

Galatians 5:16-25

16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the Flesh. **17** For what the Flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the Flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. **18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. **19** Now the works of the Flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, **20** idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, **21** envy, drunkenness, carousing, 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.

22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. **24** And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the Flesh with its passions and desires. **25** If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. **26** Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Rooted in the Spirit

I do not think it would be a stretch to say that we live in divisive times. Any glance at social media, will show you a world that is deeply fractured and increasingly angry. Our news cycle seems to be nothing more than a list of division and controversy that never seems to end. Even parts of our society that weren't politicized before— schools, public health, churches— have increasingly become just as contentious as everything else. There is increasingly a sense that politics is not about passing responsible laws, but about taking a side, winning a war. And while most of this may be nothing more than talk, it is talk that has consequences. I don't think that any of us need to be reminded of what happened on January 6 of last year. And violence is not exclusive to the conservative side. Just a few weeks ago, a man showed up outside the house of a conservative Supreme Court justice, threatening him and his family with a gun. Our whole world can feel at times to be falling apart as truth and love take a backseat to anger and division.

But while the divisions in our society may have gotten worse these past couple years, they certainly aren't new. The whole history of the Christianity contains an endless list of squabbles over everything from which way to celebrate communion to how we should decorate the church. And if you look at the Bible you'll see that division goes back even further: from the Jesus's disciples arguing over who is the greatest, to the bitter rivalry of Rachel and Leah, to Cain murdering his brother Abel right outside the Garden of Eden. Quarreling and division go all the way back to the beginning.

Why is that? Why are we so prone to quarrel with each other, to split into competing groups and even at times to resort to senseless violence. Paul lays the burden on what he calls "*the Flesh*". It's easy to misunderstand what Paul is saying here. You might think that when Paul is referring to "*the Flesh*" that our bodies are bad. That we need to transcend our bodies and

bodily desires and live on some sort of spiritual plane of existence. But this **isn't** what Paul is trying to say. The whole Bible is very clear in saying that Creation is good. And our created bodies with all their needs and desires and limitations are also fundamentally good. There is a reason that the fundamental Christian hope is not that our souls will fly off to heaven when we die, but about the resurrection of the body. The body is good. So what is Paul saying? The scholars that I read argue that Paul is really referring to when he talks about "*the Flesh*" is a power similar to the power of Sin.¹ And not Sin as just bad actions that individuals do, but rather Sin as a cosmic power that twists our desires with the intention of destroying community and the Church.

Now all of that might feel a little abstract or strange, so here's an example that I think gets at what Paul is trying to say. In an article for the *Atlantic* a couple months ago, a social-psychologist named Jonathan Haidt wrote about why our country has become so divided and obsessed with outrage.² In Haidt's mind, much of the problem has stemmed from social media. What has happened is that companies such Facebook and Twitter designed algorithms to boost people's engagement on their websites. The algorithm would determine what type of posts would be the most likely to grab someone's attention, and then it would make those types of posts more likely to appear on a person's feed. The problem, Haidt explained, is that the posts that led to the most engagement were often the ones that triggered strong emotions, particularly anger. So what the algorithms ended up doing was that they created a system where posts that were divisive and alarmist would be rewarded with 'likes' and 'shares' and attention, while posts that were nuanced and thoughtful would be barely seen at all. All of this was great at keeping people engaged on the platforms, but it did so by creating an environment that fueled rage and division. As Jonathan Haidt writes "The newly tweaked platforms were almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves".³

Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to equate social media with Sin itself. There are certainly plenty of ways to use it in a healthy way. But I think this article is helpful in revealing what Paul is getting at. We don't live in a neutral world, where kindness and thoughtfulness will come naturally if you have good intentions. There are systems and structures at work that are dead set on destroying community. And if you don't approach the world critically, if you aren't aware of these powers at work, and the ways they breed division, rage and resentment, there is a good chance they catch you in their trap.

¹ J. Louis Martin, "Pastoral Guidance, Part 1: Daily Life in Wartime (5:13–24)." in *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven & London: The Anchor Yale Bible, 1997) 479–540. Theology and Religion Online. As well as Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*. (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky, 2011), 341.

² Jonathan Haidt, "Why The Past Ten Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid", *The Atlantic*, April 11, 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/>

³ Ibid.

So what do we do about it? That would be the next natural question, right? Paul's laid out the problem, he's pointed out what's wrong with the world— now we just need to figure out how to solve it. And to be quite honest, that's how I often think about the Fruit of the Spirit. A list of virtues to aspire to. A set of goals that I hope to achieve if I can just get my life together.

But what I think is interesting about this text is that Paul does not focus as much on what we should do, but rather about **who we already are**. The Fruit of the Spirit is not something we aspire to, but rather a gift that comes naturally out of living with the Spirit. A Spirit dwells with us —**why?**— because we **have already** crucified the Flesh with all its passions and desires by being in Christ Jesus. Paul thinks that the key to overcoming the Flesh is not found in what we can do, but found in remembering who we are as a community in Christ Jesus.

I think that's an important lesson for the church to remember. So often when confronting the problems of the world, we want to turn everything into a series of projects and programs. And don't get me wrong— projects and programs are important and have their place in the church. We are indeed called to engage with the problems of the world and often programs are a good way of doing that. But programs by themselves cannot truly offer the life that the world needs. And if that's all we have to offer, then we quickly be spent and burnt out. We need to be rooted in something deeper.

Last Summer I had the privilege of interning at an intentional community down in southern Georgia. While I was there I had the opportunity to learn a bit about their history— and it's a rich history! They were started in the 1940s as an interracial community where white and Black people could work together and share a meal on the farm— right at the height of Jim Crow segregation and racism! Later they were involved in the founding of Habitat for Humanity and they continue to do good work with food programs to this day. But what really struck me was learning about a tougher moment in their history about thirty years ago— back in the nineties. They talked about getting so invested in the success of their projects, that they stopped putting time into being a community. And when they stopped being a community, things started to fall apart. Trust and team morale broke down. The leadership stopped being responsible to the community and mismanaged their finances. The missions which they so highly prized became less and less effective.

What the community ended up realizing is that they needed to return to their spiritual core. They took time to worship together, to eat together and to do life together. They even went as far as to study some of the writings of medieval monasteries to learn spiritual disciplines and rhythms of life that would foster community. One of my favorite things being there, was this giant bell set up— kind of like you would imagine at an old church or monastery— that we ring 3 or four times a day, just as a reminder to stop what you were doing and to take a moment to pray.

I think Paul is meaning when he talks about being “guided by the spirit”. It’s about finding ways to remind ourselves about who we are— and even more importantly, who we belong to. And while some of the examples I listed might sound a bit extreme, I think there are plenty of ways of doing that here too. We take time to fellowship and share meals together. To listen to each other, even those we disagree with. We find ways to learn and love the stories that have shaped us— the stories of each other, the stories of the church, and the stories of the community around us. Most importantly remind ourselves weekly through worship and confession, that we are a community built around truth and grace. Truth that is not ours to define however we please or flaunt over others, but truth that comes from humbly listening to God and our neighbors. And grace. Grace that we have received from God and grace that we extend to each other in love.

None of this is easy. Real community is hard and always will be hard. But it is only by rooting ourselves in the community of the Church and by resting in the Spirit that we are able to find the freedom that the world so desperately needs. Freedom to be gentle and kind in a world full of bitterness and rage. Freedom to have joy and peace in a world racked by anxiety. Freedom to be patient and generous in a world obsessed by control. Freedom to love, even our enemies, in a world divided by hate.

Amen.