

KEEPING IN STEP WITH THE SPIRIT

Text: Galatians 5:16-25

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We are going to be looking at one of the biggest issues that determines how you fare in life; your character. In determining how well you will do at work, in your marriage, relating in the community, doing ministry in the church, so much hinges on your character; how you conduct yourself. A man called William Ward noted that 'Greatness is not found in possessions, power, position or prestige. It is discovered in goodness, humility, service and character.' Billy Graham said 'When character is lost, all is lost'. When we look at 1 Timothy 3 and note the prerequisites for church leadership we see nearly all the items listed are character issues. To think about this our focus will be on the list in Galatians 5:22-23 where we see the 'fruit of the Spirit'. Now check that list and tell me how many fruit are listed? There is in fact only one fruit. Look carefully at what it says; "fruit of the spirit" not "fruits..." Is that hair splitting? No. It is a very important distinction. If there are numerous fruits we might be tempted to pick and choose. If we have a soft nature we may be inclined to go for gentleness and forgo patience. The 'gifts' of the Spirit are indeed many and varied and we do not all have the same. But the 'fruit' of the Spirit is something that all of us must strive for; for all the fruit.

Let me define what the fruit of the spirit is about. It is an overall description of the kind of behaviour that results when a person has a living relationship with Jesus and is lived in by the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit describes a Christian character. Jesus said, "*By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.*" I love the wit of Jesus. Do you get a grape from a thornbush? No, don't be ridiculous. The point is what your character is like shows itself by your behaviour. Observe some one long enough and you will see it. Behaviour is also much determined by what we believe. James said: "*Faith without works is dead.*" If we really believe in God, it will

show itself. If it doesn't show, we don't really believe. So the "*fruit of the Spirit*" is the revealing of the character within.

But whose character is within? Whose character is being revealed by the "*fruit of the Spirit*"? It is certainly not your and my natural character. Paul shows what we are like without the Spirit in Galatians 5:19-21. "*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...*" Paul mentions these things because they were problems in Galatia. But they are still the issues of our day. Things don't change much. The fruit of the Spirit is not our natural character. So whose character is being revealed? The Spirit's. God's! [POWER POINT CHART] Look at the chart: 'The fruit of the Spirit is the character of God.' That is the key thing we must see here. The fruit of the Spirit is God's character coming through in us.

Now this may all seem a bit much. All of us will struggle with relating our Christian behaviour to the character of God. The immensity and holiness of God is too much for us. The more we truly know God, the more we would feel overwhelmed. There is the story of the little boy who was disappointed with the smallness of the egg his chook laid. So he went down the street and came back with a large parcel. He got down in front of the bantam, unwrapped the parcel and revealed an ostrich egg. He took hold of the egg and said to his chook 'Take a good look at this and try harder'. In a sense, there is as much chance for us to reproduce God's character in our lives, as there is for the chook to lay an ostrich egg. We may be inclined to say impossible and not even try. But then we must understand something else. The qualities we find here in the "*fruit of the Spirit*" are things we are commanded to do. The command is not 'Take a look at this and try harder.' But each fruit is indeed commanded. [POWER POINT CHART] Look at the chart 'The fruit of the Spirit, the commands of scripture'. See how each fruit is something we are commanded to do? We may be inclined again to think it's all too much for us. And it is. But this is not something we strive at on our own. Remember this is the "*fruit of the Spirit*."

So the big question is how do we go about working with the Spirit so that we show this fruit in our lives. This is a very important issue. It is tempting to just start preaching on the topic of '*love*', then '*joy*' the week after. But just describing the fruit without first

outlining how they grow in us will be irresponsible. We will end up striving on our own and failing and getting despondent.

First, we need to recognise that we have changed. Note : 24 "*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.*" If we have accepted Jesus Christ as saviour and Lord, then a miracle has occurred in us. We have been born again. We have a whole new life. And the source of that new life is the Spirit. Now, our conversion, was not just something that happened to us. We are involved too. For example at birth a baby comes by forces other than her own. But she is fully involved. So with us. It was the Spirit who gave us new life. But at the same time we ourselves repented and came in faith to Jesus. It is a mystery involving the Spirit and us. You notice how Paul writes here "*Those who belong to Christ have crucified the sinful nature...*" It something we have done. When we accept Jesus as Lord, then we commit to following him rather than just our sinful nature. By the Spirit we have made a deathblow to sin. We have 'crucified it'. It is no longer in complete control. We can will to serve Jesus even if we still fail in many ways. So Paul now says, in effect, be what you are. Practice what you are in principle. If the Spirit is the source of your life, then allow him to direct your steps so that you make progress.

Now that's the second thing we need to do. Look at verse 16 "*So I say live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature*". Verse 18 "*But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law.*" Verse 25 "*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*" How does this work? I want to demonstrate it to you. I need a volunteer. If I blindfold a person what is the best way to get them to walk around the pews this morning? Note what happened. Though blind folded, he made his way round the church. He walked, he was led, he needed to hang on and be guided. But he also needed to walk in his own strength. He was not carried. Have a look again at the three verses. You will see that the imagery is all about walking and being led. Verse 16 "*...live by the Spirit*". The Greek says: "walk by the spirit (peripateo)". It means 'to go about, walk, walk with someone, the walk of life'. Verse 18 "*If you are led by the Spirit...*" The Greek verb (ago) means 'to lead or bring along'. The passive (as here) means 'to be led, to allow oneself to be led'. Verse 25 "*Let us keep in step with the Spirit*". Greek (stoicheo) is not that of 'walking' in :16, but 'walking in line, stand beside, holding to a rule, following someone's footsteps and thus proceeding under another's control'.

So you get the picture. Living by the Spirit very much involves us. We are to be walking. So it involves our energy, our participation. But where we go, depends on where we are led. We are to follow the lead of the Spirit who sets the rule for where and how we go. So the fruit of the Spirit is the result of the inner working of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit in us the fruit is impossible. Without the Spirit we cannot reveal the character of God in us. But we too need to be very much involved. We must strive for obedience to the commands of God. It requires our thinking, our passion and our effort. How the two go together is a mystery. Where does the Spirit begin and end and our human response begin? We don't know. It is not a case of 50/50. But it's a matter of 100%/100%. We give it all we have as if it all depends on us. At the same time we pray to the Spirit and listen to his leading, knowing it's all in his hand. Paul says this in effect when he writes in Philippians 2:12&13 "*...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*" The theologian B.B. Warfield wrote 'It is the Spirit's task to keep us in the path and to bring us finally to the goal. But it is we who take every step. Our limbs grow tired from the labour, our hearts grow faint, our faith that revives our sinking strength.'

Now the question is how do we know the leading of the Spirit? How does he show us the way? We get a clue from Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah in chapter 5 tells us a parable of a vineyard which, despite every effort, produces bad fruit. The owner has done everything he could to produce the very best of grapes. He has dug it up and cleared it of stones. He has built a watchtower to protect it from invaders. He has built a winepress and prepared for harvest. And then he waits. Instead of the full ripe grapes of the cultivated vine, there appear instead wild grapes, perhaps sour, perhaps small, perhaps spoiled. In any case, they are utterly unacceptable. He says (5:4), "*What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?*" The fault has to be in the vine! Applying the parable, Isaiah identifies the vine as the twelve tribes of Israel, and especially Judah (5:7). The fruit which God had expected to find was justice and righteousness. The fruit he found instead was oppression and evil. What happened? What caused the production of rotten fruit? Isaiah tells us (Isaiah 5:24b) "*... they have rejected the law of the LORD Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.*" This tells us that fruit-bearing is cultivated only when we love the law of God instead of rejecting it, when we keep the word of God instead of spurning it. So to cultivate the

fruit of the Spirit we need to spend time with the Word. We need to read it. We need to study it. We need to hear it preached. To cultivate the 'fruit of the Spirit' we need to spend time in worship. To cultivate the fruit of the Spirit we need a time of prayer.
(Read JI Packer page 109)

To cultivate the fruit of the Spirit we also need the company of people; ordinary, stubborn, self-centred, selfish people. Now, in early Christianity, the model of devotion was the hermit, someone living apart from the corruption of society. These hermits wandered the desert, alone, fasting, praying, having visions. Many went to extremes eating nothing but grass, living in trees, refusing to wash. Now think about it. Is this the way to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit? Did you notice all the fruit are relational? How can you learn love if there is no one around to love? How can you show humility if you are living alone? How can you grow in patience if your patience is never tested by the company of other people? How can you learn kindness, gentleness, or goodness in isolation? In short, developing spiritual fruit requires people being around. Now, I don't mean people you have chosen as your friends. You see, you pick your friends because you like them and they like you. It is easy or easier to be good, gentle, and patient with them. Instead, God wants us to develop spiritual fruit within the context of family and church, two institutions where we can't be selective about our associates. We have no choice about who our parents or brothers or sisters will be. Yet we are expected to love them. Neither can we choose who will or will not be in the family of God. Anyone who confesses Jesus as Lord is part of his family.

One final point. The wonderful thing about being Spirit led is that it is not the negative life of feeling bad and oppressed by the wrong in our lives. We do not focus on the bad things we have to be rid of. We focus with the Spirit on the good the Spirit leads us to. Being led by the Spirit is a breath of fresh air. It is spiritual freedom. Paul writes in :16 *"Live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature."* It is like the new buds on a tree coming out in spring. They push out any old leaves still hanging on to the tree. So with the Spirit we focus on the good, and the bad will drop away. When you come up to a situation, instead of charging in, following the old nature, we pray to the Spirit within. We reflect on all we have read in the Word. And we allow the Word and Spirit to temper what we do. We follow the lead of the Spirit. But even if we fail to heed the Spirit, he still persists in working in us.

It's important to be aware how we are doing with each of the fruit. Do a self assessment and compare your assessment with someone who knows you well. Be serious about your character development. It will dramatically affect so much in your life. And the capacity for our community to find hope in Jesus.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- Whose character is being revealed by the 'fruit of the Spirit'? So why is it important for our lives to reflect this 'fruit'? How does your life compare at the moment? How come?
- What does it mean to 'keep in step with the Spirit'? How might you go about doing that in your life this week?
- How do we know the leading of the Spirit? What will you do to be better led?
- Why do we need the company of others to develop the 'fruit' in our lives? What do you need to do to grow in the 'fruit' in your life at home, at work, in the church community?