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Galatians 5:16-25

Walking by the Spirit, Not the Flesh

There are two trees in my yard - one in the front and one in the back - that, for most of the year, look almost identical. This time of the year, in the Spring, their green leaves grow back and they both burst with beautiful, white apple blossoms! We've been enjoying that a lot these past couple of weeks, getting to look out and see the trees covered in white. To look at the trees, they don't really look different (at least not to my untrained eye). The only difference, really, is that the one in the front looks bigger, older, and stronger. All covered in their apple blossoms, both are visibly proclaiming, "I'm an apple tree!" So when I see those trees covered in white this time of year, what does it make me think of? *Apples!* It makes me yearn for the Fall; it makes me excited to drink apple cider and to eat homemade apple pie!

And just looking at my two trees, this time of year, you might think, "Wow! *Two* apple trees! And that big, tall one in the front yard looks like it will especially produce a lot!" But then, when Fall comes around, the truth is revealed: the tree in the back, sure enough, starts growing and dropping bright red apples like nobody's business! But meanwhile, that tree in the front doesn't grow *any apples at all*. Now, that tree is older, stronger, bigger! In the Spring, it's *even more beautiful* than the apple tree in the back! But if your goal is to eat apples, then that big, beautiful tree will only disappoint you in the Fall. It's not an apple-growing tree at all. That fruitless tree means: no apple cider! No apple pie! If you're after apples, then the tree you're looking for is the one out back - the one that bears fruit!

But not just *any* fruit; the *right kind* of fruit. You see, I also have a *third* tree in my yard, also in the back. It starts to drop fruit in the Fall, too! Even red, round fruit! But if you see that fruit growing, and get excited for more apples, you'll still be sorely disappointed. First, you'll notice: this fruit is a lot smaller than the other apples! And then, if you bite into it, instead of tasting sweet and crisp, it'll be horribly hard and bitter. And that's because, they're not apples - they are *crabapples!* So again, that means: no delicious apples! No apple cider! No apple pie!

Clearly, fruit matters. Bearing fruit matters; bearing the *right kind* of fruit matters! And that's not just true for the trees; it's true for the Christian life, too. You recognize a Christian by seeing a certain kind of fruit produced in their life. Likewise, on the flip side, a false Christian is

recognized by *the absence of good fruit*, and an abundance of bad fruit. To be a Christian is to be in Christ by grace through faith alone. But to truly be in Christ through faith necessarily leads to a changed life, transformed by the gospel! The Holy Spirit gives us new hearts, and writes God's Law on our hearts! And that means, every true Christian will necessarily produce the *fruit* of a life changed by the gospel. Or, to put it differently, just like fruit on a tree shows us what kind of tree it is - if it bears apples, it's an apple tree - in the same way, if someone is truly a Christian, then their genuine faith in Christ will be backed up by the evidence of *fruit* in their life. So what does that kind of fruit look like?

Paul tells us here in our passage, Gal. 5:16-25, about the *fruit of the Holy Spirit*, over and against the *works of the flesh*. All throughout Galatians, Paul has made it plain and clear that we are justified purely through faith in what Christ has done for us - *not* by our own good works. But the inevitable question is: then what is the point of good works? Now, in the rest of the letter, Paul is going to flesh out in more detail what exactly this looks like. And the answer is that, if we are truly in Christ, we are no longer slaves to the flesh, but are *led by the Holy Spirit*. Therefore, the passage begins with the exhortation, "Walk by the Spirit!" followed by Paul's explanation of why and how we can do this. First, we do so because the Christian life is one of *war* between our sinful flesh and the Holy Spirit inside us; but it is not a war between equally matched opponents - it's a war already won by the power of the gospel, a victory made available to us by the power of the Holy Spirit within us. Next, Paul gives us a list of what the "works of the flesh" look like, warning us not to walk in these anymore. Then, by contrast, he tells us what the Christian life *should* be characterized by - the "fruit of the Spirit." And finally, he reminds us that we are able to walk by the Spirit, and not the flesh, because of who we already *in Christ because of the gospel*.

So we begin with point number 1:

I. Walk by the Spirit Because the Spirit is at War with our Flesh (5:16-18)

Paul begins the passage with an exhortation, or command: "But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh." Before we become believers, we don't have the Holy Spirit at work in us - all we have is our sinful human flesh, and all the sinful passions and desires that come along with this flesh of ours. We're born slaves to it. But then, we hear and believe the gospel of Christ! When we do, we're born again - the Holy Spirit enters our life! We're set free to *walk by the Spirit!* And when we do so, GOD's Word promises here, we "will

not gratify the desires of the flesh”! We’re no longer slaves to the flesh, no longer slaves to our sinful passions and desires! If we walk by the Spirit, as believers, we will not give in to the sinful desires of our selfish flesh, our sinful human nature! That’s an incredible promise, a life-changing reality! Paul promises that if we *yield to the power and presence of the Spirit*, then we will not give in to our flesh, but will instead conquer over it - not by our power, but by the power of God!

But here’s the problem, which I’m sure all of us are immediately thinking as soon as we read that verse: all of us still sin! We just read that verse, and all of us immediately started thinking about how we’ve given into the flesh this very week! So what do we do with that? Does that mean that none of us are Christians - that real Christians are sinless and perfect? I think Paul anticipates this response, and so he addresses it in v.17: “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, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” In other words, no, this doesn’t mean that real Christians never sin, or that if we’ve sinned this week, we’re not Christians. By no means! To think that would be to miss the entire point of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, the entire point of the gospel! We are not justified by our works; and that means we are not *unjustified* or condemned because of our failures, either! We’re righteous before God through faith in Christ alone! No, the Christian life isn’t one of sinless perfection - it’s one of *constant war* raging inside our hearts between the Spirit and the Flesh!

The Spirit fills our hearts and exposes *our sinful flesh, sinful human nature* and all the various sinful passions and desires that rage on within our wicked hearts and minds. The Spirit convicts us of our sin, giving us a distaste for it, so that now, when I go back to those same old sins that have always been the patterns of my life, all of the sudden, *they leave a bad aftertaste in my heart*; I feel conviction and godly grief over my sins! I don’t want to sin anymore; I want to obey God! I want to be more like Jesus! I want to love others like Christ loves me! And yet, *our sinful flesh remains!* Verse 17 tells us that; our own experience in life confirms it. We feel led by the Spirit - and yet we also *still feel the temptations and desires of the flesh!* *We still find ourselves tempted to sin!* In fact, *we still give in and sin at times!* But if the Spirit is within us, we feel conviction for our sin and repent of it, yearning to follow the Spirit of Christ. The second we become Christians, we receive the Spirit - and a *war* immediately starts raging within us. World War III erupts inside our hearts! And yet, the sides of the war are not equally matched; the

Spirit is far stronger than the flesh and has already won the victory over it - even for you and me! After all, v.16 remains true: “Walk by the spirit, and *you will not gratify the desires of the flesh*”! So how do we put these realities together?

We start to see the answer in verse 18: “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.” Now, the phrase “not under law” might seem out of place at first, but here’s what’s going on: you see, “walking by the Spirit” doesn’t just mean that we know what’s right and wrong, and then it’s up to us to obey or disobey. If that was all, then it wouldn’t be any different than the Law of the Old Testament. You see, the Law of Moses could tell Israel right from wrong, but it *couldn’t change their hearts!* So their wicked, sinful hearts kept disobeying and turning from God. The Law only brought more sin, guilt, and condemnation.

Yet, thankfully, we’re not under the Law! But this doesn’t mean that we’re lawless. It doesn’t mean we’re left on our own, to do what’s right in our own eyes. Nor does it mean that the gospel is just a “get-out-of-Hell-for-Free” card and then gives us a free pass to keep on sinning and living in the flesh. No, GOD’s grace is so much greater than that! We’re not under the Law - but instead, *we are led by the Spirit!* It means we’re free from slavery to the Law *and free from our slavery to sin!* It means that when we become Christians - when we repent and believe in the gospel, trusting in Christ alone for salvation - we are actually being *born again* spiritually! The Spirit changes us, writing the Law of Christ on our hearts, so that we are gradually changed and transformed into people who actually *want* to obey God, love Him, and love others! Again, this doesn’t mean we’re immediately sinless when we become Christians; the desires and temptations of the flesh remain; we all still have sin in our lives. But we don’t stay the same; we grow. The question is not whether or not you sin (we all do); the question is whether or not you’re *waging the war of faith against your sin*. And here’s how we fight: by remembering and believing the gospel! We repent, turn to the gospel, and strive to walk by the Spirit, for the Spirit changes us and causes all Christians to bear fruit!

And so, the question is: what does such fruit look like? Paul answers this question, but first he does so *negatively*: walking by the Spirit involves not giving into the works of our sinful flesh.

II. Walk by the Spirit, Not the Works of the Flesh (5:19-21)

So if we’re called to walk by the Spirit by not giving into the flesh, then we need to be able to recognize what kind of works are sinful and come from the flesh, not God. Now, Paul

tells us that “the works of the flesh are evident” (v.19). Sin and fleshly desires should be obvious to us, especially if we are Christians, since we are “led by the Spirit.” Yet, our flesh and the Devil are so crafty that sometimes we can deceive ourselves into ignoring or justifying sin. So, Paul gives us a list of examples of the kinds of sinful works of the flesh. So I think it would be helpful for us to just briefly walk through this list and recognize the kinds of things that our sinful flesh is tempted towards. Most biblical scholars group this list into four groups.

The first group is of sexual sins, in verse 19: “Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality.” All three of these words describe sexual sins. God created sexuality - it is a good gift! But it’s only good for us, and others, if it’s experienced within GOD’s good design for sexuality: in monogamous marriage, between one biological male and one biological female, in a lifelong, faithful, and loving commitment to each other. Any kind of sexual behavior that steps outside of GOD’s good design is sexual immorality. And this isn’t just confined to things we do with other people; it’s any kind of sexual “impurity” in our hearts, minds, or what we do or look at or think about in private. Such thoughts and actions arise from “sensuality,” or “debauchery” (NIV) or “promiscuity” (CSB), in our hearts. We live in a culture that is absolutely obsessed with sexuality; sexual sins and promiscuity are held up as good in our society, more and more everyday. And we as Christians are still human; we’re still in the flesh, we still experience sinful passions, desires, and temptations. Therefore, we need to rightly recognize sin for what it is; we can’t ignore it or justify it. It is not fitting for us as Christians to indulge in sexual immorality, to indulge lustful thought and desires, or to give in to immoral lifestyles and relationships - whether homosexual relationships or otherwise. It is not Christian to sleep around, be intimate before marriage, or live with your boyfriend or girlfriend. Those things don’t come from God - they come from the flesh, and we cannot justify them and pretend it’s ok. And if the things we watch or listen to entice the desires of our flesh so that we start to give into them, then we shouldn’t pretend like that’s ok either. Let us wage war, brothers and sisters.

The second group we can make includes the first two words of v.20: “Idolatry” and “sorcery,” or “Witchcraft.” Both of these words represent the failure to worship and honor God. Idolatry is to turn to false gods, instead of worshiping the one true God alone. This isn’t limited to worshipping Baal and Buddha. We commit idolatry anytime we let something take God’s place in our hearts - be it money, pleasure, fame, family, our own freedom and autonomy - anything. Whatever we’re trusting in or loving more than God is an idol. Similarly, “sorcery” and “witchcraft” are the attempt to receive power outside of God, either from false gods or demons or something else, to manipulate and

control the world around us. We might be tempted to think this doesn't apply to us today, but I'll just remind us that not only has witchcraft been around for a very long time and remained a stronghold all over the world, it's also on the rise in our country, especially in the Northeast. Regardless, it is true for *all of us* that our flesh is tempted to doubt God, take Him off the throne of our hearts, and put ourselves on the throne instead.

The third group is by far the largest, in verses 20-21. These are social sins, impulses of our flesh that destroy our relationships with other people, especially in a community, like the church. Such sins include "enmity" or "hatred" (NIV, CSB); "strife" or "discord" (NIV). Hatred is the opposite of love, and clearly comes from our flesh, not the Spirit. The list continues with "jealousy" and includes "envy" later on. Rather than being delighted when other people have good things and succeed, our flesh gets jealous and starts to covet, causing us to tear others down and try to build ourselves up. This is the ugliness of selfishness and pride, leading to bitterness in our hearts and strife and hostility in our words and actions. And sure enough, the next on the list is "fits of anger," unrighteous anger in our hearts leading to outbursts in our rage. We all get angry at times - sometimes justly. Yet we all need to recognize that it is far, far too easy for all of us to immediately respond with *sinful, unrighteous anger*. Outbursts of anger don't come from the Spirit - they come from our flesh. I think this might be one of the sins we're most often tempted to justify. We try to pretend our anger is righteous when it is often just a fit of rage; we try to excuse it by blaming it on the sins of others, all the while ignoring that we responded to their sin with our own sin. I'm often convicted of this in my parenting, where my child will disobey (and therefore sin against me), yet I sometimes sin back by responding in a fit of anger, yelling rather than disciplining in patient, gentle love. The anger of man isn't godly; we need to stop pretending like it is. It doesn't come from the Spirit - it comes from our selfish, prideful, impatient flesh. So let's not justify outbursts of anger - either in ourselves, or in each other. And let's *definitely* not allow such outbursts of anger to be normal in the church. Yes, we all get angry at times; but let's not sin in our anger. And if we do, let us confess it and repent.

Next is "rivalries," or as several other translations put it, "selfish ambition." Again, we're tempted to justify this. In fact, I've heard many employers look for this attribute in job interviews and encourage selfish ambition in employees. Working hard is a godly thing, but workaholism and being obsessed with work can easily come from our own selfish ambition. In fact, our flesh can even make us want to have offices and leadership in the church for selfish motives, rather than godly ones!

Selfish ambition, anger, jealousy, envy - all of these are a recipe for disaster in our relationships, our families, our church community. They breed "dissensions" and "divisions." But such friction is not fitting for Christians; this is not what a Christian family or Christian church should look like.

The fourth group are the sins of “drunkenness” and “orgies,” or as the NASB and CSB translate last word, “carousing,” which is probably more accurate. These describe a life completely given over to the worldly desires of the flesh, without abandon. This applies to the party animal, the addict, or the alcoholic. Paul is saying it’s evident that you can’t claim to follow Christ and then pretend like it’s ok to live a worldly life of partying and drunkenness! There’s Christian freedom to drink alcohol - but we must never use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh and justify getting drunk or becoming addicted to it. And I’ll make one more application here for us: even if marijuana is legal, getting high or using drugs is just another form of drunkenness - it’s the opposite of self-control, it’s giving ourselves completely over to the desires and passions of the flesh. Getting high is from the flesh, not the Spirit.

And this is by no means an exhaustive list; as Paul says, “and things like these” (v.21). Let’s not justify such things - it’s evident they’re from the flesh, not the Spirit. And lest we start to think it’s not a big deal to pursue the flesh, that it’s ok to claim to be a Christian yet live like a slave to the works for the flesh, the rest of the verse gives us a stark, sobering warning: “I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (v.21b). Now, this doesn’t mean that if you commit one of these sins, then you’re not a Christian. No, as we saw in v.17, all Christians still battle indwelling sin. But verse 21 *does* mean that if you habitually pursue such things, and you don’t repent from them, but just ignore them, or justify them and pretend it’s ok, then that very well may be a sign that you’re not a Christian and don’t have the Spirit inside you. This verse isn’t talking about occasionally falling into sins that you’re struggling against; it refers to habitual, unrepentant lifestyles committed to the flesh. For example, someone can have the Spirit inside them, be tempted to sexual immorality but at the same time want to fight against it, stumble into the sin of lust, be convicted and repent of it, keep trusting in the gospel, and then strive for purity and self-control. That person is a believer, fighting the war of repentant faith! But someone who moves in with their girlfriend or boyfriend or marries someone of the same gender isn’t fighting against sin - they’ve given into the flesh. If someone professes to be a Christian yet gives in to a lifestyle of unrepentant sin, then this is a *huge red flag*, calling their faith into question. If there’s no repentance, no war, then there is no Holy Spirit within them. No Spirit means no genuine faith in the gospel - no salvation. A tree is identified by its fruit.

If we trust in Christ alone, we have the Holy Spirit - we are at war with our flesh. Let us fight the works of the flesh to death, by walking instead by the Spirit. And this doesn’t mean we just focus on our sin - instead, it means we turn from our sin and pursue the *positive* fruit of the Spirit in our lives, which Paul describes next...

III. Walk by the Spirit by Pursuing the Fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23)

The evidently sinful works of flesh are contracted with the fruit that characterizes the life transformed by the Spirit. Paul describes it in verses 22-23: “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, notice that the fruit here is singular, not plural. There’s only kind of fruit of here, and these eight words all describe it. What we see here is a description of what it looks like when the Spirit changes our hearts and transforms us through the gospel of Christ. This new heart is one fundamentally opposed to the works of the flesh. To be led by the Spirit is to love God and love others, even as we love ourselves. When we understand just how much God loves us, it produces love in our hearts, driving us to love God with all that we are, to love other people more than ourselves! There’s no room for hatred, selfish ambition, jealousy, fits of anger, or idolatry in the heart of love. Instead of being at strife and discord with others, the Spirit produces peace in our hearts, leading to love and peace in our relationships. The Spirit produces assurance in our hearts, leading us to trust God in all things, even the trials of our lives, so that we can have *peace* instead of worry or anxiety. Instead of the discontentment that leads to drunkenness and addiction, we instead know the incredible joy of the Lord, who has saved us from our sin and the Hell we deserve! The Spirit brings us true joy! Now, I want to make a pastoral comment here: this doesn’t mean that it’s wrong for Christians to be sad. No, Jesus himself wept. The Psalms teach us to lament. This doesn’t mean we’re always happy. It means that even at our saddest, darkest moments, we have the light of joy in our hearts, knowing that God is in control and has promised to make everything alright in the end; it’s the joy of knowing the Lord is with you and one day, He will personally wipe away all your tears.

The Spirit of Christ leads us to love others as Christ loves us, being patient, kind, and gentle, even when others sin against us, just like God our Father is infinitely patient, kind, and gentle with us, day after day - even in the midst of our stubbornness and sin! We’re free to be patient with our children or those who disagree with us, to be kind to our enemies and those who sin against us, gentle with our spouses or fellow church members.

The Spirit produces goodness and faithfulness in us, making us more and more holy, just like God is holy. Instead of being driven by impure thoughts, the Spirit changes our hearts, so that we can live lives of integrity, even in our most private moments. In fact, the Spirit even gives us self-control! We’re no longer powerless and enslaved to sin - if we’re in Christ, we’re empowered to walk by the Spirit, in the fruit of the Spirit, and not give in to the desires of the flesh!

But here's the important thing to grasp: we don't earn this fruit or produce it on our own; only the Spirit produces this fruit - it's the fruit of a new heart born of the Spirit. So then, if this fruit is something the Spirit produces in us, then how are we supposed to pursue it? How exactly do we walk by the Spirit? This brings us to our last point...

IV. Walk by the Spirit by Remembering Who You are in Christ (5:24-25)

We see this in vv.24-25: "And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." In other words, we are exhorted to live differently because of what Jesus has already objectively accomplished for us on the cross and made us alive by the Spirit. We fight sin, love God, and love others *because of who we already are in Christ!*

This passage has reminded us that we all have sinful flesh and desires, yet we Christians also have the Spirit inside us, waging war. The Spirit takes the gospel and holds it up like a mirror to us. It exposes our sin, bringing conviction. Perhaps you felt conviction as we walked through the works of the flesh Paul lists for us here. But this mirror of the gospel doesn't just show us our sin - it also shows us, "That's not who you are anymore!" You're not a slave to the flesh; your chains are broken, the prison door opened! When we go back to the flesh it's like we're walking back inside that prison cell, sitting down on the floor, even though we've been set free! And so the Spirit convicts us, leading us to repent, by reminding us who we are! Our flesh has been crucified with Christ! Our sins have been nailed to the cross! We are forgiven! And not just that - we've crucified our flesh *along with its passions and desires!* Your flesh is dead, it has no power over you! The mirror of the gospel also shows us *who we are now*: we are united to Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit of God! We're alive in the Spirit! As verse 25 says, "if we live in the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." As we're convicted of our sin, let us repent - not by beating ourselves up and constantly focusing on our sin - but let us repent daily by bring our sin to Christ, and believe that you're forgiven purely because of what Jesus has done for you on the cross - that our flesh is crucified! And as the gospel takes root in our hearts, the Spirit changes us, empowering us to become more like Jesus. That's how we walk by the Spirit! As the Spirit empowers us to realize how much Christ loves us in the gospel, it moves us to love Him and love others more, to be patient, kind, gentle, and gracious to others just like God is to us! Such love obliterates enmity, strife, divisions and selfish ambition. The more we understand the reality of our salvation, that it's not up to us but all because of God's grace in the gospel, it fills

us with peace and joy, leading us to trust in Him! Such trust leaves no room for idolatry or the discontentment that leads to drunkenness, addiction, and wild partying. We're satisfied in the joy of the gospel! The more we understand the goodness of God, and the depths of His grace in forgiving us our sin through the sacrificial death of Christ, the more we hate our sin and love goodness - the Spirit changes our hearts to have good and holy desires! Such goodness will not let us flirt with impure thoughts and desires. As we wage war against sin, and inevitably fall, and keep repenting and turning back to Christ, the Spirit assures us in our souls, time and time again, that Christ is faithful to continue to love and forgive us; and the steadfast faithfulness of God so anchors our souls that the Spirit preserves us - we can be faithful and persevere because of *GOD's faithfulness to us!* As we remember who we are in Christ, victorious over our crucified flesh and alive by the Spirit, we're empowered to wage war - not by our strength, but by the power of the Spirit, who even grants us self-control, that we might not give in to the flesh! Brothers and sisters, let us walk by the Spirit by believing the gospel, day after day, and walking in light of who we are in Christ! Let us fight sin, repent when we fall, believe the gospel that says we're righteous purely by faith in Christ, and strive to walk by the Spirit!

And if you're not a Christian this morning, then I invite you to do this for the very first time! Don't wait until your life looks like the fruit of the Spirit before you come to Jesus - that will never happen. Instead, barring your flesh and failure to Jesus, and trust Him to do everything needed to save you! Simply believe that Jesus lived a perfect life, died on the cross for your sins, and was raised, and you will be saved! And the first fruit of your changed life and repentance can be baptism, where you publicly profess your faith in Christ. If you have any questions about this, I'd love to speak with you. Let us pray.