

Fact Sheet for **“Deciding Right from Wrong”**
Galatians 5:16-26

Pastor Bob Singer
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We have arrived at what I have been hinting at all along in Galatians... God's alternative to Law observance. This may stretch you a bit, but it's a good stretch.

In America we like to make laws and rules that spell out exactly, often in minute detail, what is prohibited and what is permitted. We don't like to leave anything up to an individual's discretion. In reality making laws and rules like this is impossible to do perfectly. If the Bible was structured this way you can imagine how many volumes it would have to have! Fortunately God takes a different approach, and we will see that today in Galatians 5:16-26.

So, how do you decide right from wrong? And there is another question closely associated with this. What do you do with all those pesky laws of the Old Testament?

At one end of the spectrum a few have insisted we need to come under all those Mosaic laws. At the other end of the spectrum there are those who plainly state that the Old Testament was for the Jews, while the New Testament is for Christians. This effectively relegates the Old Testament to interesting history, but with no binding application for the Christian walk. *But the Old Testament was the Bible for the 1st century church!*

Then there are those who say we need to follow the Old Testament Law, but they really mean a very small subset of those laws. *But what gives them the right to choose which laws to observe and which laws not to observe?*

There are others who make much of the difference between the Ceremonial Law and the Moral Law, teaching that we must observe the Moral Law while being able to ditch the Ceremonial Law. *This division is indefensible from Scripture. If the Old Testament Jews didn't obey the ceremonial law this was in essence a sinful moral choice.*

Many of us have been taught The Ten Commandments and that we should follow them. But one of those commandments is to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12). *But the Sabbath day is from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. This has led many to teach incorrectly that Sunday is the Christian Sabbath.*

Some have said that we need only to observe those Old Testament laws that have been repeated in the New Testament for Christians. *This assumes that everything we need to observe from the Old Testament has been repeated in the New. But the New Testament never said this!*

Still some others will focus on all the do's and don't's of the New Testament. *In reality they are exchanging Old Testament Law for New Testament Law. Their emphasis is still on Law observance.*

What a mess of theology! Here is God's word through Paul on the issue.

¹⁶ ¶ **But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.**

The word “gratify” means to “carry out”. If we walk by the Spirit we will not carry out the sinful desires of the flesh. Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit who works with our consciences. In terms of right and wrong we need to pay attention the leading of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, to help us not to walk according to the flesh.

¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

This is walking by the Holy Spirit, not by Law observance. As we decide right from wrong are we focusing only on the rules, or are we focusing on the Holy Spirit’s leading? We are creative and can get around rules, but we can’t get around the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Let’s take a closer look at a couple of words in these verses. The word “evident” in verse 19 means “clear or plain”. The fact that the works of the flesh are wrong is a self-evident truth, particularly to Christians who have God’s Holy Spirit indwelling them. The Holy Spirit has a huge impact on your conscience. Some things about God are also evident to non-Christians (Romans 1:18-19, “God made it evident to them”¹). Now consider the words “such things” in verse 21. You have here Paul’s clear statement that the list of these works of the flesh is representative, not exhaustive. In other words this list is only like a sampling from a much larger catalog of sins, all of which are evident. On the other hand Paul wrote of the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Again, the words “such things” in verse 23 shows that this list of the fruit of the Spirit is representative, not exhaustive. This is why Paul, who insisted that we are not under the Mosaic Law in Galatians 1-4, could appeal to Leviticus 19:18 in Galatians 5:13-14, not as Law but as principle, as something the Galatians should follow. When you come up to a choice when you need to decide between what is right and what is wrong pay a lot of attention to your conscience and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Take a moment here to read Galatians 2:20. We are alive spiritually not through Law observance but through faith in Christ!

²⁵ ¶ If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

This is something that was taking place with the Galatian believers.

You will find that walking by the Spirit is a much finer grid of right and wrong, and is much more challenging than walking by mere laws and rules. Galatians 5:16 would be a great verse to memorize today!

¹ New American Standard.