

The Test: The Fruits of the Spirit
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Galatians 5: 17-26
Romans 7: 14-18 & 25

As we have been throughout the summer, today we are taking a look at the book of Galatians—a relatively brief book of the New Testament that is, in fact, a letter from the Apostle Paul to the Galatian churches. These were new churches that Paul helped start. After he left the Galatians began to lose their focus. They were distracted by a group of people called the Judaizers who brought with them a false gospel and this confused the Galatians. They were studying the wrong information. After their first test, Paul has the difficult job of telling his “students” that they had failed.

We’ve been examining Galatians because we believe that at his appointed time God will move us through a period of testing, as if to ask us, “What have you learned?” As we walk through these tests, we can learn a great deal about ourselves and about our priorities. We can examine our foundations and take stock of our hearts. Are our hearts aligned with God’s? Are we a reflection of Christ in our communities?

The question I’d like you to ask yourself today is this:

Do you have good roots?

I ask because good roots are necessary to sustain life in the vegetation that we see everywhere in our neighborhoods right here in Central PA. My neighbors are remodeling a bit (who isn’t these days?), and their contractor had to move a section of their very beautiful fence they installed a couple of years ago. They had to move this fence around this ginormous tree that connects our two backyards together. Two post holes had to be dug near that tree and to dig these holes they brought out this amazing auger to drill down through the massive roots. To see this gigantic tree from that perspective. To look down and see the massive roots, was something else.

Do you have good roots?

Good fruit points to good roots.

Before we dive into the word, I feel like I need to start with something foundational. It is really important you understand this one critical fact about me before we begin. If you remember

just one thing about me from this life, I hope that (in addition to be a decent person) you remember that I love being married to Rebekah Skillen.

Rebekah is my best friend and wife. Later this year we will celebrate our 19th wedding anniversary. We've grown up and are now growing older together. We've traveled the world and walked through all of life's hills and valleys together. We've made two amazing kids and have shared our lives with a growing community in our new home state of Pennsylvania. I love being married.

While I could talk for the next twenty-five minutes (and even longer) about how amazing it is to be married, I feel like there is a small disclosure I should share before we continue.

Sometimes the worst of ourselves comes out in our human relationships. Do you know what I mean? Anyone in the house or online today know what I am talking about? In the context of the very best of our human relationships we are surprised when the very worst part of ourselves is revealed. Why? Because we are *human*.

Now, I want to take this moment to clarify something else that is really important. Our relationship with God is very different than our relationships with people. If we are not careful we will attribute human qualities to God. But here's the thing. God doesn't do human things. He doesn't start texting on his phone while we are talking to him, he doesn't forget our birthdays, he doesn't say things to hurt our feelings to make us feel jealous. He's God. Our relationship with him is very different, but there is one common element between these two types of relationships. It is us—the human element.

What does it mean to be human? One feature of the human experience is that we live in the tension between the flesh, our human emotions, feelings, fears and ideas, and the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God in our lives. These two things are in conflict with one another and it is this conflict that I want to explore today.

This tension between the flesh and the Spirit is a real concern. One that has been a part of the human experience long before any of us were here. God understood this tension, that is why he gave Moses the Ten Commandments and the many other laws after freeing his people from generations of slavery in Egypt. This law was meant to shape the physical and spiritual lives of the Israelites.

Recognizing this physical tension that sometimes exists between our physical bodies and the Spirit, God sent his son, Jesus, to die on a cross. His body was physically broken as a sign to all that when we allow God to build that new life inside all of us we are, in fact, leaving our old lives—as if that part of us is dead and gone too.

When Paul was with the Galatians, he had seen God build new lives inside these new Christians. They had cast aside their sins and had begun to live with the Holy Spirit. But then, seeing how they responded to the Judaizers who told them that their spiritual commitment wasn't enough. That in fact the Galatians would have to conform their flesh, that is they would have to adopt the rules that were given to Moses, if they wanted to become true Christians. Seeing the Galatians struggle between their humanity and their spirituality, Paul sets up a comparison for the Galatians to consider. He says in vs 19 and 20:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness (disregard of principles or rules) idolatry, sorcery, enmities (outward rageful hostilities to someone or something), strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing (drinking and loud partying), and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

This is a list of a lot different things, and as I look at some of them, I realize that in less than savory parts of my life, I enjoyed some of these things listed in these verses. The works of the flesh are just that, they are the things we do out of impulse and habit and they are often birthed in an ego-centric context—that is to say they are things we do because we want to. In other contexts, however, the works of the flesh are the things we can't believe we've done, said or felt. I hope you understand what I am saying, because sometimes we live through the works of the flesh when we don't mean to.

And look around at our culture today, there seems to be works of flesh at work in nearly every aspect of our lives. We can get a healthy diet of anger and rage just by turning on the evening news. While from our perspectives it may seem that things are worse now than they have ever been before, is this really the case? During Apostle Paul's time it was clear that the works of the flesh were present then just as much as they are now. In our present culture, the politicians will tell you there is a political reason as to why the works of the flesh pervade our lives. The educators will tell us it is because of some systemic failure of our educational institutions. Economists might tell us there is a Marxist solution to all of our woes, but that doesn't quite get at it, does it? The works of the flesh are present because on some conscious or unconscious level humankind has wanted to live like God since the original sin that we read about in the Garden of Eden. It's as if we wish to live the way we want without regard for the authority God has over our lives. That is the works of the flesh.

Let me give you an example by returning back for just a moment to the premise I started with earlier today. **Sometimes the worst of ourselves comes out in our human relationships.**

If you are in a close relationship with someone else, it doesn't have to be a marriage relationship, but a relationship where you are close with another person. Inevitably, there may

come a time when disagreement or disappointment arises and through the normal course of human interaction you say something that you don't really mean or you say something that sounds so absolutely uncharacteristic or out of place that in reflection you can't even begin to understand why you said it.

Listen friends, as much as I love being married, I can tell you there have been times where I have heard myself say the dumbest things. I don't know why. It's as if I can see and hear myself saying in slow motion and I can stop myself. What is this phenomenon? It is a work of the flesh. In those moments, I've come to understand that my own jealousy or anger is driving the conversation and I say things that just aren't nice. This is not good fruit. And as the Apostle Paul said in his letter to the Galatians, **I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

Remember, good fruit points to good roots.

The Mosaic law was established to, in a large part, address a lot of what Paul listed as works of the flesh. God's people had spent several hundred years apart from him and he saw things in them that needed to be addressed. So as part of his new promise with them he gave them some rules to live by. These rules were corrective and acclimating. Like small saplings, the roots of the Israelite people needed some direct water and sunlight.

An interesting thing that I once heard about landscaping is that when you plant new plants or shrubs in your flowerbeds they have three cycles. They sleep, creep and grow. The directions left with Moses were meant to replant God's people. But to grow his people, to give them the life they needed to sink those root systems deep into the ground, to secure them for eternity, God sent Jesus who then left the Holy Spirit.

You want to watch a body of believers grow? Tap into the Holy Spirit.

To provide the right kind of contrast to the works of the flesh, Paul then lists the fruits of the Spirit. These are the outward signs of those who are in relationship with God, who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and who seek to dwell in the Holy Spirit. In verse 22, Paul says,

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. That is to say, we have left the works of the flesh... and further, **If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.**

By comparing these two things, the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, I believe Paul is creating a great inflection point where the Galatians have to decide for themselves, which way they are going to go. Yes, the Galatians recognized their humanity. We all do. In the letter to the Romans that was read from earlier in this service Paul recognizes this about himself too. There are times when we simply don't do or say what we want to do or say. That is the work of the flesh in our lives, but Paul would contend that we do not need to put ourselves under an old law. That time has passed and further if we recognize this in ourselves we should also see the forgiveness and redemption that we have received through Christ.

Look at how the Apostle Paul characterizes those who live in Christ he says, "And those who belong in Christ Jesus **have crucified** the flesh with its passions and desires." That verb choice is important because it is in what grammarians call the present perfect tense which means the action is something that happened in the past that has an impact on something happening now. So, when we accept the forgiveness and grace of Christ, when we say yes to God, we are stepping into a new life and tapping into the Spirit. When the worst of us appears, God has already forgiven us. We should follow that model and forgive ourselves and one another.

The old flesh is dead, friends. Why would we go back and try to revive it?

In the tension that we live through, it is the Spirit that revives us with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control. Further, Paul says that we should be guided by the Spirit and I believe that is an invitation for us to find these qualities in others. These are the fruits of a life dwelling in the Spirit. They are the fruits that are so willingly and faithfully shared with others. They are the fuel and food that strengthens our roots and allows our branches to spread. These are the currencies of the mission we have to share the love of Christ with others.

Good roots point to good fruit.

How are your roots?

Are you surviving? Or are you thriving? I mean from the ground on down, are you living on the water of life that has the power to lift you up and over every strangling weed, or are you feeling crowded, cramped and suffocated? Can you breathe?

My hope and prayer is that we consider carefully the sacrifice of Christ and choose to live in the Spirit, where we are ultimately redeemed and renewed.

Amen.