

So What?

How the Apostle Paul instructs us to live out our life as members of a the body of believers.

Part 5—Living (Galatians 5:1, 6-7, 13-26)

¹ It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery...⁶The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. ⁷ You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? ... ¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

One night recently, I gathered with a group of “regular” people at a local watering hole to discuss the scriptures. In a quiet moment, one of them asked me an amazing question loud enough for the whole group to hear: “Can a person who is habitually making “bad” moral choices or continually engaging in “wrong” behaviors experience the fullness of God in their lives?”

Earlier that same night, I had been in the sitting room of a friend's house watching a video. Just after the video ended, somebody asked this question: “If God forgives the wrong choices for all people who receive Christ as Lord and Savior, then what is the point? If murderers get into heaven, why even bother to live uprightly now?”

Both questions seem to center on the issue, “does it matter how a person who received Christ as Lord and Savior behaves?” After we become a Christian, how is our status with God affected if we make choices to engage in behaviors that the scriptures condemn as being “sinful?”

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians was probably written about 49 AD and seems to directly address these two common questions. It was written to a series of new church plants Paul had started in cities along the main highway that crossed modern-day Turkey. Apparently, after Paul left that area to start new churches to the west, the people in those Christian communities began to practice a form of religion based on behaviors—the dos and don'ts of a moral and religious code—and not based on faith alone. The first four chapters of the book are a vehement restatement of the basic argument of the Christian faith found throughout the New Testament: humans gain right status with God only through the event of Christ's death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection and not through any human accomplishments or deeds. Early in the work, Paul writes:

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through (moral living), Christ died for nothing!”

In Paul's book to the Ephesians, chapter 2, he says it like this:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were (making wrong choices)—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in

the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

So when Paul writes at the beginning of 5th chapter of Galatians, “it is for freedom that Christ set us free” he is summarizing an amazing truth—those who receive Christ receive complete and total liberty. In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Chapter 6, Paul sums up this simple liberty by saying, “Everything is now legal for me.”

This makes sense. If every wrong choice we make after we receive Christ again separated us from God, then those who desire a right relationship with God would be continually feeling guilty and continually confessing sin. Life would fall into a pattern of considering what sins we might be engaging in and constantly asking for forgiveness from God. Christians would be defined by what they did not do instead of what they do. Who would want to be around a person like that? Who would want to be a person like that? Paul does state in Galatians 5 there is a law in effect, but the law does not prescribe what we are not to do, but rather prescribes what we are to do, ¹⁴ *For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

In sum, a Christian’s right status with God—forgiven and destined for eternal life in heaven—is not negated by the wrong choices we make after our journey of grace by faith begins. Sinning after conversion does not negate our salvation.

But what then does Paul mean when he writes:

¹⁹ The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Clearly the behaviors listed in the passage above are wrong—that is to say, they are sins. And apparently, those who engage in them “*will not inherit the kingdom of God.*” Very similar phrasing appears in the 5th Chapter of Ephesians, “*For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.*” Since Paul has so clearly argued that our salvation is secure as a result of our faith in Christ even as we continue to sin, then the inheritance we lose as a result of habitual or continual sin must be something other than our place in the afterlife. The inheritance we lose is in fact the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the blessings that flow through us to others.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul states this clearly: “*Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God.*” This is the heart and the soul of basic, systematic Christian theology. The inheritance of God available by faith is to inherit the actual presence of God living inside of us. The Spirit living inside of us gives us the ability to fulfill the one command that sums up the entire moral code:

Love your neighbor as yourself. There is perhaps one passage that sums up systematic Christian theology best (emphasis mine):

*⁷Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for  our sins. ¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, **God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.** ¹³**We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.** 1 John 4*

As we engage in sin, we lose the capacity to receive the inheritance—the presence of the Spirit in our lives. Confession of sin after our conversion to Christ, therefore, does not correct our status with God, but rather cleanses our vessel, our bodies, so that we can filled to capacity with the Holy Spirit. King David understood this when, after he had committed adultery, fathered a child with the wife of another man, and murdered her husband, when he wrote Psalm 51:

- ¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

We should flee from sin so that God can bless us with his Spirit, guide us, and use us to be a blessing by others. Whenever I sense I can no longer hear from God, whenever the Bible seems like dry and stale words, whenever I am selfish and self-centered, living for me and not blessing others, I know it is the result of unconfessed sin in my life and the resulting lack of the Holy Spirit flow through me. Therefore, we should confess our sins, not as a function of our guilt or in a vain hope of restoring our status with God, but so that God can continue his works through us. And not only are we empowered by God to do his works on earth as the Spirit flows through us, but our actual character begins to change. That is to say, the results of a Spirit-filled life become evident:

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Because I am a runner, I seem to appear to others to be in generally good shape. Actually, I am in quite poor health, but only my doctor knows it. He has conducted tests that reveal I have high cholesterol and high blood pressure. In all probability, my blood vessels are slowly becoming more clogged which raises the risks for heart disease and stroke. He has suggested I should radically change my diet, eliminating fats and reducing salt. I am absolutely free to eat whatever I want whenever I want. But in order for me to experience the fullness of life God intended for me, and in order for me to be around long enough to enjoy grandchildren, I need to abstain from poor eating habits (as an addict of burgers and fries, I thought fat and salt were the essential food groups) and change my habits. Similarly, for each of us to realize the fullness of inheritance of the God—the Holy Spirit—we need to abstain from behaviors we are free to do but that are not beneficial. Let us together, as Paul says at the beginning of Galatians 5, “stand firm then, and do not be burdened again...” Everything is, indeed, permissible...but not everything is beneficial. Why should we bother to live uprightly, according to morals of the Bible? So that God can freely through a pure and holy vessel—our bodies and ourselves.