

Walk in the Spirit

Last week in the news we were confronted with yet another example of a public figure who has stood tall for morality and religion and then has inexplicably drifted into a scandalous romantic affair. I'm referring to the Indiana congressman who has made it a feature of his political identity that he is an evangelical Christian and that he stands for basic family values. These are specifically, fidelity in marriage, chastity in singleness, and a no-nonsense approach to sex education, meaning abstinence. These values are ones that, if observed, would bring much relief to social ills and save untold personal pain. They're Christian values.

But here's the mystery in all of this. It appears, does it not, that the very people who most publically advocate traditional morality are the ones who can practically be counted on to disgracefully plummet from their idealism. How many times has the politician, minister, or other leader who has really taken a moral position also suffered a disgraceful fall? Hundreds!

Does our faith help us here? I believe that the answer is emphatically, "Yes!" And the place where this problem is brilliantly explored and explained is in the Apostle Paul's letters, notably in Romans from which we read today. Paul teaches that there are two distinct approaches to life. The

first says, "I'm a moral person. That means I uphold the rules and I affiliate with a religion. I have values. I focus on what I do, namely I try to do right thing at all times." The second outlook runs this way: "I have welcomed Jesus Christ into my being in part because I've lost confidence in myself. I walk through life talking with Jesus, holding his hand. I focus on God."

You might be thinking, these aren't very different. Indeed they both sound correct. But Paul would insist otherwise. And this, by the way, appears to be where so many people misunderstand Christian faith—even where you and I may miss it's genius and power. Paul would have us know several things. First, religious laws can actually educate us on how to sin. When you tell a toddler not to get into the pots and pans cupboard, she may decide that that's where the real fun stuff is. That principle applies to adults as well. Second, religious law makes us aware when we've transgressed God's requirements. Guilt is introduced. Sometimes guilty behavior is sinful behavior. Third, religious law can be manipulated. We're all little lawyers when it comes to morality, manipulating the application of the law so that we can pronounce ourselves innocent. Fourth, religious law is like a measuring stick that lets us compare ourselves with others. We may be guilty of all

sorts of things, but, at least we're not as bad as this other person. We make the calculation, God's got to accept me, because I'm about the best he's got. If I'm not in heaven a whole lot of people aren't going to be there. God will be pretty lonely up there. Fifth, I can go through the motions of obeying religious morality and not care a lick about God himself. Going to church and observance of the moral code can be a hideout for what amounts to functional atheism.

Can you see how we can all get into deep trouble simply by standing tall for no-nonsense morality without understanding the way law and human sinfulness can be a toxic combination. My suspicion is that it is just this profundity in our faith that is repeatedly missed by public officials and ordinary people—church goers and otherwise—and causes this repeated problem of moral people having shameful moral collapses.

How are we supposed to live? What's the answer? Paul and our faith offer it generously—walk by the Spirit. What does this mean? It means opening our lives up to the presence and power of the Risen Jesus—who comes to us in the Holy Spirit. It means having an on-going conversation and relationship with Jesus.

You see, Christian belief isn't so much belief that Jesus lived long ago, performed miracles and gave wise teachings and

died on a cross for our sins. Christian belief is first of all accepting the truth that Jesus can live within each of us and push forward his work in us and through us. This is what Paul means by walking in the Spirit.

Is there something we can do to receive Jesus into our lives? There is indeed. Try this. Make a list of everyone in your whole life who needs to be forgiven by you—those who've hurt you, maybe former lovers or friends with whom you've had a falling out. Maybe even God. Make a complete list and then pray through the list to forgive each person and release them. Unforgiveness takes up space in our lives where Jesus can dwell. Make a second list of all the things even back in your childhood, for which you need to be forgiven. Pray through the list and let God take your sins, one by one, out of your life. Guilt takes up space that God can occupy in your heart. Make a third list of areas in your life over which Jesus does not exercise full control. Pray through this list and let Christ re-arrange your priorities. You see anger, guilt, and idols push God away. To remove these lets God in. This is a start in walking by the Spirit.

Finally, talk with God. Think of this, the different kinds of prayer are different kinds of love language. Adoration is telling the one you love, how wonderful they are in your eyes.

Confession, is admitting when you're wrong and trusting a relationship to be able to weather betrayals. Thanksgiving is acknowledging how much the one we love has done for us.

Supplication or requests are relying on the one we love to do for us as we desire. Prayer lies at the heart of having a relationship.

I titled this sermon, "Walk with the Spirit." Just go in your imagination to the first disciples walking with Jesus. They simply put down their lives and took to the road with him. Now, you and I can do the same thing. Walking in the Spirit is walking with Jesus today. When we do this, we don't need to worry whether we're good enough. When we do this, we're making room for goodness itself to live in us.