**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**GALATIANS-007**. **WALK IN THE SPIRIT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh."*

*Galatians 5:16*

We are not to suppose that the Apostle here uses the familiar contrast of spirit and flesh to express simply different elements of human nature. Without entering here on questions for which a sermon is scarcely a suitable vehicle of discussion, it may be sufficient for our present purpose to say that, as usually, when employing this antithesis the Apostle means by Spirit the divine, the Spirit of God, which he triumphed in proclaiming to be the gift of every believing soul. The other member of the contrast, flesh, is similarly not to be taken as equivalent to body, but rather as meaning the whole human nature considered as apart from God and kindred with earth and earthly things. The flesh, in its narrower sense, is no doubt a predominant part of this whole, but there is much in it besides the material organisation. The ethics of Christianity suffered much harm and were degraded into a false and slavish asceticism for long centuries, by monastic misunderstandings of what Paul meant by the flesh, but he himself was too clear-sighted and too high-toned to give his adhesion to the superficial notion that the body is the seat and source of sin. We need look no further than the catalogue of the works of the flesh which immediately follows our text, for, although it begins with gross sins of a purely fleshly kind, it passes on to such as hatred, emulations, wrath, envyings and suchlike. Many of these works of the flesh are such as an angel with an evil heart could do, whether he had a body or not. It seems therefore right to say that the one member of the contrast is the divine Spirit of holiness, and the other is man as he is, without the life-giving influence of the Spirit of God. In Paul's thought the idea of the flesh always included the idea of sin, and the desires of the flesh were to him not merely rebellious, sensuous passion, but the sinful desires of godless human nature, however refined, and as some would say, spiritual these might be. We do not need to inquire more minutely as to the meaning of the Apostle's terms, but may safely take them as, on the one hand, referring to the divine Spirit which imparts life and holiness, and on the other hand, to human nature severed from God, and distracted by evil desires because wrenched away from Him.

The text is Paul's battle-cry, which he opposed to the Judaising disturbers in Galatia. They said Do this and that; labour at a round of observances; live by rule. Paul said, No! That is of no use; you will make nothing of such an attempt nor will ever conquer evil so. Live by the spirit and you will not need a hard outward law, nor will you be in bondage to the works of the flesh. That feud in the Galatian churches was the earliest battle which Christianity had to fight between two eternal tendencies of thought--the conception of religion as consisting in outward obedience to a law, and consequently as made up of a series of painful efforts to keep it, and the conception of religion as being first the implanting of a new, divine life, and needing only to be nourished and cared for in order to drive forth evils from the heart, and so to show itself living. The difference goes very far and very deep, and these two views of what religion is have each their adherents to-day. The Apostle throws the whole weight of his authority into the one scale, and emphatically declares this as the one secret of victory, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh.

**I. What it is to walk in the Spirit.**

The thought which is but touched upon here is set forth more largely, and if we may so say, profoundly, in the Epistle to the Romans (chap. viii.). There, to walk after the flesh, is substantially the same as to be carnally minded, and that mind of the flesh is regarded as being by fatal necessity not subject to the law of God, and consequently as in itself, with regard to future consequences, to be death. The fleshly mind which is thus in rebellion against the law of God is sure to issue in desires of the flesh, just as when the pressure is taken off, some ebullient liquid will bubble. They that are after the flesh of course will mind the things of the flesh. The vehement desires which we cherish when we are separated from God and which we call sins, are graver as a symptom than even they are in themselves, for they show which way the wind blows, and are tell-tales that betray the true direction of our nature. If we were not after the flesh we should not mind the things of the flesh. The one expression points to the deep-seated nature, the other to the superficial actions to which it gives rise.

And the same duality belongs to the life of those who are after the Spirit. To walk, of course, means to carry on the practical life, and the Spirit is here thought of not so much perhaps as the path on which we are to travel, but rather as the norm and direction by which we are to travel on life's common way. Just as the desires of the flesh were certain to be done by those who in their deepest selves belonged to the flesh, so every soul which has received the unspeakable gift of newness of life through the Spirit of God will have the impulses to mind and do the things of the Spirit. If we live in the Spirit we shall also--and let us also--walk in the Spirit.

But let us make no mistakes, or think that our text in its great commandment and radiant hope has any word of cheer to those who have not received into their hearts, in however feeble a manner and minute a measure, the Spirit of the Son. The first question for us all is, have we received the Holy Ghost?--and the answer to that question is the answer to the other, have we accepted Christ? It is through Him and through faith in Him that that supreme gift of a living spirit is bestowed. And only when our spirits bear witness with that Spirit that we are the children of God, have we a right to look upon the text as pointing our duty and stimulating our hope. If our practical life is to be directed by the Spirit of God, He must enter into our spirits, and we shall not be in Him but in the measure that He is in us. Nor will our spirits be life because of righteousness unless He dwells in us and casts forth the works of the flesh. There will be no practical direction of our lives by the Spirit of God unless we make conscience of cultivating the reception of His life-giving and cleansing influences, and unless we have inward communion with our inward guide, intimate and frank, prolonged and submissive. If we are for ever allowing the light of our inward godliness to be blown about by gusts, or to show in our inmost hearts but a faint and flickering spark, how can we expect that it will shine safe direction on our outward path?

**II. Such walking in the Spirit conquers the flesh.**

We all know it as a familiar experience that the surest way to conquer any strong desire or emotion is to bring some other into operation. To concentrate attention on any overmastering thought or purpose, even if our object is to destroy it, is but too apt to strengthen it. And so to fix our minds on our own desires of the flesh, even though we may be honestly wishing to suppress them, is a sure way to invest them with new force; therefore the wise counsels of sages and moralists are, for the most part, destined to lead those who listen to them astray. Many a man has, in good faith, set himself to conquer his own evil lusts and has found that the nett result of his struggles has been to make the lusts more conspicuous and correspondingly more powerful. The Apostle knows a better way, which he has proved to his own experience, and now, with full confidence and triumph, presses upon his hearers. He would have them give up the monotonous and hopeless fight against the flesh and bring another ally into the field. His chief exhortation is a positive, not a negative one. It is vain to try to tie up men with restrictions and prohibitions, which when their desires are stirred will be burst like Samson's bonds. But if once the positive exhortation here is obeyed, then it will surely make short work of the desires and passions which otherwise men, for the most part, do not wish to get rid of, and never do throw off by any other method.

We have pointed out that in our text to walk in the Spirit means to regulate the practical life by the Spirit of God, and that the desires of the flesh mean the desires of the whole human nature apart from God. But even if we take the contrasted terms in their lower and commonly adopted sense, the text is true and useful. A cultivated mind habituated to lofty ideas, and quick to feel the nobility of spiritual pursuits and possessions, will have no taste for the gross delights of sense, and will recoil with disgust from the indulgences in which more animal natures wallow. But while this is true, it by no means exhausts the great principle laid down here. We must take the contrasted terms in their fullest meaning if we would arrive at it. The spiritual life derived from Jesus Christ and lodged in the human spirit has to be guarded, cherished and made dominant, and then it will drive out the old. If the Spirit which is life because of righteousness is allowed free course in a human spirit, it will send forth its powers into the body which is dead because of sin, will regulate its desires, and if needful will suppress them. And it is wiser and more blessed to rely on this overflowing influence than to attempt the hopeless task of coercing these desires by our own efforts.

If we walk in the Spirit, we shall thereby acquire new tastes and desires of a higher kind which will destroy the lower. They to whom manna is sweet as angel's food find that they have lost their relish for the strong-smelling and rank-flavoured Egyptian leeks and garlic. A guest at a king's table will not care to enter a smoky hovel and will not be hungry for the food to be found there. If we are still dependent on the desires of the flesh we are still but children, and if we are walking in the Spirit we have outgrown our childish toys. The enjoyment of the gifts which the Spirit gives deadens temptation and robs many things that were very precious of their lustre.

We may also illustrate the great principle of our text by considering that when we have found our supreme object there is no inducement to wander further in the search after delights. Desires are confessions of discontent, and though the absolute satisfaction of all our nature is not granted to us here, there is so much of blessedness given and so many of our most clamant desires fully met in the gift of life in Christ, that we may well be free from the prickings of desires which sting men into earnest seeking after often unreal good. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, and surely if we have these we may well leave the world its troubled delights and felicities. Christ's joy remains in us and our joy is full. The world desires because it does not possess. When a deeper well is sunk, a shallower one is pretty sure to give out. If we walk in the Spirit we go down to the deepest water-holding stratum, and all the surface wells will run dry.

Further, we may note, that this walking in the Spirit brings into our lives the mightiest motives of holy living and so puts a bridle on the necks and a bit in the mouths of our untamed desires. Holding fellowship with the divine Indweller and giving the reins into His strong hand, we receive from Him the spirit of adoption and learn that if we are children then are we heirs. Is there any motive that will so surely still the desires of the flesh and of the mind as the blessed thought that God is ours and we His? Surely their feet should never stumble or stray, who are aware of the Spirit of the Son bearing witness with their spirit that they are the children of God. Surely the measure in which we realise this will be the measure in which the desires of the flesh will be whipped back to their kennels, and cease to disturb us with their barks.

The whole question here as between Paul and his opponents just comes to this; if a field is covered with filth, whether is it better to set to work on it with wheel-barrows and shovels, or to turn a river on it which will bear away all the foulness? The true way to change the fauna and flora of a country is to change the level, and as the height increases they change themselves. If we desire to have the noxious creatures expelled from ourselves, we must not so much labour at their expulsion as see to the elevation of our own personal being and then we shall succeed. That is what Paul says, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh.

**III. Such a life is not freed from the necessity of struggle.**

The highest condition, of course, would be that we had only to grow, not to fight. It will come some day that all evil shall drop away, and that to walk in the Spirit will need no effort, but that time has not come yet. So in addition to all that we have been saying in this sermon, we must further say that Paul's exhortation has always to be coupled with the other to fight the good fight. The highest word for our earthly lives is not victory but contest. We shall not walk in the Spirit without many a struggle to keep ourselves within that charmed atmosphere. The promise of our text is not that we shall not feel, but that we shall not fulfil, the desires of the flesh.

Now this is very commonplace and threadbare teaching, but it is none the less important, and is especially needful to be strongly emphasised when we have been speaking as we have just been doing. It is a historical fact, illustrated over and over again since Paul wrote, and not without illustration to-day, that there is constant danger of lax morality infecting Christian life under pretence of lofty spirituality. So it must ever be insisted upon that the test of a true walking in the Spirit is that we are thereby fitted to fight against the desires of the flesh. When we have the life of the Spirit within us, it will show itself as Paul has said in another place by the righteousness of the law being fulfilled in us, and by our mortifying the deeds of the body. The gift of the Spirit does not take us out of the ranks of the combatants, but teaches us to fight, and arms us with its own sword for the conflict. There will be abundant opportunities of courage in attacking the sin that doth so easily beset us, and in resisting temptations which come to us by reason of our own imperfect sanctification. But there is all the difference between fighting at our own hand and fighting with the help of God's Spirit, and there is all the difference between fighting with the help of an unseen ally in heaven and fighting with a Spirit within us who helpeth our infirmities and Himself makes us able to contend, and sure, if we keep true to Him, to be more than conquerers through Him that loveth us.

Such a conflict is a gift and a joy. It is hard but it is blessed, because it is an expression of our truest love; it comes from our deepest will; it is full of hope and of assured victory. How different is the painful, often defeated and monotonous attempt to suppress our nature by main force, and to tread a mill-horse round! The joyous freedom and buoyant hope taught us in the gospel way of salvation have been cramped and confined and all their glories veiled as by a mass of cobwebs spun beneath a golden roof, but our text sweeps away the foul obstruction. Let us learn the one condition of victorious conflict, the one means of subduing our natural humanity and its distracting desires, and let nothing rob us of the conviction that this is God's way of making men like angels. Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh.