

Life in the Spirit | Fruit of the Spirit | Galatians 5:16-26

August 11, 2024 | Matthew McNutt

[Title slide] We have been spending this summer exploring what it means to live life in the Spirit, God the Holy Spirit. This week we're going to explore Galatians 5 and the fruit of the Spirit. Fruit of the Spirit? It's kind of a strange phrase if you stop and think about it, right? What does it even mean? And why do these guys keep popping into my mind?

[Fruit of the Loom guys photo]

Why does God choose the word fruit? Why is the Spirit the source of this fruit? Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's get into it:

Galatians 5:16 (NLT) ¹⁶ So I say,

Let's pause for a moment. What does that word "so" tell us? It tells us that what comes next is the result of something else, a point that Paul is making in regard to something. What are these verses in response to?

The Christians in Galatia were experiencing conflict, tension amongst each other over cultural and ethnic differences. They were divided in factions, butting heads over how to follow God and what it means to look like a follower of Christ. Their conflict threatened to destroy them and their witness to the surrounding community. In response, Paul lays out them how the transforming presence of the Spirit should be shaping their interactions and reputation:

Galatians 5:16 (NLT) ¹⁶ So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves.

It is a war, an ongoing struggle going on within each one of us. Why? Because we aren't yet in heaven, we haven't been made perfect yet, our sin nature is still within us, demanding we live according to values contrary to God. At the same time, as believers we have the Holy Spirit living in us, guiding us. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 6:19-20a (NLT) ¹⁹ Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, ^{20a} for God bought you with a high price.

You are a temple of God, a temple for the Holy Spirit. What an incredible gift and honor! The challenge is that it is a pairing of the literal divine and the profane. Two incompatible forces, one guiding us to Christlikeness, the other guiding us to destruction, both battling within us. Back to Galatians:

Galatians 5:17-18 (NLT) ¹⁷ The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what

the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. ¹⁸ But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.

This last line is a rebuttal to some of the Jewish Christians that were trying to make the others follow the Old Testament law. The reason Jesus came to bring salvation was because there is no way for us to earn salvation on our own! The law of the Old Testament revealed God's holiness, but no one was able to live up to it – we cannot be good enough on our own or on our own strength or will power.

More practically, the law was a distraction that was resulting in pride, boasting, a feeling of superiority – all attitudes that are wrong in God's eyes. Before we get too self-satisfied that we aren't like these ancient Christians, though, the reality is that this still happens to this day. We love to compare ourselves to others to make ourselves feel better, superior. "Hey, I might not be perfect, but I'm not like so-and-so. They're a mess!" That kind of pride only fuels disunity and judgmentalism, and it misses the point: sure, we might make ourselves feel good by comparing ourselves to others – but that's not the standard we're measured against, is it? When we're compared to God's holiness, we're all left wanting!

When my dad was in elementary school he had to join a remedial reading group where he started improving. One night at dinner, he declared to his family, "I'm the smartest one in the dumb group!" There is not one family gathering, sixty-plus years later, where someone doesn't bring up being "the smartest one in the dumb group." Why? Because it's hilarious! That's what's going on when we compare ourselves to one another, when these ancient Jewish Christians tried to use the law as a way to measure themselves against one another instead of God.

Galatians 5:19-21a (NLT) ¹⁹ When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these.

Paul is making the case that it's an either/or scenario. There's no neutral ground. We're either letting the Holy Spirit guide our lives or we're letting our sinful nature guide our lives, and if it's the sinful nature, the natural results are these kinds of behaviors.

Sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures? Any kind of sexual behavior outside of marriage. Where it's with another person or people, pornography, affairs, recklessness. It could be the movies we watch, the content of video games we're entertained by, the jokes we tell – or that we laugh at. Our sinful nature rebels against the beauty of God's intent for sex.

Idolatry, sorcery – that’s gone, right? In our first world, modern culture, these don’t come up any more do they? Except anything we love more than God has become an idol, something we worship. Money, career, sports, the Eagles can be an idol, politics. Which is not such a new idol after all; centuries ago Martin Luther wrote in his commentary on Galatians, **“it is clear that many rulers and bishops nowadays are treated like idols.”**¹ Perhaps this is a timely warning for the church as we enter this fall.

Hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division; politics, lives lived with no margin, these labels describe the reputation of far too many churches and Christians in our country, don’t they?

Envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. “Other sins like these”? Paul’s way of saying, hey, this isn’t an exhaustive list! I’ve only got so much ink in my pen! His point? These are the kinds of things someone who is guided by their sinful nature is known for, these are the kinds of words people would use to describe them. Here’s where it gets intense:

Galatians 5:21b (NLT) Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

I have to think that when this letter was read to the Galatian church, you could have heard a pin drop after that sentence. Is Paul calling us to perfection? No, in fact, elsewhere he laments his own imperfections. But he is warning readers; hey, if these words describe the pattern of your life, you need to ask yourself if the Holy Spirit is actually present in you – you need to ask yourself if you have actually given your life to God or if you’re just living a lie, you’re just fooling yourself. He goes on to describe what a transformed life, a life given to God looks like:

Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT) ²² But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

I love the use of the word “fruit” here. Fruit is the result of the growth process – it’s not something we do, it’s the natural result of something deeper. Martin Luther wrote in his lectures on Galatians, **“Love is not a quality that can be hidden, and as Augustine said about faith, everyone knows who has it.”**² In other words, these things are the natural result of a life guided by the Holy Spirit. They don’t happen in secret, if the Holy Spirit is guiding your actions, people cannot help but notice the love, the faith. Each of these fruit should characterize your life. Are you loving? Joyful? Peaceful? Are you patient? Kind? Faithful? Are you gentle? Do you have self-control? In person? Online?

¹ Gerald L. Bray, ed., *Galatians, Ephesians (Reformation Commentary on Scripture)* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 194.

² Ibid, 197.

[Galatians 5:22-23 slide] Let me put it differently; it's not enough to just say we are Christians. If we are saved, if we have the Holy Spirit, our actions should naturally reflect it.

When I was 21, fresh out of Bible school and headed to Gordon College, I was a vegetarian. Had been for a year at that point. The one qualification I had to that was that if I was a guest somewhere, and they served meat, I would eat some rather than say something. It basically meant I had meat maybe once or twice a month. Well, my aunt and uncle lived a couple miles down the road from the college and offered to let me live in their finished basement to save money. I was under the impression I would be on my own so I was surprised the first day when they invited me up for dinner, and didn't say anything when they served meat. The same thing happened the next day. And the next. After about a month of this, I was at school one day and somehow it came up that I was a vegetarian, and as I was explaining it to the other student it hit me, somehow for the first time, that I had been telling people I was a vegetarian while eating meat every day for dinner for the last month. It was the most surreal moment of me standing there having this sudden realization that I wasn't actually a vegetarian. I could say it all I wanted, but the fact that I was eating meat every day really undermined the premise.

We can say we're Christians all we want, but if we aren't known for being **loving, joyful, peaceful, patient and kind, if we aren't faithful, gentle, and have self-control**, Paul suggests it might be just as ridiculous a claim as me claiming to be a vegetarian while eating meat every day.

Paul was challenging the Galatians, he **is** challenging us to look at our lives and see what naturally spills out. Is it our sinful nature? Or is it the fruit of the Spirit? Here's a better question, how would the people in your life describe you? John Calvin wrote this in his commentary on these verses: **"Paul draws a picture for us of the flesh and the Spirit. If we knew ourselves, we would not need this, but such is our innate hypocrisy that we never perceive our foulness until the tree has been made known by its fruits."**³

"We never perceive our foulness." It's a jarring statement, and yet, it's real isn't it? We give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. We can have a false sense of confidence, righteousness. Have you ever watched a competition like American Idol or America's Got Talent and been mystified by the contestant who does horribly but is convinced they are amazing? They look foolish, but we look so much more so when we are unaware of what kind of fruit we are producing. We need to be brave enough to take a hard look at ourselves, to ask hard questions.

³ Ibid, 194.

Galatians 5 closes with these thoughts:

Galatians 5:24-26 (NLT) ²⁴ *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there.* ²⁵ *Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.* ²⁶ *Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another.*

What does it mean to nail our sinful nature to the cross? How do we become people who let the Holy Spirit guide every aspect of our lives – not just the parts we see here at church? Our sinful nature wants to set boundaries, to say “that’s a great ideal, but it’s not how I can actually live, right?” **Nijay Gupta** writes of this passage, **“The flesh prods and provokes us to wonder, *is the one God really enough for me? Isn’t it better to hedge my bets and have a backup plan?*”**⁴

Dr. Gupta gives five ways that we can live a life guided by the Spirit, a life that produces fruit based on how we can produce literal fruit⁵:

1. Be in the Light

To produce fruit, a plant needs light. Are you taking time to be in the Word of God, letting it’s wisdom and goodness beam like light into your heart and soul?

2. Water

Water promotes growth, it keeps plants healthy and clean. There are a lot of things we can go without and still survive; water is not one of them. It is one of the most essential sources of life for us; in the same way, prayer is like water for our soul, it connects us to God, it tunes our spirit to the Holy Spirit, as we listen to the Holy Spirit through prayer, He waters our soul, He leads us, He helps us to grow.

3. Brace Yourself to Christ

Heather’s relatives have a vineyard with acre after acre of trellises. The vines are braced to the trellis to guide them to grow strong and healthy. We need to brace ourselves to Christ; in other words, as scripture calls us, we need to imitate Christ in all areas of life – with our family, our neighbors, our coworkers, our classmates, our teammates. Do we demonstrate His love? His patience? His grace?

4. Pest Control

If you have had a garden you know you have to protect it from pests or all your work will be lost to some hungry rabbits, right? So you have to be vigilant! It’s the same way with our lives; who are we surrounding ourselves with? We are shaped by those we spend time with! Yes, we need to be in the world to reach the world for

⁴ Nijay K. Gupta, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 232.

⁵ Ibid, 238-239.

Christ, but do you have believers surrounding you, protecting you, promoting growth, challenging you to live a life guided by the Holy Spirit? Are you guarding against bad influences?

5. Pruning

Finally, plants have to be pruned. Heather's uncle explained to me once why pruning was so critical and took so much of his time with the vineyard. Every branch that does not produce fruit is wasting resources; it is taking the nutrients, the energy, the strength of the vine and if it's not producing, it is lowering the ability of the rest of the vine to produce grapes. What in your life needs to be pruned for you to be more focused on God? It may not be a bad thing, but if it is getting in the way of Christlikeness, than it needs to be pruned.

If you look at the list of fruit Paul names - **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control** - and see areas you need to grow, that you need to improve in – and we all do – the answer is not to try and will power yourself into being more loving or patient. These are the symptoms of a deeper relationship with God, with the Holy Spirit. You produce these kinds of fruit when you're in the light / in the Word of God, when you are watered through prayer, when you brace yourself to Christ and grow in the direction He leads, when you guard against negative influences and when you prune away the things that get in the way of producing fruit. Perhaps the biggest question today, then, is this: which of these five areas of your walk with Christ, with the Holy Spirit, with God, need to be addressed?

Let's pray.