

The Flesh and the Spirit
Galatians 5:13-26

Turn to Galatians 5. Our lives are a battle ground between the flesh and the Spirit. Each one of us individually lives with the flesh pulling one way, and the Holy Spirit pulling the other way. Our church, as a body, a church family, is a battle ground between the flesh and the Spirit.

The “flesh” in Galatians 5 is not our physical body, it is our human readiness to sin, our weakness when we are tempted so that we often yield to temptation. We quickly do the wrong thing. In Galatians 5 Paul treats the flesh like a force, pulling us away from the Spirit’s leading.

In Galatians 5, there is no key to success, there is no formula or recipe that if we just do this or that, we will always produce the fruit of the Spirit. Still, we need to know how the flesh acts, and on the other side, we need to know what the Spirit wants to do among us. And we are not helpless in this. We can make choices, and the Spirit always helps us.

We’re reading Galatians 5 because next Sunday is our covenant Sunday. Our covenant with each other tells God and one another that we are resolved to live out the fruit of the Spirit with each other, and we are resolved to avoid the works of the flesh. Our covenant puts the fruit of the Spirit into a different package, but it is pretty much the same thing.

The Problem in Galatia: Biting, Devouring, Provoking, Envy (5:15, 26)

If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other... Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. Biting, devouring, provoking and envying.

Paul does not actually say that this is happening there, but given how the whole chapter reads, there’s not any doubt. Relationships between Galatian believers were rocky. They were going at each other far too much. That’s why he teaches them about the flesh and the Spirit.

Opening Summary: Free so we can Serve One Another (5:13-15)

This opening paragraph packs the whole teaching into a few lines. *You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free [from the Law of Moses]. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

In the Bible, freedom is not so we can do what we want; God frees us so that we can enter a better service. Indulging the flesh means we bite and devour each other, and end up destroying each other. That’s the wrong use of freedom.

Instead, serve one another humbly in love. This way we fulfill what the law wanted all along. This is a remarkable statement, although not more than Jesus himself said. Gentile believers like the Galatians and like us are not under the Law of Moses at all. But Paul won't leave it there. If the Spirit leads us to serve one another humbly in love, then we will be doing what the Law wanted more than anything, we'll be fulfilling the Law. (As we've seen before, in the NT Letters, "neighbour" is always another believer.)

The Daily Battle, and the Solution (5:16-18)

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

The Spirit and the flesh want opposite things. The flesh wants us biting and devouring each other, and the Spirit wants us to serve one another humbly in love. As a result, we cannot just go through life doing whatever we want. Sometimes we may want to do the right thing, and that's good, but other times we'll want to do what's wrong.

So, what do we do? We walk by the Spirit (v16), we are led by the Spirit (v18), and we keep in step with the Spirit (v25). The answer is not to go back to the Law, no, the answer the Holy Spirit, to walk by the Spirit, be led by the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit.

How do we know if we're walking by the Spirit and being led by the Spirit? Do we get some special Holy Spirit tingling, or some feeling in our heart that for sure this is the Holy Spirit? No. Those things might happen, but that's not how this Scripture works.

Paul will list the works of the flesh, and then he will list the fruit of the Spirit. When our actions produce the works of the flesh, we are *not* being led by the Spirit. When our actions produce the fruit of the Spirit, we *are* being led by the Spirit and we *are* walking by the Spirit.

We know by the result of our words and actions. He opens the next line, "The acts of the flesh are obvious." This Scripture will spell it out, two lists, a flesh list and a Spirit list, so we will be able to recognize in ourselves and others whether flesh guides us or the Spirit. Both are obvious.

The Acts of the Flesh (5:19-21)

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you now, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

There are several lists like this in the New Testament. It's good for us to read these lists out once in a while. As God's people, we name the things we will not do. We name the things God calls us to avoid, we say them out loud. Every believer is uncomfortable with something on this list, something that we struggle with, and it feels too close to home. Nevertheless, we name the things God has told us not to do.

If we compare this list to other similar lists, one thing stands out in this list and makes it different: eight of these terms describe relational troubles, the thing that plagued the Galatian believers: *hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy*. All of these are the opposite of "serve one another humbly in love." Doesn't matter how righteous it feels, it's the flesh.

I have heard people say, "I was serving the Lord, but I was doing it in the flesh, and not by the Spirit, and that's why it was so hard and I got tired. I was doing it in the flesh." Wrong thinking, people, the Bible doesn't teach that. The flesh *never* does the right thing, *never* serves the Lord.

Sometimes what the Spirit leads us to is hard work and exhausting, and sometimes it comes more naturally and is a joy. Either way, it is the Spirit, because the flesh never desires to do the right thing. This list told us what the flesh produces, and it's not that.

I warn you now, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. That is a frightening line, isn't it. Galatian believers reading this letter are doing some of those things: *hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy*.

Paul does not tell them they won't be saved, or that they've lost out on the kingdom. I don't know where to draw the line here, and Paul was not interested in that. God will do that. Still, there are sometimes people in the church who will not inherit the kingdom of God, and it will be for reasons like this. We all struggle with something here, and the kingdom is a kingdom of forgiveness. Let's make sure that we understand that the Lord has called us away from these.

The Fruit of the Spirit (5:22-26)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

"Love, joy, peace." These are not describing how the Spirit makes us feel, this is not telling us that we will feel loving and joyful and peaceful. Our whole Scripture today talks about what's going on in the *group*, in the *congregation*.

When the Spirit produces his fruit in the church, the relationships in the church are loving and peaceful which brings joy. For the most part, our group atmosphere has much of this. Sometimes that's not true, but usually it is, which is wonderful.

The Holy Spirit wants to guide relationships between believers. How are we getting along with each other? How do we treat each other? Let's not use our freedom as a chance to let the flesh go wild. Instead, let's serve each other humbly in love.

Love, joy, peace, then patience. In some churches, there are people that drive you nuts, they are horribly irritating. I know that we never have people like that in our church, but it happens in other churches. When there are people like that in the church, the Spirit leads us to patience. We gently bear with these people.

In Ephesians we read, "be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bearing with one another in love." That's patience. My brothers and sisters, living out the fruit of the Spirit can be very hard work. At different points in your life, you have been patient with difficult and abrasive believers. That's not easily done, is it, especially when it goes on for a while.

Love and joy and peace happen in the congregation only when there is also much patience, the kind that bears with one another in love. Don't read this "fruit of the Spirit list" and imagine something dreamy and idyllic, don't get sentimental. Spirit fruit regularly takes real effort.

The last fruit of the Spirit is self-control. The Spirit produces self control. So are we controlling ourselves? Or is the Spirit? Answer: The Spirit leads us and helps us to control ourselves. And now we're talking about the people who are irritating and abrasive, which we all are once in a while. And we will be irritated with them and will be ready with the works of the flesh!

And the Spirit will say, "Don't do it. Keep still. Don't say a thing. Not a thing." That's the Spirit producing self control. If there will be love and joy and peace in the church, there will also be plenty of patience and self-control. And when we do speak, we do it gently and humbly, though we feel no love whatsoever at that moment. That's the fruit of the Spirit.

I read a commentary that said the first the fruit of the Spirit and the last were the most important. Love and self-control. As far as the Galatian believers were concerned, love and self-control were most important. At the time I read this, it seemed unlikely, but it has grown on me. Love and self-control go hand in hand.

I will mention one more: faithfulness. The Spirit produces people who are faithful. People who are faithful in the congregation are so wonderful, they keep showing up, they keep doing what they do, whatever their role is in the body. Much of this happens in our Sunday gathering, but a lot happens in other ways as well. Faithful people: the church needs them, God uses them.

And if you are faithful, then sometimes you're doing what you do when you don't want that. Yes, you do want to serve the Lord, in the big picture; but not today please. But it's time to do what you do, so you do it. That's the Spirit leading you, on the days you want that, and on the days you don't, and the Spirit produces your faithfulness to bring God's life to the rest of us.

So, let's walk by the Spirit, let's be led by the Spirit, let's keep in step with the Spirit. This Scripture has told us what it looks like when we keep in step with the Spirit, and what it looks like when we don't. We need the Spirit to lead and guide and help us, and we also need to be taught what that will look like.

Every marriage has difficult times. Tension and pain. Let us not suppose that what God says to spouses is any different than this. Every married couple needs to take Galatians 5 home with them. Never mind any one else's marriage, or your spouse. This is God speaking to *me*, period.

A Note on Miracles and Gifts of the Spirit

The Galatians and the Corinthians get special mention as churches having miracles and gifts of the Spirit on a regular basis in their church life (1 Cor 12-14; Gal 3:5). In other letters this does not come up, but we know these two churches had miracles and gifts of the Spirit.

And these two congregations, Corinthian and Galatian, also had the worst relationships with each other. We've read today about the Galatians, and the Corinthians were no better. They both had miracles and the dramatic spiritual gifts and experiences, and at the same time they were not walking by the Spirit, or being led by the Spirit, or keeping in step with the Spirit.

Miracles and gifts of the Spirit are very good, everything the Spirit does is good, and I'd be happy to see more of it here. But don't confuse the Spirit's miracles and gifts with the Spirit's fruit, or being led by the Spirit.

Conclusion

Let's walk by the Spirit and be led by the Spirit. Let's live out the fruit of the Spirit in our homes and in our church. Let's thank God for all the times this very thing has happened. God has equipped us for doing his will, and by his Spirit he has worked in us what pleases him. For this we will thank him.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for every time we have said "no" to the flesh, and have lived out what the Spirit produces. We have not done that every time, not at all, but with your help we often have. And Father, forgive us our sins, as we forgave those who sinned against us. We are not blameless, and lead us out of the places where we often fail. Thank you for the Holy Spirit, and for all the Spirit has done among us.

BENEDICTION: May the God of peace equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.