

Freed to be Fruitful

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[0 : 0 0] I was in Morningside yesterday in Edinburgh on the street, and I've never seen so many people buying flowers.

Pots of yellow flowers and red flowers and bouquets of flowers and small shrubbery and little trees and all sorts of things to bring a little bit of beauty into their homes in what is a very dark and uncertain time.

I read in the news yesterday that actually communities across the UK, whole communities are putting out Christmas decorations to just bring a bit of a spark of light back into their homes and into their lives because beauty gives us hope and joy, especially set against darkness.

That's when light shines most. And this passage in Galatians, it offers us something really beautiful. For really hard times.

This is something of a crescendo in Paul's letter. This is a kind of a hammering letter from Paul to the Galatian church who's gone astray from the true gospel and has fallen for a false gospel.

[1 : 1 2] And Paul ends this, the meat of this letter by talking about the fruit of the Spirit. But the passage begins with a word of comfort.

If you have a Bible within reach in your living room or wherever you're at, feel free to turn and read along as we go. We're going to look at 1st Galatians 5, 16 to 18.

But I say, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

All Christians experience inner war. It's the opposition talked about here. These are opposed to each other. There's a battle inside.

[2 : 1 2] Why do we Christians find it so difficult to not sin? Why is that so hard? Because somewhere deep down, we want to sin.

Some part of us desires that sin and that part of us is the old you, the pre-Christ you. Paul calls it the flesh.

But if you want to sin, then why don't we just do it? Why don't we give in? Why don't you cave to that desire? Why is there a fight at all? Because somewhere deeper down is the new you.

This is the you led by the Spirit, the you that desires God more than you desire sin. There's an inner war.

And sometimes it feels like we don't want God. I feel that a lot often and it's hard, isn't it? But we want, in those moments, we want to want God.

[3 : 1 6] And that's a confusing emotion to have, isn't it? To desire something that you don't desire, to desire to desire it. There's still some fight left in us.

If you are in Christ, there's the old you and the new you. And so I experience the old me kind of pulling the leash, trying to drag me down a path that the new me doesn't want to go.

The flesh wants to be in charge, but the new you is led by the Spirit of God. Second Corinthians 5.17 says, If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. And that's the kind of you that we're talking about here.

It's new creation, you. It's the work of new creation that God works in you when you put all of your trust and hope on Jesus.

So the old you and the flesh, it's fighting and straining against the Spirit of God. And the fight is the thing that keeps you from doing the things you want to do. Now I said that the passage starts with a word of comfort.

[4 : 17] So why is that a comfort? Because it means you're not crazy. Or if you are, then so am I, and we're not in this alone. We're in this together.

All Christians feel this. All Christians have an inner war. There is no such thing as the victorious Christian life as it were.

If you feel the full weight of temptation, if you actually want to sin and want God at the same time, or you don't want God, but you want to want God, then you're in the company, you're in the company of the Apostle Paul and Saint Augustine and Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Wycliffe and John Wesley and Charles Spurgeon.

You're in good company. You're in good company and the good news is that Christianity isn't for winners. Christianity is for weary sinners who can't seem to get their act together and who just collapse into the arms of Christ.

Now, if you don't know what this inner war feels like, maybe you haven't really put all your chips on Jesus's square, so to speak.

[5 : 30] And maybe today you need to go all in with Jesus right there in your living room. Maybe it's time now. There's no such thing as fightless Christianity.

Verse 18 says, but if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. So in Christ, you're freed from the law. You're not under the law anymore, which means you're no longer measured against God's perfect standard of righteousness and moral purity.

It means you're no longer required to work and perform and do all to earn God's smile. If you are in Christ, you already have the smile of God.

Servants work and earn for the pleasure of their master. They have to earn it, but sons have it. And in Christ, you're a son of God.

You already have God's smile. And it means the law has no right to torment your conscience anymore. Why? Because at the cross, Christ took our sin and put it on like clothes, and He gave us His righteousness.

[6 : 43] We call it the glorious exchange, and it is glorious. At the cross, the law crushed Christ instead of you and instead of me.

So when we feel shame or condemning guilt because of our sin and our temptation, Jesus says by the Spirit, brother or sister, I paid for that sin.

That doesn't belong to you anymore. You don't have to pay for that. So the law shouldn't have any domain in our conscience to make us feel condemning guilt or shame.

But what do we do when it does? What do we do when we do feel that way? What do we do when we feel what Martin Luther called the terror of the law?

I'm going to read, it's only going to take a couple minutes. I'm going to read a chunk from Luther, the introduction to Martin Luther's commentary on the book of Galatians. I think it's what converted John Wesley to become a Christian.

[7 : 40] It's a remarkable text, and he puts it really well. If the law presumes to creep into your conscience and tries to reign there, you must make the right distinction.

Give no more to the law than is right, but say, you want to climb up into the kingdom of my conscience? Do you, law? You want to reign over it and reprove sin and take away the joy I have by faith in Christ and drive me to desperation?

Keep within your bounds and exercise power over the flesh, but do not touch my conscience. By the gospel, I am called to share righteousness and everlasting life.

I'm called to Christ's kingdom, where my conscience is at rest and there is no law, but rather forgiveness of sins, peace, quietness, joy, health and everlasting life.

Do not trouble me in these matters, for I will not let an intolerable tyrant like you reign in my conscience, which is the temple of Christ, the Son of God.

[8 : 38] He is the King of righteousness and peace, my sweet Savior and mediator. He will keep my conscience joyful and quiet in the sound, pure doctrine of the gospel and in the knowledge of Christian and heavenly righteousness.

When I have this righteousness raining in my heart, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is to say, I come out into another kingdom and I do good works whenever I have a chance.

We need to learn to talk like that to our conscience and to the law. Now, one more thing about verse 18 before we move on to the rest of the passage. We have to get this if we're going to understand

what's coming.

If we don't get this one point, then when we get to the fruit of the Spirit, it's going to feel like another law and it will drive us to despair because we're not measuring up.

So here's the point. Look at the phrase, led by the Spirit. We have to ask, where does the Spirit lead us?

[9 : 40] And the answer is, He leads us to Christ at the cross every time. The Spirit always leads us back to Christ and His work for you and me on the cross.

So let's move on to Galatians 5, 19 to 21, the next chunk. What does it look like when we give in to the desires of the flesh?

Now, the works of the flesh are evident, sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. So the flesh is that old Jew that's addicted to sin and allergic to God, as it were.

The flesh says, I'll take that cheap mockery of joy if I can have it right now. The flesh is self-destructive.

[10 : 48] Look at that list. Carry those things out to their logical conclusion and its death and isolation, drunkenness, sexual sin, fits of anger.

The flesh looks at the sin, considers the consequences in the outcome, and goes for it anyway. The flesh is self-destructive.

And the flesh is mercenary. It's ruthless. It's cutthroat. It will step on anything and anyone to get what it wants, because no one and nothing is safe from its warpath.

No one and nothing has value. No one is precious to the flesh but me. Don't believe that's really inside of you.

It can be hard to swallow. But if we don't believe it, then we're not being honest with ourselves when we read that list. We're meant to read that list and go, oh, I'm in that list, maybe more than once.

[11 : 54] Verse 19 says that the works of the flesh are evident. In other words, we don't need to overthink this. It's rather obvious when you look at something and wonder, is that a work of the flesh? Well, does it smell like smoke?

And verse 21 says things like these, which means this list isn't exhaustive. It's an illustration. It's an example. You and I could each write our own list.

So see now how the language shifts from slavery and labor to freedom and gardening. Isn't that great? It says these are the works of the flesh.

The works of the flesh are evident. But then it says the fruit of the spirit. If you live according to the flesh, it will work you into the ground and it'll kill you.

Make no mistake about it, if you live according to the flesh, you will pay for your own sins. But if you're led by the Spirit of God, then Christ has already paid for your sins.

[12 : 58] And Christ has planted his spirit in you like a seed from the tree of life. And he will bear beautiful, life-giving fruit in you.

So let's look at the fruit of the spirit. Galatians 5, 22 to 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. This list is not a new law. This is not a wall surrounding the kingdom of God that's too high for you to climb over.

It's not another list for you to measure yourself against to see how you failed to check off boxes one or two. It's not another standard for you to fail to obtain.

It's a mighty promise from God of what he is doing in you by the power of his spirit, if you belong to Christ. Christ, your captain in this war, is leading you down this beautiful path by his spirit.

[14 : 05] And this is your glorious destiny in Christ. This is what resurrection life feels like. You know, the vibe on the street is a lot of panicky, fearful people trying to distract themselves from pain and uncertainty.

That's what it's like right now in Edinburgh. The vibe on the street in the resurrection life when Christ returns will be love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

That's what resurrection life feels like. This is as if you were to reach through time into eternity, into the new creation, and take a little handful of resurrection fruit and draw your hand back into the now

and enjoy it together.

That's what the fruit of the spirit really is. So it's not a cause for despair. It's an invitation. Now the flesh wants to lead you to a life that's ugly and mercenary and ends in a meaningless death. But the spirit, if you are in Christ, is leading you to a life of grace and beauty. So how do we get that kind of life?

[15 : 30] Because even if you're a Christian, you might look at that list and say, I don't see it. I don't seem to have any joy. I'm impatient.

Well, just as a sidebar, we need each other for this, don't we? You know, all of the, when you see you in your English translation here, it's all plural. Paul's talking to a group of people.

Y'all need this. Y'all need each other to say to each other, I see you. I see what the Lord's doing in you, brother. I see what the Lord's doing in you, sister.

You're doing well. The Lord is using you to build His kingdom and to glorify Himself. We need to hear that because Christian growth is like, it's like the growth of a garden.

It's imperceptible in short slivers of time. It's hard for us to kind of look back at our yesterday and say, I've grown. We need other people to tell us what the Lord is doing in our lives.

[16 : 33] Anyway, verse 19 says, if you are led by the Spirit, the flesh leads us to death, but the Spirit leads us to the cross so that through Christ's death, we can have life.

At the cross, we find both the reason or the why and the power or the how for joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

For example, let's look at a couple of them. Joy. How do we get joy? Why should I have joy? And how do I get joy? Just as an example. So why should I be joyful?

What's the reason? Because at the cross, Jesus overcame the world. He overcame all of this darkness.

He dealt with everything that steals our joy. So that's the why. How can I be joyful? With what power can I do this? By taking your fears and your anxieties and laying them at the foot of the cross.

[17 : 38] And see, one, the certainty of God's love for you. And two, receive by faith the gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation.

We stare at Christ on the cross and we find the why and the how. Second example, self-control. Why should I have self-control? What's the reason? Because Jesus purchased your freedom.

He freed you. So you're not a slave to your own whims anymore. You're not a slave to the flesh anymore. So how can I have self-control? By looking at Jesus, who withstood the absolute worst temptation of history for you.

At the cross, we find the why and the how. Or how to have that kind of life. The Spirit leads us there. Galatians 2.20, which we heard several weeks back, says, I have been crucified with Christ. That's passive language. That's something that Christ did to me and for me. I have been crucified with Christ.

[18 : 48] But now Galatians 5.24 says, I must crucify the flesh. That's active voice, right? And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

John Stott in his commentary on Galatians says, We must not only take up our cross and walk with it, but actually see that the execution takes place. We are actually to take the flesh, our willful and wayward self, and metaphorically speaking, nail it to the cross.

We need both of those things. Now this passage does not say that sinners won't inherit the kingdom of God. We shouldn't come away from this thinking that sinners have no place in the kingdom.

This passage does say that unrepentant sinners won't inherit the kingdom of God. The Spirit leads us into repentance.

It's how He bears that fruit. So how do we practically repent and see this fruit grow? I can think of no better kind of summary of the Bible's teaching on repentance than the Westminster Shorter Catechism, number 87.

[20 : 01] Question, what is repentance unto life? Answer. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner out of a true sense of his sin, an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.

So we have to have a true sense of our sin, and then we have to apprehend the mercy of God in Christ. How do we do that? By going to the cross. We see our sin with grief and hatred only when we see Christ, our precious Savior, dying for you and paying for your sin.

And then we turn from the sin to God. You can't turn from one thing to nothing. So we turn from our sin and we look at God instead with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.

Example, your conscience that bears down on you that you're being selfish in whatever way that looks like. You look to the cross and you see the Son of God considering little weak you, more important, more precious than infinite Him.

And you begin to find that the selfishness seems more ugly and Christ more beautiful. And then you turn from your sin to God and start doing the right thing by his power, by his grace.

[21 : 33] This new way won't be easy, but who said war was easy? Now, in this passage we have remarkable doctrine about the spirit and about the gospel.

But gospel doctrine shapes gospel culture. And I have to tell you, St. Columbus, you're doing really well. It's been a deep encouragement to my heart this week to see how you've come together to serve and worship Christ and serve and love one another.

It's amazing. When a church really believes the gospel, they really do. They put their feet down on Christ. It changes the way they live radically. And you really see the fruit of the spirit.

Sidebar over. The flesh, if you follow it, will eat you alive. It'll kill you without any mercy.

But the spirit leads us to the cross, where we see how our sin killed Jesus. And then we accept that gift all over again or maybe for the first time.

[22 : 47] And we follow him into this new gift, this new life of grace and beauty, just moment by moment. What a gift.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, in these dark and uncertain times, comfort us with the beauty and certainty of your gospel, with the certainty of your love for us in Christ.

Lord, just transform us all by the power of your Holy Spirit to become more like you for our joy and for your glory. Amen.