



Galatians 5:16-26
Finding Freedom: Galatians
The War Inside

Rev. Brian North
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This morning as we continue our series going through Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia, we come to the part of it that contains what are probably the best-known verses – 5:22-23, the Fruit of the Spirit. Everyone loves the fruit of the Spirit and many people pray for more of the fruit of the Spirit to be evident in their lives. How many of you have ever wanted more, or prayed that God would give you more, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, or self-control”? If you haven’t prayed that for yourself, you probably have for others: “Lord, give my kids some self-control...Lord, make my boss a kinder person (that’s probably a common prayer around here) ☺...Lord, make that driver behind me more patient.” Hopefully, however, we’re praying the same kind of thing for ourselves.

Here’s the thing, though: **The Fruit of the Spirit do not come easily.** That’s why I’ve titled this morning’s message “The War Inside” rather than some bland and easy-sounding sermon title such as “The Fruit of The Spirit” or “Everyone’s Favorite Galatians Verses.” That would be misleading and a disservice to you. So, let’s dive into today’s passage. And just a quick reminder: this follows on the heels of Paul’s directives that the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in “agape” love (verse 6) and then in verses 13 and 14 he gives more definition to what that means: serving one another with humility and loving our neighbors as ourselves – which is essentially saying the same thing twice. So, today’s passage is flowing right out of that. With that as the lead-in to today’s passage, let’s read **Galatians 5:16-26.**

So, let’s dive right in because that’s what Paul does here. **“So, I say, walk by the Spirit,” he writes in verse 16.** If we’re going to live out the previous verses about our faith expressing itself in love, walking by the Spirit (or “in” the Spirit) is the only way to go. And that’s not actually as mystical or difficult to figure out as we might imagine it to be. I’m not saying it’s easy to actually *do*...but *knowing* the Spirit’s leading in regards to expressing our faith in love... to serving others with humility and loving our neighbors as ourselves...*that* isn’t usually rocket science. It’s not usually some mystical

experience of the Spirit that leads us. Walking by the Spirit is to walk by God's Word, the Bible. The Spirit speaks to us most concretely through Scripture.

“Walking by the Spirit” and being led by God's Word go hand-in-hand. It's not really an either/or situation. Psalm 119:105, combined with today's passage makes this abundantly clear: **“Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105)**. This is a verse about walking...living our faith, and the role of God's word in leading us along that path. So, if you're wanting to be in step with the Spirit, if you're wanting clarity about God's leading and how to express your faith in love, then get into God's Word – it will light the path for you to walk on. So, walking with the Holy Spirit is much more about *that* than some supernatural experience of the Spirit that you may or may not have.

This “walk with the Spirit” is then contrasted with, **“...and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16b)**. Walk by the Spirit, and this other stuff won't happen. The next couple verses go on to emphasize this conflict between the Spirit and the flesh. And so here we see why the war within us happens. What the Spirit leads us to do, and how the Spirit leads us to live, is oftentimes in conflict with what comes naturally to us. **Now, if you've been a Christian for a long time, it certainly is possible that some of the ways of the Spirit have become more natural to you, much like other facets of life where if we do things enough they become second nature to us.**

Some of you know this about me, but for others this will be new...but since late October of 2019, I've been the assistant band director for the Elementary Band program that combines Peter Kirk and Lakeview Elementary Band students into one band. I'm not the main director...my position is not a certified teacher position like the main band director, and mine is just a few hours a week...but I am helping kids learn their instruments, I'm conducting songs in practice, and so forth. I got interested because my youngest son is in the band program as of last year, and they were looking for an assistant...and my mom started this same before-school program for orchestra students back in the late-90's in the LWSD.

And it all fits really well with our family schedule and my pastoring, because elementary band meets before school. One of the benefits for me is I get to deepen my connections in the community, and another is that I get to live my faith out in the secular work world like many of you do. It is so hard for me not to end a class with a closing prayer or a benediction or at least a “God bless you!” Man, I’ve had to watch myself.

But a beginning band student is just learning how to play their instrument correctly – from how they hold it, to their embouchure, to reading music. At first, it’s a struggle and a challenge. It’s a lot of new information and new muscle memory to develop. But by the time a first-year student gets to *this* time of the year, they’re playing the Star Wars theme song (a simplified version, but still). That’s a song we’re working on now, and they’ll be recording it for a virtual concert in a couple of weeks. And so what happens as the year progresses is that playing the instrument becomes second nature to them. They don’t have to think about it like they did when they first started. And if they continue on into Middle School and High School, it will become even more natural to them...second nature.

Living by the Spirit – at least in some regards – may be like that for a few Christians, because of similar kinds of discipline and practice. Being that “in step” with the Spirit would be awesome. But for any who can honestly say they’re there, it’s probably in a small facet of life, leaving plenty of room to grow. For most of us there is a constant war, a battle, going on inside of us, between the Spirit’s leading and our flesh. Our gut instinct is to do one thing, while the Spirit is prompting us to do something different that would bear good fruit in our lives.

In case we wonder what Paul might have in mind as far as the desires of the flesh, he gives some very specific examples (v. 19-21) of the stuff that the flesh tends to desire. And he says they’re obvious. Sexual immorality impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage...and on he goes. If they’re obvious, they ought to be easy to avoid, right? A few weeks ago, I went up skiing at Stevens Pass with some friends on a phenomenal powder day – maybe 14 inches of new snow or even

more than that...and it had snowed a ton throughout February. Snoqualmie Summit, for instance averaged 10 inches of new snow every day in February.

So, on this particular day, on a couple runs we skied through some trees, because the snow stays fresh longer in the trees. And when you're skiing in the trees, you see them: they're obvious – like these works of the flesh – and similarly, you don't aim for them. You don't want to hit a tree because the tree will win every time, potentially with disastrous consequences. Fortunately, they *are* easy to see, like these works of the flesh, and the resorts will often trim branches in some groves of trees, to make it easier to ski there.

Here's the thing, though: On this one tree run we did, where the branches had been trimmed back, my skis managed to go under a tree branch that had not been trimmed and was *completely* covered by all the new snow. I had *no* idea the branch was there until my skis stopped dead in their tracks in the blink of an eye, and I got catapulted out of my skis and onto my face in the snow. I was totally blindsided, because this branch was anything but obvious, even though I could very clearly see the tree it was attached to.

Generally speaking, the stuff that our flesh gravitates toward and trips us up in life is pretty obvious, as Paul says. Nothing on this list, for example, surprises us. But sometimes it's lurking where we don't expect it, and we suddenly find ourselves knocked down and no longer moving in step with the Spirit. Either way, Paul gives a list of some things here that are fleshly temptations that we want to steer clear of, like the trees when skiing. This list is not comprehensive and it's possible that many of the things on this list are *not* things that you struggle with. Maybe you have other things. Or it may be that these things take a different form for us today than what we think of when we read some of these words, like idolatry. **We might say, “I don't have any idols in my life” because we narrowly define it as images or statues of pagan spiritual deities.**

But what about the idolatry of money? Or our time? Or our work? Or the idolatry of history and the way things used to be? Sometimes Christians make an idol out of their churches even...holding on to something that prevents the church from flourishing for God's Kingdom and being a church

that passes the faith on to the next generation. In some churches there's an idolatry around their pastors. There was an article in Christianity Today a few weeks ago with the title, "The Celebrity Pastor Problem is Every Church's Struggle."¹ Lord have mercy if that's the case here. We are here to lift up Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...not the pastor or any staff member. Even if "idolatry" seems obvious as a sin, but irrelevant to you, there may very well be a place in your life that it is lurking, like a branch covered up by the snow. That could be true with pretty much any of these. So, these are the kinds of things we want to navigate around. We want to see them and be aware of them, but not engage with them.

Now, you can't have a war with just one side. Who wants to watch a sporting event with only one team? So, what's the other side of this war within? Paul gets to that in verses 22-23, with the Fruit of the Spirit. **Because of the tendencies of the flesh, the Fruit of the Spirit does not come easily, but as we mature in faith, we will bear the fruit more abundantly.** None of this should come as a surprise. A tree does not bear fruit easily or quickly. It takes a certain degree of maturity, of growing through the different seasons of the year, and weathering storms and hot summers. An apple tree takes about 4-5 years to start bearing fruit, for example. Grape vines, which they would have been familiar with, take about three years. And over time as the tree or vine matures, the fruit will get better and more abundant. It's the same for us, as we grow and mature in Christ.

That growth process is up to each of us. Certainly, others can help us grow, and God grows us...Scripture says so explicitly...but we have to engage – whether that's through Worship, small group or personal Bible study, serving others, and so forth. All those things help us grow. **We can also help others to grow, so that they would bear fruit.** If you've got kids in the home, or grandkids you interact with regularly, you have a great opportunity right there to help others know Jesus, walk by the Spirit, and to bear fruit.

Just this last week I had such an opportunity with one of my kids. One of the challenges we've had this school year is that none of my kids' school-issued computers will print on our home printer. I'm not sure why...but they won't. So, about once a week on average, I'll get an email from one of them with an

attachment that they need me to print. I got one earlier this week from one of my daughter's school email accounts. The email had an attachment and the body of the email said (and this is exactly how it came to me): **“Helloooo daddy can u print that for mee thank youuu. Ur favorite child.”** Of course, I noticed the funny spelling and the arrogance of the signature, so to teach a lesson and clarify who my favorite child is², I immediately replied back in an email, “Did Elliott hijack your email account?” ☺ So, this was a Fruit of the Spirit teaching moment: the email I sent gives an opportunity for my daughter to have patience, gentleness, and self-control.

By the way, this is also proof that you should be glad I'm not God, because if I were, some of the fruit of the Spirit would be “sarcasm,” “smart-allec,” and “dad humor.” But in all seriousness: **We parents and grandparents have an opportunity help the next generation bear the Fruit of the Spirit in their lives.** To encourage them to have patience when their patience is tried, to help them be joyful about another kid's accomplishments. And of course, we can model the fruit of the Spirit for them as well. Kids mimic their parents, and as we all know they learn by watching us. So, remember that the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree.

But: **The Fruit of the Spirit is born through trials, through resisting the desires of the flesh.** I mean, if you want to have patience, how are you going to start bearing that fruit? You've got to be put into a situation where patience is needed. No one bears patience driving on 405 at 11:00 at night, but you do at 4:30 in the afternoon when frustration can mount instead. “Joy” is sharing in someone else's good news and success, maybe even when their success minimizes your success. Do you have joy for the person who gets the promotion at work that you would have liked to get? That's true joy, but selfishness beckons instead.

After essentially finishing this sermon on Thursday afternoon, I had a “lovely opportunity” to exude five of the fruit of the Spirit: peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. Funny how God gave me that opportunity right after finishing this message. And, I have to say: I managed quite well; Even Gwen acknowledged that later in the evening. And although God helped me get through it, I had a battle going on inside. In fact, after quite some time of

conversation, I decided I should step away. So, I told Gwen to take over the parenting duty (“Tag – you’re ‘it’”), and I went into another room to be by myself. I put on some headphones, cranked them about as loud as I could stand it and I was a one-man air-drumming, air-guitaring, head-banging, mosh-pitting machine for 55 minutes. My Apple watch gave me a lot of exercise minutes for my efforts and I needed a shower when the album ended. I will also confess that the back of my neck was a little tender the next morning. But the Spirit helped me win the war when I needed to, and I bore good fruit in the conversation...but man, it was not easy.

That’s why praying for the fruit is kind of a dangerous prayer – or writing a sermon about it is a dangerous sermon to write ☺ – because God will put us in situations where the Fruit of the Spirit will get formed. That’s the war inside us, the battle between the flesh and the Spirit, and each time we win, the fruit gets a little more robust. The fruit we bear might be small fruit at first, or it might be imperfect. But as we mature and find ourselves in similar situations, that fruit will grow and become better fruit. God’s Spirit will mature us, His Word will sink into us, and we will bear the Fruit of the Spirit more robustly. So, we pray the dangerous prayer: “Lord, help me mature in my faith so I would bear the Fruit of the Spirit.”

So, how’s your maturity as a follower of Jesus? **In the language of our passage today: How is your walk with the Spirit?** *Are you winning the war inside?* Is the fruit of the Spirit what marks your life? Probably there’s room for growth; Maybe even a lot of growth. Maybe some areas you’re doing pretty well. That’s ok to humbly acknowledge, and then pray that God uses that to model for others so they would bear fruit in their life, too. But wherever greater fruit is needed, pray the dangerous prayer: Ask God to help you grow fruit there. Consider asking someone else who knows you well and will lovingly tell you the truth about where they perceive good fruit in your life, and also where the Fruit of the Spirit could be a little more evident. Then get going on a closer walk with the Spirit and get a little more light from God’s word on your path (Psalm 119:105). It’ll lead to a war inside, almost guaranteed. But with Christ already reigning victorious, it’s a battle you can win, as you walk in step with the Spirit. Let’s Pray...Amen.

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2020/december-web-exclusives/celebrity-pastor-entitlement-church-culture-humility.html>

² Joking! Neither Gwen nor I have favorites among our kids.