

Over the past few weeks we have been reading through the letter that Paul wrote to a group of Christians that made up the churches in the region of Galatia. We call this letter Galatians. Today we are going to be reading from the 5th chapter.

This section of Scripture contains a description of the “fruits of the Spirit.” We are going to see this list as a contrast to the list associated with the works of the flesh. As we prepare to read this section of the letter we may need to set aside a tendency to quickly assume what Paul is talking about when he describes sins of the flesh.

Many times today when the phrase “sins of the flesh” is used the focus is exclusively on sexual expression. But as we will see in this Scripture, the word “flesh” refers to any actions that are in contrast to the work of God’s Spirit. In this passage Paul sets up a contrast between actions that share the presence of God’s Holy Spirit in an individual and a church community and actions which prevent God’s Holy Spirit from being present in the life of an individual or church community.

Let us pay attention to what actions reflect that God’s Holy Spirit is present in a church community and actions which reflect an absence of God’s Holy Spirit.

Read Galatians 5:1, 13-26

As Paul points out, God in Christ provides us incredible freedom. In Christ there is freedom. Following Christ is not about being consumed with making sure we follow the right rules to earn salvation from God. Following Christ is about accepting the freedom which comes through Christ. The question for us, though, becomes what do we do with this freedom in Christ? Do we use that freedom for good or evil?

Rabbi Friedman tells the story of Billy. When Billy was about 6 years old, he drew his first picture on the bedroom wall. His mother, torn between wanting her child to express himself and wanting her wall to be clean, decided to let him be.

Billy continued to draw but his mother began to notice something about his drawings that began to disturb her. Billy would draw all of his characters lying down. Not only was everyone lying down, it also appeared that everyone was hurt. She told her husband about Billy's drawings. Each figure showed little life and now there were ribbons of red color attached to many of the bodies suggesting gushing blood.

The parents became more and more concerned. Was Billy depressed? Was Billy even suicidal? The father went into Billy's room and asked Billy what was going on. Why was he using his gift of art to show people in pain? Was this the beginning stages of a very angry child who would grow up to harm many people?

So Billy's father asked him, "why are you drawing these figures?" Billy said, "that's just the way I think them up." Billy continued to draw figures with even more violence. He drew pictures of people run over by cars, hit in the head with rocks, stabbed, and shot. Limbs were missing, heads were severed.

The parents were concerned that Billy was using his gift of art to create very dark images. The parents also discovered that his toys were torn into pieces. Soldiers were missing arms, a doll had its eyes ripped out, a stuffed cat had its belly ripped open.

Finally the parents called a child psychologist to come and examine Billy. The psychologist began to play with Billy and observe Billy and began to build some trust with Billy. Finally, feeling more comfortable with Billy, the psychologist tried to get to the point of Billy's graphically violent drawings and actions.

“Billy,” the psychologist asked, “are you angry?” “Angry?” Billy responded? “Why should I be angry? My parents are really nice to me. They provide me with lots of things. They take me to lots of places. The only thing that would make me angry is if they would not let me be what I want to be when I grow up?”

“And what do you want to be when you grow up Billy?” the psychologist asked. Billy excitedly responded, “I want to be a doctor.”

Like Billy, we are all given lots of freedom by God. But that freedom can be misused by us. Wanting sexual intimacy, we pursue fornication or lewdness. Wanting contact with God, we pursue idols like greed and success. Wanting joy, we engage in excessive partying and drunkenness which leaves us empty the next morning.

Wanting acceptance from others and having our importance affirmed we tear others down and seek to break relationships apart through talking harshly about others behind their back.

Paul is quite clear in describing examples of behavior which shows the lack of the presence of God’s Holy Spirit in one’s life. Actions which show a lack of the presence of God’s Holy Spirit in an individual or family or church are actions such as fornication, impurity, idolatry, jealousy, quarrels, creating factions, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

Paul says that when people tear relationships apart that this is not the sign of the presence of God’s Holy Spirit. Paul even says that anyone who acts in this way will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But how do we find signs of the presence of God’s Holy Spirit in a person, in their family, or in a church? Paul is quite clear about how to find the presence of God’s Holy Spirit in a place. According to Paul, whenever people express joy to one another, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.

Our friends down the road may say that one can see the presence of God's Holy Spirit whenever someone is speaking in tongues and has some type of ecstatic experience in worship. And they may be right according to what Paul says elsewhere in his writings. But Paul would also say that if you really want to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life, then treat someone with kindness, show someone your love, bring peace to a situation of conflict, be patient and don't rush things too quickly, be gentle and self controlled.

How are you going to do that this week? Where can you show love to someone else who may feel unlovable right now? How can you bring joy to someone's life who may be feeling quite depressed right now? Where is there a situation where some people are not getting along and how can you be a peacemaker?

Where are you noticing people who need something of substance in their life and how can you share something with them through your generosity? Who is it that you know who has lost faith that God is doing anything in the world and how can you be a sign of hope for them and a witness to God's goodness?

Where do you notice someone being harsh with another and how can you show a gentle presence? Where are you seeing people trying to rush something before its time and how can you be the one to say, "slow down. Be patient. Allow God to work in God's own time."

If we want to know and experience the presence of God's Holy Spirit in our lives, then we share with one another these fruits of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

-Douglas, Mark, *Feasting on the Word*, editors Bartlett and Taylor, WJKP, 2010

-Friedman, Edwin, *Friedman's Fables*, Guilford Press, NY, 1990, p. 39-43