

Gospel Character

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[0 : 00] Galatians chapter 5, we're going to read from verse 16 to 25 as we consider again this letter that reminds us time and time again that there's no other gospel, there's no other good news other than that God sent his son Jesus into the world in order to pay the price for our sins, to deliver us from the power of sin, to give us freedom so that we might know God as children of God. Here in chapter 5 verse 16 to 25, Paul begins to turn to think about gospel character, Christian character, what does it look like to live a life that's transformed by God's grace.

So we'll read together chapter 5 from verse 16 to 25 and let's again hear God's word. So I say, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other so that you do not do what you want.

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. The acts of the sinful nature are obvious.

Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you as I did before that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But 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.

[2 : 16] Amen. Now I don't know if you have come across at all imposter syndrome. If not, you'll probably get what it's about. The idea that there are people who have expectations of us and we have that sense, hold on a minute, I can't do what everyone else expects of me. That worry that you are a fraud, you've been over-promoted. You are kind of aiming beyond your abilities and at some point somebody is going to find you out. That's imposter syndrome. We might experience that in the workplace or at school or university. But what about in church? Do you ever come to church and look around and think, well, everybody else belongs here. Everybody else seems to have their faith figured out. It seems easy for them. Why is it so hard for me? Why is it so hard for me to grow, to be more like the person that God wants me to be? Today, Paul is going to turn our attention to thinking about growing in

Christian character. What does it look like to become more holy, to become more like Jesus? And our first reaction might be, well, I can't do that. That's simply not me. I think the reason why Paul saves the talk about Christian character till the end of the letter is because it gave him a chance to tell us so many times about God's grace and what God's grace does in our lives. That God's grace in Jesus gives us a new identity as a child of God. It makes us a new creation. God's spirit is then at work in our hearts and our lives. So that Paul would say, and the Bible would say, if you are trusting in Jesus, if you are in Jesus, you are holy. And so now, in our lives, we're called to be who we truly are. So that's what we're going to be thinking about this morning. How does this change happen? Now, hopefully, as we read through our passage, you'll have seen the spirit appear again and again and again, seven times God's spirit is mentioned because the work of God's spirit in our lives, the presence of God's spirit in our lives is crucial to all of this. Donald read for us in John chapter 15, where Jesus said, I am the vine, you are the branches. We need to remain in Jesus if we are to bear fruit. And it's the spirit that connects us to the Lord Jesus. And the spirit that connects us to Jesus, it is the spirit that lives to bring glory to God, God the Father and God the Son. And as the life of the spirit is in us, so we too will increasingly desire to live for the glory of God, Father, Son, and Spirit. It's God's spirit that gives us the power in our lives to make us more like Jesus. So it's important for us to recognize before we get going, there is a danger for us to avoid. It'd be really easy to look at a passage like this and say, well, here's a list of bad behavior. These things are wrong. And a list of good behavior and qualities. These are right. And I'm going to try. We can think,

okay, I'm going to turn over a new leaf morally. I'm going to try and say no to doing the bad stuff. And I'm going to try and do the good stuff. We could try and shortcut the inner heart change that Paul's been talking about all along.

And so the reason why he brings it to this point in the letter is so that we should be really clear on recognizing, I can't be like Jesus just by trying really hard. I need a new heart. I need a new desire. I need the Spirit within me. Perhaps we can think of Jesus's words when he said, a bad tree can't bear good fruit and a good tree can't bear bad fruit.

So you could find, so we had an old plum tree in our garden, which was rotten. And we could, I suppose, try and fake some health in the tree by going to our local supermarket and buying a punnet of plums, get some string, tie it to the branches. That's not real life. That's not real growth. And so Paul wants us to be really clear. If we want to grow to be like Jesus, first of all, we must be saved by grace.

First of all, we must be in Christ. We must be in the vine. Then comes the Spirit-enabled, Spirit-powered obedience. We work as God by His Spirit works in us and on us. So let's see this this morning, looking at the three pictures that I think were given here by Paul. First of all, let's think together about the battle for gospel character. Verses 16 to 21, we get a picture of conflict and battle, a picture of an internal battle. Now, it's important for us to see this is more than simply a moral dilemma. This is not Paul talking about these moral conflicts that everybody has. This is a peculiarly Christian struggle. Only a Christian struggles this way because it's talking about the struggle between two natures. And so he gives us this picture of battle. So imagine the heart, the heart which had been the territory of the sinful nature. The sin nature was king. But then a person hears the gospel, a person hears the good news of Jesus, and trusts in Jesus. There is faith. And now what happens is that God's Spirit invades by His grace.

[8 : 21] And God's Spirit pushes out, begins to drive out the sinful nature. The sin nature is now a defeated enemy. Christ on the cross has won a decisive victory, but that victory is not complete yet.

So in our lives, there's this internal battle that's going on. The sin nature, which is defeated, but keeps fighting, the sin nature that wars against the Spirit. So let's have a look at that as we find it here in our section. What's the battle according to Paul? Let's look at verse 16.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what's contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit was contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other. So we've got this battle, Paul is saying between two natures, the old sinful nature versus this new nature in Christ, where we're living by the Spirit. And that's really a conflict between two opposing desires. So we've got the Spirit with its desires and drives for us, but we've also got the sinful nature with its desires and drives.

And at the heart of this battle, this battle for Christian character, it is a fundamental question. In this moment, not just in my life, but in this moment, which desire will I choose to follow?

Will I choose to live by the Spirit, or will I choose to gratify the sinful nature? The desires of the sinful nature are this strong pull that we have in our hearts towards self-glory, to make much of ourselves, or to live for created things rather than to live for and to worship our Creator. It's that drive towards self-indulgence and to simple disobedience to God and His Word.

[10 : 25] And to help illustrate what this looks like in our lives, Paul then provides a list of, verse 19 to 21, the acts of the sinful nature. Notice it's not a comprehensive list, because at the end he says, and the like. So here is just a representative sample of how the sinful nature wants us to act. And so you see that there is self-indulgence. Look at the examples of sexual sin in verse 19, or alcohol-fueled sin in verse 21. Here is a life where we're just doing whatever we want, just giving in to whatever our desire is. Whereas Paul had said earlier that freedom in Christ looks like self-control, the sinful nature is the absolute opposite. It's all about sinful indulgence. Where Paul has said freedom in Christ means you are free to love and serve others, the sinful nature would have us to use others to get what we want. Look at that big long list of actions and attitudes that serve to destroy personal relationships. Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy. I am the center of the universe and you must not get in my way. The sinful nature would pull us in that direction. And again, Paul had said to us, freedom in Christ is freedom to love God, to obey God, to follow God. But instead of that, the sinful nature would have us commit, verse 20, idolatry. Where we're valuing, where we're living for other things, other people rather than the one true God. And Paul is saying to us, this battle rages within us. These desires are within us. There is realism here. It's not saying become a Christian and all those desires, all those

inclinations go away. No, he's talking to us about battle.

A battle with sin that is lifelong. A pool of our old nature that remains present in us. And so he gives, at verse 21, a stark warning against complacency. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. If we live following those deep drives and desires, if our habitual practice is to live by our sinful nature, to listen to that, to practice those things, then Paul is saying that's going to keep us from God's kingdom. So here is an incentive to battle for Christian character with the help of the Spirit. This is serious. This is war. Now, how do we resist?

That's really important. Again, it's not by self-effort, because our willpower and our moral reform is not strong enough, but nor is it by sitting back and letting God do the work. No, we are invited to participate with the Spirit's power to strive for living like Jesus. So how do we make progress in this battle?

Some helpful pointers from Paul at this point. First thing to say, remember your true identity in Christ. There's a significant phrase at the end of verse 17. Verse 17, they are in conflict with each other, and then this, so that you do not do what you want. Now, Paul uses that same language in Romans chapter 7.

Romans chapter 7, Paul is talking about this internal spiritual battle that he has as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is still having to fight against sin. He still finds himself falling into sin, but he can say that when I do that, that's not what I want to do. As someone who's been transformed by grace, my main desire, the real me, is to live for Christ and to walk in obedience. And so he's saying that to the Christians in Galatia, and he's saying that to us, even when we fall into sin, if our hearts are being changed by grace of the Spirit's within us, first of all, we're not condemned because we're not under the law, but also that's not our true identity. It's not our greatest desire, which is to follow the Spirit, which is to love and honor Jesus. Because the root of Jesus' change in our lives runs deep. That Paul has spent time saying to us, sin has no more authority over us. We're no longer slaves to sin. So we can say that while we do sin, it's not inevitable anymore. We don't need to sin. We have the power now to say no to sin. So it's really important for us to remember who we are in Christ. That in this battle for being like Jesus, we're not frauds, we're not fakes, we're not imposters. In Christ, you are holy. In this battle for gospel character, we're called to fight to be who we really are. So remember your true identity in this battle and also live by and be led by the Spirit. Notice this little section, verse 16 and 18 begins, live by the Spirit. Verse 18, be led by the Spirit. Now Paul has already told us in chapter 3 and at verse 2 how the Christian life begins, how we receive the Spirit. We receive the Spirit by faith.

[16:22] When our faith is in Jesus, we receive God's powerful Spirit within us and then the Christian life therefore continues by faith in Jesus and in the power of the Spirit. We are led by the Spirit to follow His desires and His desire is always to bring glory to God and to Jesus, His Son.

The image of being led by is imagine the Holy Spirit is our shepherd. He's leading us in a good course. We are the sheep. We are to follow, follow after, glorifying, obeying, honoring our Savior. And when we're being led by the Spirit, we live by the Spirit. Those are the desires that we listen to. We want to love God and others. We want to serve others, not ourselves. We want to reflect the glory of Jesus in our lives, not fight for glory for ourselves. Now given that this is all the language of battle, what weapon do we have for this battle? If this battle is all about desire, how does the Spirit work in us to keep on renewing, to keep on changing our desires so that we want to be more and more like Jesus? How does that work practically? Martin Luther, the reformer, says, in the battle, the only remedy is the sword of the Spirit, the word of salvation. In other words, God's Spirit uses God's Word, the Bible, and God's Gospel, the good news of what He's done for us in Jesus. We want to do that. We want to do that. We want to do that. We want to do that. We want to find ourselves being satisfied in God above everything else. But that desire doesn't just happen, it needs to be cultivated, and the Spirit uses God's Word to do that. I've been reading a really helpful book recently by John Piper called Reading the Bible Supernaturally. I probably talked to a few of you about it, but what he's saying there is that the Spirit uses the Bible. The Spirit, first of all, when we're reading the Bible, He causes us to see the glory of God. So we read the Bible not just as a duty, not just as an end in itself. We read the Bible to see the glory of God.

And more than that, the Spirit then wants us to delight in the glory of God, that it would lead us into worship, and then to being transformed by the glory of God, so that we become more like Jesus.

[19:11] That's what the Spirit wants to do in our lives through the Bible. Help us to see the glory of God, to delight in it, and to be transformed by it. So this battle for gospel character requires us,

therefore, to be in God's Word. To be in church where we hear God's Word read and taught. To be in places where God's Word is being shared with other believers. To be led by the Spirit into the Word, to see more of God's glory, to become more like Jesus. So that's the picture of the battle for Christian character. But then the image changes in verse 22 and 23. So let's think for a few minutes about the growth of gospel character. So the image changes to growing fruit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Now it's not fighting, now it's farming that we're thinking about. Now in this, again, just to say, Paul is not saying turn over a new leaf morally. Paul is really careful to keep us focused on grace.

I am not trying really hard by our religion to please God or earn his acceptance. And so notice the contrast. So there's two ways the contrast comes out. First of all, you've got those two lists.

One is the list of those things to avoid, and one is those things to cultivate in our lives. So the acts of the sinful nature, and then you've got the fruit of the Spirit. But the language itself, you've got the acts of the sinful nature, but then you've got the fruit. Not the acts, the fruit.

of the Spirit. Which again is saying to us, you and I, we can't grow to be more like Jesus unless we are, first of all, connected to Jesus. There is no shortcut in that process. Jesus is the vine.

[21 : 24] We must be branches that remain in him if we are to bear fruit. The fruit image is also helpful because it reminds us that fruit requires nutrition, it requires life to grow, and God's Spirit is that life-giving energy because he is the one who connects us to Jesus. He enables us to grow in these graces.

The fruit image is also a helpful one for us because it reminds us that this kind of change, this kind of growth is also gradual. As much as we'd love to go from zero to everything in a moment, that's not the way it works. Our war against our sin is long, and sometimes our progress is really, really slow. For those of us who've ever planted a small fruit bush or waited for a fruit tree to produce a harvest, you know that the progress can really only be seen over a season.

You go check two, three times a day, there's not much change that happens. It's gradual. It's sometimes hard to notice that growth is seen over a season. That's the way it is often with our own lives. As we look back, perhaps we can say, do you know what? I'm a little bit more gentle than I was last year.

I'm a gossip less than I did two or three years ago. I tend to be a bit more kind towards others than I was when I was younger, but it's a slow and it's a gradual process.

But what fruit is it that the Spirit wants to grow in our lives? Of course, He wants us to grow in our love and obedience to God to cultivate the kind of lives that bring glory and honor to Jesus.

[23 : 15] And we may be asking, what does that kind of life look like? And so Paul gives us here this combination of graces to show us the kind of life that the Spirit is looking for us to pursue because this is a picture portrait of Jesus, isn't it? When we look at the life of Jesus in the Gospels, we find these graces supremely in His life. He is one who lived full of love, love for God, love for others. He is one who had perfect joy and hope in His relationship with God, His Father.

He is the one who had perfect patience towards His disciples when they didn't get it or when they let Him let Him down. He is the one who dealt with people with perfect gentleness. So we have a picture of Jesus as we reflect on those verses, but it's also a picture that God wants us to reflect.

Jesus is our representative, but Jesus is also our model. And with the help of the Spirit, we are to seek to grow in these graces alongside the Spirit. So how can we participate with the Spirit to be more like Jesus? Let's choose one of these fruits. Let's choose one of these character qualities.

Let's think about patience as an example. I'm guessing most of us probably struggle at some point or another with patience. How can we work with the Spirit to cultivate patience in our lives?

Again, John Piper was really helpful in this in his book on reading the Bible supernaturally. But the first thing I think is for us to acknowledge, all of us to be honest, that we need help to be patient, just as we do with any of these graces. Some may become more naturally to us than others, but with all of them, we need help. Which then leads us to pray. Pray that we would become more patient. Pray in a particular situation. Okay, I'm walking into a situation. I know this is the kind of place where I can lose my temper. I fly off the handle. So I need help to deal well with my children, in the workplace, wherever it might be. And from that also to trust. Prayer isn't just good feelings. Prayer is trusting that God's powerful Spirit in me and with me can help me to say no to anger and frustration, to say yes to exercising patience. Trust is saying, I can change because God's

[26 : 14] Spirit who wants me to glorify Jesus is working in me. So we trust as we pray. I find it helpful also to meditate. Meditate on God's patience towards us in our sin, in our slowness to learn

lessons, in our slowness to change. And from that standpoint, where we're depending on the Spirit, where we're aware of God's grace in our lives, then we act. Trusting that God in that moment will help us to be more patient or more kind or more gentle as He seeks for us to be. So it's a slow process, a gradual process, but it's a process where we are to work with the Spirit to seek to cultivate these graces.

And then there's another picture in the last couple of verses. Now let's think together about the long walk of gospel character. Verse 24, 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. Now that keep in step with the Spirit, that's drawn from the parade ground. That's military language. That's soldiers marching in file, one behind the other. All of our Christian life is a long walk of obedience and a long walk towards freedom. Where we're living by the Spirit, we're looking to keep in step with the Spirit. He is the one who sets the course we seek to follow. So we're waging war on sin in our lives.

We're fighting to delight in Jesus above all until the day of final freedom, the day when we go to be with Jesus, the day when we are set free from the power, the penalty, and the presence of sin in our lives.

But until that day, there is this long walk of gospel character, seeking to pursue more of the character of Jesus in our lives. So how should we do that from now until eternity? How should we live?

Verse 24, Paul says to us once again, live out your true identity because he talks to those who belong to Christ Jesus. Christian, you belong to Christ. He has paid the price for your freedom, not with silver or gold, but with his own precious blood so that we're not a slave to sin, but we are a child and heir of God. And in the family, we are to seek to live in a way that honors our Father in heaven.

[29 : 18] And we are to remember that he is our Father, that Jesus is our Savior and the one who intercedes for us, the one who has won the decisive victory for us, and that Father and Son have given us the Spirit.

So as we fight, we remember, I belong to Christ, I am his. He will hold me fast. I'm a child of God. God lives in me by his Spirit. This isn't on us. This is God has made this fundamental change in us and is working his grace and his Spirit in our lives. The second thing in this long walk of obedience is that we are to crucify this sinful nature with its passions and desires. So this is an active thing for us. We are to crucify. That's different from a verse that we looked at earlier in Galatians chapter 2 and verse 20 where he said, I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

But here we are to crucify the sinful nature. What does that mean? Well, what does it mean for somebody to execute a prisoner on a Roman cross? We are to show sin and its desires no mercy. We are to recognize that that sinful nature and its desires deserves to and must die. That just as somebody who was hanging on a Roman cross was deemed to be in the most shameful position imaginable, we are to see our sin as shameful and horrific and to want nothing to do with it.

We are to tear down our idols. We are to put an end, to put an end to the attractiveness of sin in our lives. And we do that by allowing the Spirit to renew our hearts and our minds so that Jesus, and not these sinful desires, is truly glorious to us. To quote Thomas Chalmers' famous sermon, we need the expulsive power of a new affection. We need a new love to come into our hearts to drive out the old.

[31 : 47] We need the light of Christ to drive out the darkness of sin in us. So we must crucify our sinful nature day by day by day. See it as more ugly and see Jesus as more beautiful day by day by day.

And again, we are to live by and to keep in step with the Spirit. Because if we're looking to pursue gospel character, if we're looking to become more like Jesus, that's exactly what the Spirit wants for us. The Spirit wants us to be who we long to be.

The Spirit wants us to be who God wants us to be. So we become more like Jesus. And we'll notice in our lives that God has lots of different ways of achieving that process, of shaping us, of renewing us, of reforming us. David Powlison, who's a biblical counselor, who's written a book on sanctification, he talks about the fact that sometimes it's God that works, God sovereignly intervenes and takes away certain desires and gives us new desires.

Other times, oftentimes, God works through his word. That as we read, we discover more of the treasure of the gospel. It causes us to worship and to obey and to love and we want nothing more to do with our sin. Sometimes it's as God sends wise people into our lives that change comes. People who speak truth into our lives. It's people who are able to challenge us or to convict us. People who, sometimes it's just their godly example makes us want to be different.

[33 : 30] Sometimes it's suffering and struggle that will change us. We realize that we have need and we must depend on God and his grace. Sometimes it's about us changing. Sometimes it's about us repenting.

Often, daily, often, daily. It's about us repenting, turning away from sin and turning towards Jesus. A classic question that's asked of a child, what do you want to be when you grow up?

If we ask that of a child of God, what's the answer? Well, the Spirit gives us the desire and the Spirit gives us the power to say, I want to be like Jesus, my Lord and my Savior. I'm looking forward to that day when I see him face to face, when I'm made new, when sin no longer has any part in my life, where I can love and worship and serve him forever.