

LESSON 3

The Spirit Who Does the Growing

I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don't do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

— Galatians 5:16-25

You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him. Now if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, then he who raised Christ from the dead will also bring your mortal bodies to life through his Spirit who lives in you. So then, brothers and sisters, we are not obligated to the flesh to live according to the flesh, because if you live according to the flesh, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all those led by God's Spirit are God's sons.

— Philippians 2:12-13

The Spirit of God lives in every Christian and sets the pace of our growth. Our work is real, and it is the work of keeping in step with him.

A Long Gravel Lane

ANYONE WHO HAS WALKED A LONG GRAVEL LANE WITH A FOUR-YEAR-OLD KNOWS HOW IT GOES. Your son takes off for the mailbox at a dead run and has to be called back. A minute later, he's squatting over a beetle fifty yards behind, then he comes pounding up the lane, out of breath and a little put out that nobody waited. By the time you both reach the road, he has covered twice the ground and arrives at the same moment. Your pace never changes the whole way.

Most of us walk the Christian life at the four-year-old's pace. In a good week we sprint: a new reading plan, a promise made in the car after class, and the feeling that this time it's finally taking. In a bad week

we fall fifty yards behind and decide the whole thing has gone on without us. Both weeks rest on the same assumption, that we are the ones setting the pace.

Paul has a phrase for what the child on that lane is slowly learning: *If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit*, Galatians 5:25. It comes at the end of a passage worth reading closely, because it speaks to the question underneath this whole quarter.

Whose Verbs Are These?

Galatians went to churches that were being told faith in Christ was a fine start. The rest, they heard, was up to them and the law of Moses. Paul had already asked them bluntly: *After beginning by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the flesh?* Galatians 3:3. Chapter 5 is where he answers his own question.

I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh, Galatians 5:16.

Last week, we ended by asking you to mark every verb in this passage that has the Spirit as its subject. If you did, the count came out shorter than you might have expected. The Spirit *desires what is against the flesh* in verse 17, and in a few weeks, we'll spend a full week on that collision of desires. In verse 18, we are the ones *led by the Spirit*. Most of the verbs belong to us: *walk* in verse 16, *live* and *keep in step* in verse 25. Paul hands us the walking and never takes it back.

What he says about the Spirit comes in a different form. Paul sets two lists side by side, and the first is *the works of the flesh*, Galatians 5:19. It runs fifteen items before he stops and writes *and anything similar*. The second list is the one we might have expected to find, and it begins as a single noun: *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*, Galatians 5:22–23.

Paul follows the list with a short line most of us read right past: *The law is not against such things*, Galatians 5:23. Remember who was listening. The Galatians had been warned that without the law of Moses standing guard, a Christian would slide into everything on the first list. Paul takes that danger seriously; he has just told them that *those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God*, Galatians 5:21. But nobody ever had to pass a law against patience. What the Spirit grows is what the law was reaching for all along, and Paul had already said so: *For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself*, Galatians 5:14. That is how he can say that those *led by the Spirit* are *not under the law* without handing anyone a license. The Spirit doesn't lead anyone toward the first list.

Works is plural. Fruit is singular, one harvest with nine qualities in it.⁸ Every one of the nine is something we have tried at one time or another to produce on a deadline. Paul describes them as what comes up when the Spirit does the growing. Fruit keeps a calendar nobody can rush. The farmer in our first lesson slept and got up while the seed sprouted and grew, *although he doesn't know how*, Mark 4:27.

Keeping in Step

That brings us back to the lane. *Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit*, Galatians 5:24–25.

Keep in step is a different word from the walk in verse 16.⁹ Walking is the everyday word for how a life goes. Keeping in step belongs to people moving in a line, each one matching a pace that someone else has set.

Here is part of the answer to main question we're addressing in our study: growth feels slow because the pace was never ours to set. The Spirit keeps the same stride through our good weeks and our bad ones, and Paul's instruction is to stay beside him. What changed on that lane, over a good many summers, is that the child quit sprinting for the mailbox and quit sulking fifty yards back. He learned to walk beside the one who was leading him.

Nothing Owed

Romans 8 tells us where that leading comes from: *the Spirit of God lives in you*, Romans 8:9.¹⁰ Paul means every Christian, and he closes the verse so that nobody is left out: *If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him*. Three verses later, he spells out what that means for the week ahead of us.

So then, brothers and sisters, we are not obligated to the flesh to live according to the flesh, Romans 8:12. Obligated is a debtor's word. The flesh still sends its bills, the same old demands in the same old handwriting, and we don't owe it a thing. Lesson 2 called our baptism a burial, and nobody hands a bill to a dead man.

But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live, Romans 8:13. Lesson 6 takes up what that looks like on an ordinary Tuesday. For now, the phrase worth noticing stands at the front of Paul's sentence: *by the Spirit*. The fight is ours, and the strength for it is his.

Then Paul says what being led makes us: *For all those led by God's Spirit are God's sons*, Romans 8:14. Being led is part of growing up in a family.

The Apostle Was Absent

Paul wrote to the Philippians from custody. He was a long way from a church he loved, and unsure whether he would see them again. So, he gives them a command for his absence: *Therefore, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence but even more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*, Philippians 2:12.

Notice how Paul gets to the command. He calls them *my dear friends*, and before he asks for anything he tells them what he has already seen: *you have always obeyed*. He calls it *your own salvation*, too. It already belongs to them. Paul wants it carried all the way through, down into the *grumbling and arguing* he mentions a verse later, Philippians 2:14. It has to reach the quarrel between Euodia and Syntyche too, the one he eventually addresses by name, Philippians 4:2. Every *you* in these verses is plural. Paul is writing to a congregation, and much of what gets worked out happens among people who still have to sit in the same room on Sunday.

That's a serious assignment, and Paul means all of it. Work out is a verb for carrying something through to the finish.¹¹ Paul would not be standing over them while they did it. Then he tells them who would be

there: *For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose*, Philippians 2:13.

The apostle was absent. God was not.

The two workings use two different verbs. *Theirs* carries something through; *God's* is the verb behind our word energy, and Paul puts it in the present tense. *God is working*, right now, inside the same people who are working. He works *according to his good purpose*, so the aim is his as well as the power. The *For* at the head of verse 13 explains the fear and trembling. It's the seriousness of people who have realized that God himself is at work in them.

Back on the Lane

Think about your own last few months. You may have spent them sprinting, with a plan for every morning and a promise for every weakness, wondering why nothing seems to stick. You may have spent them fifty yards back, sure the Spirit of God has gone on ahead without you. Paul's instruction is the same in both places: keep in step. Walk by the Spirit, refuse the flesh when it sends the bill, and work out your salvation while God is working in you. Every one of those is done at his pace, beside him.

Some weeks you'll look back and see very little movement. On those weeks, Philippians 2:13 still says he *is working*.

Paul's *Therefore* at the start of Philippians 2:12 reaches back to the verses just before it, to Christ Jesus, who *humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death*, Philippians 2:8. When Paul commends the Philippians because they *have always obeyed*, he reaches for the same word. The obedience God is working in you is the obedience Christ Jesus carried all the way to a cross.

Key Concepts

Complete each statement.

1. Paul asked the Galatians, "After beginning by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the _____?"
2. Galatians 5:22 calls love, joy, peace, and patience the _____ of the Spirit.
3. Galatians 5:25 says that if we live by the Spirit, we should also keep in _____ with the Spirit.
4. Romans 8:12 says we are not _____ to the flesh, a word for someone in debt.
5. Philippians 2:13 says it is God who is _____ in you both to will and to work.

ANSWERS: 1. flesh · 2. fruit · 3. step · 4. obligated · 5. working

Discussion Questions

Opening

1. What is something in your life that only happens at its own pace, no matter how much you want to hurry it? Bread rising, a broken bone healing, a child learning to read?
2. Think of someone you have walked beside who moves at a different speed than you do. What did it take to match them?

Core

3. Read Galatians 3:3, then Galatians 5:16–18. How do you think churches that were trying to finish by the flesh would have heard the words *walk by the Spirit*?
4. Read Galatians 5:19–23. Paul calls one list *works* and the other *fruit*. What difference do those two words make to how we go after the second list?
5. Read Romans 8:12–14. What bills does the flesh still send you? What does it mean that you don't owe them?

Deeper

6. On the gravel lane, are you more likely to run ahead or fall behind? What does each one look like in an ordinary week of your life?

7. Read Philippians 2:12–13. The apostle was absent, and God was not. How might your effort this week change if you believed God is working in you while you work?

Journaling Prompts

15–20 minutes. Nobody reads these but you.

1. Write about a season when you tried to grow faster than you were growing. What did you do, and what came of it?
2. Look at the nine qualities in Galatians 5:22–23. Choose the one you have been most impatient to see in yourself, and write about why that one matters so much to you right now.
3. Galatians 5:25 asks us to keep in step with a pace we don't set. Write about what in you resists that, and what in you might be relieved by it.

Weekly Practice

THIS WEEK. Memorize Galatians 5:25.

Say it out loud each morning and then pray for one of the nine qualities in Galatians 5:22–23 by name, starting with the one you've been most impatient to see.

Looking Ahead

Lesson 4 – Renewing the Mind, Romans 12:2; Philippians 4:8

Lesson 3 named the One who does the growing. Lesson 4 asks what happens to the way we think while he does it.

Paul gives the Romans a command in the passive voice: *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*, Romans 12:2. It's the same verb Lesson 1 found in 2 Corinthians 3:18, and those are the only two places Paul uses it.

Read Romans 12:1–2 and Philippians 4:8 before the next class. In Philippians, count the things Paul tells us to dwell on, and notice how many of them got much of our attention this past week.

⁸ *Works* in Galatians 5:19 is plural. *Fruit* in 5:22 is singular, *karpos*, even though nine qualities follow it. Paul lists the nine as one harvest from one source.

⁹ *Walk* in Galatians 5:16 is *peripateō*, the everyday word for walking around and Paul's usual word for a way of life. *Keep in step* in 5:25 is *stoicheō*, a word for standing or moving in a row. Paul uses it of those who *follow in the footsteps of the faith our father Abraham had*, Romans 4:12, and of *all those who follow this standard*, Galatians 6:16.

¹⁰ *Lives in* is *oikeō*, built on the ordinary word for a house. Paul uses it three times in Romans 8:9–11, the last in a compound form. He had used the same verb a chapter earlier with sin as its subject: *it is sin living in me*, Romans 7:17, and again in 7:20. In chapter 8 the verb has a new subject.

¹¹ *Work out* is *katergazomai*, to carry a task through to its end. God's *working* is *energeō*, the verb behind the English *energy*, and it appears twice in 2:13: *God is working*, and what he works in us includes the *to work*. *Obedied* in 2:12 is *hypakouō*; *obedient* in 2:8 is *hypēkoos*, the adjective from the same verb, so the Philippians' obeying in verse 12 echoes Christ's in verse 8.