston Island hear that the National Weather Service has issued a hurricane warning, you can bet they’ll pay attention! The Surgeon General’s not kidding when he warns us against cigarettes.

I don’t know what you do with warnings. My policy is to heed some warnings and take my chances with some. And at times, this policy has served me well. (Maybe you have a similar policy?)

Well, this morning we are warned by the Apostle Paul. And he issues a warning that we’d all be wise to heed.

Throughout our time in Galatians, we’ve listened as Paul has issued a number of warnings.

He’s warned us against legalism and urged us to a grace orientation. He has warned us against a works mentality and exhorted us to a life of faith.

Now, with the letter winding toward its conclusion, he urges us to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit as he warns us against giving in to “the flesh.”

Freedom? Walk By The Spirit! (vv. 16-18)

The Sole Sure-Fire Route to a God Honoring Life (v. 16)

Walk by the Spirit... (v. 16a)

[16] But I say, walk by the Spirit...

I love to walk. I find walking through our neighborhood early in the morning or hiking a wilderness trail tremendous therapy. And, while walking alone is good, taking a hike with Kathy or with other hiking buddies is even better.

When you're walking with somebody, each hiker may have to adjust his or her pace so that they actually walk together. But during a good walk, conversation flows and the fellowship is sweet. There is the delight of shared beauty.

Taking a walk with someone is one of life's sweet and simple pleasures. Walking may be the slowest form of travel (in the first and the twenty-first centuries), but to walk is to make progress.

Paul tells us that we are to ***“walk by (or “in” or - my preference “with”) the [Holy] Spirit.”***¹

Every Christian has received the Holy Spirit; He resides in each redeemed heart.² The Spirit of God is an ever-present reality in the life of the believer. And the Spirit is walking. We want our company and we are told to walk with Him.³

But what does that MEAN?

“Walking by (or with) the Spirit” may seem like one of those nice, spiritually-correct phrases that doesn't communicate much because it is so vague? How do I walk with the Spirit? And what does walking with the Spirit look like?

Well, I'm convinced that ***“walking by the Spirit”*** is not that hard a concept to grasp. It isn't even a complicated thing to do. It involves a couple of things.

First, it requires that we listen to (by that I mean that we pay attention to - not that God is necessarily going to audibly SPEAK to us) God's words of promise and live on the basis of them. Over and over again we hear Scripture's promises from God:

“I PROMISE I love you”; “I PROMISE I will never leave you”; “I PROMISE your sins are forgiven”; “I PROMISE that you will go to Heaven to live with Me eternally when you leave this earth.”

The Spirit of God is always either whispering or shouting God's promises to us. Walking with Him involves purposing to be mindful of those promises.⁴

But walking by (or *with*) the Spirit also involves going where He is going. And where is the HOLY Spirit walking? Toward HOLINESS!⁵

The path that the Spirit is blazing is the path of love and joy and peace - and freedom!

Paul says that the sure-fire way to a life that honors God is to walk by the Spirit. The image isn't flashy. Walking is slow. But if we walk by the Spirit, we will make progress as a Christian.

Or, as he puts it in this verse, we ***“will not carry out the desires of the flesh.”***

...then you won't carry out the lusts of the flesh (v. 16b)

[16] But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.

Throughout this letter, Paul has used the term “flesh” a number of times and in a number of different ways. Sometimes, the reference is clearly to “material” as opposed to “immaterial.”⁶

¹ The title of a book by J. I. Packer Keep In Step With the Spirit, paraphrases Galatians 5:16 and wonderfully captures the sense of walking “with” the Spirit.

² The Galatians have already been reminded that they received the Holy Spirit when they believed (3:2, 5).

³ There should be no confusion here about the object of “Spirit.” It is a clear reference to the Spirit of God, and not to the human spirit.

⁴ Note 2 Cor. 3:17, ***“Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”***

⁵ This morning we will see the devastating results of NOT walking with the Spirit as we observe the deeds of the flesh. Next week, we will see the beautiful fruit that the Spirit produces in our lives when we do walk with Him (Galatians 5:22-23).

⁶ 1:16; 2:16; 2:20; 3:3; 6:12-13; 6:8 (?)

At other times, Paul speaks of the “flesh” to draw a contrast with the promise of God, as in the situation where Isaac was born according to promise, but Ishmael according to the flesh.⁷

But when we come to this fifth chapter, it is difficult to NOT see a change in the usage of the term “flesh.”

Beginning at verse 13, and then following (in verses 16-17, 19 and 24), Paul speaks of the flesh as an active force that tries to get us to sin.⁸

And the force of this “flesh” is defeated whenever we are walking with the Spirit. That’s a promise from God!⁹

THAT is a nugget worth chewing on, friends.

When you and I have learned to walk where the Spirit is walking (holiness; living in light of God’s promises), then He will energize and empower us to live in such a radically loving and faithful way that the Law can’t shackle us and the flesh can’t drag us down to defeat!¹⁰

So, Paul says that we will not carry out the evil desires of the flesh if we are *“walking by the Spirit.”*

Which is not to say that the Christian walk is going to be a walk in the park! There is a battle royal going on. There is conflict involved in living for Jesus.

⁷ 4:23; 4:29; 6:8

⁸ This is why the New International Version translates “flesh” with “sinful nature.” However, I much prefer the literal translation “flesh” because “sinful nature” may leave the impression that the Christian has two natures, one sinful and one not. The Bible teaches that the Christian is a “new creation” in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) with one nature.

⁹ There is a tragic mis-translation of the verse in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which has *“Walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.”* - as if Paul was commanding us to not gratify the desires of the flesh. In fact, though, he is issuing a promise that IF we walk by the Spirit we WILL NOT carry out the desires of the flesh.

¹⁰ As we read in Hebrews 13:9, *“Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were thus occupied were not benefited.”*

The Christian’s Tug-of-War (v. 17)

[17] 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.

A tug-of-war

Christians are engaged in a tug-of-war between two opposing forces. The Spirit of God is walking in one direction. The “flesh” leads in an entirely different direction.

Both the flesh and the Holy Spirit are urging Christians to follow their lead.

This is not in any way to say that the Christian has two natures, sort of a “good dog” and a “bad dog” living inside.

No, the Christian is a new creation in Christ. The Christian is redeemed by God and adopted into God’s family. He is forgiven. She is heaven-bound.

But that is not to say that the Christian is immune from temptations from the *flesh* to live contrary to who he or she is in Christ. There are two forces competing for our allegiance.

Result: a life of conflict!

No matter which direction we choose (Spirit or flesh), somebody won’t be happy.

We will either please the flesh and thereby grieve the Holy Spirit of God, or we’ll deny and displease the flesh and please the Spirit!

We will please one or the other, but not both. And we’ll experience a life of conflict whether we side with the Spirit against the flesh or with the flesh against the Spirit. This conflict is distinctly Christian, it is inevitable, and - get this - it will be lifelong!

I’ve spoken with really mature Christians who tell me that they have never outgrown this conflict.

They assure me that in this life we never arrive at a place where walking with the Spirit is as easy as falling off a log because the flesh never gives up!¹¹

We've got to come to grips with the idea that there are two opposing forces competing for our attention.

But yielding to one - the flesh - brings slavery while yielding to the other - the Spirit of God - brings freedom and joy and life!

Then, Paul adds one helpful layer to the image of the walk we are taking with the Holy Spirit. It is not a walk between peers. The Spirit is walking ahead of us. He is leading us.

Led by the Spirit; NOT under Law (v. 18)

*[18] But if¹² you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.*¹³

We ARE LED by the Spirit!

Lots of people are leading or seeking to lead us today. Politicians are leading us in a myriad of directions. At work, we are led into new projects by our superiors. In the family, parents lead children and fathers seek to provide loving leadership in the home.

In all these realms of life experience we are led. But the fact that someone is leading doesn't necessarily mean that anyone is following!

In any arena the led might buck the leadership of the leader. If that happens in a nation, the result is anarchy; in a business, it's chaos; in a home, disruption and divisiveness.

¹¹ As brilliant a theologian and mature a Christian as Leon Morris says, "No matter how mature we are in Christ, we never outgrow this conflict."

¹² "If" - Paul assumes this condition (1st class conditional), that is, that they will allow the Spirit to lead them.

¹³ Essentially, verses 16 and 18 are two ways of saying the same thing. In v. 16, we walked (active), here we are led (passive).

Spiritually, it is disastrous when Christians don't follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. BUT when we do allow the Spirit to lead us into the life He wants us to lead - a holy, God-honoring, loving, joy-filled life - we experience freedom from the Law.

Therefore, WE ARE NOT under the Law!

See, all legalists (from the first century forward) will tell us that the way to overcome the flesh is by submission to law/the Law/rules/Thou shalt/Thou shalt not.

Paul says, "*NO! It is by way of following the leadership of the Spirit.*"

Following the Spirit, walking with the Spirit is the key to victory in the Christian life!

HOWEVER, we might NOT live that way.

It is possible that the Christian might NOT walk with the Spirit. It is possible that a Christian might carry out the deeds of the flesh, any of them.

So, with Paul, let's consider what a life NOT given to following the Spirit's lead might look like.

The Dead Deeds of the Flesh (vv. 19-21a)

The Self-Evident Nature of the Deeds of the Flesh (vv. 19a)

[5:19a] Now the deeds of the flesh are evident...

During my college days, I was involved in a Bible study of Galatians. I guess the leader of this study decided that we college guys needed to understand the deeds of the flesh. (We actually understood them all too well...). Anyway, he chose to spend an evening on each of the various deeds mentioned in these verses.

That's right. He actually took fifteen weeks to move through these verses. And, no, I won't do that to you.

It's important that we get a general understanding of what Paul's talking about. But there will be no exhaustive examinations of each deed of the flesh.

In fact, he even says that the kinds of deeds carried out by people who are yielding to the force of the flesh are obvious and apparent to all. We understand them.

There are, first, sins of a sexual nature.

The Deeds of the Flesh (vv. 19b-21a)

Sins of a sexual nature

[5:19]...immorality, impurity, sensuality

All types of forbidden sexual relationships are in view here. Sexual involvement with anyone to whom you are not married. All moral uncleanness in thought, word or deed. All indecency and lewdness. It is all out of bounds and all of the flesh.

Then there are "religious" sins.

Religious sins

[5: 20] idolatry, sorcery¹⁴...

The worship of anything other than the one true God is idolatrous - and just as in the first century, there is a lot of that going on in the 21st! Sorcery, witchcraft, paganism, wiccanism are all around us. And these are "fleshly."

We keep reading and discover that in the same list in which we find those outrageous, grand sins Paul also mentions some behaviors that may seem a bit more socially acceptable.

¹⁴ The Greek word is "pharmakeia" - drugged worship practices were frequently found among the witches, sorcerers, and soothsayers of the Canaanites, Babylonians, and Egyptians.

Social sins (vv. 20b-21a)

[5:20]...enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, [21] envying...

Now, of course, nobody is going to defend envying, but did Paul really mean to place it in the same category as sexual immorality? Does it strike you as odd that in a listing of sins including idolatry we also find "outbursts of anger"?

Does that surprise you? Does that trouble you?

Paul's list of particulars is winding down.

Substance abuse sins

[5:20]...drunkenness, carousing

Here is substance abuse. Such sins are as rampant in our own culture as in ancient Greece and Rome. Wild parties and drinking bouts where substance abuse of all kinds is on display is a problem.

And to make sure that he covers all his bases, he concludes with this:

An open-ended list

[5:21] and things like these...

It is an impressive list, made all the more so by its length. Fifteen members of the "flesh family" are included. But, while exhausting, it is not an exhaustive list as is made clear from Paul's final comment, "**and things like these.**"

After all, he didn't mention pride. He didn't mention cheating or lying or stealing. There are all kinds of misbehaviors that are not explicitly listed - and they would all fit under "**and things like these.**"

And all of these attitudes and actions have one thing in common. They are all fueled by the energy of the flesh. They are all committed by those who are yielding to the flesh.

Now, here is the question I want you to ponder with me this morning. Why does Paul include this catalogue of various sins here?

Why, in writing to the churches of Galatia, populated by Christians, would he think it necessary to list over a dozen fleshly sins?

Why? He tells us that he is giving a *WARNING*.

Warning! (v. 21b)¹⁵

[5:21b]...of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit¹⁶ the kingdom of God.
17

One More Time...

This (the letter to the Galatians) was not the first time Paul had warned the Galatians against these things. Based on what he says here, he had warned them when he was with them at the time that he had brought the Gospel to them on the First Missionary Journey.

So, how are we to understand this last part of verse 21?

It is a strong statement - and not all Christians agree as to what Paul means. There are at least three major interpretations.

I want to state them, and tell you why I think one of them can't be correct, why one of them is likely not correct, and why I think one makes the most sense.

¹⁵ The Message: This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 6 catalogues eleven types of wrongdoers who will not inherit the kingdom of God. See also Ephesians 5:5.

¹⁷ This is the only reference to the Kingdom of God in this letter. Significantly, though, in Acts 14:22, Paul and Barnabas had warned their South Galatian converts that *"through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God."*

How to Understand this Warning

Option: #1 - If you practice such things, you won't go to Heaven

Some people read what Paul has written and take him to be saying that if the Galatians (the "professed" Christians to whom he is writing) practice the deeds of the flesh, they won't go to Heaven.

If that is what the apostle is saying, it is indeed a warning!

Those who take Paul's words this way believe that receiving an inheritance in the Kingdom of God, or inheriting the Kingdom of God means the same thing as having eternal life.

They also believe that a genuine Christian would never practice the deeds of the flesh.

And they further believe that if a person commits the deeds of the flesh (and habitually does so) they prove that they have either never *really* trusted Christ for salvation¹⁸, or, having once been actually saved, they have lost their salvation as a result of (habitually) committing the deeds of the flesh.

So, in this first interpretation, Paul's warning is, *"You who call yourself a Christian, don't do the deeds of the flesh, or you'll not go to Heaven, but Hell."*

But this simply cannot be what Paul means!

In the first place, throughout this letter he has been addressing people who have placed their trust in Christ for salvation. They have been redeemed and adopted into God's family - and it is impossible to be unredeemed once redeemed or to be un-adopted once adopted! (see John 10)

And in the second place, the New Testament is clear in many, many places that genuinely saved people may do genuinely bad things.

¹⁸ Stott: to engage in such behavior indicates that these people are not in Christ. As much as I respect Dr. Stott, I do not believe that engaging in such behavior (envy, outbursts of anger, carousing) necessarily means that a person is not "in Christ."

It is certainly tragic, but is it a news flash to say that Christians sin?

No, whatever warning Paul is issuing is not a warning to his readers that if they don't shape up and stop doing the deeds of the flesh they will go to Hell.

Maybe, though, Paul is saying something else.

Option #2 - People who haven't trusted Christ and do these things don't go to Heaven. You ARE going to Heaven, so why in the world would you live this way?!

Maybe he is urging his readers, who are true Christians, to not do the deeds of the flesh, as that would contradict who they are as new creations in Christ.

I love the logic of this (and in fact this is exactly the logic and reasoning we find in Ephesians 5).

Believers shouldn't live sinfully because sin is exactly what puts people under the wrath of God.¹⁹ And now, as people who have trusted Christ for eternal salvation, we are NOT under the wrath of God. Therefore, it is absurd to live sinfully!

The problem with understanding Paul in Galatians 5 this way is that this interpretation carries with it no warning. And Paul explicitly says that he is warning us that something bad will happen to us if we (Christians) do engage in the deeds of the flesh.

But there is another way to understand Paul's words that takes all the particulars into account and serves up a very serious warning.

Option #3 - If you believers live this way, though you will go to Heaven, you won't inherit the Kingdom of God

I believe that Paul, recognizing that he was writing (at least for the most part) to people who had received eternal life by trusting Jesus, was warning them that while they were guaranteed Heaven, they would not

¹⁹ F. F. Bruce: While good deeds do not admit one to the kingdom, evil deeds of the type mentioned certainly exclude one.

receive an inheritance, would not receive great reward in the life to come if they led lives characterized by the deeds of the flesh.

This view affirms a couple of very important truths that are affirmed throughout the New Testament.

FIRST, it affirms that genuinely saved people sin.²⁰

Some who read this passage see the listing of sins, and automatically conclude that Paul must have had lost people in mind. But why must that be the case?

After all, the saved people to whom Paul is writing have compromised the message of the Gospel. They have opted for legalism. They have become enslaved to rules.

Why do we assume that he changes audience simply because he now speaks of jealousy, drunkenness, or sorcery?

Is it so hard to imagine that people who are born-again might fall into sin?

No, of course not! Saved people sin. We may get envious every once in a while. A problem involving drinking too much may surface. Believers have been known to dabble in the occult and to even drift into cults. Sexual sin is not unknown among God's people.

Could a person who is saved continue in sins like that? Sadly, yes!

And, if that happens, it indicates that he or she is not walking by the Spirit, they are not following the Spirit's lead, they are not depending on the promises of God for their spiritual sustenance.

AND to the extent that a Christian walks in the flesh, to that extent his or her inheritance will be small in the Kingdom of Heaven!

²⁰ This, from Dr. Thomas Constable: It is not necessary to suppose that all of these deeds of the flesh reflect the actual behavior of the Galatians. The fact, though, that the list includes not only those vices which belong to the stock-in-trade of Jewish polemic against paganism but enmity, quarrelsomeness, jealousy, outbursts of rage, selfish ambitions, dissensions, party spirit and envy, suggests that it was in these forms that the "flesh" manifested itself in the Galatian Christians' lives.

This leads us to the second truth affirmed by this understanding of Paul's words, namely, that reward and lack of reward after this life is based on faithfulness in this life.

The subject of "inheritance" is woven throughout the writings of the New Testament.²¹ The Lord Jesus spoke frequently about inheritance and about laying up treasure in Heaven.

And one thing that becomes clear is that **inheriting** the Kingdom, or receiving an inheritance in the Kingdom, is, in many passages, a distinct concept from receiving eternal life and going to Heaven.²²

In the New Testament, discussions about the inheritance that awaits believers on the other side almost always have a tie-in with the subject of rewards which come our way as a result of our faithfulness in this life.

And I believe that the very sobering message Paul is delivering in these verses is that a life not controlled by the Spirit - indicated by the performance of the deeds of the flesh - will yield no reward in Heaven.

People who have placed their faith in Jesus for eternal life are saved. Period.

But, these saved people who practice the deeds of the flesh will not **inherit** the Kingdom and will not **possess** the Kingdom.²³

What is at stake in whether or not we walk by the Spirit is whether we will enjoy the Kingdom of God to its fullest potential!

Christians who sow to the flesh during this life will not have a bountiful inheritance in the Kingdom of God. WOW!

²¹ Paul, Peter and John all speak of "inheritance" separate from eternal life. The theme is also present in the book of Hebrews.

²² For some excellent reading on the subject of inheritance and reward I would recommend *Grace in Eclipse* by Zane Hodges, and *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* by Randy Alcorn.

²³ A few of the passages that speak of rewards would include 1 Cor. 9:27; 1 Cor. 3; 2 Cor. 5:1-10; 1 Timothy 4:7-8. Some verses that speak more explicitly about inheritance would be Luke 12:15-21; Luke 19:12-26; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 5:5-6; 2 Peter 1:11

Conclusion:

Eternal salvation. It is by faith alone in Christ alone. The theme of GRACE sounds from the beginning to the end of the letter to the Galatians and throughout the New Testament.

Our works have everything to do with our condemnation, but NOTHING to do with our salvation!

But that is not to say that our works are irrelevant! Holy living is critically important for:

- bringing maximum glory and honor to the God who has saved us;
- making maximum impact on the world He loves;
- ensuring maximum joy and a rich inheritance in the life to come for us.

With the list of the "*deeds of the flesh*" in view (vv. 19-21), and an understanding of what is at stake in avoiding these deeds (inheritance in the kingdom of God!)...

are you following the Spirit's lead into a world of holiness?

If not, are you willing to begin to follow Him? Beginning today? Beginning right now?