



## THE FERTILITY OF THE SPIRIT

Catalog No. 1256  
Galatians 5:16-24  
Eleventh Message  
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February 1st, 2004

We return to one of the key passages in the New Testament, a text that reveals the process by which God makes believers godly. The mystery isn't knowing what goodness is, but becoming godly. We don't need exhortations to try harder or do better. What we need is the power to act the way we know we should. What is the dynamic for change? What can we do to be more like our Lord? These are the apostle Paul's concerns in our passage from Galatians 5.

In our last study we talked about the futility of the flesh. This morning we will focus on the fertility of the Spirit.

**But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:16-24 NASB)**

Paul is talking about two elements that are in conflict with one another, i.e. the flesh and the Spirit. In these verses "flesh" is mentioned three times, "Spirit" five times. "Flesh" is to be preferred, rather than the NIV's translation "sinful nature." Paul is not talking about some part of us that is sinful, i.e. a sinful nature. He is referring to our entire humanity: what we are, what others have made of us, and what we have made of ourselves apart from the grace of God.<sup>1</sup>

All of us come into the world with genetic inclinations. Some have better genes than others, but nobody is perfect. Some of those genes show up in certain physical afflictions, or certain phobias, and various inclinations toward habitual behavior. It's easier for some to fall into certain habits. They may have been born with an inclination toward a bad temper or depression. All of this is part of our fallen humanity. We come into the

world bent, twisted and distorted.

And we are dependent on others who are fleshly. They too have bents and often do things that are harmful to us. Some of you were physically or sexually abused when you were children. We may have been victimized by the abuse of others: relatives, teachers, coaches, bosses. And we do terrible things to ourselves as well. We use drugs. We get up early and go to bed late, destroying our health. The flesh is what we are as the result of our genetic structure, our heredity, what we inherited from our forefathers, what others have done to us, and what we have done to ourselves.

But we also have inside us a hunger for something more, what Pascal called a "God-shaped vacuum" that only God can fill. When we finally realize how much we need God because of our self-centeredness; when we understand that he sent his own Son to die in our place; and when we ask Jesus to be our Lord and Savior, then the Spirit of Christ comes to dwell inside us. That is when we are regenerated. We are born from above, and God himself indwells our basic sinful humanity.

That's when the conflict between the Spirit and the flesh begins. That struggle will always be there as long we live in these bodies. We have already observed the futility of the flesh, of its attempts to be good by trying harder. It doesn't work! Indwelling sin is the lot of all the children of Adam, but the great privilege of the children of God is to have the indwelling Spirit to fight and subdue that indwelling sin.

Before we go into detail about the fruit that the Holy Spirit is in the process of producing in us, let's review some truths about the Spirit that many Christians are confused about.

First, *if you are a Christian, you possess the Holy Spirit.* You don't have to ask for the Spirit, and you don't have to have some special experience to receive him. If you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, if you have submitted to his lordship in your life, you possess the Holy Spirit. Paul says in Romans 8:9 that if you do not possess the Spirit you are not a Christian at all. That is the distinguishing mark between believers and unbelievers.

Second, *the Holy Spirit is within us.* According to Scripture, the Spirit resides somewhere in our human spirit. We do not need to go to a special place to get more of the Spirit. There is no more of the Spirit here in

this building than there is at home, at work or in a restaurant. The Spirit resides in people, not in buildings. Some people think the Spirit is in Israel and they want to go there to get closer to the Lord. Israel is a wonderful place to learn about these things, but we are not any closer to the Spirit there than here. Wherever you go, he goes. That is why the NT tells us that we are the "temple," because the Holy Spirit makes our body a sanctuary.

Third, *the Holy Spirit is nothing more than the Lord Jesus coming to dwell inside us*. Paul calls the Holy Spirit the Spirit of Christ in us (Rom 8:9), and says that Christ is in us (Rom 8:10). When we come to Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells within us. He is nothing more and nothing less than the Lord Jesus himself. In fact, the Spirit's purpose in our lives is to make the life of Jesus continuing and real. The same Lord Jesus who walked here on the earth and did those mighty works now lives in us! And he will never leave us. Sin cannot drive him out.

We had an old basketball once that had a leaky bladder. After playing with it for a while we'd have to pump it up. Many Christians think that, as far as the Holy Spirit is concerned, they have a slow leak, just like that old basketball. So they go to meeting after meeting to get pumped up, to get more of the Spirit. But the Spirit will not leave us. He will not "leak" out. We don't need to get pumped up. Christians receive all of the Holy Spirit, nothing more and nothing less. We don't receive part of him. He is a Person. He does not come in doses, and he is not poured into our lives.

Paul goes on to describe the fruit of the Spirit. Notice the change in terminology from works to fruit. He doesn't say the "works" of the Spirit. There is a difference between the works that the flesh produces and the fruit that the Spirit produces. Any mechanism can work, but only the Spirit can produce life.

Fruit is a good analogy. Fruit doesn't grow overnight; it takes time. Just now many fruit trees don't look very productive, but in a couple of months, new growth and buds will sprout and they will produce fruit. The life in the trees will flow through the branches. The change in terms here is designed to evoke a different image: from one of human responsibility to one of divine enablement. The image of fruit has a certain sense of passivity to it. It is the Spirit of God who produces such things, and they grow in the life of the Christian. We are not Christmas trees; we are fruit trees. When the Spirit of God comes to live in us, this is the kind of fruit he produces.

Paul lists nine traits. Many commentators divide these into three triads: inner attitudes that are sourced in God (love, joy, peace); relational qualities expressed to others (patience, kindness, goodness); and personal qualities that guide our behavior (faithfulness, gentleness, self-control). It might be more helpful to see all of these qualities flowing together and proceeding out of us toward God and others. Let's look at them briefly.

**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (5:22-23)**

This is the kind of love that God has for us: unconditional love that doesn't seek anything in return but constantly gives. The Spirit brings home to us the love of God. As Paul says in Romans 5, "the Spirit has poured into our hearts the love of God." It is the Spirit who reminds us that God loves us. He loved us even when we were unworthy of that love, when we were his enemies. He loves us now when we are his friends, and we are still unworthy of it. He can't stop loving us. No matter what we do or don't do he can't stop liking us. It is the Spirit of God who assures us of that love and fills our heart with God's love. We love, as John says, because he first loved us. We can't love from a vacuum.

*Joy* here is a sense of well being. It is not silliness, or even the happiness that we feel when things are going well. It is a deep-down sense of wellbeing that comes from our new relationship with God, and the certain hope that one day we will be everything that God wants us to be.

*Peace* is joy's spiritual twin. It is the gift of God to his children because of the cross. Formerly there was a barrier, a state of enmity between us, but now we have been reconciled. Colossians declares that God reconciled us to himself through Christ, making peace through the blood of the cross. The war is over. The conflict has ended. We are at peace with God, and because of that we can know the peace of God.

*Patience* is a compound Greek word: *makrothumia* (*makro* means "long"; *thumos* means "heat"). The word literally means, "long before we get heated." You have heard the expression "he has a short fuse." This word means, "to have a long fuse."

*Kindness*: This word was used in the ancient world for wine that had mellowed. Jesus used it to say that no one who has drunk old wine wants new wine, because the old is "better." The old is kinder; it is not harsh. "Mellow" is a good translation. It speaks of a gracious, gentle spirit. It isn't sharp or bitter, but sweet.

*Goodness*: This word is closely related to kindness, and refers to the generosity that springs from kindness.

*Faithfulness* is the quality of being trustworthy and reliable.

*Gentleness* means non-defensive. Translated "meek" in the beatitudes, it means being calm and peaceful when surrounded by a heated atmosphere; emitting a soothing effect on those who may be angry or otherwise beside themselves; and possessing tact and courtesy that causes others to retain their dignity.

*Self-control* means moderate.

"Against such things there is no law," says Paul.

The law was given to restrain evil, but these qualities don't need to be restrained. We don't have any laws against gentleness and patience. We know that these things are right. These are the qualities that all of us want, but how do we attain them?

In verse 16, the inspired apostle identifies God's method for making us good: "*But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.*" Walk by the Spirit; walk in the Spirit; walk with the Spirit. What does Paul mean? This isn't the kind of experience that becomes ours all of a sudden, in a moment of time. It isn't something that happens during a dramatic communion service or after hearing an inspiring sermon. It isn't the result of a warm fuzzy feeling after a morning devotion, or a firm resolve made following a retreat.

This is much more of an everyday concept. It means just what it says: walk. If I can phrase it this way without being crude, it means "hanging out" with Jesus. If you have a good friend who has a strong personality, soon you will begin to act like your friend. In a very real sense that is what happens to us spiritually. Paul puts it this way in 2 Cor 3:18: "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit."

It's an unconscious thing, not some magical encounter that effects change overnight. It's not about learning ten principles. It's just walking day by day with Jesus. When we get up in the morning we hear the voice of Jesus inviting us to walk together with him through the day. Now the activities of "walking with the Spirit" will certainly involve those disciplines that we have called the "means of grace," things like looking into the Scriptures to see the face of Jesus, spending time in prayer to get our thoughts aligned with his, and living in community with others.

We have made the distinction between regarding these activities as the things that render us more favorable to God and looking at them as the things that are the means to grace. That difference means a great deal. God can't love you any more than he loves you right now. If you spend two hours in prayer tomorrow morning, God won't love you any more than he loves you right now. If you aren't able to spend any time in prayer tomorrow, he will still love you. But prayer is an expression of our dependence on him. It is a means to help us depend on him.

You don't have to strain to be godlike. You don't have to determine that you are going to be more patient, that you are going to stop talking so much, that you will not get angry again or have lustful thoughts anymore. As Jesus reveals these areas of weakness to you, humbly expose them to him and say, "Lord, change me." Then keep trusting and relying on him. Little by little he will change you. It won't happen overnight. Most change is observed in retrospect. We look back over the last four or five years and realize there's

been some progress. Sure, there will be failures along the way, but that's all right. We're forgiven. Just get up, dust yourself off, and keep asking the Lord to change you.

There may be some things that won't change until we see his face, but these keep us clinging to him and trusting him. When we fall we can fall forward. We can pick ourselves up and keep asking him to change us, and keep on walking with him. When we hurt someone, ask for forgiveness and keep on walking. One of these days when we stand before him he will deal with this flesh. He will take away the body that has made life so difficult and give us a new body that doesn't have that genetic damage and all the old habits, a body that is equal to the demands of the Spirit. That is our hope. It is what keeps us going.

And that is what Paul means in verse 24, "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." Paul wrote that verse for our encouragement. When we read that and we look at our lives, we say, "But I still sin. If my flesh is dead, why do I still have some of those same desires and passions?" I used to think that when I got older I would simply outgrow those sinful desires. But growing older has only deepened my perception of my sin, and shown me how much of my flesh is still unconverted. The more I grow, the more shades of evil I see in myself: hidden areas of self-interest and self-protection; destructive ways I relate to others, deep-seated hungers for human approval.

I believe Paul is encouraging us by reminding us that the battle is already won. It's over! Christ died on the cross. At our conversion, when we were regenerated, we were united with him. We died with him, in effect. That settled the issue! Our former life is over. The old life has ended. The score has been settled. The debt has been paid. Our destiny is not in doubt. The flesh has been dealt with. The struggle is still going on, but our destiny is established. That is what enables us to get up and keep going when we fail—because we know how the story ends. It doesn't end sadly, with our failure, but victoriously, when our Lord returns.

Many of you know I love to coach. I have always thought how great it would be if I didn't have to worry about winning or losing because the outcome had already been decided. I could just concentrate on skill development and character building. I could encourage my team to play with abandon: "It's all right that you missed your first five shots; keep shooting. I know you've made three turnovers in a row, but keep attacking the basket. Don't worry about any bad calls. The referees aren't going to control the outcome. You don't have to look at me when you make a mistake, wondering if you are going to be taken out of the game. No, just forget your mistakes and keep playing with abandon, because the outcome had already been decided. Victory is certain! We are going to win. It's already determined.

That's what Paul is saying here. Don't give up! Keep trusting Christ. Keep depending on him and keep clinging to him. He has made provision for our failure, and he is continually working inside us to finish the work he has begun.

1. I am indebted to David Roper for this definition of the flesh.

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