

Spirit Life

Last week, we saw how difficult it is to move from captivity to freedom. We saw how a prisoner's mindset, his or her outlook on life, is shaped by the structures and by the fears associated with prison life. We saw that their release into the world of freedom is often a very difficult adjustment, largely because it requires relearning how life works on the outside.

And then we compared that to what happens to us when we become followers of Christ. We are invited into a new life called freedom, a life in which we have been liberated from the bondage of the old life, from the power of sin that held us captive. The problem is that that we have no training, no preparation for this new life. Our experience up until this point has been the experience of prison life, of following the rules of selfishness, of fear, of trying to get others to see things our way, to do things our way, to make life easy on us. And that approach to life produces conflict, criticism, battles of pride and will.

Paul says that that's how we're supposed to live. He says that instead of indulging our sinful nature we are now called to "serve one another in love." That's the new standard and, as I've mentioned already, it's not one we have been prepared for. But Paul continues on from this statement to teach us how we can learn this new life.

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.

Let's stop there for a few minutes. This is radical, life-changing information and we need to absorb it. There are two possibilities facing us in every decision we make. The two possibilities are opposed to each other, radically opposed. "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." Guess what we were most familiar with and what still hangs around even when we don't want it to? The sinful nature. Guess how that conflict will work out in our life unless we make the determination to live free? "... so that you do not do what you want."

This is Romans 7 in a nutshell. My sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit desires what is contrary to my sinful nature and the result of that conflict is that I end up not doing what I want. What do I want? I want to please the Lord, to honor Him with my life, to be continually filled with the Spirit and producing His works as the fruit of my daily living. In Romans 7, Paul describes this inner conflict this way:

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. (v. 18)

As you read through the rest of Romans 7, you see Paul trapped in misery, unable to rely on himself to produce anything good at all. At the end of the day, he finds the solution outside of his sinful nature, and in this passage in Galatians 5, he comes

back to the same solution:

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the old sinful nature.

This is the key to everything about Christian living. This is the secret to success and to growth as a follower of Jesus. What was the secret for the disciples in response to their calling to follow Jesus? It was to follow Jesus. What is the secret for modern-day disciples in response to our calling to follow Jesus? It is to follow the Spirit of Jesus, to be led by Him and to learn from Him. Where some will say that the secret to success is to follow the rules laid down through Moses and others will say that you will grow in your life of faith through continually choosing to do the right things, Paul says that the real key, the necessary step, is to follow the leading of the Spirit. And so he can say, here in v. 16,

Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

And in Romans 8:1 he writes this:

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

This is the key to living in freedom which, as we saw last week, involves serving one another in love. I said then, and I say it again now, this is not natural for us. We are more likely to think of our own wants and needs before we think of serving others. But who is there to help us, to change our mindset? -- the Spirit of Jesus. Who do we learn how to live in freedom from? -- the Spirit of Jesus.

In the remaining verses of Galatians 5, Paul tells us how we can know the difference between the leading of the Spirit and the leading of our sinful nature. And here it gets practical:

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.

Paul has framed his argument in the context of slavery to sin and freedom in the Spirit. So this list of activities are part of the slavery, part of what we learned while we were in prison to the sinful nature.

Now what do all these things in the list have in common? They are all the result of selfishness. Not one of them is produced as the result of serving one another in love. None.

Sexual immorality does not take place because a person is trying to be more loving. It happens because a person is greedy, wanting more for himself or herself. It happens because selfish desire is looking for someone else with selfish desire so

they can mutually satisfy each other, but not so that serving in love can happen, never to open that door. Impurity is that lusting after a person or experience that can never be morally right; again, it's a sign of sexual greed, of sinful and selfish desire.

Another place where this same word is used by Paul is in 2 Corinthians 12:21:

I don't look forward to a second humiliation by God among you, compounded by hot tears over that crowd that keeps sinning over and over in the same old ways, who refuse to turn away from the pigsty of evil, sexual disorder, and indecency in which they wallow.

Notice with me that the world in general has very little negative to say about sexual immorality. Oh, they pretend to be shocked by unfaithfulness in celebrity couples or by the high rate of teen pregnancy, but the reality is that they celebrate sexual sin. When the Winter Olympics were on in Vancouver, Tiger Woods was going through all of the aftermath of his highly publicized affairs, which on the surface the media made fun of. At the time, American downhill ski champion Lindsay Vonn laughed about it, saying something to the effect of, "You get yours, Tiger." Now that she and Tiger have hooked up and are an item, the media laughs along with her and continues to promote Woods as if he were still winning championships. There is no holding back in admiration for the man because he is a sexually promiscuous man, nor is there holding back in admiration for any other athlete or celebrity that I can think of in our day because of sexual immorality.

The world's attitude toward human sexuality has very little to do with love and a whole lot to do with the freedom to do whatever you want to do, the freedom to become, in Paul's words, a slave of sin. The third word he uses here in this Galatians passage is debauchery or sensuality or lewdness. It simply means to be unrestrained in moral attitudes and behaviors -- again, an appropriate description of the attitude toward sexuality displayed in the media. Again, the word is used by Paul in Ephesians 4:19 and the context gives us a clear indication of what he means:

Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

So the world's attitude to sexuality is to be greedy about it, and Paul points out that this greed is sinful and unloving.

The next pair of words he uses are idolatry and witchcraft, pointing to a public display of giving honor to false gods and the private activity of seeking power from the spiritual forces of darkness, spiritual forces opposed to God and His Kingdom -- both are false worship.

Then comes a large grouping of words that deal with the challenges of living in loving relationships with one another: *hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy*. Again, the thing that all these things have in common are that they are rooted in selfishness, in pride and a sense of superiority over others. Their inclusion in this passage leads us to conclude that the Galatian church was full of dysfunctional relationships, including the biting and devouring that we saw last week.

People who serve on city councils and school boards and community service groups know how political a meeting can become. They know how difficult it can be at times to carry on a civil discussion about an important issue. But in the church, we are surprised at the negativity that can come out. We weren't expecting people to be so selfish or so intolerant or so impatient with the process. We thought we could discuss all the options without stirring up an emotional hornet's nest. Our expectations are higher than the world's because they should be. Our expectations are for preferring one another in love because that's what our book tells us to do. When that doesn't happen, when people get angry and divisive in the context of church life, we are right to be surprised. We have been called to a higher standard and we need to expect that of one another.

Three of the words on this list refer to the person whose words or actions drive a wedge between people: discord, dissensions and factions. At the root of these words is the sense of standing apart from others with the intention of getting one's own way, of pursuing a selfish course of action without regard to the feelings of others. One of the three, the word NIV translates "factions" is actually the Greek work "hairesis" from which we get "heresy". These words involve pushing forward a personal agenda to the extent that you will trample on those who disagree with you. Obviously that creates factions, divisions among people who agree with you and those who don't. You may find yourself on the phone or writing emails with the intention of getting other people to take your side in a dispute. You may attack another person's character or intelligence or motivation in the attempt to sway people to your viewpoint. It's selfish, it's unloving and it's damaging to relationships in the church. This is the fruit of the sinful nature and Paul is urging the believers in Galatia -- and through them he urges us -- to resist those things.

The other five dysfunctions that Paul points to are hatred, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition and envy. Jealousy and envy describe the heart issues of looking at others and feeling like you deserve more from life, you want more than you have, you feel shortchanged, unlucky, not blessed because you're missing something that someone else has - some gift, some talent, some prosperity or sign of good fortune. This is the person who is never satisfied, who can never feel content with being able to make ends meet, who is always striving and restless. This, too, breaks apart relational warmth in the family of God because this person can make everyone else feel guilty for whatever success they have or at least we feel resented by that one person.

Hatred and fits of rage are the extremes that we seldom see, or expect to see, in the church family, but which come from a person who has allowed these jealousies and judgments to poison their mind against other believers. Hatred and rage are extreme examples of the self-centred mindset which has no regard for others and lashes out at anyone and everyone for any and every cause imaginable.

The last one from this list is the all-inclusive term "selfish ambition" which includes the idea of rivalry or competition. The word is translated in the King James as "strife",

in the New Revised Standard Version as “quarrels” and in the ESV as “rivalries”. It is a twisted version of ambition as its aim is to succeed against others, to be promoted above others, to have your views be judged superior to others.

Paul has listed eight items, eight ways in which we can have relational dysfunction in the body of Christ and the amazing thing about this list is that we tolerate most of them most of the time. We’re not upset by people being envious or jealous, and we have very little to say when a person says or does something which has the potential to be divisive or is an obvious display of selfish ambition.

In the final pair of vices Paul mentions two more items that are related to each other, drunkenness and orgies and then adds “and the like”. The life of excess is not the life that demonstrates the presence of the Spirit of Jesus. Excess in selfish consumption demonstrates a lack of restraint, a lack of respect for self and others and, according to Paul, an absence of the Spirit.

I say that because he goes on from this verse to warn all his readers against the whole preceding list:

I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

Let’s sum this all up before we make our conclusions. Paul says that the acts of the sinful nature are evident and then he divides them into 4 categories:

1. Sexual sin (3 items)
2. False worship (idolatry and witchcraft)
3. Selfish ways of relating to one another (8 items)
4. Selfish expressions of individual excess (drunkenness, orgies and the like)

If we were to be childish about this list, we might say, “Well, Paul says that we should live in freedom, then turns our life into a legalistic pursuit of the kind of holiness we could never achieve by obeying the law.” But let’s look at this list again and decide whose understanding of freedom we accept as valid. Sexual sin, false worship, selfish ways of relating to one another and individual excess are the fruit of the old, sinful nature. Paul says that at the beginning of verse 19 and he says that the fruit of the old, sinful nature will not get us into the Kingdom. In fact, he said earlier that the sinful nature was enslaved to sin, was, in fact, the opposite of freedom, because it meant doing whatever the tempter, Satan, told us to do. So, it would be wrong to conclude that this list represents true freedom, because it is produced in our slavery to sin.

Paul will define the fruit of the Spirit in the verses that follow and these traits: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, rage, selfish ambition, etc. etc. are not the fruit of the Spirit. They have a different source, our sinful nature, and are not produced by truly free human beings. They are the language we learned in prison -- as we talked about last week -- and they don’t bring us close to God nor do they produce His Kingdom in our lives. It’s not that we came

out of prison fully equipped to perfectly do all these things -- we came out of prison as the first step in our healing, as the first step in God giving us the capacity to live a new life.

Look at the Galatians -- they had been Christians for a few years and look at all the things they were participating in that Paul had to warn them about. He mentions 15 and then adds "and the like". They were in trouble, they had slipped back into the slavish kind of thinking they had learned when they were prisoners of Satan and their sinful nature. And Paul is simply saying here that the old way was never good enough to merit having a place in God's eternal kingdom. Going back, returning to prison life, or to slavery to sin, is not progress and its fruit is poisonous.

His warning is, "Don't go there! Don't continue to be led by your old self-centredness that makes you want just what you want and therefore produces all kinds of proud and independent ways of living and ways of dealing with other people in your world. Don't be like that in church. Don't be like that in your marriage and your family. Don't be like that in your relationships out in the world. Your freedom from all those old ways of thinking and acting has been purchased for you by the incredibly costly sacrifice of the blood of Jesus and you're wasting it if you return to living that old way. And then he tells us of the better way, of the fruit of life in the Spirit -- and we'll start on that next week.