

“Walk by the Spirit: The Fruit of Self-Control” – Galatians 5:13-26
January 10, 2021 –8:15AM & 11:00 AM Service
Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA
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Gal. 5:13 For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15 But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 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.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Let’s pray together.

While we worked in Peru, I met two brothers who came to our church, convicted of their sins and wanting to change. They became members, they brought their families and their children and were a joy to have in our church. We were overjoyed.

But as time went on and difficulties would arise in their lives, they would start drinking. Their drinking led to many other problems in their families and in their workplaces. We tried to intervene and to help them. We would pray with them and try to get them help, we would walk with them through the difficult moments and surround them with love, but each time, they would return to the bottle. They finally cut ties with us and stopped coming to church. It was deeply sad for us, and we know that their story is not yet over.

But as we helped them, I remember that those of us who could see what was happening would wonder, “What are they doing? Don’t they see what is going on? Can’t they see that that the alcohol is only making their lives worse?”

We could see that they were enslaved. We see the harm they were bringing upon themselves and their families and even when they would be rescued or helped, they would go back to their situation. Somehow they believed that alcohol would make them feel better. They believed the lie that it would take away the pain. Every time they fell back, it was worse, and the strain on their families has grown more and more intense.

The passage we are considering today describes a similar struggle. In this passage, Paul explains that we too are enslaved. But we are enslaved to sin.

You see, sin promises us lies. It promises us good things, promises joy, happiness, safety, security and peace. Sin promises never to hurt us or betray us. And over and over again, we fall for the lies. We buy the false promise and are beaten up by sin over and over again. It deceives us and leaves us broken.

As a church, we would help these two brothers repeatedly. We rescued them over and over again....but they continued to return to the lie.

Paul tells us that we too have been rescued. We have been freed from the mastery of our temptations and addictions. We have been rescued by Jesus.

Jesus came to free us from the slavery of sin. Not so we would return to our sins, but so that we can live freely by the Spirit.

For that reason he says, Do NOT use the freedom that Jesus purchased for us on the cross, to return to the desires of our flesh (and its slavery), but instead live lives in service and love for God and his Kingdom.

In the case of these two brothers, they were blind to their reality. They couldn't see how bad their situation was, but the signs of their addictions and the consequences of them were obvious to the rest of us.

And Paul explains that the desires and temptations of our flesh are obvious as well.

He writes, 19 **“Now the works of the flesh are evident:** sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 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.”

And as we study at this list, there are a few things that stand out in these verses.

First of there are a lot of sinful and fleshly desires that cause people to stumble. Sins that you might not expect and many that you might expect.

The second thing that stands out to me, is that at the end of v. 21, Paul says, “I warn you, as I warned you before”.

See, Paul is having to come back to this same issue again. And this isn't the only place Paul, and the NT writers address these issues. We find similar passages throughout the NT.

So Paul is preaching the same sermon again. He writes to the, as I warned you before, "**brothers**...we are called to freedom."

Paul tells the brotherhood that this is an issue that we are going to have to fight against. We are going to have to go at war against these carnal desires while we are here on this earth. Not just once, but over and over again.

And we don't just fight against one kind of sin, we will fight against many similar sins, and maybe even different kinds of sins, but we will have to fight.

This is part of the Christian life. To live life by the Spirit, we must fight the desires of the flesh. We may not conquer them completely in this world, but even so, we are called fight, grieve over and hate our sin.

Paul himself was no stranger to this fight. In Romans 7:15 he says, "*For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*"

Rom. 7:21 "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

The great Apostle Paul, whose writings and life we admire, was a man just like us, who struggled with carnal passions and sins. And he knew we would too. So he tells us not once, but repeatedly that we must continue to fight against the sins of the flesh. We must, as Jesus preached, deny ourselves and take up our cross daily (Luke 9:23). This will be a daily struggle. A daily battle.

Fruits of the Spirit

And this is why Paul gives us the fruits of the Spirit. Because Scripture teaches that the desires of the flesh are overcome by the Spirit.

Now, we've gone over the other fruits of the spirit in my morning devotional series, "Walking by the Spirit." But today we focus on this final fruit of the Spirit. Self-control. And how through this fruit of the Spirit we will overcome the desires of the flesh.

So, what is going on here?

Is this list here in the book of Galatians so that we can be known as the friendliest people on earth? So that we can be known as the kind and gentle people? So that we become exemplary people who are well-mannered? Is Paul trying to make sure that we are well-balanced people? Is that why he wants us to be "self-controlled"?

No, of course the Bible is not concerned with our being a good person. Jesus didn't come to this world so that we wouldn't eat too much ice-cream! He didn't die on the cross so that we could have a six-pack or so that we could be successful. He didn't come for us to drink just the right amount of alcohol and not too much. It isn't about us having an orderly and prosperous life now, or our "Best Life Now."

If that was what Jesus was striving for and if that is what he is teaching us here, then Jesus and Paul, the Apostles and the men and women of the Hall of Faith failed miserably. They had their worst life now. They died horrible deaths and suffered for the sake of the gospel.

Jesus didn't come to improve our lives; he came to save us from our slavery to sin and its desires and to make us into new creations. We are to seek the fruit of self-control so that we learn to not give into the flesh and so we can serve God and his kingdom.

His Kingdom

If you have ever watched those shows where people compete for some grand prize, the host always asks what their end-goal is. Why are they doing what they are doing. Why do they want the money and what do they plan on doing with it?

The world sees the importance of this question and we should too. So, why are we seeking to be self-controlled? If it is not so we can just be better citizens and better more well-balanced people, what is the end goal?

The end goal is to further God's purposes and his kingdom.
See, the end goal in all of Scripture is the glory of God and the good of his people.

And where do we see this in our passage? Look back to v. 13.

Gal. 5:13 For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. 14 For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

God gives us freedom as a path to service. To service in his kingdom.

It might seem like it is almost thrown in there out of nowhere. But that is only because we often miss the reason why we are to die to our sins and seek love, kindness, gentleness and self-control. We are to do this to love our neighbors. All we so must be subservient to God's purpose. Our money, our time, resources and abilities.

One worldly example of this sort of dedication comes from a letter I may have shared with some of you at some point. Many years ago, Billy Graham came across a letter from a young man who had decided to go to Mexico to become a Communist. Upon making this life-changing decision he wrote to his fiancée, explaining to her why he had to break off their engagement. It is clear that for him, there was no room for selfish agendas. He believed that every area of his life needed to be submissive to his greater cause. Here is what he wrote:

“We Communists have a high casualty rate. We're the ones who get shot and hung ...ridiculed and fired from our jobs, and in every other way made as uncomfortable as possible. A certain percentage of us get killed or imprisoned.

We live in virtual poverty. We turn back to the party every penny we make above what is absolutely necessary to keep us alive. We Communists don't have the time or the money for many movies, or concerts, or T-bone steaks, or decent homes and new cars. We've been described as fanatics. We are fanatics. Our lives are dominated by one great overshadowing factor, THE STRUGGLE FOR WORLD COMMUNISM.

We Communists have a philosophy of life which no amount of money could buy. **We have a cause to fight for, a definite purpose in life. We subordinate our petty personal selves into a great movement of humanity, and if our personal lives seem hard, or our egos appear to suffer through subordination to the party, then we are adequately compensated by the thought that each of us in his small way is contributing to something new and true and better for mankind.**

There is one thing in which I am dead earnest and that is the Communist cause. It is my life, my business, my religion, my hobby, my sweetheart, my wife and mistress, my bread and meat. I work at it in the daytime and dream of it at night. Its hold on me grows, not lessens as time goes on.

Therefore I cannot carry on a friendship, a love affair, or even a conversation without relating to this force which both drives and guides my life. I evaluate people, books, ideas and actions according to how they affect the Communist cause and by their attitude toward it. I've already been in jail because of my ideas and if necessary, I'm ready to go before a firing squad.”

As we can see, this man was dead serious about his persuasion. There was no turning back. He saw every decision, every action as either furthering or detracting from his cause. His money, time and reading all had to serve “the cause of communism.”

If this is the sort of passion and commitment an earthly and unknown communist party in Mexico holds on a person, how much more should the gospel grip us and guide our ever decision.

Food/Alcohol/Body

Do our eating and drinking habits serve the Kingdom? Again, this life isn't about becoming the best, physically “in shape” people around. It is about loving others well. Loving your children, your brothers and sisters, by sacrificing that dessert or extra helping. It is about limiting the alcohol and other vices in your life so that you can better serve those around you. So that you can be more alert for your children, for your neighbors.

This afternoon, after church, will we have self-control in our eating so that we are less sleepy and can lend more of our time loving our children or our family or our neighbors? Everything we do has implications for the kingdom. Everything we do serves us or God.

What about Money? How do we serve with our finances?

A headline this week highlighted that Elon Musk has become the world's richest person, with a net worth crossing \$185 billion. One writer (Dan Robitzski) said that with that money, Musk could end hunger in the US or send one million people to Mars.

Now we might not have \$185 billion dollars sitting around, but we all have resources that are at our disposal. We live in one of the wealthiest and most prosperous countries in the world.

Living by the Spirit with the fruit of self-control means that we are good stewards of our finances. Our end goal is not to become the wealthiest people in the world. We seek to be the most generous. We don't seek to build up our little kingdoms or own the latest and the best things that come out.

The fruit of self-control means we *restrain our spending and fight against our lust* for the new or fun things in this world. And instead we bless others with the money God has entrusted us for his purposes. We help those who have nothing – here and abroad.

Yes, we save up for ourselves, but we also save up for our neighbors. We give generously when we see people are in need and we take a hit out of love for others. We actively seek ways to help those who don't even yet realize that they need help.

We support the widow and the orphan. We support missionaries, ministries and foodbanks. We love our neighbors and give to them generously in Jesus' name.

This is walking by the Spirit. This is how we show self-control with our finances. By using them to serve the Kingdom of God rather than our own worldly desires.

What about holiness? Does holiness matter for the kingdom?

What about our showing self-control against the lusts of the flesh? Fighting the lusts of the flesh, from sexual immorality, sensual acts in private, and impurity?

Robert Murray McCheyne said, "The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness."

When we pursue holiness, when we fight and crucify the desires of the flesh, the light of Jesus prevails in our lives. Jesus' light shines all the brighter from us and it is not clouded by the darkness of our sins.

If the young man in the letter applied his practices toward communism to Christianity, we would see a man dedicated to doing his utmost, not the bare minimum.

And that is exactly what Jesus calls us to. Rather than searching for the outer limits of holiness - what we can or can't do in relationships- we are to hold them in the highest regard of holiness. Or rather than push the limits on what we view, instead, we are called to run far from temptation and hate anything that comes even close to the line.

Imagine the impact you would have in your own life, those around you and the unbelievers all around us if our holiness was evident to all around us. If the light of Jesus overflowed from your lips and hands and feet. If people knew you were Jesus' disciple because of your holiness and love and you could speak to them with authority and freedom.

Brothers and sisters, I need this from you, and you need this from me. The Kingdom needs our holiness. This isn't just about our progress or our personal holiness. We love each other best, when we are overcoming and *not indulging* in the sins of the flesh and instead living in holiness. Those around us will be impacted in ways we don't even comprehend.

Time

When Alicia and I first moved here in 2005, I was fresh out of college and was working toward getting into ministry. My father in law helped me get connected with Youth for Christ – and I would mentor and work with unchurched youth. I'll be the first to admit that because I was inexperienced and untrained I felt like I didn't know what I was doing.

Yet I met with these youth and tried my best to witness to them. But I would look back at my time with YFC and think, "man I didn't know what I was doing." But years after we had moved away, we came back for a visit and I remember asking about the young men I had pursued and mentored. If anyone knew what had become of them. Someone responded with a huge smile, "YES! He is now one of our leaders in our high school ministry!"

I share this story because this is another case of the Lord using an inadequate and weak tool to do his work. Looking back, even today, I am shocked that the Lord used my efforts to change this young man's life. It doesn't make sense to me. But then again, it wasn't me. It was Jesus' light that overcame the darkness in this young man's life.

Time is one of the most valuable things you have to offer the kingdom. You may not feel particularly gifted, you may not feel useful, you may not feel outgoing, you may feel completely useless, but you are not.

You can show your love for others through your time. I want to encourage you to think about this over lunch today. How can you serve those around you? Who can you mentor or disciple? How can we give our lives, go all in for the kingdom with our time and become living sacrifices?

During this past year, many people have reacted to the isolation differently. Some people are frustrated by it complaining about the isolation, and other people are calling it heavenly. Saying it has been the best to be alone and away from all the people!

And I want to push back on that a little. Because I have heard that more than a couple times.

And I know that most people may be joking, but seeking to be alone, to get away from people can be a desire of the flesh as well. This can be your temptation.

You can fight the flesh's desire to always be alone, to relax, to avoid people, or to avoid awkward situations.

Those of you who have worked hard all your life and are ready to rest and just enjoy life, or those of you who are just starting out. The work of the kingdom is not yet done. No matter how young or old you are, you have gifts that can be invested in those around you.

If you are timid and prefer books over people, fight the temptation to spend your time on yourself. Spend it on someone else.

If you are outgoing and prefer to fill your time being around people, find times to listen and serve those who are less outgoing.

If you find it difficult to fit in, or you are single, or you are new, don't wait for someone else to invite you over, or for someone else to initiate with you. Fight the temptation to be passive and seek people out.

By just spending a little bit of time with someone else, you have no idea the impact God can make in their lives. You may not know until we are in heaven.

Elementary school students, high school students, college students. You may not have money to invest in people, but you have your time. Invest in those around you. Give your time. Pursue people in love. Fight the temptation to serve yourself with your time. And fight the temptation to only pursue fun, adventure and entertainment with your time.

Many of us need to fight the urge to always be finding ways to relax. Others of us need to fight the urge to be busy with work. We have a calling and a purpose in this world to glorify God with our time.

Place no confidence in the flesh

This week in our reading plan, I read Jesus' teaching that we should take the log out of our own eye before we try to take the speck out of the eye of our brother.

As we hear this message, we will be tempted to glance over at our neighbor's speck. We all know someone who struggles with self-control.

Or perhaps we will feel our need for this message, but we consider our need for change to be miniscule. We see the speck in our own eye. But we see logs in other people's eyes.

But the whole point of Paul's message is that we all have logs in our eyes. We all have so much to grow. And we must take this calling seriously.

We must change, we must crucify daily the desires of the flesh. We cannot consider our sin small; we must see it for what it is. We must wage war on it and destroy it.

But we cannot do this in the flesh. We must place no confidence in the flesh. Paul writes the Galatians (3:3), “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

We, who are saved by the Spirit, chosen by God before the creation of the world by grace, not by works. If that is the case, why, why, why!?! would we go back to trusting in the flesh to walk by the spirit? Why would we rely on ourselves to overcome our sins? Not even Paul could do that!

As long as we remain on this earth, we will have to fight the temptations of our flesh daily. But we cannot fight it in the power of the flesh. The flesh longs for the things of this world. It will continue to take us to the wide and easy way, making the same mistakes over and over again. Heading down the path of destruction and death with the empty promises and empty lies of Satan.

We cannot rely or trust in ourselves to be better or get better. We cannot trust in a resolution or a written plan to change. We must turn to the Spirit and those God has placed in our lives to help us bear up our burdens.

We must demonstrate self-control and fight the urge to fix ourselves, and instead turn to the Lord and his body.

Brothers and sisters, we live in a culture that is deeply individualistic. We all live in our own houses with our fences, and we don't like to depend on others for our needs.

But in a war against the powers of darkness, we cannot rely just on ourselves. We need Spirit and the church – the body of believers. Our desire is to resist help from others and keep our struggle deeply hidden. But that desire is grounded in self-reliance.

God has given us his indwelling Spirit and he has given us the church of Christ. We are a body; we are all useful. Not just the pastors or elders or deacons – God has given us all to each other, to “bear one another's burdens, to love each other as ourselves.

Alone, we will not overcome the lusts of the flesh. But together in Christ, as we walk in the Spirit we will not gratify the desires of the flesh. Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Hendrickson, William. *New Testament Commentary: Galatians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1968.

Stott, John R. W.. *The Message of Galatians: The Bible Speaks Today*. Downers, Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968.