



THE FREEDOM TO SAY YES

SERIES: IN SEARCH OF FREEDOM

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Galatians 5:15-26
Seventeenth Message
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In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, is called the *paraclete*, or helper. The Holy Spirit is the one who comes alongside believers and encourages them. He is sent by the Son, and he shares the nature of the Father: he is deity, he is eternal. At the time of creation, God breathed his Spirit into Adam's body, and Adam became a living soul. When we are recreated by God, God breathes his Spirit into us, and we who in Paul's words were "dead in trespasses and sins," become alive to God.

If you are a Christian, then, the Holy Spirit, a divine person, a member of the triune Godhead, is living in you right now. There is a promise of God that is repeated throughout Scripture that says, "I will be with you. I will be your God and you will be my people." This was the promise that was made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. It was repeated to Israel for two thousand years, and Jesus proclaimed this ancient pledge to the church when he said to his disciples, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20). The Holy Spirit is the fulfillment of this promise.

In Galatians 5, the apostle Paul has much to say about the Holy Spirit and his ministry to believers. We have seen that the message of this book is that Christians have been set free from the law. We are not controlled by the law, but neither are we dominated by the flesh. If we are to experience our freedom in Christ, however, we must understand the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the linch-pin in Paul's argument for Christian freedom.

In our last study we talked about the flesh and the Christian's freedom to say no to its desires. Today we will talk about the Spirit, and our freedom to say yes to his prompting. Our text is the same as last week, Galatians 5:15-26:

But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.

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.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another. (Gal 5:15-26, NASB)

Clearly, the exhortation here is to walk in the Spirit. He is the instrument, the agent of our freedom.

I want to make five observations about the Holy Spirit from this text, expressed in the form of principles. Here is the first observation: The Spirit opposes and subdues the flesh. We mentioned this principle last week, but it is so important it bears repeating. Before we came to Christ, we lived under law in a futile attempt to find acceptance, love and approval. But when we became believers, we found approval in God. We became sons and daughters, and thus were set free from the law. But the flesh remains an obstacle to our living out this freedom on a daily basis. Verse 13 of chapter 5 declares that the purpose of freedom is to love one another, not to give an occasion to the flesh, which would result in anarchy and chaos.

The question that arises then is, what will rein in the flesh and allow us become free to love unconditionally? Paul's answer is, the Holy Spirit. It is not an MBA or a six-figure salary. The apostle argues that we will not be able to do as we might wish, because the Spirit will oppose the flesh so that we will not carry out its desires. Notice in verse 16 that the word "desire" is singular. The desire of the flesh is to find friendship and acceptance from this world, to please self, in other words. But the desire of the Spirit is to take us into the kingdom of God and to empower us to live by an entirely new set of values. Flesh and Spirit thus are incompatible; they belong to different kingdoms. The law does not have power over the flesh, because the law belongs to the present age. But the Spirit does have power over the flesh, because the Spirit belongs to the age to come. The Spirit therefore is perfectly capable of keeping the flesh in check so that the weeds of sin and darkness will not grow out of control in our spiritual garden. Paul does not say that we will never sin, but he maintains that the flesh will not dominate us. We will have the capability to love because of the Spirit's presence within us.

Before I became a Christian, I harbored many erroneous values and beliefs. I wanted to find fulfillment in the things of the world, but I was unsuccessful. When I became a Christian, the love of God was poured out into my heart, and my desires began to change. Why? It was because the Holy Spirit had come into my life and he was opposed to the desire of the flesh. Now I stand opposed to many things that the world embraces. I oppose premarital sex, for instance. I oppose abortion. I oppose humanistic religion. I oppose divorce. And the reason I am opposed to

these things is not because somebody told me to oppose them, because I am under law, because I have aligned myself with a political cause, or that I think I am better than other people. I oppose these things simply because that is what the Spirit does. He opposes the flesh and the values of this world. As Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, therefore, we are guaranteed that we will have an ally to defeat the flesh.

Here is my second observation: The Spirit produces the fruit of godly character. We come now to Paul's conclusion as to why living under law as a Christian is an utterly futile exercise: It cannot make us acceptable to God and give us a right standing with him. But that is not all. Living under the law cannot produce godly character. And that is our goal—that we might become like the Father. Having begun in the Spirit, we must continue in the Spirit. If we are living under the law to effect godliness in life, all we will see are the works of the flesh, as we discussed last week. But, in contrast to the ugly works of the flesh, the Spirit produces good fruit, which the Bible refers to as character.

In these verses Paul lists nine characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit. The list is not comprehensive (as suggested by the words "such things" in verse 23), but representative. Every characteristic in the list, except for self-control, is an attribute of the character of God.

The first of these is *love*. It should not surprise us that love tops the list. Paul has already stated that it is for this reason that we have been set free. The apostle said, "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love" (5:6). As Christians, we experience the love of the Father through the Son, "who loved us and gave himself for us." As we embrace our acceptance as sons, then we are set free to truly love others the way God loves us.

Notice that love stands in direct contrast to the self-centeredness of most of the characteristics on the list of the works of the flesh. Love means having the compassionate heart of the Father, initiating forgiveness, and giving without expecting anything in return—the kind of love that comes from a full, not an empty heart.

Joy is the discovery that exuberance and vitality flow freely from God's life into our lives as Christians. Living under the strain and weight of law, however, inhibits and stifles joy. In the story of the prodigal, the father rejoiced over a lost son being found. The older son had not experienced his sonship, and he was resentful and complaining. He could not enter into the father's joy, because joy and resentment cannot exist together. But the presence of the Spirit allows us to enter into the Father's joy, no matter what the circumstances. Henri Nouwen put it this way, "In our world, joy and sorrow exclude each other. Here below, joy means the absence of sorrow and sorrow the absence of joy. But such distinctions do not exist in God. Jesus, the Son of God, is the man of sorrows, but also the man of complete joy" (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 118).

As a result of the life and death of Christ we have *peace* with God; we have *shalom*, a sense of wholeness and well-being. God works through the disparities and contradictions of our experience and brings them into harmony. Peace also is an attribute of the Christian community. It

stands opposed to the works of the flesh, and in particular the eight manifestations which describe the breakdown of relationships and the resultant discord, strife, anger and divisions. We cannot have peace in community until we know the peace of God individually. As is the case with love, what we receive works itself out into community.

Love, joy, and peace stand together as large, general categories. They describe what we receive from God and what we manifest in our behavior as a result.

Patience literally means to "put anger far away." It speaks of forbearance and long-suffering toward those who aggravate and persecute us, not pushing for a result or resolution. Patience is the antidote to the "biting and devouring" of verse 15, to the "outbursts of anger" of verse 20, and "provoking one another" in verse 26.

Kindness. Patience and kindness are two different sides of love. One is passive, the other, active. Patience is withholding anger; kindness is giving something that is contrary to what we receive. These words are given together in Romans 2 to describe God's attitude toward human arrogance, and they are the first two words that describe love in 1 Corinthians 13. Kindness finds ways to actively show mercy. It is often a question of disposition; the freedom to deal with life in a relaxed and leisurely fashion, not forcing, not coercing, not pushing and shoving.

Goodness is closely allied with kindness. Generally speaking, it is the all-embracing quality that describes one's character. It is a favorite word used to describe God's character in the Old Testament. When put into practice, goodness takes the form of "doing good." It involves words and deeds—active expressions of love. In chapter 6 we will see that those who sow to the Spirit "do good to all" (6:10). Goodness is the freedom to see and respond to life in terms of its good creation rather than in terms of its willful rebellion.

Patience, kindness and goodness can be seen in our attitude toward others.

Faithfulness is closely tied to trust in God. We believe, we have faith, and this faith works itself out in love. Faithfulness is the freedom to be involved in long-term, loyal commitments based on invisible values and meanings rather than immediate, tangible self-interest. We experience this with God and in relationships with others.

Gentleness is often translated "meekness." This word is used of the character of Jesus. Meekness is a sense of humility, a proper estimation of oneself. It is the antonym to "selfish ambitions" in the list of the works of the flesh. Meekness is the freedom not to assault a resistant world, but to be salt and light.

Self-control. This word is unique since it does not appear elsewhere in Scripture with reference to the character of God. This characteristic applies more to the individual believer than the community. Self-control involves self-mastery; the freedom to discipline and direct our energies wisely. It is impervious to whim and impulse. In the list of the works of the flesh, self-control takes aim at sexual indulgences and excessive use of alcohol. But it is not to be confused with abstinence, for elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul is harsh on anything that even smacks of abstinence for its own sake as a Christian virtue.

Faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control deal largely

with internal attitudes.

So this is what the fruit of the Spirit looks like. Freedom is living under the control of the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit produces godly character. This freedom is manifested in healthy relationships in church, in marriage, with our children, and in business—in all relationships. This kind of freedom is in direct contrast to living under the law, which manifests itself in unhealthy relationships and is described by the deeds of the flesh. Thus, as we observe our relationships, we can evaluate our spiritual climate. If we see the works of the flesh, that is a sign that we are living under law. But if we see the fruit of the Spirit, then we know that we are enjoying freedom in Christ.

Notice the contrast between works and fruit. The flesh, of course, is characterized by works, implying sweat, labor and toil. It takes great effort to sustain the flesh, because the emphasis is on human endeavor. But fruit is organic and self-sustaining. It is a result or a by-product of something. If the tree is healthy, then the fruit is good.

Eugene Peterson says that “fruit is the result of a long organic and living process. The process is complex and intricate. Fruits are not something made, manufactured or engineered. They are not the product of the drawing board. They are not the invention of a genius. They are not the product of a sophisticated technology. They are the results of a life of faith created by God...Fruit is the appropriate metaphor. We do not produce it by our own effort. We do not purchase it from another. It is not a reward for doing good deeds, like a merit badge, a gold medal, a blue ribbon. Fruits are simply there” (*Traveling Light* [Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1988] 166). This is why Jesus said, “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. 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 15:4-5).

Fruit is simply the manifestation of what is going on inside. The life that is in the roots and in the trunk will naturally produce fruit in the branches. Our behavior will mirror the source of our life, the roots of our nourishment. If we are under law, we will see the works of the flesh. If we are abiding in Christ, we will see the fruit of the Spirit. Godly character is the result of a life that abides in God. We cannot produce it. We remain healthy and free by abiding, and the agent of our abiding is the Spirit. Irenaeus said, “He became what we are so that we might become what he is” (quoted by Peterson, *Traveling Light*, 170).

My third observation is this: The Spirit eliminates the need for law in that it fulfills the law. The Holy Spirit produces godly character. The result is that we are free from living under the control of the law and from being obsessed with performance. It is the Spirit who writes God’s law on our hearts. And the fact that we are no longer under law does not mean the end of righteousness. Rather, the Spirit produces the real thing. Against such things as the fruit of the Spirit there is no law.

An illustration will help us here. What is the first thing you do when you see a police car driving behind you? You look at the speedometer, don’t you? You want to see if you are breaking the law of the speed limit. Do we need further proof that the function of law is to curb, restrain and

deter?

But the presence of the Spirit makes the law irrelevant. When we walk in the Spirit we don’t have to keep looking over our shoulders, wondering if we are doing anything wrong, whether we have approval or not. We are no longer controlled by guilt, condemnation or rejection. We don’t have an attitude of just getting by on the minimum. Rather, we walk in the “now” of God’s presence. We are looking for ways to love. Gordon Fee has a good word here: “There is no need of Torah to say ‘you shall not kill,’ to people who by the Spirit are loving one another, nor to say, ‘don’t covet,’ to those who are actively pursuing the good of others out of kindness. This does not mean, of course, that such *reminders* are irrelevant—Paul himself is long on such—but that the need for Torah to ‘hem in human conduct because of the transgressions’ (3:19, 22) has come to end with the advent of the Spirit, God’s way of fulfilling his promised new covenant” (*God’s Empowering Presence* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994] 453).

The fourth observation is this: The Spirit identifies us with the new humanity, a new community. As Christians, we have entered into the kingdom of heaven. God did not enter into our world in order to perfect it; he came that he might take us to the new humanity. The flesh and the law are part of the old order in which people practice the works of the flesh and do not have an inheritance in the kingdom of God. Even as Christians, when we live under the law we live like flesh people. But the apostle’s point in verse 21 is that we no longer have to live under law like flesh people, because we are Spirit people. We have been separated from this world, delivered from this present evil age. Our struggle is in seeing the extent of this transformation. The Spirit is God’s agent for bringing together a new community and empowering us to experience God-like relationships. God wants us to share with one another the kind of relationship that he wants with us. In this way we experience God through the Spirit. Community, therefore, is the context of this passage.

This is what our singles group discovers on our Yucatan trip each year. For one week we experience New Testament, first century community in a small Mayan village in Mexico. While the week is not always fun—tensions do arise at times—we experience love, encouragement, forgiveness, serving, and joy in community. We enjoy relationships, and we enjoy God through the fruit of the Spirit. When we return home we have culture shock because we miss the sense of community that we had in Mexico. This year I had the privilege of taking my 14-year old daughter to the Yucatan for the first time. When she returned home, she told her mother, “I loved being with all the Christian women.” Last weekend we had our picture party. It was scheduled to start at 5 o’clock, and Annie and I were doing some shopping in the afternoon for mother’s day. She must have asked what time it was every ten minutes. At 4:30, she made sure we headed home to pick up her mother for the party. She wasn’t home, and I told Annie that we should wait; it wouldn’t hurt if we were a little late. She said, “Dad we are not going to wait. We are going to go now. I have been waiting all week for this party.”

How true are the words of Paul, “against such things there is no law.” We are Spirit people, and this is Spirit community, and God’s purpose is that we have Spirit relationships. We don’t practice freedom by ourselves for our-

selves. My prayer for us as a community of believers is that we would begin to manifest and enjoy the fruit of the Spirit that Paul describes in these verses. I pray that our marriages would be healthy, that our relationships with our children would be free and honest, and that when we come to church, we would enjoy the love, joy and peace that only God can bring. That is my vision for our church. "Against such things there is no law."

My last observation is this: The exhortation here is to say "yes" to the Spirit. Paul uses three words, "walk," "lead," and "stay in step," to encourage Christians to live Spirit-filled lives. These words imply a two-fold process: "lead" describes the action of the Spirit, "walk" and "stay in step" describe the action of the believer. There is passive as well as active activity.

The passive activity is that we are being "led by the Spirit" (18). John Stott describes this process in these words, "The verb is used of a farmer herding cattle, of a shepherd leading sheep, of soldiers escorting a prisoner to court or prison, and of wind driving a ship...As our 'leader' the Holy Spirit takes the initiative. He asserts His desires against those of the flesh (verse 17) and forms within us holy and heavenly desires. He puts this gentle pressure upon us, and we must yield to His direction and control" (*The Message of Galatians* [IVP, 1968] 152).

The active activity is to "walk and stay in step" (16, 25). The word "walk" in verse 16 is Paul's normal word for walk. It is his favorite word for ethical actions, covering the whole sphere of our activities. The verb in verse 25 refers literally to people being drawn up in line. Hence it means to walk in line or be in line with. A certain rule, standard or a principle is being followed. Sometimes it is translated "conform" (Rom. 4:12; Acts 21:24; Phil. 3:16; Gal. 6:16). Both verbs are in the present continuous tense. It is the Spirit who does the leading but we who do the walking—it is we who are to follow after him. To walk by the Spirit, then, is to deliberately walk along the path or according to the line which the Holy Spirit lays down. The Spirit leads us, but we are to walk by him, according to his rule.

There is a divine person in our life who is constantly leading, beckoning, urging and prodding us. He is before us, within us, around us and through us, and he wants us to follow him. When we walk where he leads, he produces good fruit in our lives and leads us in paths of righteousness. Paul's argument is that since we live as a result of the Spirit's work, then we should continue to live in him. The Spirit is leading and empowering, but the choice we are always making is to follow after him. We do not have the power to do, but we do have the power to choose. We follow, we abide, we pray, we listen, and then we take a step of faith. In the sacrifice of Jesus our flesh has been crucified with him. The old order of law and flesh is past, and we have the freedom to say no. Because of the Spirit, who opposes the flesh, fulfills the law, identifies us in the new order and produces the character of God, we have the freedom to say yes.

There is a great deal of talk these days about the Spirit, most of it centered on signs and wonders. While these manifestations are important and should not be diminished, I wish we would talk more about this passage on the work of the Spirit in Galatians 5. In the Upper Room, Jesus had much to say about that work. We love the miraculous and the sensational, but what about the quiet fruit of God's Spirit? Are we as awed by godly character as we are about the miraculous? What good are miracles if we don't have freedom and healthy relationships? The fruit of the Spirit is indeed a miracle of gigantic proportions. The fact that God can reproduce his life in me is a miracle. The truth that I can be set free to love through the Spirit is a miracle. The reality of having free and healthy relationships in my marriage and with my children is a miracle. The joy of hearing the Father call me his beloved son is the greatest miracle of all.

These then are the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. May God grant that as a body of believers we will experience such fruit in abundance.

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