

We look to Jesus first, and we see his commands as a way to express loyalty to him, not as rules “that have to be kept or else we’ll be punished.” We have not come to Mt. Sinai, where punishment is prominent. Rather, we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, where joy and salvation are prominent, where the blood of Jesus speaks forgiveness (Heb. 12:18-24).

It is a different approach to worship, a different outlook on salvation. The commands of Christ are commands, but they are not like the old covenant laws that brought punishments. The Spirit is leading us to become more like Jesus Christ.

“The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6). In Galatians 5, Paul lists a variety of sins: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (vv. 19-21). Some of these are behaviors, some are attitudes, but all of them are self-centered.

Paul warns us: “Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (v. 21). This is not God’s way of life; this is not the way we want eternity to be; this is not the way we want the church to be.

Forgiveness is available for each of these (1 Cor. 6:9-11). The church is to be a place where grace and forgiveness is expressed and extended, but not a place where sin is given permission to abound unchecked. The church preaches against such sins, as well as preaching forgiveness for those same sins.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23).

This is the product of a heart devoted to God. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” (v. 24).

With the Holy Spirit at work in us, we grow in the will and the power to reject the works of the flesh. We bear the fruit of God’s work in us.

Paul’s message is clear: We are not under the law — but we are not lawless. We are under the authority of Christ, under his law, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Our lives are based on faith, motivated by love, characterized by joy and peace and growth. “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (v. 25).

## **Life in Christ: Living Like a Christian**

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Christians are saved by God's gift, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Good behavior cannot earn us salvation. But Christianity does have behavioral standards. It involves changes in the way we live. We are to live for Christ, not for ourselves (2 Cor. 5:15). God is our priority in everything, and he has something to say about the way we live.

One of the last things that Jesus told his disciples to do was to teach people "to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). Jesus gave commands, and as his disciples, we must also preach commands and preach obedience.

We preach and obey these commands not as a means of salvation, not as a standard of condemnation, but as instructions from God. People are to obey him not out of fear of punishment, but simply because their Savior says so. We trust that his instructions are good for us.

Perfect obedience is not the goal of the Christian life – the goal of the Christian life is to live with God. Christ lives in us when we put our faith in him. Christ leads us by the Holy Spirit toward obedience.

God is transforming us into the image of Christ. By God's grace and power, we are becoming more like Christ. His commands involve not just outward behavior, but also the thoughts and motives of our hearts. Our hearts need the transforming power of the Holy Spirit – we cannot change them just by willpower.

Part of faith is trusting God to do his work in us. The greatest command — love for God — is also the greatest motive for obedience. We obey him because we love him. It is God who works in us, both to will

and to live according to his good purpose (Phil. 2:13).

What do we do when we fall short? Repent and ask forgiveness, in full confidence that it is available for us.

What does the Christian life look like? There are hundreds of commands in the New Testament. We are not lacking in guidance for how a faith-based life works itself out in the real world. There are commands for how the rich should treat the poor, commands for how husbands should treat their wives, commands for how we should work together as a church.

1 Thess. 5:12-22 contains a basic list:

Respect those...over you in the Lord....

Live in peace with each other....

Warn those who are idle,

encourage the timid,

help the weak,

be patient with everyone....

always try to be kind....

Be joyful always;

pray continually;

give thanks in all circumstances...

Do not put out the Spirit's fire;

do not treat prophecies with contempt.

Test everything.

Hold on to the good.

Avoid every kind of evil.

Paul knew that Christians need some basic instructions or reminders about the Christian life. Paul did not threaten to kick people out of the church if they failed to measure up — he simply gave commands that guided them in the paths of faithfulness.

Paul had high standards. Even though forgiveness is freely available, the New Testament gives us plenty of commands. We can see that in Paul's letter to the Galatians, for

example. Christians are not under the law, we are told, but neither are we lawless. Paul warns the Galatians about people who would try to prevent them "from obeying the truth" (Gal. 5:7).

Christians are called to be free — "but do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13). With freedom comes obligations, or else one person's "freedom" would conflict with another's.

"The entire law is summed up in a single command," Paul says in verse 14: "Love your neighbor as yourself." This summarizes our responsibility toward one another. The opposite approach, fighting for self-advantage, is self-destructive (v. 15).

"So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature" (v. 16). The Spirit will lead us to love, not to self-centeredness. Selfish thoughts come from the flesh, but God's Spirit produces better thoughts. "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..." (v. 17).

Because of this conflict between Spirit and flesh, life does not always go smoothly. "...you do not do what you want" (v. 17, last part). We sometimes sin, even though we don't want to.

What is the solution to the sins that so easily beset us? Bring back the law? No! "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law" (v. 18). Our approach to life is different. We look to the Spirit, and the Spirit will develop in us the desire and the power to walk according to the commands of Christ.