

# How Christians walk after the flesh

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To hear most Christians talk about it, you'd think that sins are something we should actively avoid committing. When the street preachers here in my city give their sermons, the focus is always on sin and how our sinful actions will send us to an afterlife realm called "hell" if we don't get our sin dealt with by "getting saved" in the manner the preachers believe one needs to do so in (completely missing the fact that Christ's death for our sins in the Gospel is a proclamation, not a proposition, and that sin has already been taken care of for everyone whether they believe it or not, although that's a topic for another article I've already written, so please read my *"What the Bible really says about heaven, hell, judgement, death, evil, sin, and salvation"* study if you haven't already). And if you talk to them one-on-one you'll discover they believe that, even *after* we "get saved," we still need to do our best to avoid certain actions the preachers consider to be sinful (as well as do certain things they consider to be commanded of us). Following rules is basically the foundation of their entire religion, and so when they attempt to interpret passages such as the following ones, they'll tell you Paul was explaining how we need to try to do good, spiritual acts while trying to avoid fleshly, sinful acts:

*There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the*

*Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. — Romans 8:1-10*

*This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. — Galatians 5:16-25*

While Paul is indeed telling his readers they shouldn't be walking after the flesh — and what the consequences of doing so might be — in those verses, that he isn't telling people to try to actively avoid sinning should be very obvious to anyone who considers the context of the passages. Unfortunately, most Christians are so obsessed with religious rules that they've actually made Sin their lord (anthropomorphically speaking), which keeps them from being able to grasp what Paul actually taught about the topic of sin at all.

So what was Paul talking about in those passages? Well, if you ask any Christian who has studied Paul's epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians, they should be able to tell you that a large part of both books is about how we're not under the law, and how we shouldn't allow ourselves to be placed under it at all. The problem is, when they get to passages that talk about "the

flesh,” most Christians immediately forget this fact and proceed to completely ignore the context of the passages, reading their love of religious rules into the passages instead. Following religious rules isn’t even close to what Paul was talking about when he wrote warnings about walking after the flesh, however. In fact, the exact opposite is true. Even though the context of those passages should make it obvious, it can help to read an entirely different passage written by Paul, one which can serve as the key to understanding the other times he writes about the flesh. In Philippians 3:1-11, Paul is warning his readers against having confidence in their flesh<sup>1</sup> — by which he means trying to be righteous by following rules — telling them they should instead be trusting in the faith of Christ for their righteousness rather than in their own actions.<sup>2</sup>

This, along with the context of not being under the law (and the fact that Paul compares walking after the Spirit with not following the law), should make it clear that Paul was actually telling people to stop trying to follow (and enforce) *any* religious rules at all, because trying to follow religious rules is what it

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<sup>1</sup> Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you, to me indeed is not grievous, but for you it is safe. Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision. For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. — Philippians 3:1-11

<sup>2</sup> But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; — Romans 3:21-23

actually means to walk after the flesh. (This includes the 10 Commandments, by the way, which are indeed a part of the Mosaic law, as Paul made clear by referencing the 10th commandment<sup>3</sup> when he wrote Romans 7:7<sup>4</sup> as a part of his teaching that we shouldn't allow ourselves to be placed under any parts of the law.) So if you are actively trying to avoid (or even do) specific actions in order to please God, you're actually walking after the flesh. He then contrasts the concept of walking after the flesh with the concept of walking after the Spirit. But what does it mean to walk after the Spirit? Well, if walking after the flesh means trying to follow religious rules, walking after the Spirit must necessarily mean we *aren't* trying to follow religious rules. Those who are walking after the Spirit are instead trusting that Christ will live the life He wants us to live through us,<sup>5</sup> and will end up doing the things God wants us to do and avoiding the things God wants us to avoid Himself through us. It's only when we start walking after the flesh, meaning we start worrying about religion and trying to follow rules and prohibitions, that we begin doing the very things that God doesn't want us to do, because trying to follow religious rules (be it the Mosaic law, or any other form of religious rules) only leads to more sin.<sup>6</sup>

At this point most Christians will protest and say that, while we aren't under the Mosaic law itself, there are still other rules in the Bible we need to follow,

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<sup>3</sup> Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's. — Exodus 20:17

<sup>4</sup> What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. — Romans 7:7

<sup>5</sup> I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain. — Galatians 2:20-21

<sup>6</sup> Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: — Romans 5:20

but in making such claims they're ignoring everything Paul taught throughout his epistles. You see, the reason we don't follow the Mosaic law isn't because there's anything wrong with the specific rules in the law themselves.<sup>7</sup> The commandment against murder<sup>8</sup> is not a bad rule in and of itself. Which means that it isn't simply the specific rules in the Mosaic law we aren't supposed to follow, but rather it's *trying to follow religious rules in general* that we aren't supposed to do.

Which brings us to the next protestation most Christians will make. "What about the long list of sins Paul mentioned in the passage in Galatians? Wasn't he telling his readers to do their best to avoid those specific actions?" The answer to this will shock most people, but no, he most certainly wasn't. If walking after the flesh means trying to follow religious rules, how could Paul possibly then turn around and say, "but make sure you don't break these specific religious rules, okay?" Instead, if you look at the context, it becomes clear that he's warning his readers what will happen if they *try* to avoid sinning. Instead of becoming the holy, righteous people they hope that avoiding those specific actions will make them, those actions are instead exactly what they'll end up doing. Just as positive attributes like love, joy, and peace are the fruit of walking after the Spirit, the various negative actions Paul listed there are the fruit of walking after the flesh, meaning those actions are the fruit that will come forth from trying to follow religious rules.

And so, Paul's condemnation in Romans 10:2-3 can equally be applied to Christians today: *"For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going*

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<sup>7</sup> But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; — 1 Timothy 1:8

<sup>8</sup> Thou shalt not kill. — Exodus 20:13

*about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.”*

There's a ton more that can be told about this topic than I have the time to tell today (I've scarcely scratched the surface of the subject), but I'm going to have to leave it at that for now. However, Martin Zender has written some excellent material in his series of articles on Romans in his ZWTF newsletter that says it even better than I ever could (specifically Volume 4, Issues 6,<sup>9</sup> 8,<sup>10</sup> 13,<sup>11</sup> 14,<sup>12</sup> 15,<sup>13</sup> 16,<sup>14</sup> 26,<sup>15</sup> and 27<sup>16</sup>), so please read those if you're able to, in order to learn even more details on the topic of sin, the old humanity, and walking after the Spirit rather than after the flesh.

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<sup>9</sup> Romans Part 51, Chapter 6:1-7: Death of the Old Humanity, Part 1: <https://martinzender.com/ZWTF/ZWTF4.6.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Romans Part 52, Chapter 6:8-11: Death of the Old Humanity, Part 2: <https://martinzender.com/ZWTF/ZWTF4.8.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Romans Part 53, Chapter 6:12-14: Death of the Old Humanity, Part 3: <https://martinzender.com/ZWTF/ZWTF4.13.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Romans Part 54, Chapter 6:15-16: Death of the Old Humanity, Part 4: <https://martinzender.com/ZWTF/ZWTF4.14.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Romans Part 55, Chapter 6:17-19: Death of the Old Humanity, Part 5: <https://martinzender.com/ZWTF/ZWTF4.15.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Romans Part 56, Chapter 6:20-23: Death of the Old Humanity, Part 6: <https://martinzender.com/ZWTF/ZWTF4.16.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Romans Part 60, Chapter 8:1-2: Walking According to Spirit: <https://martinzender.com/ZWTF/ZWTF4.26.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Romans Part 61, Chapter 8:3-9: “FLESH” in Romans 8: <https://martinzender.com/ZWTF/ZWTF4.27.pdf>