

**Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.**

**(Galatians 5:26)**

## Introduction

Are you a Spirit-fighter?

The term “Spirit-fighter” comes from the Greek word *pneumatomachi*, which was used to describe a sect of Christians during the fourth century. Unfortunately, it was not a badge of honour. The Spirit-fighters offered resistance to the Spirit. More specifically, they denied his full deity. They believed that he was not God but was instead a created being. Of course, this is unbiblical and those teaching this doctrine were condemned as heretics in 381 AD.

So, are you a Spirit-fighter?

Hopefully, you are not in the sense that I’ve described above. But perhaps – and I want to use the word differently – you are fighting the Spirit in another way: not so much in who is he is, but in what he does. Let me put some flesh on this question and bring it closer to home.

How do you respond when provoked? Perhaps it’s during break time at school and there’s a mean boy or girl in your class who is always trying to make fun of you. Perhaps there’s a colleague at work who’s equally as childish as the school bully, still going about his or her life making others miserable. How do you respond? Or perhaps there’s a church member who is just really difficult to be around. Everything seems to always be about them.

What about that ideal life you’ve always dreamed of? That perfect house? That holiday that so-and-so got to go on? That relationship you wish you had? What is it that stirs up envy in your life?

I’ve offered these questions as a way of examining our hearts. These are things that we are all – me included – tempted to. But, like Cain, it’s our response that the Lord is concerned about. And that is what the apostle Paul would have us consider in our text.

## Freedom to Love One Another

The two “one anothers” in v. 26 serve as kind of summary of Paul’s argument in this passage. Paul is laying before us two ways to live here – two paths to take: On the one hand, we can indulge our flesh and its desires. On the other hand, we can walk by the Spirit, crucify our flesh, and produce fruit from the Spirit.

# Keeping in Step with the Spirit

Galatians 5:26

Shane Williamson

---

Of course, Paul's concern in this context surrounds false teaching in the Galatian churches. These teachers insisted on circumcision as a requirement for becoming a Christian. Paul emphatically rejects this. Being a child of God is rooted in having faith in Christ, in Jesus becoming a curse for us. He tells us that no flesh will be justified in God's sight by the works of the law. The reality is, for the Christian, there is glorious freedom from manmade ideas about how to become a Christian.

But, as we read in v. 13, the glorious freedom that Christ has purchased for us through the gospel is a freedom not for indulging our flesh. It is not for running after the feelings of our heart. Through the Spirit, we are freed from serving ourselves to serving others. Through the Spirit, we are freed from the love of self to the love of others. It is in this way that the whole law, Paul says, is fulfilled.

Friend, have you used your freedom in Christ to strain the conscience of another brother or sister? Perhaps you've told yourself that they need to get on board with your generous agenda of the Christian life. Or perhaps you have scrutinised another brother or sister with grace-less and painful legalism.

Legalism and license both belong to the realm of the flesh. And the path of the flesh bites. It devours and eventually consumes others. Both extravagant living and stifling rule-making stray from the gospel.

But the path of the Spirit is a path in another direction. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are its fruit. Walking this path is not easy. You and I fail every day. Sin crouches at the door, always ready to master us.

But this does not mean we don't put up a fight. Paul tells us that there will always be an inward battle. This is what it means to be a Christian. The flesh and the Spirit are up against each other, complete opposites: like oil and water, like a virus and its antidote. So let me offer some encouragement to the weary soul, battered by sin's weight: It is "carnal men," says John Calvin, who "have no battle with depraved lusts, no proper desire to attain to the righteousness of God."

Friends, the desire to fight—to hate our sin—is a sign of new life. The ship out at sea, unaware of danger, does not drop the mast or send up flares. But those aware of approaching danger do. Those in the struggle with sin will put up a fight and take action.

So, are we fighting sin? Or are we fighting the Spirit's work in our walk with Christ?

A Christian is one who has died to their old self. A Christian is not just a nicer version of themselves, not someone who has simply cleaned up their act. Earlier in Galatians, Paul tells us that he has been crucified with Christ. He is not just a nicer person, but has been crucified.

“It is not even I who lives!” he says, “but Christ in me” (3:20). This statement tells us that Christians are those who have been radically transformed; they have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Perhaps this is something that you have yet to do: You have yet to heed the command of the gospel, to repent of your sins and turn to Christ, turning to Jesus in faith, trusting that his death and resurrection provide you with a way to be vindicated before God, to be acceptable and reconciled to him. If this is you, don't let the day pass away without crying out to Christ to save you and put to death your fleshly desires.

For the Christian, the flesh still exists. Yes, we still live in it – but its power over us is limited. The Spirit has taken the driver's seat and now steers us toward Christlikeness. The Spirit is the very source of our Christian life.

The logic then follows plainly enough: If the source of our life is the Spirit; then the Spirit must also direct the way in which we walk.

## A Mother and Her Two Children

This brings us to the one another in our text. There is a very clear expectation placed on the life of believers, simply because there is a genuine expectation that the Spirit transforms us.

Have you ever considered that God doesn't believe that exhorting us to godly living contradicts the reality of the Spirit in our lives? Yes, there is freedom. No, there is no law against the fruit of the Spirit. But Paul doesn't hesitate to move toward ethical teaching, because specific commands promote and enhance life in the Spirit. They are the very means by which life in the Spirit is carried out.

Yes, love is at the heart and soul of biblical ethics, but freedom from law does not involve freedom from ought. God so instructs us and gives us particular commands concerning love, because, as Tom Schreiner says, “it can be so, so easy to deceive ourselves about just how loving we are.” We do not get to define what love looks like. Love is of God and is defined by him.

So, here is our one another. Paul writes, “Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.”

I much prefer the word “vain-glory” to “conceit” or “pride.” “Pride” is strangely ambiguous to us today. We describe ourselves as proud parents or proud about this or that achievement. It takes away what the issue is here: glory that is vain, glory set on self and not God.

John Calvin writes,

Of many evils existing in society at large, and particularly in the church, ambition [or vainglory] is the mother.... Mutual provocations and envyings are the daughters of ambition. He who aspires to the highest rank, must of necessity envy all others, and disrespectful biting, stinging language is the unavoidable consequence.

Friends, if pride, vainglory, and conceit are the mother, provoking others, and envy very naturally are her children.

How might we separate ways from the flesh and give no opportunity for vainglory sitting at our doors?

One way I think we could slam the door shut to sin is if we would pray for this fruit of the Spirit to be visible in the lives of others. Just think for a second: What kind of church would we be if everyone was consumed, not with serving self—like the world—but with seeking the spiritual good of the person next to us? Provoking one another naturally arises out of a heart intoxicated with self. The person who wants to be first cannot stand the success of another.

Likewise, envying one another naturally arises out of the heart infatuated with self. The person who wants to be first is grieved at the excellence of other men and women.

It was because of envy that Cain murdered Abel, that the sons of Israel threw Joseph into the pit, and that we despise fellow members of the body of Christ because they have what we do not. However, on the contrary, as Paul says elsewhere, love does not envy (1 Corinthians 13:4).

Is the way we steward our authority in the workplace or in the home characterised by pride—as an opportunity to indulge our flesh? Can our judgements never be questioned? Can we never be wrong? Do we provoke our children because our discipline of them is always in response to them disturbing our “me” time? Do the successes of our fellow church members drive us to envy and despair, to bitter dispositions?

The opposite is also true: Does success and divine blessing obscure your view of those in need, those destitute and lonely? Children, do we—as I sadly did too often—irritate our parents and choose to disobey when we know we shouldn't? Brothers, do we abdicate our responsibility to speak up against injustice, seeing our freedom in Christ as an opportunity for slothfulness, inaction and passivity? Do we deny that we are our brothers' keeper?

Friends, I ask not to condemn but to stir our hearts toward Christ—to our ever present need for his grace, for the power of his Spirit. One thing is certain: We need God's Spirit to obey. We need to be actively sowing to the Spirit, exercising self-control, not giving in to our flesh. We need weighty, intentional moments and seasons in prayer. We need the word of Christ renewing our minds, reminding us daily of the cross of Christ and that there—at the cross—

## Keeping in Step with the Spirit

Galatians 5:26

Shane Williamson

---

all of us are equally in need of his grace, that there at the cross we are all accepted by an alien justification – the goodness of Jesus.

Will we fight against the Spirit, or will we live with him, abide with him, and keep in step with him? “Where the Spirit is,” says Martin Luther, “he renews people and produces new feelings in them.... Such people do not seek their own glory but God’s; they do not provoke one another or envy one another, but give way to one another and give honour.”

AMEN