



LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

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Galatians 5:25-6:10
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In Galatians 5 Paul explains the process by which God makes believers good. Only God can be godlike, of course. It's foolish to think that we can attain godlike character on our own. It is only by faith, by dependence on God, that we can do that. One day some men asked Jesus, "What must we do to do the works of God?" All of us have asked that question at times. Jesus answered, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent" (John 6:28-29). He was saying that we can't do God's works. Only God can. Only by depending on the Spirit of God who lives within us can we reproduce the works of God. Scripture says there is no other way. It is always by faith, by dependence that we do that.

Jesus used the analogy of a vine and branches to bring this truth home to his disciples. In John's gospel he said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The fruit, of course, is that which we discussed last week from Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. The branches are completely dependent on the vine. That is how we must live, Jesus said, by abiding in him, by drawing upon the life of the vine that is available to us. Spiritual growth comes from our relationship with and dependence on our living Lord who dwells within us.

In Ephesians, Paul uses the metaphor of "putting off the old man and putting on Christ." Here we have the same idea, using different symbolism. Before I began to wear contact lenses I had to wear eyeglasses as thick as Coke bottles. I have to put my contacts in first thing in the morning. I can hardly see without them. It would be foolish of me to think that they were merely a crutch and that I could get along without them. In Galatians, Paul is saying that we can't be godly on our own. To have the character of God we have to depend on the indwelling God. We cannot be what God has created us to be without being filled and flooded by his Spirit.

How can we tell when someone is walking in the Spirit? What does "hanging out" with Jesus produce? Contrary to what we might think, the best evidence of our walking in the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit is not found in some personal spiritual experience, but in the relationships we have with others. This makes sense, since the first fruit of the Spirit is love. Our spiritual life is more than an individual experience. It is lived out in community. To know whether we're grow-

ing, we need to take an honest look at our relationships.

Here is what Paul says:

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:25 NASB)

The method for individual growth is walking in the Spirit. The method for corporate growth is walking together in the Spirit. The word "walk" here is different from the one Paul used in 5:16. It means to walk in rank or file, to walk together in the Spirit. Here he is talking about the corporate walk—the walk of the body of Christ together—not the individual walk described in 5:16.

Paul exhorts us to walk together, in unison; and in the rest of the passage he tells us how to do that. The key is learning how to give ourselves away in service to one another. That is what we are set free to do. Earlier he said, "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (5:13). Paul first states the principle negatively, how we should not act toward each other (5:26); and then positively, how we should act toward each other (6:1-6).

Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another. (5:26)

This could be rendered, "Let us not become boastful, with the result that we challenge and envy one another." In other words, how we look at ourselves will determine how we regard others and react to them. "Boastful" means to have a false or vain opinion of oneself; to be self-centered, preoccupied with our appearance, clothes, hair, what we do, the impression we make on others, etc. That is the flesh, who we are apart from the grace of God—self-centered, preoccupied with self.

Paul says that if this is our preoccupation it will tend to exhibit itself in two ways: challenging certain people and envying others. The verb means to challenge someone to a contest of strength or speed for the purpose of proving our superiority. We are so sure of our superiority that we want to demonstrate it. If we think people are better than us, we envy them. But in both cases the underlying cause is pride. In fact, whenever our relationships with others deteriorate, pride is almost always the cause. It is the trait from which all evil traits derive, a terribly ugly thing that separates us from God and others. Speaking of pride, C.S. Lewis said, "Pride is the essential vice, the utmost evil. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all the rest are mere fleabites by com-

parison. It was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind.”¹

By contrast, the love which the Spirit of God produces and which is evident as we walk with the Spirit flows from genuine humility. There is no conceit in that love. The Spirit has opened our eyes to our own sin and unworthiness and the value of others in the sight of God. Unfortunately, humility, the opposite of pride, is the least appreciated and prayed for virtue in the Bible. Yet it is the prime virtue, the trait from which springs all the other good traits. Humility leads not to an attitude of competition but of service. As John Stott writes, “The correct attitude to other people is not, ‘I’m better than you and I’ll prove it’, nor ‘You’re better than I and I resent it,’ but ‘You are a person of importance in your own right (because God made you in His own image and Christ died for you) and it is my joy and privilege to serve you.’”²

Paul now goes on to share this principle positively, describing how we should treat each other.

Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. For each one shall bear his own load. And let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches. (6:1-6)

In verse 2 the apostle summarizes what he is saying here with the principle, “Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.” This assumes that God does not intend any of us to bear responsibility for living alone in this world. We were meant to live inter-dependently. At times we are faced with unbearable burdens. We all need someone to listen to us, to talk to us, to touch us, and, as we will see in a moment, even to confront us.

Yesterday morning I was awoken by a call from a dear friend whose husband had just had a heart attack and died instantly. She and her two children face the difficult task of moving on without him. A burden like that can’t be borne alone. Some of you are carrying burdens that are too heavy for you. It’s not a sign of spiritual strength to refuse to bother people with problems. In fact, we often don’t experience God’s love in difficult times because we keep things to ourselves. That is why Paul prays in Ephesians 3:17-18, “that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (NIV). Part of God’s plan for lightening our load is using the hands and backs of his people to help us carry the baggage or show us where

we can unload it.

In case anyone considers himself above bearing burdens, Paul warns, “For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” None of us is too good or too spiritual either to avoid helping other Christians or to resist being helped. The church is a body of believers with different gifts, different needs, different maturity levels. We need each other! To think otherwise is to deceive ourselves.

The apostle is saying that we need a lot of help to grow in godliness, that we can’t live independent lives. It is not simply our individual relationship with God that matters. That relationship is very much dependent on the help we get from our brothers and sisters.

It’s pride, that fleshly, competitive attitude we referred to earlier that causes us to think we’re too good to bear another’s burden. We evaluate our spirituality by how much better we are doing than they. We wouldn’t fail like that, we think. But that is to deceive ourselves, thinking we are something when we are nothing. Formerly we were rebels against the God who made us, deserving nothing but destruction.

Paul urges us to evaluate our own lives in and of themselves, not in comparison with others. He says: “But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another.” Instead of scrutinizing everybody else’s spiritual life, and evaluating how we are doing by comparing ourselves with them, we ought to test our own work. Paul is talking about personal responsibility. “For each one shall bear his own load” (verse 5). We are responsible to God for our own work, and one day each of us will give an account of it to him.

Paul is not contradicting himself. “Burden” here is different from the word in verse 2, which means a weight or heavy load. Here it is a common term for a man’s pack. John Stott put it this way, “So we are to bear one another’s ‘burdens’ which are too heavy for a man to bear alone, but there is a burden we cannot share—indeed we do not need to because it is a pack light enough for every man to carry himself—and that is our responsibility to God on the day of judgment. On that day you cannot carry my pack and I cannot carry yours.”³

In verse 1 we are given a particular example of how we are to bear each other’s burdens: “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted.” As servants, the first action we ought to take is to be redemptive and restorative. How do we respond when someone who has been victimized by the enemy, who is down and out, who has been ensnared by Satan, has fallen into sin? Unfortunately, oftentimes we shoot those who are wounded.

In his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey shares a story about a prostitute who came to a friend of

his for help. She was in bad shape: homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. In tears she confessed that she had even been using her daughter in sexually abusive ways to support her own drug habit. The friend could hardly bear listening to this sordid story, and knew he was legally liable to report this case of child abuse. What stuck with the author about the story was the woman's answer to the question of whether she had ever thought of going to a church for help. A look of pure, naive shock crossed the woman's face: "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse." Perhaps her response said more about her than it did about the church, but it made him wonder.⁴

The fallen ones are not the enemy, but the victims of the enemy. They need to be delivered and restored, not criticized, ostracized and rejected. The word "restore" was used in those days as a medical term for setting a fractured or dislocated bone. It is used in Mark 1:19 of the apostles who were "mending" their nets. It means to put back into place something that is out of place. Paul says that is how we ought to act, considering ourselves lest we, too, be tempted.

We are not to respond self-righteously, but recognize that we are prone to falling into the same sin and need a restorative ministry in our lives. Restoring the victimized, building them up, encouraging them, putting them back in a place of useful service where God wants them to be is a mutual ministry of all Christians. That is one important way that we bear each other's burdens.

And there is no hierarchy in the church of Jesus Christ. Leaders have the same needs as those who are led. So Paul says in verse 6: "And let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches." Teachers struggle with the same areas, and they need to be ministered to. The same ministry that you carry out for one another must be carried out for your leaders as well. We need one another, and therefore we are to share all good things with one another.

In verses 7-10, Paul goes on to say that to ignore these principles is to fall back into bondage:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith. (6:7-10)

We can't live life in the flesh and expect beautiful fruit as a result. We can't thumb our noses at God. Sooner or later life will catch up with us. If we live our lives dependent on, serving and indulging ourselves, the result will be loss. But if we live depending on the

Spirit and giving ourselves away in the life of service, the result will be gain. The Christian life is not difficult. It is impossible! It takes God to make us godly. Jesus said, "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing." Unaided humanity is useless.

This is the great Christian paradox: the only way to have life is to lose it. We must put an end to our own efforts to save ourselves and accept Christ's death and our own. These words of Paul cut right across our culture today. Magazine articles, television commercials and popular songs tell us to save ourselves, that our lives are our own and we should live how we please. But Scripture declares that if we live life that way, in the end we'll lose it all. Life will slip through our fingers no matter what we do. We can gain all the wealth we ever dreamed of, and the plaudits of the whole world, but if we live that way, we will end up with nothing. Our lives will be a waste. We can't avoid the process. There's no other way.

You would think that if you went about living for others and dying to your own desires that you would shrivel up and die. But you won't. It's the other way around: Those who live for themselves are the ones who die. Those who insist on their own rights, who never give in, who lavish care on themselves, who think only of their own place, who are obsessed with looking out for themselves are the people whose lives are empty. They are insecure and unhealthy.

Being obsessed with trying to find yourself is suicidal. Only that which dies can be resurrected. Dying is the only way to go. We gain ground by giving up. If we look for love we won't find it, but if we give love away we'll be loved. If we search for a friend we won't find one, but if we befriend another we'll have a good friend. If we woke up this morning singing, "Nobody loves me, everybody hates me; guess I'll eat some worms," we've got it all wrong. If we are forever looking for others to encourage us we may look forever. The way to be encouraged is to encourage others. It seems backwards, but that's the way it is.

Being a servant is discouraging at times. People don't appreciate us or recognize what we're doing. We grow weary and tired and want to quit. But the apostle reminds us to keep going and not be discouraged. And one day we will hear those words we long to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master."

I want to close with a true story that illustrates what Paul is saying. These events happened a few years ago at the Special Olympics in Seattle, a competition for physically and mentally disabled children. The hundred-yard dash had nine entrants. The gun sounded and the runners started out as fast as they were able. Then one little boy tripped and fell on the track. He began to sob. The other eight heard his cry and all stopped to turn and look. Seeing him on the ground, they all walked back to him—every one of them. One

little girl with Downs Syndrome bent down, kissed his leg, and said, "This will make it better." Then all nine put their arms around one another and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood and applauded, their applause continuing for several minutes.⁵

That story touches something deep within us. It reminds us that there is something more important than individual success. We were created to be interdependent. Life was never meant to be lived solo, but in tandem. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk together in the Spirit.

1. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 110.
2. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1968), 157.
3. Stott, *Galatians*, 159-160.
4. Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 147-148.
5. Dwight Edwards, *Revolution Within* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2001), 187.

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