

Keeping in Step with the Spirit

Gal 5:16-18

This morning we come to an important shift in the book of Galatians. The first 4 ½ chapters are really focused on warning the Galatian believers against the error of legalism. Paul's deep concern is that they are being turned away from the gospel of grace to a false gospel of Christ plus law and he takes the first four chapters to convince them that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone. To add to Christ's finished work is to lose Christ's finished work. He couldn't say it more strongly than 5:4

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.

But legalism isn't the only danger a church can face – on the other end of the spectrum is something the Bible calls "license" – where churches get careless about how they live and grace becomes an excuse to sin. If legalism abandons grace, license abuses grace. One of the accusations the legalists were leveling against Paul's "no-law" gospel is that it will lead to a sloppy, licentious lifestyle. And they were able to point at the Galatian church where there was division and anger and all kinds of sin issues to validate their claim.

Beginning in 5:13, Paul makes the case that it's the gospel, not the law that empowers us to lead a holy and Christ-like life. The law can tell us what to do, but it can't impart to us the power to do it. The gospel calls us to holiness and imparts to us the power to live holy lives. Let's unpack this passage a few verses at a time.

I. The war between the Spirit and the flesh is fought on the battlefield of our desires (vv. 16-18)

The first thing we see is that there is a war going on between the Spirit and our flesh and that battle is fought in the arena of our desires: *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...*

Some older translations translate the word *desire* with the word "lust", but that can be misleading because it might make us think that it's talking about sexual desire. But the word *desire* doesn't really communicate its full meaning either because it can lead us to think that all desires are evil. The Greek word translated "desire" is the word *epithumia* and it literally means "over-desire" or inordinate desire. Sin takes our normal, healthy desires and puts them on steroids so that they become a life-controlling force in our lives. It's not just about our desiring "bad" things, it's about our over-desiring good things until we give them a place in our lives God never meant for them to have.

Sin didn't invent our desires – God gave them to us. What sin does is twist and distort and pervert our God-given desires so that we try to fill our lives with everything but God. Sin doesn't begin with something we *do*; it begins with something we *desire*.

[14] But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. [15] Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death. (James 1:14-15 ESV)

What this means is that our over-desires reflect a deeper craving for self worth, self validation and

self reliance independent of God. Instead of finding our lives and worth in God, we try to derive our life and our worth from other things and our desires attach to those other things as if our lives depended on them – because we think they do! The greedy person craves more money because he or she thinks that having a lot means that their lives are worth a lot. The immoral person is trying to fill up an empty place in their soul with sex; the people-pleaser is trying to find their self worth by getting others to like them, the fearful person fears not getting something, or losing something, they desire very much. Someone has said that fear is really just an inverted want – it's the flip side of craving.

And this is why the law has no power to deal with our sin - because the law can tell us what we should do, it can even tell us what we should or shouldn't feel (we shouldn't covet, for instance), but it can't actually change our desires. The best that legalism can do is clean up the outside of the cup by suppressing our fleshly desires, but it has no power to clean the inside of the cup by changing those desires. Jesus told the Pharisees they were like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful but within are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. That's the best that legalism can do.

When we become Christians, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our hearts and the war begins. The Holy Spirit brings peace with God to our lives but He also brings war to our lives as the Spirit opposes the desires of the flesh and the flesh opposes the desires of the Spirit. Neither side ever declares a truce – it is a war that will wage until we go home to be with Jesus. The Christian isn't someone who has no bad desires; the Christian is someone who is *at war* with those bad desires by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit is never content to just work on the externals – He works deep within us, boring deep into our motives, our ambitions, our fears, our cravings. The Holy Spirit does what the law can't do – He works in and changes our hearts. Not by abolishing the law, but by writing it on our hearts:

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. Jer. 31:33

This is why Paul says that if we are led by the Spirit we are not under the law – not because we throw the law out, but because we now have inner desire to obey the law. The way the Spirit

empowers us to obey the law isn't by forcing us to obey it even though we don't want to. The empowering He brings is the power of desire: the law is written on our hearts and we want to obey God. Not to earn salvation, but as a response to the supernatural work of saving grace.

So the Spirit and the flesh are at war within us, and that war is fought on the battlefield of our desires. Paul then goes on to contrast the desires of the flesh with the desires of the Spirit.

II. The works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit (vv. 19-23)

The list of the works of the flesh that Paul gives isn't meant to be exhaustive, but it does cover a wide range of our fallen condition. It can be broken down into four distinct categories:

- a. Sexual sins – sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality.
- b. Religious deviations – idolatry and sorcery
- c. Relational breakdowns – this is the longest list and may indicate that this is where the Galatians had the most serious problems – enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy.
- d. Indulgences – drunkenness and orgies (or carousing).

We don't have time to unpack each one, but all of the works of the flesh are generated by over-desires. Sex is a good thing created by God, but the flesh presses those good desires outside of the boundaries God intended for sex and turn it into something impure and defiled. Jealousy is something we experience when we over-desire something someone else has. Divisions and strife are created when there is a conflict between what one person (or group) wants and what another person wants. Anger is our way of punishing someone who either stood in the way of our getting something we want, or was responsible for giving us something we didn't want.

I think the reason Paul uses the terminology *works of the flesh* isn't because any of these things take effort. He's not describing what we get when we work at it – actually these are things that come quite naturally. An angry man doesn't have to work at being angry. An immoral person isn't working at being immoral and a jealous person doesn't break a sweat to be jealous. I think he uses the word *works of the flesh* because this is what the over-desires of our flesh will naturally and inevitably produce. No matter how hard we try to contain these things with legalistic restrictions, these things will eventually pop out in some form because they are what we are.

Someone once saw the actor/director Robert Redford getting on an elevator in a hotel. As the door to the elevator was closing, he called out, *are you the real Robert Redford?* Redford replied, *only when I'm alone.* We can put on a holy act for a time, or in certain situations, but the real us is fallen to the core and inevitably who we are at core will work its way out and produce works of the flesh. It might be sexual immorality, or it might be self-righteous morality, but it will

be unacceptable to God. *Those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (vs. 21).* The only remedy is to change who we are at core.

So when Paul intentionally shifts his terminology from *works of the flesh* to *fruit of the Spirit*, I believe he's emphasizing that what the Spirit produces isn't the result of our effort, it's the result of the Spirit's *life in us*. Apple trees don't work at producing apples, it's a natural product of the life flowing through them. Christians don't work at producing the fruit of the Spirit; it's the supernatural product of the life of Christ flowing through them. I think that's exactly what Jesus meant when he said in John 15:5

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5 ESV)

Our part is to stay connected, to abide in Christ, to be led by the Spirit. We'll talk more about that in a minute. But what does the fruit of the Spirit look like? The first and foremost fruit is love. The word is agape, and it means the kind of love that serves a person for their good and intrinsic value, not for what the person does for us. Love desires the best for someone, not for any self-centered motive, but simply because the desire of love is to see good come to the loved one. That's not the natural state of my heart or yours but it is the natural state of God's heart. It's that kind of agape love that moved God to send His Son as the Savior of the world, and it's agape love that moved Jesus to suffer and die in our place on the cross. Gal. 2:20 says, *the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* When we truly comprehend the depth of God's love for us, it frees us to trust Him with our lives (knowing He only wants the best for us) and to be channels of His love to others. The fruit of love is the Spirit overflowing in our hearts with the love of God, which is what Romans 5 says:

God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Rom. 5:5

The Spirit produces in us things like joy and peace and patience and kindness and faithfulness and self-control. These are all desires that are good and promote good in others. If you look at the works of the flesh, you'll notice that they are relationship-killers. Sin defrauds and exploits and abuses and hates and divides and murders. The fruit of the Spirit protects and preserves loving and healthy relationships by breaking the self-centeredness of the flesh and recalibrating our character to die to our sinful impulses and to love others and seek their best.

So when we step back, these two lists give us a measurement to evaluate what's growing in our lives and church and it stirs a desire in us to see more of the fruit of the Spirit growing in our lives. But it can also be discouraging if we are more aware of the works of the flesh in our lives than fruit of the Spirit. How do we grow fruit that doesn't come from us? What's our part? Do we have a part? The answer is found throughout chapter 5 and it's clear that we do have a part in cultivating lives that bear the fruit of the Spirit.

III. Keeping in step with the Spirit is a walk of faith (25-26)

If we live by the Spirit is an indicative – it's not what we do, but what's been done for us and to us. Through faith in Jesus Christ we have been made alive to God – we live by the Spirit. But Paul goes on to say, *“let us also keep in step with the Spirit”*. That's an imperative – something we do! Faith in what God has done leads to action on our part – but that action is also based on faith. Keeping in step with the Spirit is a walk of faith.

We see faith in verse 5: *For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness*. And in verse 6: *For in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love*.

Keeping in step with the Spirit means walking by faith.

a. *It takes faith to depend on the Spirit when our flesh wants to rely on ourselves (vs. 18)*

Paul writes in verse 18 that if we are to be led by the Spirit. If he had said that we are to follow the Spirit, it would have emphasized our role, but when he says that we are to be led by the Spirit he is emphasizing the leadership of the Spirit in our lives. John Piper points out that the way the Spirit leads us isn't like the pace car in the Daytona 500, He leads us the way a locomotive leads the train. We don't follow the Spirit's leadership in our own strength; it is His power that enables us to follow. So every day, every minute we need to depend on His power to give us strength to follow. But our flesh wants desperately to rely on ourselves: give me something that I'm in control of! That's why legalism is so attractive. It takes faith to depend on God rather than ourselves. Keeping in step with the Spirit means walking by faith.

b. *It takes faith to crucify our fleshly passions and desires (vs. 24)*

Remember that our fleshly desires are more than wants – they reflect a deeper craving for self worth and self validation and self reliance independent of God. Pride is a way for us to protect and puff up our self worth. Manipulation is a way for us to control people to do what we over-desire them to do. Anger is a way for us to exact punishment on someone who gets between us and what we over-desire. Self-pity is a way for us to draw the sympathy that we over-desire from others.

The point is, even though these desires are fleshly and sinful, they are also life-controlling and we feel like our identity is wrapped up in them. To deny them feels like a death – it takes faith that when we die to our pride, God will resurrect us in the newness of a heart wrapped up in Christ. We don't want to be glorified, we want to glorify Jesus. It takes faith that if we die to our desire to manipulate people to do what we want them to do, that God will work out His will without our manipulating help. It takes faith to put fear and worry to death – because we long for something that that we won't get or we fear will be taken from us. Whatever the over-desire is, its life controlling and it feels like our life is wrapped up in it – if we lose it we lose life. And that's

true – the Christian life is a life of dying to self: *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* Our flesh cries out that we will lose all that is precious to us if we kill our over-desires and it takes faith to believe that that death will be sweet to our souls and that Jesus will raise us up in a newness of a far better life.

c. It takes faith to love with the love of Christ (vs. 6)

The only thing that counts, Paul says, is faith working through love. Faith is the root, love is the fruit. Genuine faith in Christ will produce love. The Spirit-led life will bear the fruit of love. And that takes faith because there are so many life-controlling desires that block the love of God from flowing through us.

- Selfishness
- Fear of making ourselves vulnerable
- Fear of being hurt

The fruit of love won't grow in our lives apart from faith. It will always be "faith working through love". If we are going to really love others, we need to have our eyes of faith on God cause we will have to die to selfishness and we will risk hurt. But faith gives us a glimpse of a better life, a life used by God to love others rather than live for small selfish purposes.

d. It takes faith to fight discouragement over the gradual process of fruit growing

One thing about fruit is it grows gradually. Fruit doesn't just spring up overnight and the fruit of the Spirit doesn't mature overnight in our lives either. It takes faith not to get discouraged but keep our eyes on the Lord and our faith in His word when our failures seem so persistent.

We live by the Spirit because of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ saving us by his grace through our faith – but *because* we live by the Spirit, God calls us to keep in step with the Spirit. Whatever you are walking through in your life right now, be challenged not to walk through it in the power of your flesh. Stir up faith to walk by the Spirit, to keep in step with the Spirit. Ask God to bear His fruit through you and believe His promises that as you stay connected to Christ and draw his life into yours, that the Spirit will empower you to kill your fleshly over-desires and bear the fruit of the Spirit. Let's pray and close with a song (call Steve up).