



The Spirit of Holiness | The Spirit and Sanctification

Lesson 6

Sometimes we use words we get without really knowing what they mean. For example, the New Testament often calls believers “saints.” Many Christians use the word while either thinking it has something to do with Catholicism or not really knowing what it means. The word “saint” comes from the same Greek word as the word “holy,” so that a “saint” is “a holy one.” If one of the main terms for Christians throughout the New Testament is “holy ones,” and it’s not very surprising that holiness is a big deal to God! In one sense, our salvation makes us holy to God, but in another sense, we are called to live out a holy life before God. This process of becoming more and more holy is called sanctification, a word which is the verb form of saint. But living out the holiness we have in Christ is a lot harder than it sounds. And that’s where the Holy Spirit comes in.

If holiness is to be one of the defining traits, so that being called a “saint” is the same as being called a “holy one,” what should the typical Christian look like?

Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit comes to dwell inside us when we accept Christ and are regenerated. At the initial point of salvation, we are declared righteous based on the righteousness of Christ, and we are cleansed, washed, and made holy in the blood of Jesus (1 Corinthians 6:11). All of this is positional, in other words, we stand before God as righteous. But God then expects that as we grow in our faith that our positional righteousness will become practical righteousness, in other words that we will start acting like what we really are. God sees us as holy at the moment of our salvation, and then through the Spirit He makes us holy in our ongoing sanctification. This process will continue throughout our lives and will ultimately be finished when we die and are given glorified bodies.

Why does God not make us practically holy immediately once we are saved?

The Illustrations of Following the Spirit

How exactly does the Spirit help us grow, and what does such growth look like? This question is challenging to answer, because it’s experiential and experiences can be very different from person to person. Rather than lay out a step-by-step plan of everything that we should do, the Bible gives us powerful images that help us understand how the dynamic of spiritual change works. We’ve looked at these before, but we’ll talk about each of them again briefly.

Walking in the Spirit (Galatians 5)

Cars, trains, and planes have radically altered the way we live. People used to need to walk almost everywhere all the time. In fact, people walked so much that Paul could use the word “walk” as a way of talking about someone’s entire way of life (cf Ephesians 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15). Galatians twice uses the image of walking as a way of talking about following the leading of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16, 25).

How does the image of walking in the Spirit help you understand what it means to follow God’s leading?

When Paul uses this illustration, his point seems to mean that every action we take, the whole of our lives, should be dictated by what the Spirit wants. Every step we take should be following the leading of the Spirit. Doing so will put us in a war against our flesh, so that throughout the day we will have a hundred small decisions and occasionally very large decisions to follow the leading of the Spirit or to follow our own sinful flesh.

How can we know if we are walking in the flesh or walking in the Spirit?

Living by the Spirit (Romans 8)

As we saw, “walking” came to be used as a way of talking about one’s entire way of life. It is not surprising, then, that Paul also tells believers they should be living by the Spirit. Romans 8:11-13 uses this analogy, but with an interesting twist. Not only should we live by the Spirit, but we should also kill whatever is disobedient towards God in our lives. In verse 13 we read that we should “mortify the deeds of the body.” For some this makes them think of someone saying they are “mortified,” or shocked, and so we might lose the full impact of what Paul is saying here. This is a call for murder. Paul is instructing believers to kill their sinful behaviors and habits, and this isn’t the only place he uses such language (cf Colossians 3:5-7).

What does it look like to murder our sinful habits?

Why do we fall short of this standard so often in our battle against sin?

To live in the Spirit means we can no longer choose the path that leads to death. Ironically, then, to walk in the Spirit will mean to kill that which is leading to death. Or, as the preacher once put it, “Be killing sin or sin will be killing you.” In other words, part of walking in the Spirit is the hard, grueling work of murdering our sinful tendency to go our own way.

The Process of Following the Spirit

So if following the Spirit is illustrated by walking in the Spirit and living by the Spirit, what does that actually mean? How do we go about doing that? While the following list could no doubt be improved upon, three key ingredients appear to be part of following the leading of the Spirit: (1) having an attitude of submission to God (2) listening to the Word of God and (3) asking God to guide.

Submission to God

At the heart of a Spirit-led holiness is the humble disposition to submit myself to God's ways over my own. On the one hand this sounds easy, but it might be one of the hardest things you ever have to do. From our earliest years we long to be in charge. From the two-year old defiantly shouting "No!" to the teenager sneaking behind their parents back to the adult employee who thinks a new law or rule at work is dumb and so they just won't follow it, we all have a deep streak in our hearts that wants to be in control. Yet Scripture tells us that we must humble ourselves. "Submit to God" James will remind us (James 4:7). Following, by its very definition, means doing what someone else wants to do. If I am going to follow the leading of the Spirit, I must be ready to go wherever He sends me and do whatever He asks me. I cannot start with a heart that is willing to obey God but only on my terms. I must be ready to do whatever God says.

What are some ways that people try to follow God, but only on their terms?

Why is submission to God an essential first step in walking in the Spirit?

Years ago the acronym W.W.J.D. became wildly popular. It stood for "What would Jesus Do?" A similar question could be asked in relationship to the Spirit: W.W.S.W "What would the Spirit want?" If we simply take the time to stop and ask that question, many times it would be clear what God would want us to do in a given situation, and the longer someone attempts to live for God the clearer that will become.

Why do we not ask what God would want us to do more often in our everyday lives?

Following God's Word

But how will the Spirit lead us? Some people seem to be looking for some sort of audible voice telling them, "Do this; don't do that." Others are expecting some sort of vague feeling about what God wants them to do. But if we want to know what the Spirit of God thinks, we need only look at the Word of God which He wrote to know the answer to that question.

Have you ever had a situation where you knew what God wanted you to do based on a Bible verse or a Bible principle?

If you look carefully at the books of Colossians and Ephesians, you will notice a lot of overlap. If you look specifically at Colossians 3:16-17 and Ephesians 5:18-20, you will notice some interesting parallels. In both Colossians and Ephesians, there is instruction about the right kind of singing and about having a grateful heart. Yet the two passages start in slightly different ways. Ephesians talks about being filled with the Spirit, whereas Colossians talks about the Word of Christ dwelling richly in us. Being Word-filled and being Spirit-filled will both pour out into the kind of singing and praise we have and in the kind of thankfulness we show. That's because the Spirit of God uses the Word of God to lead us. The better we know Scripture, the more clearly the Spirit leads. Sadly, some people want to claim God's guidance when they make a sinful choice. "We just felt like God wanted us to take the next step and move in together," the unmarried couple might say. God most certainly did not. God would never lead you contrary to His Word.

How can we better learn Scripture so that we can better follow the Spirit?

Constantly Being in Prayer

So the Spirit will lead us through God's Word as we humbly submit ourselves to His control. But beyond this truly walking in the Spirit demands a constant attitude of prayer. Some issues are pretty clear – God doesn't want you to steal. But many issues are not as clear. What punishment should I give this persistently rebellious child? How should I handle the holidays with family tensions that I myself can't fix? How should I respond to my boss asking for more and more of my time? These and other issues require wisdom, and as we saw previously, the Spirit is often associated with wisdom. James 1:5 tells us that God gives wisdom to all who ask. If we want to follow God's Spirit, we need to know what He would want. And if we want to know what He would want, we should be asking regularly.

Why don't we ask the Spirit more regularly what we should do?

How can we cultivate an attitude of persistent prayer in our lives?

The Results of Following the Spirit

The Bible doesn't necessarily lay out an abundantly clear step by step program for walking in the Spirit: "Read your Bible for 20 minutes, then pray this prayer, then do this..." But it does give us pretty clear guidelines for what it looks like when we are walking in the Spirit. Walking and living in the Spirit will mean a growth in holiness and the fruit of the Spirit.

The Spirit Brings Holiness

As we have seen from the beginning of this lesson, part of the reason we have been given the Holy Spirit is so that He can produce holiness in our lives. Holiness involves a consecration to God, which demands a separation from sin. If we are becoming more holy, that means we sin less and less. That includes the big, obvious sins we think of like adultery, murder, and stealing, but also the sins of our hearts like lust, anger, and covetousness. It also involves relational sins, like impatience, selfishness, and laziness. If the Spirit of God is dwelling within us, we should see positive growth and change over time as we become more and more like God (cf 2 Corinthians 3:18).

What sins do we often ignore when thinking about spiritual growth, sins that are a big deal to God?

The Spirit Brings Fruit

Many people think of the phrase "a godly person" and sadly don't think of anything close to what a godly person would look like. Often people will think of someone who is arrogant, smug, perhaps antisocial. But this is not at all the picture painted by Galatians 5. The fruit of the Spirit that we find in this passage describes what someone who is controlled by God's Spirit looks like, and it might surprise some people.

How would you summarize some of the major themes in Galatians 5:22-23?

Based on this lesson, how should you seek to go about more faithfully walking in the Spirit in areas which you are not living up to these standards?