

This morning we're finishing our series on what it means to bear fruit as children of God. Before he got to the fruit of the Spirit, Paul wrote in his letter to the Christians in Galatia that because they had the Spirit of God, they were not to do whatever they wanted to do, which reminds me of when my mom would say things like, "Richard, because you are my son, I expected better of you." But that was a long time ago.

This morning we're going to investigate what Paul said about our struggle to bring forth fruit in our lives and what this might mean in our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

GALATIANS 5:16-24

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

The tasty delicious part of this passage is the "**fruit of the Spirit,**" the "**love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.**" It's good to meditate on these qualities of the Christian life, about how they reflect the character of Christ himself and about how we might make them our own. But their meaning and significance becomes even more powerful when we reflect on what Paul said as an introduction to this list of fruit.

He wrote, **“So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (v.16)**. When we read the word **“flesh”** in contrast to, **“the Spirit,”** we should think about two different kinds of lifestyles. On the one hand, to **“walk by the Spirit”** is the Christian lifestyle, which includes the fruit of the Spirit. On the other hand, there’s the lifestyle of the **“flesh,”** which is everything that is contrary to the life of Christ. In the preceding verse, Paul wrote, **“If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another” (v.15)**.

That’s graphic. Fruit is tasty and delicious, indeed. But devouring one another not so much.

To **“bite and devour one another”** is a summary of how the world lives. Of course, no one will admit it up front. But isn’t that what’s happening when people use each other for sex, for financial gain, or for political power?

Thus when Paul wrote, **“So I say, walk by the Spirit”** he was providing an exit ramp from the devastating consequences which lay at the end of this road of destructive behavior.

After encouraging us to **“walk by the Spirit,”** he wrote, **“For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh” (v.17a)**.

Influencers on social media are a thing. They are persons who have ideas or products to sell, and they have thousands of followers on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook. The more followers they have, the more money they’ll make from the marketing departments of companies. For example, cosmetics companies pay good money to young women who’ll fawn over their products on their Facebook and Instagram accounts.

Take for example cosmetics. A young woman fawns over a skin care product, her followers run out and buy it, and the influencer gets a check. Thus the power of the “influencer.” It’s about image and lifestyle.

“Flesh is a sphere of influence” (Das). It’s a force inside of us and outside of us which wants to impose on us its values and character, its lifestyle. It challenges

our walk with God every single moment of every day of our lives, and it influences how we choose to live.

But the Spirit of God is also an influencer. But the Spirit has a different goal; it's a single, focused goal: genuine love.

One commentator wrote that to **“walk by the Spirit”** means “to walk in the sphere of influence of the Spirit, within the arena of the Spirit’s activity” (Das). In other words, if you want the Spirit to shape who you are and how you live, you must live in the world of the Spirit and follow the ways of the Spirit.

Paul wrote, **“if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (v.18)**. He was saying that while the law does show us God’s perfect will, it gets in the way of his genuine love. For the law is an influencer of the flesh. Obsessed with fulfilling the law, one either imagines that he has fulfilled it, and becomes proud, or he recognizes that he can never fulfill it perfectly, and despairs. Death is the end game either way. The law of God can never replace walking **“by the Spirit.”** Obedience to the law does not get us to the ways of the Spirit.

Everyone who first read this letter by Paul assumed that the law was good, as in, “Be obedient to the law of God, and you will be pleasing in his sight.” That was their stumbling block. So Paul was forced to dramatically illustrate for them how they had it all backwards. He wrote, **“The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (vv.19-21)**.

The people in the church liked to think of themselves as God-fearing, law-abiding citizens, so when they read this list, they were mortified. They must’ve thought, “You talking to me?” Only if the shoe fits.

They were convicted in their hearts, for what they did in secret and what they felt in their hearts was all right here. It was like looking in a mirror. And they realized then that obedience to the law had not changed them into Spirit-filled Christians.

That's the most important thing we might take away this morning: Obedience does not change our hearts. It might make us easier to get along with, but it doesn't make us into better persons in here, in our hearts.

The **"acts of the flesh"** are personal sins and social sins. The social sins are interesting because they're sneaky. They are framed by the personal sins in this list. They are **"hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy."** Sneaky: We might be hating on another person while outwardly pretending to be friendly. We might be inwardly filled with jealousy and envy all the while hiding what we feel underneath our smiles. We might appear to be a team player while secretly sabotaging a person's work out of selfish ambition. The greatest influencer of our age, the flesh, would have us live like this, to live the lie, to let our resentments and fears dig deep roots into our hearts and destroy us.

But Paul provided an alternative. He showed us the outcomes of living in the Spirit. He wrote, **"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (vv.22-23).**

He was saying, What will it be, love or hatred, grace or discord, kindness or jealousy, patience or rage, faithfulness or selfish ambition, gentleness or dissensions and factions?

Love is the first gift; perhaps all the gifts are emanations of some form of love. Love is so important, Paul explains in his letter to the church in Corinth, that everything else, even spiritual gifts, are worthless without it (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

God gave us his love, a self-sacrificial love through his Son Jesus (Romans 5:6-8). This is the same love the Spirit pours into our hearts (Romans 5:5). But our expression of this love doesn't just happen. Rather, we choose to love other people because the Spirit created the condition in our hearts where true loving action can take place.

There was this great scene in the movie Bruce Almighty, where Bruce, played by Jim Carrey, gets to be God for a week. It didn't go so well when he attempted to

use his newfound powers to make his estranged girlfriend played by Jennifer Aniston love him again. “Love me! Love me!” he cried at her. But you can never make a person love, for love wells up from the heart. It’s the same for the other fruit of the Spirit.

Joy pours forth from our hearts because of our confidence in God’s promise to us for eternal life. It is so rich it accompanies the third fruit, peace or shalom, which are used together by believers that they might overcome any differences they have and live in harmony.

Patience is the fourth fruit, a quality shared by God himself as we read in **Romans 2:4, “do you think lightly of the riches of (God’s) kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that (his) kindness leads you to repentance?”** As we follow the Spirit, we find the power to be patient with each other.

On the one hand patience is passive, but on the other hand, kindness, the fifth fruit, is active. And what better way to show it than to forgive one another just as God forgave us, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, **“Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32).**

The sixth fruit, goodness, is a product of God’s light and our faith. Listen to what Paul also said to the Ephesians: **“you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light ⁹(for the fruit of the Light *consists* in all goodness and righteousness and truth)” (Ephesians 5:8-9).**

Faithfulness and gentleness are about how Christians restore one another with the Spirit’s own gentleness. Bring a brother or sister back into the faith is one of our highest callings. Paul wrote later, **“if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).**

The last fruit, self-control, was an obsession of the Greeks; to control the passions and resist temptations was a high ideal. But this was a losing battle for them and the Jews who tried to live under the law (Romans 7:14-25). For the law, man’s law or God’s law, never changes one’s heart.

Paul finished this section, writing, **“Against such things there is no law. ²⁴Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other” (vv.23b-26).**

No one before Jesus and Paul had ever used **“crucifixion”** as a metaphor. To use it in a positive sense seemed almost obscene to the original listeners and readers, for they had all personally witnessed them. Crucifixions were cruel forms of torture to the death; they were gruesome; they were horrible. So when Paul commanded the people to crucify their flesh, at first they would’ve heard it as gallows humor, the lowest kind! But his point was not lost: The only way to break the power of the flesh was to kill it! And that only happens through Jesus, the one who was crucified for us all.

The prophet Isaiah wrote the Song of the Vineyard about 800 years before Christ. He longed for the day of the Messiah, but he was filled with grief at the same time, for he feared what the Lord would find when he came. In his song, he wrote,

**I will sing for the one I love
a song about his vineyard:
My loved one had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
²He dug it up and cleared it of stones
and planted it with the choicest vines.
He built a watchtower in it
and cut out a winepress as well.
Then he looked for a crop of good grapes,
but it yielded only bad fruit (Isaiah 5:1-2).**

This week, brothers and sisters in Christ, let us strive to follow the Spirit, God’s Spirit, the influencer of our own spirits, our souls, our minds, and our hearts. Let us pray to him that he would **“lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”**

This week let us contemplate the fruit of the Spirit and consider how the Lord is bearing fruit in our own lives to make a difference in the lives of the people around us.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.