

COLLECTIVE

Life in the Spirit Series (Lesson 18)

Fruit of the Spirit – Conclusion

Read: Galatians 5:16-25

We have come to the end of our study of the wonderful qualities in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit. We began, in the introduction, by reminding ourselves that God's longing for every Christian believer is that they should become more and more like Jesus. And one of the keyways toward that kind of Christlikeness is to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit. Our daily prayer must be that God would make the fruit of the Spirit ripen in our life.

However, spiritual maturity and Christlikeness are not only the fruit of the Spirit, but also the fruit of the Word of God as it takes deep root in our lives. Indeed, since the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, it is very natural that we should use the Scriptures to bring to life and ripeness the fruit that he wants to see in us.

Hence, the conclusion of this CG lesson series is this - let's get back to the Bible in daily study.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-25)

"Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:23) - this seems a very odd statement that Paul makes at the very end of his list. What Paul meant was something like this: "In relation to these things, there is no law." The New English Bible translates Galatians 5:23 as "there is no law dealing with such things as these." That is, these qualities are character virtues; you can't legislate to make people behave this way. People will do these things because of who they are, not because there are laws that compel them to. The law is not really relevant here.

So, Paul, in his complex discussion of the law (of Moses) and the Spirit, is saying in effect, "Here are some characteristic qualities that the Holy Spirit will produce like fruit in your life as he lives within you. These things are not like legislation. This kind of life is not a matter of law at all. This kind of Christlike character does not come from submitting to the law, but from submitting to Christ by faith, and living your life under the power and guidance of his Spirit.

So, as we said right at the beginning, the fruit of the Spirit is a matter of character. The kind of attitudes and behaviours that Paul lists come not from the rules you keep, but from the person you are. Or rather, to be more specific, this way of living flows from the person you are becoming as you become more and more like Christ. Or to be more specific still, such behaviour flows from the Person who dwells within you, as Christ is formed in you (remember Galatians 4:19) and the Spirit of Christ bears his fruit in your life.

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And that point (that this is a matter of character, not a matter of keeping a list of rules), is the reason why the word “fruit” is singular. Paul lists nine items. But they all cluster together as a single fruit. Perhaps we should think of them like the segments of an orange, rather than like a bunch of grapes. These nine qualities are not a menu from which you can select a few and ignore the others. They are not like a tick-box exercise where you can tick a few and get a pass mark while failing on the others—as if somebody might say, “Well, I admit that I lose my temper a bit—but hey, I’ve got plenty of joy!” or, “Okay, I do get a bit rough and sharp with people sometimes, but I’m pretty dependable.”

No, the fruit of the Spirit is a single character package. The fruit of the Spirit is not like the gifts of the Spirit, which are distributed among God’s people, some to some people, others to other people, all within the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). The fruit of the Spirit grows all together within a Christian’s life, with a unity, wholeness, and balance. All the pieces of the one fruit work together and strengthen each other.

And so, finally, to complete his beautiful statement about the fruit of the Spirit, and as a conclusion to his whole argument in this chapter, Paul tells us “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Galatians 5:24). This is very strong language. It is also decisive. Paul writes in the past tense— “have crucified”. Paul is telling us, “This is what you signed up to when you surrendered your life to Jesus. You died! Or rather, you crucified that sinful nature—the flesh.”

Now of course Paul did not mean that we no longer have any sinful desires or that we no longer ever actually sin. That kind of sinless perfection is not what the New Testament teaches about our present life. We are sinners saved by grace, but we still live in this world, surrounded by temptation, sometimes falling and failing, but steadily learning and growing. We look forward to being completely freed from sin and temptation only when we live with Christ in the new creation.

Nevertheless, there is an act of will and choice that we are called to exercise day by day. That decisive past fact — you “have crucified the flesh”— has to be translated into a daily present intention. Of course, we must immediately add that this too is a matter of grace and gratitude. It has nothing to do with legalism or earning God’s favour by our good behaviour. That kind of thinking is utterly contradictory to all Paul teaches us.

Yes, it is all a matter of grace. But, as Paul points out in another place, the grace that saves us is also the grace that teaches us. Having been saved by grace, we are to live by grace in ways that exclude certain kinds of behaviour. Here is how Paul makes that double point.

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)

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Good parents and good teachers know that they have to teach children to be able to say “No” to some harmful and dangerous things. And that is what the loving grace of God does. Once God has saved us by grace, God teaches us by grace.

So, to make it personal: as a man/woman in Christ, saved by grace and taught by grace, we have to work out what it means to “say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions.” We have to make it very clear to ourselves that:

- There are places I should not go.
- There are things I should not look at.
- There are relationships I should not play with.
- There are words I should not allow to pass my lips.
- There are conversations I should not join in or pass on.
- There are feelings I ought to rebuke and suppress.
- There are desires I should not give in to.
- There are attitudes toward others I should not hold... and so on.

This does not mean withdrawing from the world into a hermit kind of life. Nor does it mean that I sink into a negative, legalistic kind of life in which everything is narrow and restricted by rules. It simply means that I recognize that Christ calls us to a joyful and liberating exercise of self-discipline. For we are in a spiritual battle, and when our sinful human nature tries to control our lives, we need to deal with it very strongly. Crucify it, says Paul.

Finally, Paul tells us – “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.” (Galatians 5:25).

Paul doesn’t use the example of just ordinary walking but describes it in the context of military drills and marching into battle. Soldiers are trained to keep in step with each other, to stay in line, in order to face the enemy with united strength, “shoulder to shoulder”. It is very important to listen to the commands of the officer and follow them instantly without breaking step.

Paul is thinking of something like that here. If the Spirit orders a “U turn,” don’t go marching straight on. If the Spirit says, “Left Turn,” don’t march off to the right. It is very important that we follow the beat of the marching band. In other words, if you’re following the band, keep in step with the band! Let us listen to the beat of the Spirit, through the teaching of God’s word, and keep in step with him.