

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(October 15, 2023)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Growing a Culture of Grace

(Studies in Paul's letter to the Galatians)

Beautiful Fruit Over Dead Deeds

(Galatians 5:16-24)

Study #9

Introduction: Two kinds of...everything

As you know, there are two kinds of people in the world: Those who divide people into two camps and those who don't.

It is common to view humanity in a binary way. For instance:

- There are those who make their beds every day and those who don't see the point.
- There are those who unroll the toilet paper the right way and those who do it the wrong way.
- There are those who keep all the different foods on their plate separate from each other and those who mix their food up on the plate to annoy those who don't want their food mixed together.

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul has made some binary divisions of the way Christians might order their lives with God.

He has described this division in terms of Christians who follow Law or grace, or those who live by faith or by works.

He has even put this division in a story.

Recalling the Genesis story of Abraham's two son by two women, Paul spoke to this idea of a division between slave and free.

Abraham fathered Isaac by his wife, Sarah. So, Isaac was destined to lead a life of freedom because his mother was free.

Ishmael, though also fathered by Abraham, was born to Sarah's slave, Hagar, and was destined to be a slave like his mother was.

Paul referred to this story to highlight that even though Christians are called to freedom, we might live in slavery. But it will be one of the other. It's binary. Either / OR.

This morning, Paul invites us to explore this binary division about how we Christians might live from yet another perspective.

Want Freedom? Walk By The Spirit! (vv. 16-18)

There is a Christian "tug-of-war" (v. 17)

[17] For the desire of the flesh is against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, in order to keep you from doing whatever you want.

Paul makes a division between Christians who live according to "***the Spirit***" and those who live according to "***the flesh***."

The desire of the flesh

Ways to understand "the flesh"

Throughout this letter, Paul has used the word *flesh* a number of times and in different ways.

Used one way, *flesh* refers to a flesh and blood person.

Back in the first chapter, Paul told us that he didn't confer with "***flesh and blood***" about the content of his message.

He didn't need to get permission from other people to preach what he preached, because Jesus had already given him permission. (See also 2:16 and 2:20.)

Paul also spoke of the *flesh* to draw a contrast to God's promise. Isaac was born according to God's promise, but Ishmael was born according to the *flesh*. (Also 4:23, 4:29)

But here (5:16), *flesh* refers to something else. Paul uses *flesh* here to describe an internal force that is opposed to the Spirit of God.

Even though we are God's children, the *flesh*¹ is still active. The *flesh* causes us great internal tension.²

The flesh is the last remaining baggage of who we were before we came to faith in Jesus. We are told to get rid of it (Ephesians 4:22) and are reminded that we have already stripped it off. (Colossians 3:9). We are to be done with the *flesh*!

So, what is it that the *flesh* desires?

What does "the flesh" want?

The *flesh's* desire is that we would do all the things Paul has been urging us to not do in Galatians. The flesh wants us to...

- ...bite, devour, and be in conflict with each other.
- ...to adopt a rules-based orientation to life with God, to be legalistic.
- ...live according to an external code of conduct.³

All of that is what the flesh wants. The desire of the Holy Spirit is something entirely different. And it is elegantly, beautifully simple.

The desire of the Spirit (i.e., Holy Spirit)

In short, the Spirit wants to free us from bondage to legalism and release us to lead lives of love and service.

¹ Referred to as "indwelling sin," Romans 7:17, 20; or "the old self", Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9.

² See Romans 7 and note Paul's comments there about "*the flesh*."

³ As Paul explicitly says in his letter to the Colossians, victory in Jesus is not found in legalistically satisfying or denying the flesh: **[2:23] *These are matters which do have the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and humility and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.***

That is the life we want to live. Paul says that the key to leading that kind of a life is found by taking a hike.

Taking a Spirit Hike... (vv. 16a, 18a)

[16] But I say, walk by the Spirit...[18a] But if you are led by the Spirit

Those words are music to the ears of a guy like me who loves to hike and to a church like ours that defines growth in Jesus as taking a spiritual "next step."

Those two phrases (from vv. 16 and 18) are two ways of saying the same thing.

To walk "**by**" the Spirit pictures us walking beside the Spirit, in lock step with the Spirit, even relying on the Spirit. To be "**led by**" the Spirit is to follow His lead.

So...what does all of that mean?

Well, earlier, Paul defined living for Jesus as living **[Galatians 2:20] *by faith in the Son of God.***

So, another way to understand what it means to live by faith is to "**walk by**" and be "**led by**" the Spirit.

And if that still sounds like some churchy Christian-ese, try this: Walking this "**walk**" means living on the basis of God's promises and not in response to the Law's, "*Thou shalt!*"

"**Walking by the Spirit**" and being "**led by the Spirit**" are all about listening to God's promises and living on the basis of them. God says:

"I PROMISE I love you."

"I PROMISE I am always with you and will never abandon you."

"I PROMISE your sins are forgiven."

"I PROMISE that you will never face My condemnation."

The Spirit of God is always either whispering or shouting God's promises to us. If we walk with Him, we will be mindful of those

promises, will listen to them, will come to believe them, and will find in them the freedom for which Christ set us free.

And this way of walking - by faith - is the only defense against fleshly legalism.

...Defends Against the Flesh (vv. 16b, 18b)

[16] But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh⁴...[18] But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.⁵

If you are walking by the Spirit (trusting Him), relax. You won't be carrying out the desire of the flesh as long as you're doing that.

If you are led by the Spirit (following His lead), breathe easy. By definition, you aren't being legalistic as long as you're doing that.

Paul's not calling us here to anything other than what he's been urging from the beginning of Galatians: *"Walk by faith!"*⁶

And that is a nugget worth chewing on.

When we are resting in the reality that God is for us and with us, the Spirit empowers us to live in such a radically faithful way that the Law can't shackle us, and the flesh can't drag us down to defeat.⁷

That is the life to which we have been called in Jesus.

And...it is possible that we might NOT live that way. It is possible for the Christian to NOT walk by the Spirit.

⁴ Revised Standard Version translation is inaccurate, *"do not gratify the desires of the flesh."* Paul is not giving a command, but a statement of fact.

⁵ Essentially, verses 16 and 18 are two ways of saying the same thing. In v. 16, we walked (active), in v. 18 we are led. (passive)

⁶ See Galatians 3:11; Habakkuk 2:4; also, Romans 1:17; Hebrews 10:38 for this same very important phrase in different places in the Bible.

⁷ As we read in Hebrews 13:9, ***"Do not be misled by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were so occupied were not benefited."***

And if a Christian is not walking by the Spirit and by faith, that Christian will do the deeds of the flesh.

The Dead Deeds Of The Flesh (vv. 19-21)

The Self-Evident Deeds of the Flesh (vv. 19-21a)

[19] Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: sexual immorality, impurity, indecent behavior, [20] idolatry, witchcraft, hostilities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, [21a] envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these...

We don't need to do a deep dive into all fifteen deeds of the flesh Paul lists here, so we won't.

But, just to get a sense of what he's talking about, he begins by listing sins of a sexual nature, without explicitly describing them. ***(sexual immorality, impurity and indecent behavior)***

He lists behaviors associated with substance abuse, which were as rampant in Greece and Rome as they are in our own culture. ***(drunkenness, carousing)***

We keep reading and in the same list in which we find those weighty sins, Paul also mentions behaviors and attitudes that may seem a bit more socially acceptable: ***"jealousy" "outbursts of anger" "strife" "disputes" "dissentions" and "factions."***

Nervously, we notice that he puts ***"envy"*** in the same list as ***"witchcraft"***⁸ and ***"selfish ambition"*** in the same list as ***"idolatry."***

It's an impressive list, made all the more so by its variety and length.

There are fifteen ugly, dead deeds of the flesh. But this list isn't exhaustive as is clear from his next comment, ***"and things like these."***

⁸ The Greek word is *"farmakeia"* (related to our "pharmaceutical") – referring to drugged worship practices frequently practiced by the witches, sorcerers, and soothsayers of the day.

I'm not spending much time on the deeds of the flesh because, like Paul said, they are self-evident.

But I'm also limiting my time on the list because I want to give more attention to what Paul says are the consequences for the Christian who carries out these deeds of the flesh.

The Results of Practicing the Deeds of the Flesh (v. 21b)

[21b] of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.⁹

A previously given warning given again

Paul says that he had warned them along these lines before and we find one of these prior warnings in the book of Acts.

As he and Barnabas were wrapping up the first missionary journey to Galatia, they stopped in the cities where they had preached the Gospel, led people to faith in Christ, and established churches.

They encouraged / warned these converts, ***[Acts 14:22] to continue in the faith, and saying, "It is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God."***

That is not a Gospel comment.

That is a stern warning to the people they had led to faith to be faithful in the hard times that were coming.

If there is one thing that is clear from the New Testament it is that receiving the gift of eternal life, being redeemed and justified, and being adopted into God's family as His child has nothing to do with our faithfulness.

⁹ This is the only reference to the kingdom of God in this letter.

It is about receiving a gift from God by simple faith, a gift that is so valuable that it is either impossibly expensive and we could never afford it, or it is free.

So, just as he had told the Galatians before and now, here in the letter, Paul is not warning non-believers about the danger of not going to heaven if they don't behave.

He is issuing a warning to Christians who persist in sinful behavior. And the precise words Paul uses make that abundantly clear.

Inheritance

He mentions "***inheritance***." Paul wrote about inheritance a lot in his letters.¹⁰ Jesus spoke often about inheritance, sometimes using the word "*reward*" as He did repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount.¹¹

There is a difference between inviting people to receive the gift of eternal life, and warning believers about losing an inheritance.

Again, eternal life is a gift given freely to the one who believes in Jesus.

A reward is something God gives to His child for being faithful to Jesus. An inheritance is something God gives to the believer who has been faithful to Jesus.

So, what does Paul mean when he says that Christians who "***practice***"¹² the deeds of the flesh he lists "***and things like these***" will not inherit the kingdom of God?

The tragedy of a lost inheritance

¹⁰ And all over the writings of Peter in the letter to the Hebrews, and in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

¹¹ A few of the passages that speak of rewards for faithful believers in Jesus: 1 Cor. 9:27; 1 Cor. 3; 2 Cor. 5:1-10; 1 Timothy 4:7-8. Verses that speak more explicitly about inheritance would be Luke 12:15-21; Luke 19:12-26; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26-27; 3:21; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Eph. 5:5-6; 2 Peter 1:11.

¹² Literally "*those who do such things*" with the sense of more than a one-time event. Habitual behavior is in view.

Well, *“the kingdom of God”* Paul mentions here refers to that future time when Jesus will return to earth to reign in righteousness.

On a couple of occasions, He promised His disciples that they would sit on thrones in His kingdom - and this is what He was talking about.

Faithful followers of Jesus will reign with Him in His earthly kingdom. They will even be given ruling authority in the eternal kingdom.¹³

But Christians who don't walk by faith during this life and who practice the deeds of the flesh will *“inherit”* no such ruling authority in Jesus' kingdom.

Remember. Paul's writing to believers. And believers sin, right? Right! None of us here would argue that Christians don't sin.

The Galatians were guilty of sins of various kinds. They agreed with people who were *“distorting”* (or “perverting”) the Gospel. They opted for legalism. They submitted to a rules-based approach to God.

It is likely that some were guilty of jealousy, drunkenness, or involvement with witchcraft.¹⁴

Being a saved person, myself, I know that saved people sin. We get jealous every once in a while. And we may give in to outbursts of anger, sexual sin, or selfish ambition.

Could a person who is saved - say, me! - continue in sins like that, *“practice”* (repeatedly, habitually) this or that sin? Sure.¹⁵

And, if that happens in my life, it indicates that I am not walking by the Spirit, I am not following the Spirit's lead, and I am not depending on the promises of God.

¹³ See Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30.

¹⁴ Acts 19:19 indicates that it was three years between salvation and the time that many of those in Ephesus got rid of their magical arts.

¹⁵ Paul would never call the items listed in verses 19-21, *“the fruit of the flesh.”* “Fruit” is produced by a living organism, and the deeds of the flesh are dead things.

To the extent that I don't do those things I am walking in the flesh, and to the extent that I am walking in the flesh, to that extent my inheritance will be small in the kingdom of God.

And if that's not a weighty enough reason to be done with the stuff Paul mentions here, who wants to lead a life marked by this stuff, anyway?

The deeds of the flesh are ugly. Indulging the flesh doesn't open the door to Jesus' abundant life. In fact, it robs us of meaning and purpose and fulfillment.

The flesh isn't winsome and it doesn't attract others to Jesus. The path to LIFE rejects the flesh and embraces holiness.

So, the list of sins is a list of dead deeds. The next list is alive. Paul gives us a picture of the most beautiful tree we could image.

The Beautiful Fruit of the Spirit (vv. 22-24)

The Fruit Listed (vv. 22-23a)

[22] But the fruit¹⁶ of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23a] gentleness, self-control

The “normal” fruitful Christian life

A life marked by this fruit is what we'll call the normal Christian life.

It may not be the **average** one. It may not be what you see around you. It may not be what you observe when you look in the mirror. But it is God's “norm.”

It is God's plan that you and I exhibit the full measure of the Spirit's fruit in our lives as we follow the Spirit's leading.

¹⁶ Why did Paul use the singular rather than the plural when referring to nine separate fruits? For one thing, “fruit” is a collective noun whose singular can imply the plural. But perhaps Paul is emphasizing by the singular the one tree from which the many fruits come forth. Or it may be that he means to say that the fruit of the Spirit is love - and that the remaining eight are expansions on the theme of love.

The first fruit Paul lists stands by itself. The first fruit represents the apex of spirituality. Jesus said so.¹⁷

Love - the summit of the Spirit's fruit

"The fruit of the Spirit is love..."

Love is the defining characteristic of Jesus' disciple.

The Christian who is walking by the Spirit loves. The Christian who is not growing in love is not growing, no matter how much his church attendance increases, or his ministry involvement grows.

Love will take different forms in different settings. Sometimes love will be tender and compassionate. It will always be self-sacrificing. At times it will be tough.

But what motivates the loving actions and words of the Spirit-led Christian is that he or she might be a blessing to someone.

That blessing may come at the cost of risk and the cost of time, treasure, and talent. But the loving Christian has heard God's promise, *"I love you"* - and so he loves those in his world.

From love, Paul moves on to list eight other fruits. Whether we should think of these as deriving from love or as stand-alone graces, they are each beautiful in their own way.

Additional beautiful fruit from the Spirit

JOY and PEACE are the Spirit's graces for hard times. Joy and peace protect us against panicking or complaining when times get tough.

PATIENCE¹⁸ and FAITHFULNESS¹⁹ are the graces the Spirit gives that allow us to focus on others in trying times.

¹⁷ See John 13:34-35

¹⁸ Patience - endurance in what is good, persistence, a tenacious, clinging, bulldog-like tenacity to not give in to evil or to temptation. Includes "slow to anger."

¹⁹ Faithfulness - not "one who depends on God" but "one who is dependable."

KINDNESS, GOODNESS, and GENTLENESS²⁰ are the Spirit's graces for dealing with tough people.

SELF-CONTROL is the Spirit's grace when we face pressure. We don't seek to control others and we can't control most situations. But the Spirit gives us the ability to control ourselves.

That's the list - and I love Paul's final remark here, because I think I see apostolic humor.

Liberty in manifesting the fruit of the Spirit!

[23b] against such things²¹ there is no law.

Isn't that great? We are free to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit as much as we wish - no restrictions.

We never have to worry that we are being too kind, too good, too patient, too peaceful or too joyful.

And here's the vision: That by the Spirit's power, the trees of our lives will be heavy with His fruit as we walk by faith. He will transform us into people who love like Jesus loved.

And this brings us to Paul's final comment for this morning. It is perfectly practical.

This is the most blunt "how-to" he has offered to this point in the letter. He's writing here to those of us who know that we have a long way to go before the tree of our lives becomes heavy with the Spirit's fruit.

How do we make progress in fruit production?

²⁰ Animals who are tame are said to be "gentle." Just as an animal is only useful if tamed, Christians are only useful in service if they are tamed to do God's bidding.

²¹ I take it, too, that "*such things*" implies that the list of the Spirit's fruit is not exhaustive, just as the list of the deeds of the flesh (vv. 19-21) was not exhaustive.

There is one thing we can do that is totally consistent with a grace-based, faith-filled, and Spirit-led approach to the Christian life. We can crucify the flesh.

Pursuing the Spirit's Fruit For All We're Worth! (v. 24)

Earlier in this letter, Paul used the word "**crucified**" to say that when he believed, the old Paul was crucified (note the passive voice). The old Paul as surely as Jesus had died on the cross. **[Galatians 2:20] I have been crucified with Christ.**

Then, a new Paul, a born-again Paul, was raised up just as surely as Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day.

That is true of us all. When we believed in Jesus, the old "us" was co-crucified with Christ, and we were given new life in Jesus.²²

Paul continued, describing his own experience, "**and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God...**"

And then he proceeded to scold the Galatians for NOT living by faith and for falling into legalism. (Galatians 2:20--3:1ff...)

So, in making that reference to his (and theirs!) co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Christ, he hid a strong exhortation. Imitate me and walk by faith!

Something similar is happening here.

[24] Now those who belong to Christ Jesus crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

This is not something done TO us, but BY us.

Throughout this letter, Paul has repeatedly told us that the path to spiritual growth is not by rules-keeping, Law-keeping, rituals, and "Thou shalt."

But the force of Paul's words here is to remind us of an action we have taken - "**crucified the flesh**" - and to exhort us to continue to crucify the flesh "**with its passions and desires.**"

It is true that the fruit of the Spirit is displayed as we walk in the Spirit. But it is also true that we are very active in the process of growth.

The Christian life is not like a balloon ascension, where we lazily drift into Christlikeness.

Instead, in different places, Paul tells us to "**put on the new**" and "**put off the old**" and "**discipline yourself for godliness**" and "**wrestle...against spiritual forces of wickedness**" and "**be a hard-working farmer**" and "**run the race**" and "**fight the good fight.**"

We play an integral role in the change God wants to accomplish in our lives as we "**[crucify] the flesh with its passions and desires.**"

And there is a point behind Paul's use of the ugly picture of death by crucifixion. He wants to emphasize the ruthlessness necessary to making spiritual progress.

Will it cost something for you to grow as a Christian? YES!

You will need to attune your ears to listen to "*I promise*" when you are tempted to order your life according to a code of conduct.

It will often feel like death to walk by the Spirit and follow the Spirit's leading into holiness when you are tempted to practice the deeds of the flesh.

When your desires for self-fulfillment get in the way of whatever fruit the Spirit wants to produce in you, you will have to pound a nail through that desire and yield to the Spirit.

And it is at that point of crucifying the flesh that you will experience God's power to love, to be gentle, kind, and good, to patiently and faithfully endure, to control yourself.

²² This is explicitly stated in Romans 6:6 and with a slight difference in Colossians 2:20 ("**died with Christ**").

Yes, the cost of spiritual growth is great. But it will cost you much more to NOT grow as a Christian.

If you do not crucify the fleshly passions and the deeds of the flesh, you will forfeit so much.

You will lose a rich inheritance which could have been yours in the coming kingdom.

And here and now, you won't experience the growth in character pictured by the fruit of the Spirit. You won't know the deep satisfaction of being "on mission" for Jesus. You won't enter the fulness of the abundance Jesus offers in this life.

And just imagine if all of us here didn't walk by the Spirit, didn't follow the Spirit's lead, did practice the deeds of the flesh, don't produce the fruit of the Spirit, and don't crucify the flesh - what a mess!

But what a glorious culture of grace it will be if more and more, each of us here is walking in lock step with the Spirit, walking by faith, crucifying the flesh, and manifesting the Spirit's fruit.

One Christian, living like that, would be one spectacular tree. They would be like a beautiful fruit tree, offering nourishment to all who pick its fruit.

But an orchard made up of lots of those trees, displaying love, joy, and peace, and offering those to a world in need in Jesus' Name. Well, that would be irresistible.