

The New Way of the Spirit

Do you serve God “in the new way of the Spirit” or “in the old way of the written code” (Romans 7:6)? Paul says that in Christ we have died to the law so that we serve by the Spirit, a new and different way. What does it mean to serve in the new way of the Spirit?

Long ago, God promised better days were coming. One primary characteristic in the descriptions of those better days is that God would pour out his Spirit on all his people (Isaiah 32:14-20; Ezekiel 36:27; Joel 2:28-32). The Ezekiel passage tells us one of the purposes of God’s doing so, namely, to move us to keep his decrees.

When John baptized Jesus, the Lord was anointed with the Spirit and power. This enabled him to go around doing good and healing all who were afflicted by the Devil. John taught that Jesus would baptize others with Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34), but this did not take place until after Jesus had been glorified (John 7:39).

During the forty days between his suffering and ascension, Jesus instructed his followers to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the gift God promised (Acts 1:4-5, 8; cf. Luke 24:49). Then, on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit was poured out on the twelve (some say a larger group)(Acts 2:1-4). Peter explained that this was the fulfillment of the prophecies (Acts 2:14-21), that Jesus had now been exalted to the right hand of God, and that he is the one who poured out the Spirit (2:33). Those who grasped the message Peter preached, that Jesus is the Christ (2:36), and who repented and were baptized in his name, would likewise receive that same Spirit (2:38). The promise (cf. 1:4) was for people of all time everywhere (2:39).

Some people understand John the Baptist’s words (2 paragraphs above) to mean that he baptized with water only and that Jesus would baptize with the Spirit only. But Acts shows that baptism with water continued to be a part of people’s response to God (2:38, 41; 8:16, 36, 38; 10:47-48). Instead of being a replacement for baptism in water, receiving the Spirit is an additional blessing of being baptized in the name of Christ (Acts 2:38; 9:17-18; 19:2-3; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Titus 3:5).

On two occasions in Acts, however, the Spirit is not given at baptism, although he is still given in proximity to it (Acts 8:14-17; 10:44-48). The very mention of the Spirit being received at a time other than at baptism may indicate that it was a notable difference from the norm. It is significant that, on both of these occasions, the word was spreading to new ethnicities (Samaritans, Gentiles). Ethnicity was a significant issue for first century

Jews, and this is clearer when we put ourselves back into their time and culture and remember what an enormous divide there was between them and both Samaritans and Gentiles. This explains the considerable effort God went to in Acts 10 to bring Peter and Cornelius together. Some even say that Peter is being converted in Acts 10 as much as Cornelius is, that is, converted to the truth that everyone is welcomed by God (Acts 10:34-35).

In light of the enormous barrier between Jews and others in the first century, I believe God gave the Spirit in a different way from usual on these two occasions to affirm that people of all nations can be accepted by him. Having apostles go to Samaria and lay hands on the new believers there so they would receive the Spirit would have shown Jewish believers that these often despised "half-breeds" were indeed acceptable to God, and it would have been very affirming to the Samaritans as well. As to the Spirit being given to Cornelius' Gentile household, a divine commentary a few chapters later states that on that occasion God "showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us" (Acts 15:8).

Regardless of whether we can understand everything about exactly when and how the Spirit has been given, it is very clear that every Christian has the Holy Spirit in them. Or, as Paul puts it, "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ" (Romans 8:9). My belief is that everyone who grasps the good news that Jesus is the Christ, sincerely repents of their neglect of God, genuinely believes in Jesus, and humbly submits to baptism in his name does indeed receive the Spirit (Acts 2:36-38; 5:31-32; 19:1-7; Galatians 3:1-5, 14; Ephesians 1:13-14).

This may or may not be obvious. Sometimes there was evidence that people had received the Spirit, in the form of speaking in tongues and prophecy (Acts 2:1-11; 10:46; 19:6), but Scripture is clear that not everyone receives such gifts (1 Corinthians 12:27-31). Joy is a fruit of the Spirit, and it was also sometimes said to be present when people came to Christ and received the Spirit (Acts 13:52; 16:34; Galatians 5:22). But even if we do not detect tangible evidence of a person receiving the Spirit, I believe that all who sincerely come to Christ do in fact receive him and that the fruit of his work in our lives will increase and become more obvious as we "live by the Spirit."

This brings us back to where we started. What does it mean to live by the Spirit? I have reservations about the popular understandings of this. I won't go into them, but since many feel inferior if they do not experience the Spirit in the same way as others, I will just mention one thing. Though I do sometimes get a subjective sense of what God wants me to do in a specific situation, I am not aware of Him or the Spirit ever speaking to me directly.

Rather, I have come to focus on two aspects of what it means to be led by the Spirit that I have seen in Scripture and have also experienced in my life.

Following the Desires of the Spirit

The first one is introduced in an intriguing way. Paul says that if we walk by the Spirit we will not carry out the desire of the flesh. So, if I told you there is a way we can stop sinning, would you believe me? I'm guessing you wouldn't, and of course you would be right. But at the same time, it actually is legitimate to raise the question since the Scriptures state that there is indeed a way we can keep from gratifying the sinful desires of our flesh. We may not be able to do it constantly, but there is way it can be done. Are you interested?

Here is the statement of that truth, from NASB (2020), a literal, accurate and helpful translation:

¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the desire of the flesh is against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, in order to keep you from doing whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law (Galatians 5:16-18).

Verse 16 plainly says that if we walk (live) by the Spirit we will not gratify the desires of the flesh. So there it is. The way to not gratify our sinful desires is to live by the Spirit. I should mention, however, that the form of the verb "carry out" (subjunctive) indicates *possibility* more so than *certainty*. That means we were right to doubt that we could stop sinning totally, and yet the verse does say there is a possibility of not carrying out the desires of the flesh. The possibility lies in living by the Spirit.

This again brings us back to our question, What does it mean to live by the Spirit? This passage will tell us one aspect of it.

It is important to notice the word "for" at the beginning of v. 17, because it tips us off that the verse is going to be a further explanation of what he just said in v. 16. In other words, v. 17 is an explanation of how or why living by the Spirit prevents gratifying the flesh. This explanation can be clarified in three statements.

First, the flesh and Spirit both have desires. Scripture often refers to the flesh producing sinful desires in us, and we are all too familiar with this in our lives (Romans 13:14; Galatians 5:24; Ephesians 2:3). Not all desire is

sinful, however; there are good desires, too (Luke 22:15; Philippians 1:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:17). Galatians 5:17 indicates that the Spirit produces good desires in us.

Second, the flesh and Spirit desire opposite things. They are opposed to one another. This is stated clearly in Galatians 5:17 and is not surprising.

Third, the purpose of these opposing desires is “in order to keep you from doing whatever you want.” NASB rightly translates this as a purpose clause. The purpose of our having these desires is to keep us from doing whatever we want. We may think the meaning is that our sinful desires keep us from what we really want to do deep inside, that is, please God. But if we remember the context, that v. 17 is explaining how to prevent gratifying the desires of the flesh (v. 16), then we realize the meaning is the opposite. The desires of the Spirit are what keep us from doing “whatever we want,” that is, living however we jolly well please. God has given us good desires by means of the Spirit to counteract the sinful desires of our flesh and keep us from indulging them.

The principle is similar to the notion that, “If you are headed north, you aren’t headed south.” We sometimes talk about a project, game or conversation that is “headed south,” meaning going down or deteriorating. Our very lives can also head south—but not if they are headed north! In sports, defense may win championships, but in Christianity, a good offense is the best defense. According to Galatians 5:16-17 you don’t “win” by trying not to sin (defense) but by focusing on following the good desires of the Spirit (offense).

One reason it is difficult to see the teaching here is that the passage does not state outright that the Spirit gives us his desires. It definitely implies it, though. Otherwise, if the Spirit had good desires himself but did not impart them to us, the verse would not fulfill its purpose of explaining how the Spirit helps us resist the desires of the flesh. The clear implication of the verse is that God actually supplies us with wholesome desires by means of the Spirit in order to counteract the sinful desires of our flesh. Paul’s concern is not to explain just how that happens. Rather, it is simply to state the fact—the desires of the Spirit prevent us from doing whatever our flesh may want to do.

We should note that this is a powerful provision. Giving us the *desire* to do good is extremely significant. He does not merely help us become aware of some good things we could do. The Law could do that much! Rather, the Spirit also gives us the actual desire to do those things.

And it so much easier to do the things we truly want to do (Spirit) than things we merely think we ought to do (law).

If we choose to follow these good desires of the Spirit instead of the sinful desires of our flesh, then we are living by the Spirit (v. 16) or, another way of saying it is that we are being "led by the Spirit" (v. 18). We are not subject to law, nor do we need to be. Instead, God's Spirit gives us good desires that indicate the sort of things we should do and also neatly provides us with power for doing them (the power of desire).

I recognize that other Bible versions of this great passage can give a different impression of the meaning. But if we remember that v. 17 is a further explanation of how it is that living by the Spirit keeps us from carrying out the desire of the flesh, we will be headed in the right direction. And the NASB's translation of the purpose statement at the end of v. 17, "in order to keep you from doing whatever you want" is not only the usual translation of the Greek word there but also keeps the verse in its context of explaining how a person can keep from following the desires of the flesh.

It is worth noting the parallel with v. 25. The exhortation there is that, since we've chosen to abandon the old way of Law and live by the Spirit, let us actually follow the Spirit. Or, said another way, let us go along with his desires.

As we seek to live by the Spirit, we may wonder at times whether a given desire that emerges in us is good or bad. It's usually obvious, but sometimes it may be unclear. Part of the way we can determine it is by comparing to the lists of typical desires of the flesh and of the Spirit Paul gives us (vv. 19-23). Another way we can know is by being taught God's word (Galatians 6:6). Paul makes this statement about God's word while still very much in the context of living by the Spirit (see the immediately following 6:7-10). Living by the Spirit does not release us from knowing and following the word that was inspired by the Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Though the Spirit's work is not limited to inspiring Scripture, still, he does indeed work through God's word (Ephesians 6:17).

What all this means practically is that whenever a good desire comes to our hearts, we should act on it as soon as possible. Sometimes we may not be able to act on it immediately. For example, we may be at work or driving or something else. Or writing. (I just stopped and sent a text to someone who came to mind yesterday and then again just now.) As I have acted on the good desires I have, I sometimes get affirmation that the person really did need someone to reach out to them. Other times I don't. I still do not understand the ways of the Spirit thoroughly (John 3:8). But I do

know that the good desires he gives us is a way to find vital power to live well. One key aspect of living by the Spirit is to cooperate with the good desires he gives us.

Setting Our Minds on the Things of the Spirit

Galatians 5:16's promise that living by the Spirit can keep us from gratifying the desires of the flesh is matched in Romans 8 with another remarkable promise, that "the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:4). In other words, we can do the essence of what God wants if we live by the Spirit. The word "might" in the verse is an accurate translation of the form of the verb there (another subjunctive as in Galatians 5:17) and shows that it is not guaranteed that we will fulfill what God wants, but that through the Spirit we do indeed now have the possibility.

The verses that follow show us that Paul has in mind here a different aspect of living by the Spirit, the second one we will notice. Unfortunately, the NIV makes it difficult to see this because it begins a new paragraph at v. 5 and also omits the opening word "for." ESV, NASB, RSV, and NRSV all continue the paragraph and include the "for," showing that vv. 1-4 and vv. 5-8 are connected. As in Galatians 5:17, the "for" in Romans 8:5 is significant. It indicates that Paul is going to give us a further explanation of 8:4, that is, what it means to live by the Spirit.

This second aspect of living by the Spirit involves setting our minds on the things of the Spirit (v. 5). As we do so, we experience abundant life and peace (v. 6; cf. 14:17). Note well that our thinking affects what we experience in our lives. A person who sets their mind on the Spirit is in stark contrast to those who live according to the flesh and set their minds on the things of the flesh. Those who do the latter experience death even now, are hostile to God, do not submit to him, cannot submit to him, and cannot please him (vv. 6-8).

Scripture teaches that ignoring God and living in sin warps our minds (Romans 1:21, 28). When our minds are warped, we not only think about sinful things we want to do, we also hold distorted notions in our minds. For example we might think we should continue in sin so that grace might increase (6:1), that we are doomed to a life of slavery to sin (contrast 8:1), or think more highly of ourselves than we ought (12:3). Any such thought is wrong in itself, is unhealthy, and will rob us of life and peace. It will also lead to tangible acts of sin. We cannot please God with such a mind set (8:7-8). This is why we need to have our minds renewed (Romans 12:2).

The renewal of our minds is also key to our being transformed (Romans 12:2). "Be transformed" is a passive verb, which indicates transformation is not something we do but that is done to us. God is the One who transforms us (2 Corinthians 3:18). I used to think Romans 12:2 was saying that transformation is God's part and the renewal of my mind is my part, but it turns out that renewal, too, is a work of God. Titus 3:5 states clearly that renewal is a work of the Spirit. Similarly, elsewhere, verbs for "renew" are always passive ("being renewed"). The passive verbs point not to something *we do* but to *something that is done to us* (2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 4:23; Colossians 3:10). So both transformation and renewal are works of God, not works we do on our own, and yet we do need to cooperate with him. So, we might state the second aspect of living by the Spirit as cooperating with God's efforts to renew our minds by his Spirit. As with the first aspect, mentioned above, here again we must not resist, rebel, grieve, or despise him. Instead, we go along with him.

How do we do so? I'm trying to *be careful what I put into my mind*. Perhaps you've experienced, as I have, catching yourself singing a song you did not deliberately or consciously choose to sing. Perhaps something subtly reminded you of it, but it came out of your mouth easily because we had listened to it so many times it was well established in our minds. I have to confess sometimes the songs that have come out of me haven't been flattering. In contrast, a woman told me about her aging father whose mental abilities were declining. His speech had become incoherent. Yet still, many of the words he spoke were Scripture. He had filled his mind with God's word over many years, and so words of God came out of him effortlessly. We cooperate with God by choosing not to put unhealthy thoughts into our minds but to put in wholesome thoughts instead.

Sometimes, though, you can't help what comes to mind. This is especially true if we have filled our minds full of unwholesome thoughts for decades. Even as our minds begin to be renewed, sometimes a distorted thought arises seemingly out of nowhere or we see something negative or a conversation goes bad. In these cases, I am trying to cooperate with God's renewal of my mind by *not dwelling on those negative or sinful thoughts*. I may not have a choice about what comes to mind in the moment, but I do have a choice about whether I dwell on it. The positive antidote for unwholesome thoughts is to "set your minds on things above" (Colossians 3:2) and think about "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise" (Philippians 4:8). The old adage that, "It's okay to think it if I don't do it," is a lie of the devil. The mind set on the flesh is death. To live by the Spirit is to choose to dwell on healthy thoughts instead of unhealthy ones.

I'm also trying to cooperate with God's renewal of my mind by *judging my own thoughts*. I've finally become aware that there are all kinds of thoughts and feelings going on inside me that I wasn't cognizant of for decades. I'm now praying that the Lord will search my heart, test me, and know my anxious thoughts (Psalm 139:23-24). As I read Scripture, I am trying to allow God's sharp word to discern the thoughts and intentions of my heart (Hebrews 4:12). When I do identify a distorted, unhealthy thought, I then seek to find and clarify a corresponding positive, healthy thought to take its place. I do this by reading Scripture, reflecting, and seeking counsel from spiritually minded people. Finally, once I have identified the healthy thought, I seek to assimilate it into my thinking. I do this by memorizing a Scripture that states the truth clearly and concisely—not for memorization's sake, but so that I can repeat the truth to myself regularly and constantly. That has been very helpful when I'm driving or waiting in line or lying awake staring at the ceiling, wrestling with unhealthy thoughts. In addition to memorizing Scripture, I pray that the Lord would indeed put his laws and truths into my mind and write them on my heart (Hebrews 8:10). After all, the renewal of our minds is the work of God.

Since this third way of cooperating with God's renewal plans for our minds is a bit more involved than the first two, I'll give an example. Unfortunately, I have had a tendency to be judgmental toward others. Through Scripture, prayer, and reflection, I have been able to identify several unhealthy thoughts that lie behind that sin. Some of those distorted thoughts are that God wants me to be focusing on ways others fall short, that pointing out other's flaws somehow makes me better, and that I am lacking in value and so need to find a way to bolster my sense of worth. An alternate, true, and healthy thought could be found for each of these by reversing them, but I chose to concentrate on a related healthy thought, namely, that God wants me to be merciful, not judgmental. And I found Scripture that states this truth succinctly: "I desire mercy not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13; 12:7). I have been and continue to quote this truth to myself and pray that God will write it on my heart. And I actually have seen some improvement, "from one degree of glory to another, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

I'm convinced that, just as having a worthless mind causes us to live in death and sin in our deeds, so having a renewed, spiritually healthy mind is life and peace and lead leads us to do many good deeds. Cooperating with God as he seeks to renew our minds is a second aspect of living by the Spirit. If we will also follow the good desires the Spirit gives us, we will be led by Him to live a life worthy of him.