

The Spirit of Freedom

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would open your Bibles to Galatians chapter 5 on page 179 and 180. 179, 180. Thank you so much for singing happy birthday to me.

I'm aware there are others who may have their birthday today. Is Sally Palm here? No. I know Ted Engle's wife Gloria has her birthday today. Chris Lay's birthday was yesterday.

Who else is within this week? Just put your hand up. Yes, over there, Dawn Dunkley. Yes, Beeth and Thomas. You can take the happy birthday sung to you as well.

I am very grateful for the singing of it. It was the sentiment, not the actual expression of your singing, which I appreciate. Thank you.

Well now, if you have been with us over the past few weeks, we have learned from the book of Galatians that a Christian is not someone who turns over a new leaf or develops a new philosophy of life or even develops a special interest in going to church and praying.

[1 : 09] In fact, it's not someone who really does anything, really. That at its root, a Christian is someone who has the growing realisation of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

That in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has completely and utterly and absolutely and eternally accepted us. And that there's nothing we can do to make him love us more.

There's nothing we can do to make him love us less. It's all been done in the death of Jesus Christ. And this is the great freedom that Paul has, the apostle Paul has brought us to.

I am free from having to justify myself before God. I'm free from having to justify myself before you, you before me. God has come to dwell in our hearts by his Holy Spirit.

We live by the Spirit. But there's only one problem. And it's called the university entrance argument. And you often hear this from people who come close to Christianity and begin to understand something of what the Christian gospel teaches.

[2 : 14] And it goes like this. If you take a 12-year-old and you say to them that they have already been accepted into university, it doesn't matter what they do with their high school education, it doesn't matter what grades they get or how good or bad they are, you'll ruin them.

That's how the argument goes. If a 12-year-old begins to think that they've already been accepted into university, they're not going to be motivated to work. They're going to become addicted to computer games and parties and whatever else teenagers do these days.

Now, that is exactly the problem for the new Christians in Galatia. They had put their faith in Jesus Christ. The transformation had begun, but they had troubles.

Look at verse 15 and verse 26, if you have that page open. They were having troubles. They were backbiting and gossiping and struggling with jealousy and arrogance, things you'll find in just about every Christian group.

So a group of new Christian teachers came into Galatia and they used the university entrance argument and offered an illustration. And they said, look, the way to go ahead is to get really serious with God's law and to come under God's law.

[3 : 32] They said there's only two ways to live. You're either a pagan and you're living for yourself and gratifying the desires of your flesh or you're under the law and trying to obey God. And the Apostle Paul says, no, actually, there is a third way.

It's not the way of self-gratification and it's not the way of moral reformation, but it is the way of keeping in step with the Spirit. The key verse in our passage today is verse 25 over on 180.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit or better still, keep in step with the Spirit. If the Spirit has come into your hearts and made you alive to God, says the Apostle, you will begin to be transformed from the inside.

True spiritual transformation doesn't come from the outside, from obeying laws, not from any external observance or ceremony or liturgy or anything, but from keeping in step with the Spirit. And this passage that Maria read for us earlier is one of the clearest and deepest and most practical sections I can think of in all the Bible on the Christian life.

[4 : 48] And I'm sorry we only have a few minutes to look at it. I want to give you two coat hangers to hang your thinking on and you can go and think this through yourselves.

The first is this. It shows us what this transformation is like, what it looks like, what does keeping in step with the Spirit look like and then secondly, how does it happen?

So first then, what does it look like? Go back to verse 13. You are called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love, serve one another.

The whole law is fulfilled in this word, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. It's one thing to say that Christ has set us free. It's one thing to say I'm completely in accepted and I stand loved by God.

It's an entirely other thing to live out that freedom. See, until now, Paul has been demonstrating what it means for me to be free and now he starts to talk about how I should use my freedom.

[5 : 54] And this is what it looks like. God has made us free so that you and I will serve other people. Very simple. Faith in Jesus Christ doesn't just bring us into connection with God.

It brings us into a particular relationship with God's people. You cannot walk with God unless you walk with God's people. You cannot, if you do not walk in love with God's people, you cannot say that you're walking in love with God.

God's people. This is the primary way we express the gospel of freedom and forgiveness. It's serving other people in love. This is the mark of freedom, brothers and sisters.

It is the mark of the reality that the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, that we use our lives, that we make decisions, very practical, day-by-day decisions, as to what will serve other people.

Not in some grand gesture of self-sacrifice that everyone's going to look on and say, aren't they fantastic? But in the slow, invisible, quiet, daily death of small inconveniences.

[7 : 07] That's how you show that God is real in your life. It's doing the opposite of what comes naturally. That's what Paul's point in verse 16 to 17 is.

Let's read those. But I say, walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh, for the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, so for these are opposed to each other to prevent you from doing what you would.

In the King James Version it says, the flesh lusteth against the Spirit. And that's a great translation, except whenever we say lust and whenever we use the word desires, we think of sex.

And that's not what it's about here. It's speaking about the deep inner motivation of desire and longing. And the word flesh also makes us think of sex or the body, and that's not what it means here either.

Every time Paul uses the flesh here, he is speaking about our human nature. And here is what the Bible says about us, that our human nature is hostile to God, that it is intrinsically and radically and permanently and defiantly and pervasively hostile to God.

[8 : 32] The Apostle says in Romans 8, for the mind that is set on the flesh or on human nature is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot. Our human nature is acting true to form when we are self-seeking, disobedient and defiant towards God.

Every part of my human nature is touched with this. There is no part of our nature that escapes this effect. If you think this is a bit strong, remember what Jesus said.

This is Jesus' view. He says in Mark 7, from within, out of the heart of woman and man come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

All these evil things come from within, say Jesus, and they make us impure. See, we have a terribly flattering, optimistic, sentimental and superficial view of ourselves.

We all want to think of ourselves as basically innocent. See, the proof of the hostility between our nature and God is that when the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts, when we place our faith in Jesus and God takes residence by his Spirit, your life becomes a struggle.

[9 : 53] It's wonderful. I mean, Paul is writing to Christians here. When I was in college, I had a number of friends who became Christians and they said, look, before we followed Jesus Christ, we didn't ever struggle with temptation, we just gave into it.

When the Spirit comes into our hearts, he brings with him holy affections from God. You now begin to desire the things of God and they come into direct conflict with the flesh, my own sinful desire, because my nature lusts against the Spirit.

Verse 19, what does that look like? The works of the flesh are plain. Here's another list. Fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, which is the word *pharmakaia* for drug taking, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, which is not being the life of the party. The Greek word there is heresy. Envy, drunkenness and carousing and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who practice these things ongoingly shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Now, I think that list covers just about all of us. Should I ask anyone to indicate if they're not covered? No, I shouldn't do that. It's a great list, you know, because some of the sins here are sins of religious people and some of them are sins of irreligious people.

[11 : 23] If you have a look at them, the first couple have to do with sexuality, some of them have to do with substance abuse, and then there's selfishness, jealousy, anger.

And the point is that if you are led by the spirit, you're not under the law. That is, the law can't do anything to transform this inner issue.

It only happens through the leading of the spirit. Let me just pause here and say, this phrase, being led by the spirit in verse 18, should get an award for one of the most abused phrases in the Bible. People use it today as though the Holy Spirit were kind of an internet connection where I download fresh information from God to give me guidance for today. And it usually comes in the thought of odd feelings, a nudge or a thought.

And when I do this, I say, I was led by the spirit. But this is one of two places in all the New Testament where we read this phrase and it has nothing to do with guidance and everything to do with godliness.

[12 : 32] being led by the spirit is not having a hotline to heaven, but it's God's spirit in our hearts resisting our nature. But here is the point, that the works of the human nature, they're not all sexual, but they're all self-centered.

Because sin is self-love to the core. My nature, my flesh, whispers to me all the time and it says, you're free. That sounds terrific.

Don't put yourself out for others. Think very carefully about what's in this for yourself. I need to be indulged and if you indulge me, I promise I will be good so long as it doesn't cost me too much. And we need to hear this because we are so devious and slippery in our sinful nature. Do you know the sinful nature will try to counterfeit the fruit of the spirit so long as it can remain in control? That's the issue. Who is in control? You see, if I remain in control, I may not be sexually promiscuous, but I'll be filled with pride. Or I may not appear proud, but I'm going to harbour all sorts of deep envies and jealousies towards you.

[13 : 48] But if we keep in step with the spirit, we are not controlled by our sinful desires. We're not controlled by an external institution. We're not controlled by what other Christians think, but we're controlled by the spirit.

And that is why religion is so powerless to help us here. It cannot change my heart. All the law-keeping and all the ceremonies in the world cannot change my fundamental egocentricity. Only God's spirit can do that. So you see, when you want to serve God on your own terms, you're not keeping in step with the spirit, but you're giving expression to your sinful nature. When you make decision based on your own convenience, or when you expect the church or the group of Christians around you to accommodate your wishes, you're giving expression to your sinful nature.

This is what it looks like. The sign, the real sign of transformation by the spirit is serving others in love, using the freedom that you and I have in Christ not to get what we want, but to do what we know will help others.

[14 : 55] I am afraid that many people today think about belonging to church a little bit like belonging to a community centre. You know, you pay the dues and you expect to get the services and you expect them to accommodate your wishes.

You use their services, but you're not really going to get deeply involved and engaged with people there. There are some people who are a little bit strange and they like to volunteer at these places, but you're not going to put yourself out for the community centre.

When Paul says, let us keep in step with the spirit, you know, that is not in the singular, it's a plural command and the reason is it's not something you can do on your own or I can do on my own. We can only do this with one another. In the Greek, it's literally keep in row together with the spirit. It is through our mutual fellowship.

It's through how we are with different members in the Christian community that we keep in step with the spirit. The only way we can do this is by holding on to each other, serving one another.

[16:03] That's how we keep in step with the spirit. So that's the first thing. That's basically what it looks like. That's what the transformation looks like. And secondly, and more briefly, how does it work? How does it work practically?

Look down to verse 22, please. These are wonderful and well-known verses.

Let's read verses 22 and 23 together. But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace. Peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

And such is all. Thank you. It's wonderful. Paul calls these fruit of the spirit. They're not the result of years of earnest, moral effort and hard work.

I don't come from religious observance or ceremonies. They come from God. And they come in the arena of the heart. And they're entirely supernatural.

[17:09] If you want to see what the works of the flesh look like, just do what comes naturally. Christian growth and transformation is fruit. Fruit, it's organic. It's like what happens to a tree.

Do you remember in John's Gospel when Jesus says to his disciples in the upper room, he says, I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

The way that we bear fruit is by holding on to him and he lives his life through us. And these nine fruit that Paul mentioned here, they all belong together.

Love, joy, peace. Love is basically opening ourselves to each other and treating that person with the love of Jesus Christ, not because of what it will bring you, but because of the intrinsic value of that person.

It's choosing to do what will be spiritually beneficial for that person or that group. Sometimes they will like it, sometimes they will hate it, it doesn't really matter. Joy is taking intrinsic delight in God.

[18:22] It's joy is knowing that God has loved me in Jesus Christ in such a way there's nothing in all the universe that can separate me from God. Peace is simply knowing that God is the wise one and is in control of all the circumstances of my life.

These are all ways of serving one another. Look at patience. Patience comes from the knowledge that everything that happens to me, both good and evil, comes to me from the hand of God who loves me and that waiting is a very important instrument in the hand of God to make me like Jesus Christ.

We have to be patient because these are fruit of the Spirit and sometimes it feels like often it feels like there's nothing happening and the slowness of the growth in grace is totally frustrating and given to me by the Spirit to help me depend on God.

Kindness, generosity and they have nothing to do with abilities and gifts and IQ and success. You can give all your money to charity.

You can preach and have thousands of people come to faith through you. You can invent a cure for disease and be completely barren of the fruit of the Spirit.

[19:38] But they are the fruit of the Spirit. They are a communal reality. God sows the seed of the Word in our hearts and it takes root and bears fruit.

If you live by the Spirit and if you keep in step with the Spirit, this change change is inevitable. It will happen to us. You will become less aggressive, less touchy, less self-protective and self-focused. You will become more joyful, more self-controlled, more willing to be engaged with others and serve others. It will happen. Some of us here have been Christians for a very long time and it may be helpful today, afterwards, to ask your friends how it's going.

Are you actually less abrasive than you used to be? Are you less consumed with anger? Are you more forgiving? Or do you keep holding your resentments long time? Are you increasing in peace?

Because you see, these fruit, you can't pick and choose between the fruit. The fruit in Greek is singular. It's one thing with nine facets which means you can't say, I'll go ahead with eight but I'll let myself fall behind in one.

[20 : 56] If you fall behind in one, you fall behind in all of them. And that is why the Apostle finishes and I want to finish with these words 24 and 25. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. I think if I was to be very truthful with you, if I look at my heart I find an abundant surplus of works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit if they're there, very tiny buds.

And so what the Apostle does at the end of this passage is he takes us back to the cross of Jesus Christ and he says, God accepts you not because of any legal standard but through the death of Jesus.

And what that means is this, everything I do is covered by the righteousness of Jesus. God takes delight in any movement in this direction to serve other people.

It doesn't matter how stumbling and inadequate and hopeless it really is. Every time we try and take a step to keep in step with the Spirit, it delights God because his death covers me.

[22 : 15] the best illustration I can think of this is those times when you go to a school concert. Those of us who are parents I remember when my boys were in their first musical performances and they were in an orchestra that made funny squeaks and squawks.

You couldn't tell what they were playing and like every parent there, I loved every second of it. And that's how God looks at every step we take to strengthen and to build his church no matter how weak and mixed it is.

And you know this week we follow Jesus as he enters Jerusalem as he goes to the garden to pray and then he goes to the cross out of love for us. And in the upper room he gathered his disciples and he said this, this is my commandment to you, love one another as I have loved you.

that's what he's given us to do. That is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. So if we live by the Spirit let us keep in step with the Spirit. Amen.

Amen.