

"Inheriting the Kingdom"

Lesson Text: Galatians 5:13–26 **Background Scripture:** Galatians 5:13–26

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 44:21–28

Galatians 5:13–26

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh¹; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."² ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ 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 whatever³ 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, orgies, 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, forbearance, 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. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

TODAY'S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To list the fruit of the Spirit.
- **Biblical Principle:** To contrast the fruit of the Spirit with the works of the flesh.
- **Daily Application:** To make a plan to identify and eliminate one unhealthy fruit in your life.

INTRODUCTION

Already Having What We Seek

A man walks through his home, searching. Where are my keys? he asks himself repeatedly. Then he reaches in his pocket. His keys are there.

A woman rummages through her car, searching. Where are my glasses? she wonders. Then she touches her head. Her glasses are there.

Sometimes we already have what we are looking for. Today's text is like that.

LESSON CONTEXT

Our text is from Paul's letter to the Galatians, written to address a controversy among churches founded on his first missionary journey. He wrote in response to some people's belief that Christians of Gentile background had to obey stipulations in the Law of Moses in order to belong to God's people (Galatians 1:6; 5:2–6; see Acts 15:1–5).

But Paul pointed out that faith in Jesus, not the completion of the works of law, is the true identifier of God's people (Galatians 2:15–16; 3:1–6). God gave the Israelites the Law of Moses to guide them until He brought the fulfillment of His promises (3:23–25). That fulfillment was Jesus. His death and resurrection made it possible for people of every nation to be welcomed into God's family. Works of law in general (3:10–12) and circumcision in particular (5:2–6) had not resulted in the people living as God called them

to live: fully devoted to Him in holiness. But in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit, there was freedom and empowerment to do so.

Living in Freedom: Galatians 5:13-18

The nature of the controversy indicates the presence of spiritual brothers and sisters from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. These disparate (basically different) groups had been made into a family by God's call. That call is the good news that in Jesus, God had come in the flesh, had submitted to death, and rose to new life.

The result of that call is *freedom* (see also 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 2:4). That term would have reminded Paul's Jewish readers of Israel's exodus from Egypt. But freedom is not a license to do as one pleases. Some might have thought that because the requirements of the law were fulfilled, then their freedom meant that they could do as they pleased. Paul negated this thought.

The flesh is the sinful nature to man, which has been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20).

Therefore, we should not let our freedom (liberty) become the impulse which will start the old nature to assert itself again. On the contrary, by *love* true Christian love is the motive of true Christian conduct. Therefore we should *serve one another* constantly, and voluntarily enslave ourselves to one another.

Jesus' faithfulness was also expressed in His loving service for others (Mark 10:45). His followers are compelled to exercise Christian liberty in the same way: in love serving one another. Christian liberty (including salvation from hell) is not a license to sin but an opportunity to serve.

1. How does God want us to exercise our "freedom" (Galatians 5:13)?

Many Jewish teachers, including Jesus (Mark 12:28-34) and Paul, saw the entire Law of Moses as pointing to two great obligations: to love God and *love* others (compare Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5). Because the Galatian churches faced division, Paul emphasized loving others as the law's focus. If motivated by their love for God as revealed in Jesus, the Galatian Christians could love one another despite long-standing divisions of their respective heritages.

Such love is produced by the Holy Spirit. Love is the real fulfillment of the law which the legalist were wanting to serve. It was said of the early Christians, "see how they love one another," not how they quarrel, criticize, and backbite. Christ did not come to destroy the law... but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17). Grace does not make one free to sin; it makes one free to serve.

The alternative to the love just described was self-defeating division. Each side attacked the other, like flesh-eating animals. In such a conflict, both sides would be eaten up. In the Cold War that followed World War II, the United States had a policy of nuclear deterrence known as "mutual assured destruction"—appropriately known as MAD for short. It would indeed be madness for the Galatians to undercut *each other* since that would only result in mutual destruction. A divided church will be a devoured church.

The two groups had to come to terms with the truth that they both belong to God's people through their faith in Jesus rather than through their obedience to the Law of Moses. This did not mean ignoring their differences in background or experience; but it did mean uniting across those differences with Christlike love.

2. What are some of the benefits of loving others as we do ourselves? How can we get along with others of different backgrounds (Galatians 5:14-15)

To “walk by the Spirit” is to have the habit of continually walking by the energizing power and under the divine direction of the Holy Spirit. This is the only way of deliverance from selfish lust. The flesh opposes the Spirit in an effort to prevent the believer from a life of obedience, surrender, and victory. The Holy Spirit opposes the flesh and gives the believer victory over it. “They (the two) are in conflict with each other,” lined up in hostile face to face conflict.

Those who believe in Jesus as God’s true king are promised that God’s Holy Spirit will live within them (Acts 2:38). Thereby they are empowered to do what Israel had failed to do before: live genuinely as God’s people.

Paul did not need to tell his readers to receive the Spirit, because they already had. But the Spirit’s direction and power can be resisted (Acts 7:51). So the Galatians needed to be reminded to walk (or live) by the Spirit. In so doing, they would fulfill God’s will as summarized in the command to love. Such a life is the opposite of the life of the flesh; that is, the life of sinful selfishness. The flesh provokes desires, or any selfish motivation.

3. What did Paul mean by “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16-18)?

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to ensure that you continue walking in step with God’s Spirit?

Digging Deeper

Who is a mature believer you can ask for accountability in this regard?

Paul clarifies that there was nothing inherently wrong with the law in and of itself. But the Law of Moses did have its limitations (see verse 18 of today’s lesson, also Romans 7:7; 1 Timothy 1:8). The Jewish constituents among Paul’s original audience were especially challenged to shift their thoughts, speech, and behavior toward a life directed *by the Spirit*.

Rejecting Selfishness: Galatians 5:19-21

For purposes of contrast, Paul list is not exhaustive, but only reminded his readers what life in the flesh, the self-ruled life, was like as he began what we call a vice list. There are many such lists in Paul’s letters (examples: Romans 1:29–31; Colossians 3:5).

Note the plural, “act(s)” the complex mixture of evil desires and deeds. The flesh is always active; it never takes a vacation. These acts all issue from a heart and rebellion against God and insisting upon doing as its wills (Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21–22).

These terms encompass all forms of sexual activity that occur outside of a marriage relationship (*sexual immorality*). In addition to hurting others, these acts also harm the guilty person (see 1 Corinthians 6:12–20).

Impurity speaks to guilt through such activity (moral impurity). *Debauchery* refers to behavior that is shocking to public decency. Even cultures far from godly standards uphold some standards of sexual propriety (see 1 Corinthians 5:1). But a life of selfishness will find a way to shock any society. Life in the Holy Spirit is directly opposed to the life of flagrant sexual sin (1 Thessalonians 4:3–8).

The list then shifts the focus to false religious practices. *Idolatry* exalts the created above the Creator, reducing God to something much less than He is. *Witchcraft* is the attempt to use physical objects and rituals to manipulate the spiritual world.

Next, Paul lists attitudes and actions that work against self-sacrificial love, threatening the church's unity. *Hatred* refers to hostility toward those we identify as enemies. Discord is divisiveness, making differences greater rather than seeking to overcome them. Jealousy is a strong passion that resents the success of others.

Fits of rage refers to strong anger or wrath. God's wrath is the expression of His holiness against human evil. But human anger is often driven not by holiness but by selfishness. Selfish ambition is the forming of mutually hostile groups to advance selfish interests; dissensions intensify that unholy tendency. Factions point to false beliefs that lead to destructive differences within the community.

4. Think to "yourself" about what negative things you struggle with personally. Remember, we "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (see Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:10). How could you be working on them along with God's help and ask for His forgiveness? (Galatians 5:19-21a) (Personal question)

What Do You Think?

How does the world's inclination for hatred, strife, and cruelty affect the church's display of sacrificial love?

Digging Deeper

How might James 1:19-27 inform the church's response to such inclinations?

The semicolon after the word *envy* indicates that it goes with the previous grouping of selfish behavior. It refers to the desire to deprive others of what they have.

Paul concludes with two terms that represent public displays of the self-destructiveness produced by selfishness. *Drunkenness* (intoxication from alcohol) suggests individual self-destruction. Drunkenness is part of the wild, party-like atmosphere of *orgies*, a context which includes unrestrained immorality (contrast Romans 13:13-14; 1 Peter 4:3).

All these evils are contrary to the kingdom of God, and a rebellion against God's reign and rule brought about by Christ, now and in eternity. Such lifestyle is proof positive that one has not become a new creature in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), that person is not in the kingdom of God, and will have no share in it. A Christian may fall temporarily into these sins, but he or she will be miserable until they confess and forsake them (Proverbs 28:13). Those whose lives are characterized continually by these vices would have no eternal inheritance except death (see Revelation 22:14-15).

5. How does participating in the negative things mentioned above keep us from experiencing God's blessings while we're here on earth, and eternally? (Galatians 5:21b)

Pursuing Godliness: Galatians 5:22-26

The "Spirit" enables us to produce *fruit*. The first three are in relation to God; the next three are in relation to man; and the last three are in relation to one's own life.

The fruit of the Spirit stands in sharp contrast to the works of the flesh. The word fruit is an apt term because like a farmer who plants a crop and reaps a harvest, what the Holy Spirit produces is what God seeks in His people. Since Paul's focus is on doing good toward others, perhaps this is why the word fruit is singular: all these characteristics belong together as one fruit, not many fruits.

As with the previous list, this list groups similar characteristics. It begins with three foundational aspects of the Christ-follower's character: love, joy, and peace. The kind of love Paul has in mind is not

conditioned on how deserving of love the other person is. Rather, the kind of love in view flows from grace that blesses the undeserving. It is the kind of love that God demonstrates toward us (John 3:16). Joy is an inner disposition of well-being, but it always is expressed outwardly and shared with others (see 2 Corinthians 8:2).

The word *peace* reminds us of Old Testament statements about the peace that God granted his people (Numbers 6:26; Psalm 29:11; Isaiah 9:6–7). More than the end of hostility, such peace means positive goodwill and fellowship. As God has made whole our relationship with Him, His Spirit empowers us to make relationships whole with others (see 2 Corinthians 13:11).

The second grouping consists of characteristics that undergird relationships with others. *Forbearance* is patience regarding the failings of others, including wrongs that others commit. As God is patient with us, His Spirit empowers our patience toward others (compare Romans 2:4).

Kindness names the attitude that seeks to do positive good to others in all circumstances. It serves to nurture and protect others. Again, because God treats his people in this way, his Spirit enables them to treat others likewise (see Colossians 3:12–13). *Goodness* further develops the idea of kindness, putting the attitude into action. Those empowered by the Spirit do not simply want the good; they actually do good things for others. The Spirit compels us to be loyal to fellow Christians, committed to their welfare no matter what.

6. Which fruit of the Spirit do you have? Which do you need to work on? (Galatians 22-23)

What Do You Think?

How do the Spirit's gifts (Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:4–11) empower you to seek the welfare of others?

Digging Deeper

How will you continue to develop never-failing love (1 Corinthians 13) so that you can be attentive to others?

The list concludes with three characteristics that are to undergird all the believer's actions. *Faithfulness* in this context refers to a willingness to practice without fail what one believes. As God has been devoted and persistent to fulfill the promises that he has made, so also his Spirit empowers us to be persistently devoted.

A second feature undergirding Spirit-filled action is *gentleness*. The gentle do not seek to assert rights or privileges. As Christ emptied himself of privilege in becoming human, so also do those empowered by His Spirit (compare Ephesians 4:2).

The word translated *self-control* is also (with variations) found in Acts 24:25; 1 Corinthians 7:9; 9:25; and 2 Peter 1:6. It refers to the ability to keep desires in check. This was a characteristic admired in Paul's time but not widely practiced.

The Galatian Christians could be criticized by their Jewish neighbors for abandoning the Law of Moses and by their pagan neighbors for abandoning the customs of pagan worship. But Paul reminds them that if they live as the Spirit directs, they will produce a fruit that no law—Jewish or Roman—stands against.

Believers in Christ are joined to Him in his death and so are raised to a new life (Romans 6:1–14). This does not mean that our old desires disappear instantly. But it means that over time the Spirit replaces

them with Christlikeness. This requires our cooperation on a daily basis surrendering to the Spirit to assure that the old life remains dead.

7. What identifies us as Christ followers? (Galatians 5:24)

What Do You Think?

How would you explain to a new believer what it means to have “crucified the flesh” (Galatians 5:24)?

Digging Deeper

How might Romans 7:22–8:17 help inform your explanation?

The new life the Galatians had in Christ carried an obligation: to put that life into practice. The phrase keep in step with the Spirit could also be translated as “get in line with the Spirit.” It means deliberately reordering one’s life to reflect what God has done. It is bearing the fruit of the Spirit as routine practice.

The Spirit’s work can be destroyed easily by persistent selfishness, the key characteristic of the life of the flesh. If Paul’s original audience chose to seek attention for themselves, then the result would be to disregard and disrespect others. That would destroy the fellowship that the Spirit sought to build. Christians are saved by a Lord who was worthy of glory but chose lowliness to serve others (Philippians 2:1–11). Following His way by the Spirit’s power directs the Christian to a better way through loving others.

8. What do we as Christians need to do from this point forward? (Galatians 5:25-26)

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness Plus

Paul begins and ends his vice list with the commonly named pagan vices but devotes most of his attention in the middle to matters of hostility and disunity. He is driving home a point to Galatian church members that needs to be heard through the ages: When we divide the body of Christ for self-serving reasons, we serve the flesh. We might tend to minimize such acts by pointing to the blatant evils of the ungodly world around us, but our selfish hostility is just as evil. We paganize ourselves when we refuse to love one another. Do you want a kingdom life, the life that God always intended for His people? Then let the Holy Spirit bear His fruit.

What Do You Think?

In what ways will you serve a neighbor in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

How will the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23) inform your acts of neighborly love?

PRAYER

Thank You, God, for Your incomparable blessing of freedom and life in the Spirit. Help us to rely on the power of your Spirit so that we can be people who reflect Jesus’ resurrection. In His name we pray. Amen!

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Freedom means becoming what God made us to be.