

Galatians | The Grace Manifesto

In Step with the Spirit: A Cultivated Life

Gal. 5.16-25

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But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. ¹⁹ Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 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. ²⁴ Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

²⁵ *If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.*

This summer we have been looking at St. Paul's New Testament letter to the Galatians. The Galatians were a network of churches dealing with a unique, early problem. "How are we to think about being Christians, in light of the fact that we are also Jews?"

Most of these early Galatian Christians were of Jewish heritage. But now there's a lot of new and different people coming to follow Jesus- what do we do? And the problem was, they were asking these new Christians to also become Jewish. This is what Paul has been at times in this letter, railing against. And the theme that Paul uses to address the problem is the theme of freedom. You have been freed by Christ. You are no longer a slave to a set of rules or customs, you are no longer in bondage to the law. Christ has set you free.

The problem is that we go back to the things that are familiar and it's in those familiar places and practices that we also, often exchange our freedom in Christ for familiar burdens, bondage, and slavery. Paul is saying to them, and to us... "how many times, and how many different ways do I have to say it?? You are free, stay free!"

Today, we come to a passage in the letter that has become famous, particularly as we think about Christian living. It's a difficult passage to preach because as we've just read, we have two lists here. And anytime there are lists it presents a difficult task for the preacher. You could pick any one of these words from these lists and preach a whole sermon series. You could take one of the fruits of the spirit each week, and still not exhaust what's here. But, that's not our intention today.

Two weeks ago, TJ told us that in chapter 5, Paul begins to shift to a more practical focus. Which he said, leads us to start wondering about results? Where's the payoff? If we know, that we know, that we know, we're keeping the main thing the main thing, what should I be looking for? What kind of changes? How will we know we're living in true Christian liberty and freedom?

And then today we get these lists... a list of the desires of the flesh...

And a list of the fruit of the spirit. And if you're like me, my natural tendency is to simply say, "OK, well... Don't do the things on this list. Do the things on this list.

And we'll be fine. Right? Easy..." Well, as we're going to see... No.

And the reason it's not so simple, is because as humans we have this thing called, Desire. What are we to do with our desires?

Even our desires to love, and to do good- to grow in our dependence on God. How do we know which desires are leading us, guiding our loves, our attention? What are the things we feel are actually fulfilling us? Bringing us life? Setting us free? In your bulletin there is a wonderfully simple quote from von Goethe – "None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free." Am I actually living in true Christian freedom?

So today, I want us to consider three things – that living in true Christian freedom, leads us to 1) A Conflicted Life, 2) a Crucifying Life, and 3) A Cultivated Life...

A Conflicted Life – look at v. 16 and 17 – *"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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."*

Paul is describing a very conflicted inner life, which almost always leads to a very conflicted outer life. Internally everything is NOT OK. The Kids are NOT alright. And we know this deep down. We know that internally we are in conflict. Our thoughts, desires, attitudes... they are all over the map. And we wrestle with the conflict. We see these two lists, and we know the things we want to do, but we can't do them. We know we want this fruit in our lives, but what we think we want, is always actually what we really want.

And what Paul is describing is the "flesh." The Greek word, *Sarx*. Modern translations define as our "sinful nature." So, when we think of the flesh, the desires of the flesh, we are simply saying that our hearts, left to themselves, are opposed to God. But, hasn't the Christian been made new? Aren't we a new creation? Do we still really have these sinful desires that oppose God? This is the conflict Paul is pointing to.

In another letter Paul writes, to the Romans, he has this famous passage that is really confusing to read, but essentially, he's saying... "The new part of me, the new nature given by God's spirit, it longs and hungers for God. I want to do good. But, this other part of me, this old self that still is inside, on my own,

I can't do the good I want to do. Why? Because there are these desires. Because of the sin that is in me, the conflict between my flesh, and the Spirit."

What is happening is that our lives are shaped by what we desire. In fact, by what we love. And desires and loves are often deep-seated things in us. In fact, I would argue that they are much stronger than our brains, our thoughts. The word that Paul uses for desires is "*epithumai*" – which means, "an over-desire," or an "inordinate desire..." So essentially, the desires of the flesh are when we begin to over-desire something in our life. When we allow something to take control over us. Perhaps we know and believe this thing isn't a good thing, but we can't stop ourselves because the inordinate desire for it has overwhelmed us.

Paul is saying these sinful desires become the deep things that drive and control our lives. Sin begins to build within us this deep feeling that we must have this or that, and if we don't, we are not complete, we are unfulfilled, or we are broken, we are not whole. What we're really talking about is idolatry.

In the Old Testament, idolatry was the word that was always used when God's people drifted away from him and moved towards another god, or something else... In fact, in the books of the Kings in the OT, when you read through all these kings, one of the lines it will say about each, is either, He did tear down the idols on the high places, or he did not tear them down.

In the New Testament, this same theme is there as well, but the way it's presented is as the lust of the flesh, the desires of the flesh. The cravings of our desires that often lead us away from God and certainly away from seeing the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. The famous John Calvin quote comes to mind... "Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols."

This is the Conflicted life of the Christian. But, look at what Paul says, that is so interesting - v. 18 – "But, if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." And here's what Paul is saying, and this is very important. It is the Spirit of God that is CREATING the conflict! The reason we feel this tension in the Christian life is because God's Spirit is in you! The Spirit is fighting for you, warring against these other desires. When we feel the heaviness of this conflict it is one of the ways we know the Spirit is going to work in us. That we are walking in step with the Spirit.

Paul also says this of these two sides within us. "If you are led by the spirit you are not under the law. Meaning this... all of these sinful desires, the desire of the flesh... they are all just another form of the law." We see the free gift of God's grace. We've felt it. It's in us. But we choose to reject it and choose something far lesser. We continue to seek our own salvation, to find our own saviors, to look to all of these desires as functional saviors in our lives that will fulfill us, make us whole, make us feel accepted, and put us back together when we're sad.

For the believing, believer, the gospel goes to work in us to reveal what is underneath all of those desires. That through all of them- Paul names, sexual immorality, anger, rivalry, envy, drunkenness- All of them somehow reflect the deep-seated lack of trust in God's grace.

This is the conflicted life. The Christian life is messy. And, the only way to experience true Christian freedom is to recognize that. Unfortunately, I believe the agitators, much like the agitators in the Galatian church, the agitators in the church today are the ones who will not allow followers of Jesus to properly recognize and own the conflicted life. The messiness of the Christian life. Living in true Christian freedom forces us to recognize that in my heart, in your heart, there is a conflict between the desires of the flesh and the Spirit.

You may have seen a flurry of stories about public people who have “left the faith” recently. And, I’m always interested to read the responses from Christians. There have been some interesting responses. There have been some terrible responses. One of my concerns however is this...

If we don’t create within the Church, the Body of Christ, the kind of atmosphere where we can wrestle with the inner conflict well... If we can’t admit like we’re admitting here, that, “yeah, we’re all living this conflicted life...” Then when the conflict begins to feel TOO heavy... we will begin to look for the nearest exit ramp.

Unfortunately, I’ve seen this in a number of my own friends over the last five years.

Living in Christian freedom though allows us to fully address and, in a way, adopt this Conflicted Life. Which then leads us to our second point. Living in Christian freedom must lead to- 2) A Crucifying Life – in v. 19-23, Paul gives us the lists – the desires of the flesh, and then this lofty, beautiful list of the fruit of the Spirit. Our kids memorize them during catechism, or at VBS.

But then look with me at v. 24, he concludes the fruit of the Spirit, and then writes – “And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” OK then, what does Paul mean when he says, “Crucify the flesh?”

“Those who follow Jesus must crucify the flesh?”

Well, two things we need to keep an eye on. First, we must always remember and believe, Christ was crucified. Once and for all. In our place, for our sin, that we might be justified before God, and receive His righteousness. That has happened in time and history. It does not need to happen again. Because that’s true, second, what does it mean for us to Crucify the flesh?

Well, following what we said earlier about the desires of the flesh being “over-desires,” desires that are out of control... I want to give you this definition. Crucifying the flesh is the identifying and dismantling of our desires and idols. It is a growing awareness of our hearts gradually drifting away from God and being led away by our desires.

And this will require all of us to do what Jamie Smith, at Calvin College calls, a “liturgical self-audit.” A self-audit of our loves and desires. Taking time to look into our lives at what is driving us and seeing where our habits are leading us. Where our money is leading us. Where are relationships are leading us.

In fact, it leads us to consider one of the fruits of the spirit, in fact the greatest fruit of the spirit, love. Where are our “loves” taking us?

Jamie Smith in his really wonderful book, *You are What you Love*, says this...

“To be human is to have a heart. You can’t not love. So the question isn’t whether you will love something as ultimate; the question is what you will love as ultimate. And you are what you love.” He goes on and says, “You can’t not love. It’s why the heart is the seat and fulcrum of the human person, the engine that drives our existence.”

So, crucifying the flesh then is to take a regular and serious look at our lives. Our inner and outer lives and ask, “where are my desires and loves taking my life? Where are they leading me?” And if there are desires that are leading me away from God, or helping me drift from God, or if there are desires that are clear from this passage, sinful, then we are called to let them go and let them die.

And how do we do that? “Phil, is this just a long way to tell me that I need to try harder to not sin?” “No...” The way we let it die, is to see that it has already died with Christ. It is already on the cross. Our desires. Our struggles. They do not define us. They have been placed on Christ.

However, the conflicted life that the Christian wrestles with, is with the temptation to take something down from the cross. John Stott used to say, our sinful desires are when we take something down from the cross and we play with it in our minds and our hands, and before we realize it has led us back into the law of the flesh. We come back to the scene of the crime if you will and instead of being overwhelmed at the cost and sacrifice of Christ. Instead of as TJ said two weeks ago, stumbling at the sight of the cross and Jesus crucified- instead, we look upon the cross and we wish we could have a little bit of the old man back.

And we start to entertain and take down the bits we want back to control, that we want to love. This is the conflicted life.

But a crucifying life, is not taking a spiritual hammer to our own life. Putting these two lists on the bathroom mirror and saying, “Today I’m only going to do the good things!!” The crucifying life is coming to the cross of Christ, and leaving it all there. Leaving all the desires. All the things my human heart wants to love, and leaving it on the cross.

It allows us all to say when we feel ourselves drifting, or loving something too much, or over-desiring something, it allows us to say... “God, I know this is not the real me. This is not what I want. I want what you want and desire for me.”

“I THINK this is what I want. I THINK this is the desire of my heart. I THINK I have to have this to be happy or be attractive, to be noticed, to be satisfied....

But God, help me to remember who I am in Christ.”

And then we pray, v. 25 – “God, help me live by the Spirit... help me keep in step with the Spirit.” We have been adopted into the family of God and so where does the Spirit reside? In us!! The Spirit of His Son has been sent into our hearts.... To live with us. To remind us we are sons and daughters...

And so, the move... what is the move? The move when we are finding our desires getting out of whack, is to look upon the cross. Remember that we are children of God, loved and accepted, and to leave what Christ has taken upon himself... there. Christians are controlled now by the Spirit. And so, we walk with the Spirit... We pray to keep in step with the Spirit that is already in us.

Greg Keener, a wonderful commentator on the Bible says this. “The way to overcome undisciplined fleshly passion is not to focus on the passion in hopes of mastering or suppressing it, but to rather live a life dominated by trusting in God, recognizing one’s new master in place of one’s old one. Knowledge of the law does not automatically transform one’s desires, but the Spirit can do so.”

How do we overcome the desires of the flesh? We crucify them by trusting in God. By gazing upon the crucified Lord and trusting that God is birthing in us new desires. Desires that in time, bear spiritual fruit.

So, Living in Christian freedom means adopting 1- A Conflicted Life 2 – A Crucifying Life, But finally... 3 – A Cultivated Life. This soaring list of the fruit of the Spirit is remarkable. v. 22 – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control: against such things there is no law.”

When I read this my thoughts go to, “OK, well, if I recognize the conflict. That I have the Spirit, but there are these sinful desires. And if I crucify the flesh by leaving those desires in the hands of Jesus, well, when do I start to see the fruit?” “Phil... when are the results going to show?” And this is where Spiritual maturity really begins to show itself.

The law- a works-based, religious approach to Spiritual growth, looks at the Christian life mechanically. Or, for our 21st century world... digitally. So much of our lives now is plug and play. Plug it in. Turn it on. Go. Or, watch something. Don’t like it? Watch something else. Post something. Instantaneous likes, comments, feedback. I post something and a bunch of people right away tell me if it’s good.

But, following Jesus is not mechanical. It is not digital. It is not even linear. Following Jesus, living in Christian freedom, is cultivating fruit. Following Jesus is like agricultural work more than engineering. And agricultural work is slow. And it’s unpredictable. You can’t account for all the pests, and the weather- the cold, the heat, the storms. Gardening is about cultivating something slowly and carefully over time.

A few months ago, we looked at this passage with our students here at Park Road, and I told them this. One of my fears for people your age, for millennials... is that because your world is so fast. Because all you know is a world that moves so quickly, in which you have access to anything you want, any information you want at any time- my fear, is that you won’t wait long enough to see the change in your life. More than likely the change won’t happen fast, because it takes a lifetime to see the fruit of the

Spirit take shape in us. My fear is that when the desires of the flesh kick up inside you, that those desires will yield much quicker results than the work of the Spirit in you.

BUT I told them, and I'll tell all of us here today- if Christ is our life... if you can fold into your lives habits that cultivate over time, a committed, rooted, trust in God, then you're going to see the difference. You're going to see not only love, but self-control, patience, and kindness in the long game of life.

One of my favorite novels is *Jayber Crow*, by Wendell Berry. Some of you might know it... but there's an exchange between two characters that is so good. It reads, "You have been given questions to which you cannot be given the answers. You will have to live them out- perhaps a little at a time.' --- 'And how long is that going to take?' --- 'I don't know. As long as you live, perhaps.'--- That could be a long time.' -- -- I will tell you a further mystery,' he said. 'It may take longer.'

To conclude, let me just give a couple of takeaways for how we might live a cultivated life. How we can cultivate grace and cultivate our freedom in Christ. One, we cultivate by pruning our desires. By bringing all of our desires and loves before the Lord and saying, "God, by your Spirit, help me to sort out what is leading me away from you. What is leading me closer to you?" To ask the hard questions of ourselves. Our hearts need to often be recalibrated like a compass back towards God. Worship does that. Every Sunday, we recalibrate the compass of our hearts back to God. The Word of God does that. Trusting in God's love for you over a lifetime does that.

But two, when we see the fruit of the Spirit in each other's lives at Park Road, we should be so quick to point out where we see fruit in each other. Because growth is slow. Because farming is slow. Because gardening is slow, and often we can't see the change and the fruit in our own lives. But others can. And so, let's be liberal with our encouragement of each other! This is the ground in which the fruit of the Spirit grows.

We deal with the inner conflict. We crucify the desires of the flesh and we cultivate our lives centered on grace. Our hearts yearn. Just as the great theologian-troubadour, Bruce Springsteen sang, "everybody's got a hungry heart."

It is in the gospel that our hearts are satisfied, and where in time, slowly, slowly, slowly, our desires and longings, our hungry hearts... produce fruit, as we walk with the Spirit, by the Spirit, and in step with the Spirit.

Let's Pray.