**The Church in the Power of the Spirit**

**April 30, 2017**

**“The Fruit of the Spirit”**

**1. Introduction: Rules, Rock Music and the Radio**

When Sherri and I were in our third year of Bible College, we were both Resident Advisors on the dorms, which meant that we had to enforce the rules, even if we didn’t agree with them. Being an R.A. wasn’t all bad, but it did involve a lot of encounters with noisy students, over-affectionate couples, stressed-out students, depressed students, love sick students and sometimes, rebellious students. One incident in particular sticks with me. The Bible College we attended had a rule about rock music. You could play secular music in your dorm room as long it didn’t offend anyone. Playing rock music in a public area, such as a common lounge area, was against the rules. Usually, we didn’t have too many problems with this rule until some well-meaning patron donated a radio to the College and it was placed in one of the lounges. One night Sherri and I went down to the lounge and there was only one student sitting on a couch and listening to rock music on the radio. Sherri intervened and instructed the guy to turn off the radio. Well, this led to an all-out confrontation featuring Sherri, the conscientious R.A. and a rather rebellious student, whose name escapes me. I honestly forget how everything played out, but I do remember that it was an unpleasant evening.

In retrospect, I think the situation was unfortunate in so many ways. In Sherri’s defense, she was doing her job by enforcing the rules of the College. In the rebellious student’s defense, it was a dumb rule and it was made even dumber by having a radio in the student lounge. What was the administration thinking when they did this? But this little story does raise the issue about *rules* and the Christian life. How do we define our behavior as Christians? What written or unwritten rules do we apply to our lives or to the lives of others? What is on our list of forbidden activities? Playing cards, listening to rock music, watching TV, going to the movies, drinking alcohol, having a tattoo, wearing jeans to church? This list could go on and on. Paul’s words in Galatians seem to challenge our obsession with rules, by suggesting that there is a better way for Christians to live in the world – in the power of the Spirit.

**2. Freedom in Christ**

To understand Paul’s discussion of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:16-26 it needs to be viewed within the larger context of the letter. If we were to walk through the entire letter, we would observe Paul’s passionate defense of the gospel in response to a significant set of problems within the churches in Galatia. These Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians responded positively to Paul’s message and placed their faith in Jesus the Messiah. Since these Gentile Christians were “in Christ,” they were now included in God’s chosen people and recipients of the promises of the covenant. Paul makes it clear that all this was through Christ’s death on the cross which paves the way for people to have a right standing before God. Everything seemed to be going fine until a group of rival evangelists arrived on the scene and insisted that “to be a good Christian, one had first to become a good Jew” (Cole, *Galatians,* p. 23). These rival evangelists taught that since Jesus was the Messiah expected by Judaism, then those who believed in him should observe the Jewish Law, which included male circumcision.

Paul was strongly opposed to such an understanding of the gospel and feared for its growing influence among the Galatians. Characterizing the rivals’ message as “another gospel,” Paul answered their criticisms with a bold presentation of the true gospel, which countered their understanding to the necessity of the Law for the Christian. Paul declared, “And we Jewish Christians know that we become right with God, not by doing what the law commands, but by faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16). Subsequently, followers of Jesus are freed from submitting to the Law’s requirements as a marker of their identity as God’s people. No longer would circumcision, dietary laws or Sabbath observance mark them as the people of God, instead, union with Christ would.

Paul, then, argued quite strongly that the Gentile Christians in Galatia were freed from the requirements of the Law. Chapter five opens with the words, “So Christ has really set us *free*. Now make sure that you stay free, and don’t get tied up again in slavery to the law” (5:1). Right after these words, Paul issued a stern warning against submitting the requirements of the Jewish Law, specifically, circumcision (5:2-4). Paul declared, “For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, you have been cut off from Christ” (5:4). In contrast, those who are “in Christ” are characterized by the Spirit, faith, hope, righteousness, and love (5:5-6).

Those who are in Christ are also characterized by a God-given *freedom*. Eugene Peterson expresses this idea quite nicely - “Through Jesus, Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but a personal Savior who set us free to live a free live. God did not coerce us from without, but set us free from within” (Peterson, *The Message,* p. 391). Yet, this freedom, like any gift from God, can be misused. Paul introduces his discussion of the fruit of the Spirit with these words, “For you, dear friends, have been called to live in freedom – not freedom to satisfy your sinful nature, but freedom to serve one another in love” (5:13). Prior to Christ, the Law provided moral direction for God’s people (3:23-25). With the coming of Christ, those who trust in him are freed from the Law, yet there is still a need for ethical living. Freedom in Christ does not mean we can do whatever we want. Again, Peterson’s words are helpful – “His (Paul’s) letter to the Galatian churches helps them, and us, recover the original freedom. It also gives direction in the nature of God’s gift of freedom – most necessary guidance, for freedom is a delicate and subtle gift, easily perverted and often squandered” (Peterson, *The Message,* p. 391).

So, how then are we to live out our freedom in Christ? Paul first tells us how not to live out our freedom, “only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence” (5:13). Literally, Paul is saying that we shouldn’t allow our freedom to become a base of operations for the flesh. Seizing upon freedom, the flesh seduces a person by perverting freedom into decadence. The “flesh” becomes an key part of Paul’s discussion on the fruit of the Spirit, since the flesh and its works are antagonistic toward the Spirit and his fruit. Our pew Bible translate this Greek word “flesh” as “your sinful nature,” which is a good translation. When Paul speaks of the *flesh,* he is not saying that material things are inherently evil or that our physical desires are to be avoided or suppressed. Biblical scholar Frank Matera offers a good definition of the *flesh* as “the inclination and the tendency in the human person to live an existence completely and totally centred on the self . . . Controlled by the flesh humans seek their own advantage at the expense of others (Matera, *Galatians,* p. 196).

Instead of using freedom to engage in self-gratification, we are to embark on a journey of mutual servanthood, using love as our vehicle. Paul continues this passage, noting, “but use your freedom to serve one another in love” (5:13). To bolster this point, he cites Scripture, specifically Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” For Paul, the commandment to love one’s neighbor *fulfills* the whole Law (5:14). It is the greatest of paradoxes - Christian freedom entails our enslavement to others in love; the Christian is freed from the law, yet fulfills the law through love. Instead of focusing on the self and looking out for #1, the Christian looks to the needs of the other person, loves the other and serves the other. Biblical scholar, Ronald Fung, gets at the gist of this verse, “In other words, the believer who is free from the law is at the same time one who fulfills that law; only the way that he fulfills the law is not by meticulously observing the rules and regulations of an external code, but by the new way of love, which is generated within the believer by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*).

Yet it seems that loving others wasn’t happening in the churches in Galatia. Right after Paul’s call to love and serve one another, he alerts them to the dangers of unrestrained conflict, “But if instead of showing love among yourselves you are always biting and devouring one another, watch out! Beware of destroying one another” (5:15). When we attack other people, through our words and actions, we fail to love them. We also open the door to the deadly spiral of a back-and-forth antagonism, which can only lead to mutual annihilation. No one emerges from this kind of a fight without deep wounds of hurt and bitterness. This kind of fight can do great damage to Christian fellowship.

**3. The Works of the Flesh and the Fruit of the Spirit**

On the heels of this command to love, Paul reflects on the fruit of the Spirit. He begins in 5:16 with the words, “Now I mean this . . .,” showing that what follows further explains how one is to resist the self and serve others. So, rather than seeing the fruit of the Spirit as a matter of private spirituality, we need to see this work of the Spirit in terms of communal relationships. The harvest produced by the Spirit in our lives is the way that we are enabled to love and serve each other.

Picking up on his previous discussion of the dangers of the flesh, that is, the sinful focus on self-gratification, Paul now juxtaposes the flesh with the work of the Spirit in the Christian’s life. “Live your life by the Spirit and you will not satisfy or yield to the desires of the flesh” (5:16). I am interested by the different verbs that Paul uses throughout this passage to speak of the Christian’s relationship to the Holy Spirit:

* *Live* by the Spirit and you will not satisfy the works of the flesh (5:16)
* But if you are *led* by the Spirit, you are not under the law (5:18)
* If we *live* by the Spirit, let us also *keep in step* with the Spirit (5:25)

In all these cases, the Spirit is the agent of change in the Christian’s life. The Holy Spirit leads, guides, and give life to the Christian. Clearly, we need to recognize that that being a good Christian is not the result of personal effort alone. At the same time, we are not passive recipients of the Spirit’s work. Ronald Fung expresses this nicely: “The Holy Spirit is not a perpetual motion machine which operates automatically in the life of the believer, but a Person whose working the Christian can respond to, depend on, and cooperate with. Therefore, the Christian faces the decision whether to follow the Spirit in this way or to give in to the flesh” (Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*). One must make an active decision to be led by the Spirit.

Speaking of the *flesh*, Paul moves on to stress the antithesis between the flesh and the Spirit. The flesh desires things that are opposed to the Spirit and the Spirit wills that which is opposite to the flesh. These two ways of life are antithetical (5:17). We can’t simply live by the Spirit on Sunday and live in the flesh for the rest of the week. One needs to actively choose to stand on the side of the Spirit over against the flesh.

Paul highlights this contrast in his comparison between the *works of the flesh* and *the fruit of the Spirit*. To begin, I find Paul’s language of *works* vs. *fruit* quite interesting*.* The *works of the flesh* are human actions done for self-gratification while the *fruit of the Spirit* is a natural product of a life controlled and guided by the Spirit. The *fruit of the Spirit* is not the result of a strenuous observance of an external legal code, rather, it is the natural outcome of the Spirit’s life-transforming power in the Christian. Next, are Paul’s lists of the *works of the flesh* and the *fruit of the Spirit.* These lists are not mirror opposites of each other. You won’t find a corresponding fruit of the Spirit for each work of the flesh. What you will find is that the *works of the flesh* are manifestations of a focus on the self instead of being led by the Spirit. They are also socially disruptive as they tear at the fabric of community.

The fifteen *works of the flesh* can be placed into four groups having to do with *sexual sin* (sexual immorality, impurity, eagerness for lustful pleasure); *pagan religion* (idolatry, occult activity); *communal dissention* (hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outburst of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, factions, envy); and self-indulgence (drunkenness, wild parties). In all these cases, there is a clear focus on self-gratification. Sexual sin emerges when one is more interested in using others for pleasure, rather than truly loving his or her spouse. Practitioners of pagan religion performed rituals to get something from the gods for themselves. Dissention within faith communities transpires when we put our own rights, opinions, and wishes before the needs of others and loose our cool when we don’t get what we want. Over-indulgence happens when our sole aim in life is to please ourselves.

But the *fruit of the Spirit* is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (5:22-23). This single harvest of the Spirit has nine facets:

* *Love* is the greatest; it is patient, kind, not envious or boastful . . . (1 Corinthians 13).
* *Joy* enables the Christian to rejoice in the Lord always, even in the most difficult of circumstances (Philippians 4:4).
* *Peace* with God and with others has been given to us through Christ (Ephesians 2:14).
* *Patience* allows one to keep calm in the face of aggravation without striking back (James 5:10).
* *Kindness* occurs when people provide something beneficial for others as an act of kindness (1 Corinthians 13:4; Colossians 3:12).
* *Goodness* involves doing good to others, specifically, by being generous (Romans 15:14).
* *Faithfulness* entails the Christian’ s trust in God as well as his or her commitment to doing God’s will in the world (Ephesians 6:16).
* *Gentleness* is in stark contrast with being harsh with other people; it is strength under control as one could assert their position and deal with others harshly, yet chooses to be gentle (Ephesians 4:2).
* *Self-control* involves mastering one’s own desires and saying *no* to the pleasures of over-indulgence (1 Corinthians 9:25).

This is the harvest that God’s Spirit desires to produce in our lives. Go down the list, reflect on each one and you will see how essential each item is for the health of our congregation. Stanley Sanders offers this excellent summary, “The fruit of the Spirit is a cornucopia of practices and attitudes that build up the community and manifest God’s oneness and self-giving love. Only amidst this kind of produce, only within the reign of God, is freedom possible. And only the freedom God offers when we become servants of one another in the faith of Christ produces this kind of oneness – relationships made right – in human community” (Sanders, *Interpretation Bible Studies: Philippians and Galatians,* p. 84).

**4. Conclusion: Keep in Step with the Spirit**

So, we are faced with a line in the sand - indulging in self-gratification or living by the Spirit. Paul makes things very clear – “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there” (5:24). For those who belong to Christ habitually practicing the deeds of the flesh is no longer a viable option. Through Jesus we have been transferred to the realm of the Spirit. Yet, the Christian is not passive since one must make an active decision to follow the Spirit’s leading.

Paul ends with this challenge – “If we are living by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit” (5:25). When I read these words, I am reminded of the many times that I walked to our local school to pick up the kids at the end of the day. As a child, Ethan would often dawdle along, stopping to look at something or to sit down and take a break. This would drive Anya crazy because she was anxious to get home to get a snack and watch TV. I was a bit bothered by this as well, because I needed to get home to start supper. But I couldn’t walk ahead and leave Ethan behind – I had to wait for him. Are we dawdling along in our walk with the Spirit? Are we distracted with an obsession with ourselves and our needs? If we are living by the Spirit, let us also *keep in step with the Spirit*.”