



GRACE CHURCH

The Fruit of the Spirit

Galatians 5:16-26

Grace Church | 5.28.23

We've been in our sermon series on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit for 6 weeks now, and we find ourselves at the end today. Today in the church calendar is the Christian celebration of Pentecost. We read a description of Pentecost earlier in our service—but maybe you know the story—when the apostles and followers of Jesus are all in a room together after his death, a bit timid and wondering what to do. Now a lot of different people were in Jerusalem at that time, from lots of different neighboring nations or tribes, for the Jewish festival of the Harvest, Pentecost. Then all of the sudden, like a great rushing wind, with the appearance of fire on their heads, the promised Holy Spirit of God comes over them. They are filled with boldness and encouragement, and start speaking in tongues, that is, languages that they themselves don't understand. And Peter gets up outside, gathers a crowd, and gives a sermon, as people start to gather around and are astonished that somehow he is speaking to everyone in their native tongue. Peter tells them of the necessity of the death of Jesus and the power of the resurrection, and calls them to believe. The text says that 3000 repent that day, are baptized into new life, turn to follow Jesus, and join the church.

Pentecost is basically the first day of the church. It's about words of salvation for all people, the reversal of The Tower of Babel where everyone in sin had their languages confused. Now all people by grace begin to speak the same language, the language of Christ, and are free from the tyranny of sin. The poet Malclom Guite says it like this:

The right words come today in their right order
And every word spells freedom and release
Today the gospel crosses every border
All tongues are loosened by the Prince of Peace
Today the lost are found in His translation.
Whose mother tongue is Love in every nation.

In other words, a great historical, spiritual, cultural, seismic change happened on Pentecost. People lost in sin from every nation and tongue were brought in to form the church. The previously timid and scared were full of boldness and proclamation. A whole new kind of people were created: Spirit-filled people. Free people. Pentecost was the celebration of the fruits of the harvest, and the new Pentecost was the harvest not of crops and food, but of souls.



At Pentecost we see that The Holy Spirit shows up and leads to a great harvest of spiritual fruit. What is the great result of Pentecost? The people of God love one another.¹ What does Pentecost have to do with Galatians 5:16-26? In Galatians, years and miles away from Pentecost, Paul knows that when the Holy Spirit is involved, it leads to fruits of love. It's that famous passage where we get the "harvest" of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

But he also knows that it's not that simple. Because in opposition to the work of the Spirit, The thing that will turn the harvest of Pentecost into bitter, dead, lifeless and inedible fruit, is what he calls "the flesh". He has another list in this text, a list of the "works" of the flesh, which reads a bit like your daily newsfeed.

We all want a fruitful life. Look, our culture may laugh off certain things on the list of "flesh" as natural vices: it's funny to get drunk sometimes, it's fun to chase your sensual desires. But in the end, no one wants to die a drunkard. No one wants to be remembered for being a pornographer or an adulterer. Kids, as you get older it may seem very attractive to do whatever you want and whatever feels good, but adults aren't just being buzzkills when they push you to do what is right even when it is hard. They don't want you to waste your life. We all want to die knowing that we *produced* something. What do we want to produce? Well, it seems like the fruit in **verses 22-23** is a good starting point.

First, notice that the fruit of the Spirit is singular—fruit, not fruits. Meaning it's not pick and choose. They are all linked. The lead is love, not romantic love but self-sacrificial love, the kind of love that Paul says in **verse 13-14** "serves one another" and "fulfills the law". Peace—with God and with others, a heart completely at rest. Patience, or long-suffering, the ability to remain at peace when nothing else around you is, to endure any hardship or suffering, to not let the sin of others cause you to sin. Kindness, or undeserved favor towards another that causes them good. Goodness, a generosity or integrity, an uprightness that can't be taken from you, that everyone flocks to. Faithfulness, the ability to be relied upon, to be trustworthy and a refuge for others. Gentleness, which is power under control, knowing exactly how to exert yourself in the moment. And self-control, the trait of being completely free and not mastered by any desire.

Who doesn't want to grow that fruit? It's what Paul says is "from the Spirit". It's divine—when we begin to notice it in our life, we recognize that God is with us, working in us. It's heavenly—it will be the harvest of the age to come when sin and death and sadness are all finally no more. Who doesn't want that harvest?

So, how do we get it? First, we will see how *not* to, and then we will see how to.

¹ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts...



License and Legalism: Two Ways To Gratify the Flesh

The first thing I want you to notice about this text is this great dichotomy being presented. First off, in **verse 16**, Paul gives us the secret. That's a conditional promise: *if you walk by the Spirit, you won't gratify the desires of the flesh*. Then in **verse 17** he sets the dichotomy. There are two desires: Spirit, and Flesh, and they are fundamentally opposed. We've spent a good amount of time in the last few weeks trying to understand the Spirit. But what is the flesh?

The church in Galatia, Jews and Greeks from different walks of life, really wanted to live a full and fruitful life. They wanted to harvest. But they were being pulled on two sides. On one side, there were the Judaizers, who preached that the marker of belonging in the church was adherence to the Mosaic Law, particularly circumcision. That was the marker of a transformed life. Paul labors in Galatians to show that adherence to the Mosaic Law cannot save anyone. He gets really spicy in 5:12 and proposes that those who preach the necessity of circumcision should just go the whole way and cut it all off. On the other side, there are those who, as Paul says in 5:13, are tempted to use the freedom from the law (that is, the freedom not to have to follow Jewish customs and standards) as an opportunity to do whatever they want, or in Paul's words: "an opportunity for the flesh".

But notice how in **verse 18**, there is a kind of parallel with verse 16. In both cases there is a direction of the Spirit (walk/led) but, in verse 18, Paul substitutes "the flesh" for being "under the law". If he is not making a 1-1 correlation between Law and Flesh, he is at least connecting them very tightly together. We see this again in **verse 23**, where after listing the fruit of the Spirit, he doesn't contrast them to the "flesh", but rather to the "law". Paul is saying that the fruit of the Spirit cannot come from the Law—or as one commentator says: "a vine does not produce grapes by an act of Parliament". The law is in some way opposed to the Spirit, just as the flesh is.

That is because the two dangers of the Galatian church, either towards legalism (looking to the law for life) or license (not following any standard) both stem from the same place: the flesh. Augustine actually picks up on this and runs with it in his understanding of the human soul. He categorizes the flesh as "inordinate desires", or "disordered loves". In other words, we put a desire for something good or decent in the wrong place, often in the place of God. Our desires, passions, are from God. The law is from God. But it can become disordered. The flesh, as Robert Jewett I think puts it rightly, is "Paul's term for everything aside from God in which one places their final trust". We could say it like this: the flesh is our natural, sinful desire to find the good life apart from God.

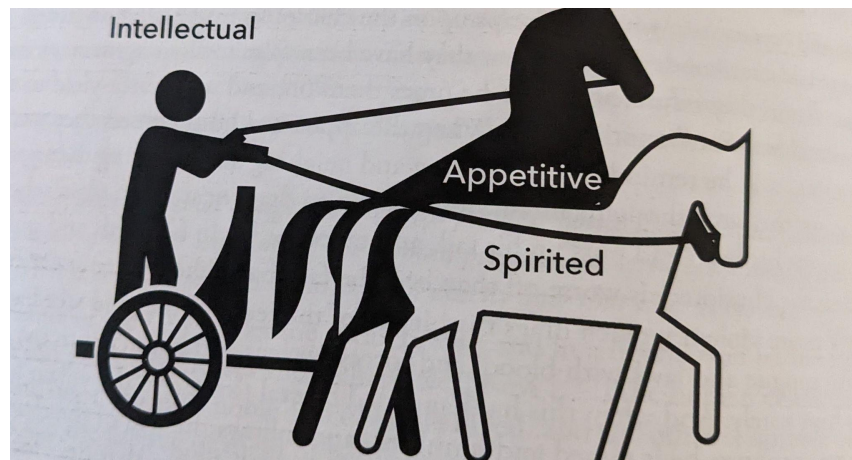
Now, two things. First, I want you to see that Paul is talking to Christians. He says that this battle is ultimately about, **verse 18**, "the flesh keeping us from doing what we want to do." What this means is that when you come to Christ and are given the Spirit of God, your desires fundamentally change. You *want* to live a life of love, you *want* to please God. This is what the text means by "the desires of the Spirit". But what keeps you from doing so is the desires of the flesh.



Secondly, notice the stakes in **verse 21**. The “inheritance of God’s kingdom” is talking about our reward—to be with God in his new heavens and earth forever. Paul is not saying that if you happen to have a fit of anger, you won’t inherit God’s kingdom. What he is saying is that if all you see in your life is the works of the flesh, if you always give into the works of the flesh without a fight, then it is obvious you are not filled with the Spirit. So this is a great battle.

It may help first by recognizing that this dichotomy, the battle of personhood is not something that is unique to Paul. From the beginning of thought, philosophers and psychologists have been trying to ask that great question: “why do we do what we do? Why do we make the decisions we make”?

One of the first thinkers to divide the soul up in a way similar to Paul was Plato, most notable in his work *Phaedrus*. In it, Plato imagines the human soul and will as a charioteer with two horses: a dark horse and a light horse. The dark horse is the “appetitive”, that is, the base passions, the lusts for food, sex, appetites. The white horse is the passions of power, or victory—which for Plato were far nobler passions. And the only way to control both of those passions was through the pursuit of wisdom, or reason. Reason, or intellect, has to determine how to steer both of these desires to the goal of the good life.



Plato's "Chariot of the Soul"

In Plato’s view, the two horses constitute “the flesh”. They are our desires that need to be tamed, that animal inside of us. But take special note of the way we tame the beast, the flesh. It’s through wisdom, knowledge, intellect, reason.

In many ways, this is the premise of most of our modern understandings of the will for most of history. In order to live a good life, you have to control your passions and desires through your reason. And so a good education looks like the accumulation of wisdom from the past, the reading of great books, a liberal arts education, in order to develop the reason necessary to fight the battle against the passions of the flesh.



That is, until the last 150 years or so, when the tables have turned a bit, at least in the west. A lot of people trace this back to Freud or Nietzsche, but I'm not a philosopher and don't want to bore you, so just notice with me how the narrative of our cultural moment is far less about control and far more about the "freedom" of desire. Instead of the good life being found in suppressing or controlling our desires, it's found in embracing them, letting them go. See if these phrases sound familiar: "I want to follow my authentic self. The heart wants what the heart wants. I can act however I want, as long as it's not hurting anyone." What essentially has happened in our modern understanding of self is that the driver of Plato's chariot, as it were, is taken away, and the desires are led to go as they please. This is true freedom, freedom to do whatever we want. Or as Paul might say: "an opportunity for the flesh". It's a form of license.

So look at the works of the flesh in **verses 19-20**. There are many of these that feel like license, like the "dark horse" of passion being let loose to run as he pleases. Sexual immorality, that word used in Greek to refer to prostitution and also sexual irregularity, like incest and homosexuality. Impurity, referring to corruption and uncleanness, sensuality, referring to the complete and utter lack of decency, or what we used to call debauchery. Orgies, drunkenness, the out of control debased lifestyle. Idolatry, the religious devotion to dead things (I would put this in the category of our worship of technology), and sorcery, which is actually the word where we get "pharmacy" from, meaning Paul is talking about the use of drugs and hallucinogens to serve dark spiritual powers. Sex, drugs, idol worship—as long as it doesn't hurt anyone, I'll just follow my heart. Following the flesh might be sold to you as freedom, but in the end it's just slavery. You can be outwardly free, but driven to your actions by whatever new desire forms in your heart.

But Paul also knew that the church in Galatia wasn't just prone to license. They were also being tempted towards legalism. The Judaizers believed that circumcision was the ultimate denial of the flesh, literally a "cutting off" of the flesh (yep, visceral). So if you look back at Plato's image—they didn't get rid of the driver, they replace him with religious rules. Now, this is scoffed at generally in the world we live in, but how often are we tempted to believe that following the rules, even God's rules, will help us to control those desires we don't want? We believe that the way to get the fruit is through obedience.

But this is the opposite of what the text is teaching us. Look again at the "works of the flesh". Yes, some of them look more like "appetites", but what about works like "enmity, strife, jealousy, rage, rivalries (which is a political term for "office seeking"), dissensions, and divisions (cliques) and envy? These are works of the flesh that are intentionally outward, pointing towards others. To put it another way, these are sure markers of legalism. Legalists follow the rules, and that makes them better. It makes them fundamentally opposed to those they see as less than. Legalism winds us up tight, prone to outburst. And through legalism we are always comparing ourselves to others, trying to get ahead, leading to jealousy, envy, divisions, rivalries. See, the problem isn't just acting better: it's getting new desires. Legalism can never give us new desires, it just hides our bad ones better.

Now, before you start to think that Plato had it all figured out, I want you to notice again how, in his view, we tame the beast: It's through wisdom, knowledge, intellect, reason. This is also common in



our world. Stoicism is actually really hot right now. It's this idea of complete control of emotions and desires, that is what will bring us peace. But in the end, that is just another version of legalism—it's secular legalism, but not that different from religious legalism. It's the same reason that Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Mormonism, you name it, all fail to truly create change in a person's life: they are dependent on *our* ability to *control* our desires. It sounds nice, but we know ourselves too well. We know that putting faith in our work will only lead us to sheer exhaustion and failure.

Ok, so it won't work to get rid of the charioteer, and neither will it work to replace him with some sort of legal code or philosophic ideal, then how do we get to the fruit? The answer of Christianity is unlike any other.

Slow Death and Daily Trust: Two Ways To Get The Fruit

For Paul, although he no doubt was influenced by Plato as he ministered in the Roman World, he rejects the chariot of Phaedrus. The flesh, according to God's Word, cannot be simply tamed. It cannot be controlled. The flesh is that life-threatening disease, that curse that got into our hearts through Adam's sin. We inherited it from him. It's contrary to God. It will always be contrary to God—it's centered on the self, the lie in the garden that we don't need God, that we can be just like him, equal with him.

So the flesh can't be controlled. The flesh can't be tamed and domesticated. The flesh has to die. Or, more accurately, it has to be "crucified", **verse 24**. Crucifixion was a slow, painful death. It was full of public mockery and rebuke. So it won't be easy, but the flesh has got to go—it's like the parasite on the vine that is choking out the fruit.

But wait—isn't that part of me? Isn't that part of myself? Are you saying that I have to become robotic, less of myself? Here is where the gospel is so much better than our imagination. The flesh isn't just killed, it is replaced with something far better, far truer to what we are created for. The desires of the self are replaced with the desires of God.

The solution to the problem of the flesh is the Christian doctrine of regeneration: when you turn away from your sin and trust in Jesus, bow the knee to him and follow him with your life, you nail your flesh to his cross where he died and in turn he gives you his Spirit. The part that Jesus kills is the part of yourself that is enslaved to sin, and in return he gives you the freedom to be who you were created to be. You are never more yourself than when you are dying to the flesh and living in the Spirit.

Although we don't have the power to crucify the flesh: how could we? But Jesus does. Verse 24 is a statement of fact: those who belong to Jesus have crucified the flesh. The belonging comes first. You don't belong because you've finally gotten the strength to master yourself. You belong to



Jesus, a needy sinner coming to him and clinging to him by faith, and then Jesus, by his Spirit, crucifies your flesh.

Jesus was the only one who was divine enough to get the fruit of the Spirit without crucifying the flesh. Meaning, he fulfilled the law perfectly. He controlled his desires perfectly. But Jesus didn't come to earth in order to give us a moral example to follow. He came to die so that we could die with him, and rise so that we could rise with him. He didn't come to earth and die just so that he could be the perfect human, but so that we could share in his perfection. He came to make us new people—not people of the Law or of the Flesh, but people of the Spirit. Jesus came to bring a harvest—a Pentecost—to make a whole new kind of people. If you don't belong to Jesus, your flesh will consume you. But even today you can come by faith to embrace the cross and die and rise with Jesus.

Now, the death to your flesh is both final and slow. It happened once for all at the cross, but it plays out over your lifetime. Until you see Jesus, you will always battle the flesh and your disordered desires. It's a slow death. Which means that every day you have to learn to trust Jesus. But remember, he hasn't left you alone, he gave you his very Spirit. Which is why Paul can say in **verse 25**, “since we currently live” by the Spirit, we should also keep in step (march on beat) with him. Notice the language for this in this text: **verse 16**, it is “walk”, **verse 18** it is “be led”, **verse 25** it is “keep in step”. Walk, led, keep in step—it's a daily, dynamic relationship with the Spirit of God wherein we trust God, every day, to be leading us one step closer to the harvest. God is the great pruner, the keeper of the vineyard, the one who has crucified our flesh and is, by his Spirit, crucifying our flesh.

So what is our part? We trust, we walk, we keep in step. We practice the spiritual disciplines, which are not intended to earn God's spirit, but to tune our hearts to trust him. We turn away from Legalism, knowing that there is no way we could ever earn the grace of God. We do not use our freedom from legalism as an opportunity to do what we want, but instead we desire to please God, to walk in lockstep with him. We do what the puritans called “mortification”, praying and seeking that God would destroy our sin and rid us of it here and now.

But ultimately, the way to the fruit is very simple. We trust the one who brings the harvest. Like the apostles on Pentecost—we wait and pray for God to bring in the harvest. If there is one thing we have learned in this short sermon series on the Holy Spirit, I would like it to be this: the working out of your faith in Jesus is primarily and fundamentally a Spiritual exercise: one driven by God the Holy Spirit. You can trust him, every day, step by step.

