

Is it possible to be free, yet not free? You bet! That was the predicament of a certain Count Raynald back in the 14th century. His brother was King Edward III, and after Raynald tried to lead a revolt against him, the king put him in prison – a prison designed specifically for him. In fact, the prison was built around him. Now, the king claimed it was *not* a prison. The door was open; Raynald was free to leave whenever he liked. So why didn't he leave? Because the door was quite narrow, too narrow for Raynald to get through. In order to leave, Raynald would have had to slim down quite a bit; go on a diet. And that was easier said than done! You see, Raynald had a very big appetite. Way too big! Truth be told, he was a glutton. And knowing this, the king sent him a rich supply of his favorite goodies each and every day. Of course, Raynald didn't have to eat these goodies. But every day he did have to make a choice. Food or freedom? Food or freedom? And every day, his appetite won out. That is why Raynald sat there for a good ten years – free, yet not free.

There is an object lesson here! In our spiritual lives, it is also possible to be free, yet not free. And don't we know this all too well? Even though Christ has forgiven our sins, we don't stop being sinful. Selfish attitudes, unhealthy appetites – impulses Paul refers to as the **“desires of the flesh”** – they're deeply imbedded within us, and they can exert such influence over us! We know we shouldn't do something, but we still want to. We know something is wrong, but it's so alluring. We know the consequences could be terrible, yet even so...even so...the desire to do it remains strong. That's what we struggle with! Selfish attitudes, unhealthy appetites, the **“desires of the flesh”** – they can still hold us captive. And until we break their hold, we will not truly enjoy the abundant life Jesus came to bring us. We will remain free, yet not free.

So can this situation improve? Sure it can! Like Raynald, we have a choice. We can experience greater freedom. We can get these impulses under control. And unlike Raynald, we don't have to do it all on our own. For that, we can count on the power of the Holy Spirit. We have all the power we need dwelling right here *[heart]*! By the same power that brought us to Christ, by the same power that enables us to trust in Christ as our Savior, the Holy Spirit can change our attitudes and curb our appetites; can strengthen us, transform us, and make us more like Christ. All of this the Spirit can do for us! Will it be easy? No. Will it happen over night? No. But can we grow and change and experience more inner freedom? Absolutely! In fact, the Spirit is **“able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine”** – if we let Him. And that's the key. We already have the Spirit within us. We already have the power we need to become free. But we must yield to the Spirit, depend on the Spirit, allow the Spirit full sway to do what needs to be done. If that is our choice, great things can happen! But nothing will happen unless it's our choice. That is why St. Paul encourages us to make this our choice: **“If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”**

Now, put this way, it's hard to imagine how anyone would *not* want to make this choice. Why live in bondage when you don't have to? But the truth is: bondage doesn't always seem like bondage – especially when you're used to it. A prison can seem quite comfortable – especially when it's all you know. And since we're born this way, wired this way, and live around others who are – since this *is* pretty much all we know! – the choice to change isn't always as obvious as one might think! After all, spiritual change is difficult. It's uncomfortable. Sometimes it's socially unacceptable. Plus, it can take so long before we see results! So why not stay the way we are and live the way everyone else does? Why not accommodate the **“desires of the flesh”** and just keep asking God to forgive us? Why deny our appetites in search of a freedom we know next to nothing about? We already **“live by the Spirit.”** That's good enough! Why go overboard and let ourselves **“be guided by the Spirit”**?

Why indeed! Fortunately, Paul answered such questions in his letter to the Galatians. Some of them had slipped into this kind of thinking, so Paul wrote this letter to get them back on track. On the one hand, he said, if you think you can base your lifestyle on the **“desires of the flesh”** and still call yourself a Christian, you are sadly mistaken. We were not saved from sin for sin. And just so there would be no doubt as to what specific lifestyles he was talking about, Paul gave them a list, adding: **“I warn you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”** But on the other hand, he said, think of the advantages to being **“guided by the Spirit.”** We can become so much better! Our lives can become so much richer. Our character can move light years ahead! For **“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”** Why settle for less? In giving us the Holy Spirit, God has given us a great opportunity! Don't waste it! Don't settle for bondage! Make the choices that will set you free! **“If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”**

History doesn't tell us how the Galatians responded to this letter. And ultimately, that's between them and God. What matters now is how we respond – and let's understand how much we are up against. Back in Paul's day, there was a very clear line between what was Christian and what was not. People might cross the line, but at least they knew they were doing it. Today, that line has become rather fuzzy. We live in a society where Christians make up the majority, yet instead of *us* transforming *society*, society is transforming us – to the point that church life is not so different from any other service group. Truth be told, most every vice Paul listed in our text can be found in most every congregation – and is tolerated...if it's even noticed at all! So the challenge to make hard choices, the challenge to fight sinful impulses, the challenge to really crucify the **“desires of the flesh”** – let's just say it's a lot harder to stay motivated when many Christians don't treat sin as a problem or make spiritual growth a priority. And that is what we're up against. But having recognized that, there's one more thing that needs to be said: *So what? So what?!* Ultimately, that's between them and God, too. What matters is how we respond! How we respond now!

And how will we? It's easy to slide over challenging passages like Galatians 5 or just pick up on the juicy parts. "**Fornication, sorcery, drunkenness** – *oooh, now they're bad!*" But if we overlook things that hit closer to home, think what that shows. Suppose we have a problem with **jealousy**. If we don't even pick up on **jealousy**, much less see how it ruins our character and our relationships, doesn't that show how much we are still in bondage – free, yet not free? Doesn't it show how little we've settled for instead of seeking the abundant life God offers? And who wants to do that?! This Scripture may be tough for us to hear, but it's still good for us to hear, good for us to chew on, and good for us to respond to. Why let the bondage continue? We can start the change process whenever we like. We already have the Spirit within us, and He will supply all the power we need. But He won't change us without our consent. It's our choice whether we yield to the Spirit, our choice whether we depend on the Spirit, our choice whether we allow the Spirit full sway to do what needs to be done. It is our choice, and God's Word invites us to *make* this choice – not later, but here and now: "**If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.**"

Not long ago, I read a book by two 16-year old brothers who made this choice themselves. It's called *Do Hard Things* by Alex and Brett Harris. Subtitle: *A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations*. Like most teens, they had gotten the message from society that it was okay to mess up, okay to goof off; that no one expected teens to act responsibly, much less make a difference. But they didn't buy that message. In fact, they rebelled against it. They committed themselves to practicing God's Word no matter how hard it might be – and mind you, not just in their private morality, but in public morality, by helping people in need and getting involved in their community. The results were amazing! Their revolution definitely succeeded! Other Christian teens got on the bandwagon, too, putting their faith into action. Frankly, they put some of us older guys to shame! And how? Not because they possessed anything extra. They found the power they needed right here [*heart*] waiting to be tapped into – just like it is for every Christian. But they made the choice to tap into it! Not to settle for what everyone else considered good enough! Not to avoid change just because it was hard! They made the choice – each day; in fact, many times each day – to yield to the Spirit, depend on the Spirit, and allow the Spirit full sway to do what needed to be done. They made that choice. And guess what? It worked!

It will for us, too. The Word we take home with us today challenges *us* to do hard things; challenges *us* to rebel against low expectations – including our own! My friends, God has something better in mind for us! Something much better! And in an age when too many Christians are like Count Raynald – free, yet not free – what good news this is! We have the power available right here [*heart*]. The Holy Spirit can change our attitudes and curb our appetites; can strengthen us, transform us, and make us more like Christ. But it's our choice whether we tap into that power – tap into it each day; in fact, many times each day. And that is the invitation before us. "**If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.**" Amen.