

Sermon – June 26, 2022
“Live by the Spirit”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we join Jesus on this mission field. Amen

There are many moments in the week that have the potential to deepen our relationship with Jesus as we encounter struggles and difficulties in our lives. Examples from this past week include the listening session with the District Superintendent, caring for a family in need, the death of Rev. Hogge, Charlotte Braxton’s sudden change from a vibrant, healthy person to a person clinging to life by a thread, and news that comes that we do not expect, such as Roe v Wade being overturned. Tensions rise, and our situation in this world is changed. In the midst of change, we have high points such as time spent with others in nature and hearing a heart filled with pain praise God in the midst of the storm. We ask why, and God does not answer; instead, we are given God’s steadfast love.

This morning we are back with the Galatians. Imagine them hearing the words of this letter from Paul on a Sabbath morning when they have gathered just as we have gathered today. As we heard part of the letter read and heard Paul’s words, the Galatians, like we, may be wondering what Paul is trying to tell us. Our context is early summer on the Northern Neck; theirs was in the midst of what is today Turkey. They had received recent teaching from new teachers who followed Paul into this area that was stressing they keep the entire Law, the Torah, in order for them to become Christians. Our context is the latest teaching in the world that

ignores what the Bible states and places emphasis on some new empty idea that is being pushed through social media and many other places we encounter information. We, like the Galatians, are looking to Scripture for God's direction. Paul is teaching them and us in this letter how to live in the world and be a Christian. Paul's solution is to set aside this new teaching and to focus on being those who are led by the Spirit, the One who leads us into all truth.

In the first verse of Galatians 5, Paul reminds us of our current condition. We are those who are called to freedom. Christ was crucified to purchase our freedom. We have been washed in the blood he shed for us on the cross. We are those who have joined with him through faith, publicly baptized, and are now trying to live in the world as Christ followers. As such, Paul is telling the Galatians not to submit to the yoke of the Law. He is reminding the Galatians that they have something better than the Law, Holy Spirit, to guide them. This freedom from the Law does not give us a new freedom to sin. We are not to live our lives in a manner that breaks the moral aspects of Torah. Instead, by Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension to heaven, we have been given Holy Spirit to guide us while freeing us from the Law.

As a pastor, I am often asked about my call to be a pastor by those evaluating my work and progress. They want to hear how I understand what I am called to in Christ. We are all ministers of the Gospel, and as such, we are all called into Christ's mission to all people. Part of our calling is to freedom. This is not a freedom to sin as we desire, but to be free from seeking to live under the Torah, the Law that Israel tried to live under in order to be seen righteous before God. The Israelites were slaves to the Law. We are called to become slaves of love to each other. This is how we should think of ourselves in the context of a local church. We are called in response to our faith in Christ to be bond servants of love to each other. How do we do this? How do we live as bond servants of love to each other here in Burgess or Ophelia?

First, we must understand that love is the key. Love is the mechanism that allows us to live as a servant of love for each other. We are to be those who love as Jesus loved us. We need to look again to the cross where Jesus was crucified. There we see what this love looks like. At the cross, we can catch a glimpse of the love Jesus has for us and for the world, and see the love we are to have for each other. The ideas of love the world holds do not even come close to Jesus' demonstration of love for us, a love that should always be expressed between those who are part of a local congregation. The Law is summed up in the statement, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If we can live and love each other in such a manner, there will be no need for the Law to be acting among us. We fulfill the Law through our love of others.

Notice that as soon as Paul makes this statement, he cautions his listeners, telling them to “take care that you are not consumed by one another by biting and devouring each other.” What Paul is saying is that if we speak negatively of each other, we are tearing down this body of Christ. If we fail to love, we are devouring each other and will consume this congregation as we push each other away, breaking relationships and doing great harm to each other. Instead, we are to live by the Spirit and not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Let’s look at this idea Paul gives us of becoming those living by the Spirit and not by the flesh. Let’s start by defining the word “flesh.” It is the stuff we are made of, but its biblical meaning as stated by Dr. David A. deSilva is the total of our “impulses, urges, and desires that lead human beings away from virtue toward self-promotion and self-gratification, often at the expense of the interests and well-being of others, of the harmony of community, or of the accomplishing of the purposes of God in our lives, communities, and world.”¹ Living by the flesh is our natural fallen state. We can easily identify this aspect present in our thoughts when we speak using the word I. If we listen to how we share our thoughts with each other and we are saying, “I think ...” we are most likely operating in the flesh. By contrast, if we are sharing what the Spirit is guiding us to, our expressions will be closer to the words, “I think the Spirit is leading us to ...” or “Here is what I remember Jesus saying about that.” We will use words pointing to what all Christians have believed for all time, or we will share how we have seen this concept we learned in God’s Word lived out in the body of Christ, the Church. A Spirit-guided life is a life looking to Jesus and the Father in Holy Spirit for guidance, inspiration, and hope.

The Law requires strict adherence in order to bring righteousness. A failure in any of the many requirements of the Law means failure, and with failure comes the consequences or curses given in the Law. Spirit leadership is not subject to the Law; it is the fulfillment of the Law. Jesus met the requirements of the Law on the cross, taking all of the punishment we deserve onto himself. We could not keep or meet the requirements of the Law, but we can follow the Spirit’s guidance and fulfill the Law. Fulfilling the law is a key distinction between what Paul is teaching, Jesus Christ crucified, and what these Jewish teachers are teaching, righteousness through keeping the Law. When a Jewish author wrote about Torah, they wrote about something to be done, kept, or guarded. The idea is an obligation to keep all of the commandments given by the Torah. When I was a young child, I remember my mother putting up a framed picture in my room and behind the glass of the frame was a copy of the Ten Commandments. Now I don’t remember the words written behind the glass very well, but I do remember that the glass itself was broken. I could never understand why she didn’t get the glass replaced. Her attempt to help

me understand what God expected of me, like every attempt of an Israelite to keep all of the Law, failed. I needed something different, I needed a greater power to help me fulfill the Law. Fulfill is the word that Paul uses in his letters to describe our relationship to the Law. This is a word that never appears in the Old Testament in relation to the Torah. If we are under the Law, then we must keep every word of the Law. To fulfill the Law is very different. If we walk by the Spirit, then we fulfill the Law in the course of loving service to others. I hope that we catch this idea. If we choose to keep the Law, then we are enslaved to the Law, trying to meet all of its requirements and face the consequences. We face words like “on the testimony of two witnesses we die.” Israel strove for righteousness before God and did not achieve it. We seek for righteousness to emerge in our lives as Christ followers not by adherence to the Law but by a radically different route, a route Paul describes as “faith working through love,” or as Paul describes it in verse 25, “letting ourselves be guided by the Spirit.” Think of ourselves as keeping the Law as we lovingly serve each other, not when we bite and devour, but when we love our neighbor as ourselves.

Paul gives us some examples of works of the flesh to help us think about what it means to be those who are struggling in the flesh. Now this is not a complete list of all the fleshly behaviors we are capable of. It is a list targeted to the Galatians for struggles they were having as they came together to follow Jesus. As we look at some of Paul’s list, we should notice that the word “works” is plural and later the word “fruit” is singular. John Wesley’s explanation for this is that “Works are mentioned in the plural because they are distinct from, and often inconsistent with, each other. But ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ is mentioned in the singular, as being all consistent and connected together.” Let’s look at some of these works that Paul lists. I also want to say that I don’t have anyone in mind as I share works of the flesh, so if you feel guilt remember that we live under grace. The goal is to better define these terms so that we can become better judges of what we might need to realize are works of the flesh we are sharing. Let’s look quickly at enmity, angry outbursts, and envy. The Greek may be translated differently in your Bibles, so we will go with these three. I am pulling these definitions from a commentary written by deSilva. Enmity is when two or more parties have set themselves against each other not to build up but to tear down or harm. The parties are looking to meet their own desires at cost to the other party. There is no common good being worked toward when parties have enmity towards each other. Next is strife or angry outbursts. Strife occurs when we allow ourselves to get too caught up in making our point or sharing our understanding, and we flood our interaction with poorly aimed energy that is wrongly focused on the other party. Strife is not Spirit-directed sharing in love of

our differences. And finally, there is envy. Envy is a desire that comes from our bitterness towards another person to see them deprived of rewards, compensation, or honor they deserve. Envy is present whether we want the reward for ourselves or not. It is more the idea of wanting to see the other person deprived of their duly earned goods. Again, if you feel like the pastor is talking about you, I am not, but Holy Spirit might be convicting us of some work of the flesh in our lives that we need to address. Notice that Paul cautions us that those who persist in doing these things will not be part of the kingdom of God. There is forgiveness for our infractions, but if these works of the flesh become our way of life, we will not inherit the kingdom of God. We should expect that we will fail as we seek to be guided by the Spirit, but remember there is grace and forgiveness as we seek to grow into Christ, led by the Spirit.

By contrast, we have the fruit of the Spirit. The first of the fruit is love. To describe love Paul uses the familiar Greek word “agape.” Agape love is the common element in all of the fruit. Love is the binder that holds all of the fruit together. Agape love is not the love we see in today’s movies. If you remember the Shema, the Old Testament prayer devout Jews prayed morning and evening and that we opened our service with for a season, the love in the Shema is total love for God—heart, soul, and mind. Agape is the love Paul speaks to for Christians to share with each other. First century culture did not often use this Greek word to describe relationships between people. Agape is the word used prominently by early Christians to describe “other-centered, self-giving love that Christ demonstrated and disciples are called to imitate.”² The next fruit is joy. This is not happiness that comes as the world promises with something that will make us forever happy. Joy is not an emotion. Joy is the pleasure of knowing God through the experience of Holy Spirit. Joy comes to us as we are assured of our place among God’s people and being part of God’s planned eternal future. Joy comes to us from God in all circumstances, even in our darkest hour. Joy is not fragile. Joy does not come to us from good fortune, pleasant circumstances, or our own hard labor. We find joy when we become aware of God’s steadfast love that is always present with us. Joy is connected to God’s love for us as seen in Jesus Christ as he is crucified on the cross. I am reminded of a line from a contemporary song we sang so often: tears may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning. The last fruit we will look at this morning is forbearance, often translated as gentleness or meekness. Forbearance is proper restraint of our anger or power, not because of our control, but out of consideration for another person. Paul uses this word when he speaks of having a spirit of forbearance rather than having a spirit of harsh, judgmental nature when confronting difficult issues. Forbearance allows us to confront difficult or tense issues while expressing love, care,

and commitment to the other party. Our experience may be that fruit is difficult if not impossible for us to bear. The word Paul uses here, fruit, implies that the Spirit is the source of fruit and not anything we do ourselves. Fruit is the work of Holy Spirit in our lives. We have to be transformed for us to bear fruit. Transformation begins with our acceptance of Jesus and the crucifying of the works of flesh we have developed. Such transformation is a lifelong process.

As we look at the list of works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit, we might be wondering how to step into this transformation. We may have found the description of the works of flesh a little too close to our nature and may have found the fruit of the Spirit too distant from our nature, yet a desire of our heart. I have been having some billing conflicts with our propane provider in King George for many months, and I would really like to be able to have the fruit of forbearance in the discussions that I am having with the employees of that company. How do we become those who bear fruit? First and foremost, we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. We accept the free gift of salvation and enter into a life marked by a filling with sanctifying grace. We will talk about how to live a Spirit-filled life in the weeks to come, but let me add one thing that we can all begin to do today and, in the weeks to come. I hope that already we are stopping in our day to pray the little prayer in the bulletin, asking the Holy Spirit to come more fully into our lives, but let me add one more idea and short prayer this morning. The idea is that we need to give up some of our works of the flesh so that there is room for the fruit of the Spirit. So, find a time in our day, maybe at the end of the day, and pray this second simple prayer, “Lord, is there anything that I need to be emptied of that is keeping me from knowing you and the fullness of the Spirit?” Pray that prayer and let Holy Spirit identify what we might need to release so that we might be filled. If something comes to your mind, then release it to Jesus. Give this prayer a try and let’s discover together what Jesus is waiting to do in our lives through the guidance of Holy Spirit.

Pray with me: Jesus, we desire to be those who have the fruit of the Spirit. Holy Spirit, we ask you to give to us the fruit of the Spirit. Open us to release the works of the flesh that we have developed and allow you to fill us with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, forbearance, and self-control. Amen

¹ deSilva, David A. *The Letter to the Galatians (New International Commentary on the New Testament (NICNT))* (p. 47x). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition p. 447.

² deSilva, Galatians, 465.