

Message

We're in the wake of Easter, when we gathered to celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Easter night ended with Jesus appearing to the disciples when they were hiding in a room, afraid to go outside. Jesus breathes on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. This is a powerful image - in both Greek and Hebrew, the word "Spirit" can also mean 'wind' or 'breath'. John imagines the Holy Spirit as the very breath of Jesus, filling us with Jesus' own life and power.

So during this season following Easter, we're going to explore what a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit looks like. Where does a life whose sails are filled with God's divine wind take us? What does it mean to have the Holy Spirit's divine power transforming us?

First, we saw that the Holy Spirit is our ADVOCATE, God teaching us how to know God, speaking for us, praying with us. Making us look more like Jesus.

Then we spent a couple of weeks exploring how the Spirit helps us to face our sin and repent so that the Spirit can transform us. This week and next week, we're focusing on how the Spirit changes us. It's not hard to figure out what we mean by being 'transformed' - we have a pretty solid sense of right and wrong, good and evil. And in that sense, we shouldn't be surprised that the transformation the Spirit offers is in line with becoming good - more like Jesus.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Galatians 5. This is a letter from the Apostle Paul to a network of churches in the Roman province of Galatia. Paul planted these churches - some of the first he planted in the non-Jewish areas of the Roman Empire. Though Jesus was Jewish, and all his first disciples were Jewish, from the earliest days of the Church, those Jewish followers of Jesus were trying to figure out how Gentiles could participate in the Church.

They understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham over 1,000 years earlier. And part of the way the Jewish people marked their belonging to that promise was through the practice of circumcision. So a big question that faced those first Christians was whether or not non-Jews had to be circumcised to follow Jesus. The natural answer was, "Yes, of course." Abraham got circumcised to show his faithfulness. Jesus was circumcised. Why is this even a question?

And of course it wasn't *really* about circumcision. It was really about the question: Do Gentiles have to become Jews to be part of God's people? Do they have to keep the dietary code and follow all the laws of Moses and all the rest? Or does God receive Gentiles as they are?

And Paul had a very clear answer: Gentiles do *not* have to become Jews to be adopted into God's family. We can follow Jesus just as we are. No dietary code. No law. No circumcision. Paul was so passionate about this belief that he dedicated the latter part of his life to travelling all over the Roman Empire preaching the good news of Jesus' resurrection and forming churches of all the Gentiles who believed.

For Paul, it wasn't things like the food you eat, the day on which you worship or whether you're circumcised or not. What marks you as God's own is... the Holy Spirit. Because the Spirit is the one who transforms us. Let's read:

I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your flesh craves. The flesh wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the flesh desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.

When you follow the desires of your flesh, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! -- Galatians 5:16-23

There's a reason this passage about the fruit of the Spirit is so beloved - don't we all know the damage wrought by the works of the flesh. We've all been hurt by sexual immorality, hostility, jealousy, selfishness, dissension, division, drunkenness and the others. And imagine if we could embody those qualities that are the fruit of the Spirit - if we were consistently loving, joyful, peace-making, patient, kind, generous, gentle, faithful and self-controlled.

Wow, right?

Of course the fact that we're *not* points at a big problem with this list - it's easier to live by the desires of our flesh. And this list of fruit feels impossible to achieve. I mean, who among us is all of those things all the time?

So here's some good news: our suspicions are right. The fruit of the Spirit *is* impossible to achieve. That's why Paul doesn't call them 'works' of the Spirit. Because they're not something we achieve or earn. They're not something we produce. These are fruit that grow from the Spirit.

A life lived in the flesh produces one set of fruit... but a life lived in the Spirit produces another.

And we need to be clear about what a life lived in the flesh looks like - it *doesn't* mean a life spent doing all those 'bad' things in the list. Remember, that's the *fruit* of the flesh. A life lived in the flesh is a life lived by law, one where we try to achieve goodness through our own merit.

For the Galatians, that looked like circumcision. After Paul left the Galatian churches, some other Christian leaders came in behind him to 'correct' his teaching. Paul is a good guy, they'd say. But he's

wrong - you *do* have to become Jewish to follow Jesus. You have to change your diet. You have to worship on Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath) not Sunday (the day Jesus was raised from the dead). And you definitely, definitely have to get circumcised.

In fact, the whole reason Paul *wrote* the letter to the Galatian Christians is because word has reached him that the Galatians are following these new teachers. They're changing their diets and getting circumcised. And Paul is *furious*. Galatians is the spiciest letter we have in the New Testament. He's furious because by following these religious rules, the Galatians are turning away from the Spirit who truly transforms them. Look at what he said earlier in the letter - back at the beginning of chapter 3:

Foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ's death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross. Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ. How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? Have you experienced so much for nothing? Surely it was not in vain, was it?

I ask you again, does God give you the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you because you obey the law? Of course not! It is because you believe the message you heard about Christ. -- Galatians 3:1-5

Does God give you the Holy Spirit because you obey the law? No! It's because you believe!

Now today, we don't get too hung up on dietary codes or days to worship or circumcision. But we have some other religious practices that we put just as much emphasis on - the very spiritual practices we've been emphasizing throughout this series: reading scripture, prayer, fasting, keeping a sabbath and giving among others. It's possible to do these things to try to earn God's approval, to prove we're religious folks. Just like the Galatians were turning to diet and circumcision.

And Paul insists, No! That's wrong! In fact, if that's what your faith looks like, it'll only produce those rotten, poisonous fruits.

True religion is based in faith - faith that God raised Jesus from the dead and faith that God gives us that same Spirit to transform us and make us new. Spiritual practices are important not because if we do enough of them or do them often enough we earn Spirit points or fill Spirit quotas, but because they open us to the Spirit's transforming power. It's not that practices earn the Spirit's presence. The Spirit is already with us, and practices open us to the Spirit.

Here's the problem though: do you know how to spot the difference between someone reading Scripture to earn God's approval and someone reading Scripture as a way of being open to the Spirit's work?

You can't. Externally, the practices look the same. Which is why Paul doesn't spend a lot of time on what we should be doing or not doing. Rather, if you want to know if a person is living in the Spirit or living in the flesh, you have to look at the fruit their life is producing.

And, perhaps more to the point, if I want to know if I'm living in the flesh or in the Spirit, I need to look at the sort of fruit *I'm* producing. Do I create division and dissension? Am I involved in sexual immorality? Do I quarrel, get jealous, am I selfish? Do I rely on a substance like alcohol to relax or unwind? Do I struggle to control my temper?

Or do I make peace? Am I patient? Am I kind and generous? Self-controlled? Gentle?

Comparing motivations is difficult. Comparing fruit is easy.

So as we move toward our time of reflection, I want to invite you into a space of self-examination. In prayer, ask God to help you interrogate your own life, to see clearly and honestly the fruit of your life. Are you living in the flesh? Or are you living in the Spirit?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We don't earn our place. We receive it from Jesus.

1. When you follow the desires of your flesh, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. - Galatians 5:19-21
2. The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. -- Galatians 5:22-23
3. What practice(s) can help me make space for the Spirit this week?

Prayer

Assignment + Blessing

Share a spiritual practice that helps you be open to the Spirit this week. And if you see a fruit of the Spirit in someone else, call it out!

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives. Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another. -- Galatians 5:24-26