

# FOLLOW THE SPIRIT

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After his profession of faith in Jesus Christ in 1979, singer-songwriter and icon of the freewheeling sixties, Bob Dylan, wrote music to express his faith. The title of his first album as a Christ-follower, *Slow Train Coming*, may have anticipated his hope in Jesus return, but probably that title described his own spiritual journey. For many people, personal faith in Jesus does not come easily. For Dylan, sadly, it did not last long.

But his hit single from that album, “You Gotta Serve Somebody,” expressed a basic truth: “It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.” That line, however, expresses the truth incompletely and that may provide a clue to the decline of Dylan’s faith. The truth is: it may be the devil, it may be the Lord, or it may be just you.

We are entirely capable of playing God ourselves and serving our own desires. I realize that these sinful desires originated with the devil’s temptation of Adam and Eve and are prodded and provoked by him in our lives today and, ultimately, add up to serving his aims. Nevertheless, the image of “serving the devil” usually suggests something darker and more evil or violent than pleasing myself. Yet, pleasing myself (instead of God first) — living independent of God (as if He didn’t exist) — is the most common form of sin. Do you know that? Consider Paul’s letter to the Galatians...

## Our Sinful Nature

*Galatians 5:19* **When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures,<sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division,<sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.**

“The desires of your sinful nature” refers to your selfish desires — the things you want for yourself, regardless of how they impact others (especially God). Matter of fact, this is the way (in varying degrees) that each of us led our lives before Jesus Christ became our Spiritual Leader. It is the “old way of life,” led by self.

Paul’s purpose is to remind us that such old ways — and this is a merely suggestive, not exhaustive, list — need to be ended and buried, or they will continue to pop up, discrediting your testimony of faith, dishonoring the reputation of Jesus, generally making havoc of your life, and finally, if not curtailed, preventing you from gaining access to the Kingdom of God (Heaven).

And even if I know what God expects of me, the harder I try to fix, the worse it gets!

*Romans 7:14* **So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin.** <sup>15</sup> *I don’t really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do what I hate.* <sup>16</sup> *But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good.* <sup>17</sup> *So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.* <sup>18</sup> *And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can’t.* <sup>19</sup> *I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.*

<sup>20</sup> *But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.*

Paul was not releasing himself (or us) from personal responsibility for behavior. Instead, he was emphasizing what many tend to overlook: that there are two ranges of desire and intention in the lives of Christians, two conflicting outlooks. Once the Holy Spirit takes up residence in your life, the conflict begins! Part of you agrees with His values, proving that God is truly in you and you have indeed been born again. But your old desires do not fall silent or lie still. A battle rages every day. And I am not altogether in charge.

There is something active in me that is outside of my control. Have you recognized that about your life? People make much of outside forces and influences and environment, but God makes much of this insidious inside force — He calls it “sin.”

The remedy for this viral condition is the life and activity of the Holy Spirit in you. Sublimation, distraction, or more determination is not the answer. In fact, *anything* generated by *you* only exacerbates the problem and cloaks it in religious garb. *You are the problem*, therefore you cannot solve it on your own.

And any application from the outside, at best, can only change the appearance, but not the essence. Other people — family, friends, sponsors, pastors, counselors, therapists, physicians — can help, if they will listen closely and respond honestly, but even their help will prove to be very limited, because it is external, and even they have their own sin issues that inevitably limit their perspectives.

The psalmist was right when he declared...

*Psalm 121:2 [Our] help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.*

## **Our Helper**

In stark contrast to the product of our flesh, our old sinful nature, Paul declares what the Holy Spirit is able to accomplish when we give Him sway.

*Galatians 5:22 But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,<sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!*

What a different picture! Paul even used a different analogy — “fruit” instead of “work” — to heighten the contrast.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control — who would like more of these in your life? Wouldn't we all?!

And give special attention to the last result: self-control. This is not control *by* self, but control *of* self. The very issue that we uncovered as the source of our plague (self-will) is the very thing the Holy Spirit comes to reign in under *His* control.

It all begins (or began) on the day that you (or I) recognized that Jesus' death on the cross was substitutionary — He died in my place (and yours). He died because of our spiritual debt. He took our sins in His own body to that cross, and by His death, broke the power of sin for each one who puts his or her trust in Jesus as Savior and Forgiver.

The day I recognized that, something in me died — something that had controlled my old way of life and held me hostage. And something new was born in me that same day! A new Controller took His place in my heart and began to generate new desires and goals for my life.

## Applying Ourselves

Paul concludes...

*<sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. <sup>25</sup> **Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.** <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another.*

That revolutionary new birth started something wonderful, but it was only the start. Since the Spirit has given us life, we ought to engage it fully by following His leading “in every part of our lives.” You cannot be passive about this. If you don’t choose to pursue it, it will not happen and you will not grow, but you will drift away from Christ into empty religious forms or back to your old ways. You cannot pick this up by association alone; you must apply yourself. You must be transformed by the power of the Spirit who now lives in you.

Spiritual warfare must be met with spiritual weapons (2 Corinthians 10:4)!

Paul offered two parallel thoughts that illuminate this process:

1. “Belonging to Christ” and “Living by the Spirit” go together. You cannot have one without the other. Belonging to Christ is not merely a religious decision; it is an act of God in response to a faith-commitment — God gives us His Spirit in a new birth experience.
2. “Crucify the sinful nature” and “Follow the Spirit’s leading” are two ways of describing one activity. We never follow the Spirit’s leading without having to crucify some fleshly inclination, because these two are in perpetual conflict (Galatians 5:17).

If you want to see God’s power applied to “the passions and desires of [your] sinful nature,” prayerfully nail them to Christ’s cross. Take captive every unholy thought and hang it there. Nail every unclean desire there. Don’t just shrug them off; ignoring them won’t work. Hang them on the cross with Jesus. He died for them; He took away their power in His death. He forgives and cleanses and makes you new again.

In conclusion, Paul clarified what he meant by addressing three behaviors that contrast/conflict with following the Spirit’s leading. He admonished us not to become:

1. Conceited. This word means boastful without reason, empty vanity, false pride, trying to appear as more than one is. Trying to bolster one’s spiritual reputation by external means (position or rank or self-exaltation), without the corresponding character development, is foolish and misleading.
2. Provocative. This word depicts challenging another person’s integrity, or making oneself a source of personal irritation by hounding them.
3. Jealous. Simply envying others, or coveting what they have or seem to have.

These three fleshly activities share the human tendency to compare oneself with others (How am I doing compared to...? Who can do it better...? Who’s ahead...?). They grieve the Holy Spirit and

quench His activity in you, because they do not build up the body of Christ; instead, they create rifts and tear it apart.

(This warning is in accord with Jesus' prophecy of Matthew 24:10: *And many will turn away from me and betray and hate each other.*) When we turn away from following the Spirit's leading, this is the ditch we end up in.

In sharp contrast, the New Testament urges very different behaviors toward *one another* in the body of Christ: wash feet, love, be devoted, give preference, be of the same mind, build up, accept, admonish, greet, wait for, mutually care, serve, bear burdens, show tolerance, be kind, be subject, regard, comfort, encourage, stimulate, be humble.

If you are not growing in your love for God's people, your love for God will be stunted. To love the Father is to love His offspring. But which comes first? Plainly, loving God is the means by which our love for each other increases. Loving God personally, passionately, and persistently. And this is exactly where the Spirit leads us.

## **Paying Attention**

What do you think about most of the time?

*Romans 8:5* *Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit.* <sup>6</sup> *So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.*

*Colossians 3:2* *Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth.* <sup>3</sup> *For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.*

What dominates your attention?

*NIV Hebrews 12:2* *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* <sup>3</sup> *Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

Don't grow weary in doing what is right. It may be a "slow train coming," but it's the only journey that's guaranteed to reach its destination. And your ticket has already been paid. Let's get on board! Let's get in the game to win!