



Time to Reflect

- How can we become more effective at following the leading of the Holy Spirit as opposed to yielding to worldly desires?
- Are you aware of these 'acts of the flesh' being evident in today's world? How can we avoid being drawn into such acts or attitudes?

Last week we saw how Paul reminded the Galatians about the freedom that the gospel brought them, and that this freedom was to be embraced and enjoyed. He wanted to challenge and encourage the Galatians. This week we move to consider the theme of gospel character and our attention is drawn to the conflict between the flesh and the Spirit. Ultimately, Paul encouraged the Galatians to walk by the Spirit.

"In normal religion, the motivation for morality is fear-based. In gospel Christianity, the motivation is a dynamic of love...Paul spells out just *how* we grow in character through this new dynamic. And his headline is: We grow as we battle."

(Tim Keller, *Galatians For You*, p145)

Specifics

- Our passage begins by highlighting the conflict that exists between the Spirit and the flesh. This is a real battle and it is one that is experienced by everyone.
- We all know what it is to wrestle with human desires while trying to be faithful to God's will for our lives. This week's passage speaks into the reality of this situation and encourages us to develop gospel character.
- Warren Wiersbe writes, **"Just as Isaac and Ishmael were unable to get along, so the Spirit and the flesh (old nature) are at war with each other...The Spirit and the flesh have different appetites, and this is what creates the conflict."¹**
- It is important to note that the Christian cannot simply will to overcome the flesh (v17). We cannot win this battle through our strength alone. Rather, we need to depend on the grace of God.
- We are to surrender our will to the Holy Spirit (v18) and seek the leading of the Spirit each and every day in our lives. The Scriptures teach us much about what it means to be led by the Spirit.
 - a) The Holy Spirit writes God's laws on our hearts (Hebrews 10:14-17; 2nd Corinthians 3).
 - b) We are to obey the Holy Spirit in love (Psalm 40:8).
- Being led by the Spirit and walking in the Spirit are the exact opposites of what it means to yield to the desires of the flesh.
- Fifteen acts of the flesh are named by Paul in (v19-21) and this list can be divided into three main categories.
 1. **The Sensual Sins (v19, 21b).** These include (amongst others) sexual immorality, debauchery and drunkenness. These sensual sins were prevalent in the Roman Empire and are still very much evident in the world today.

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians* (David C Cook, 2009), p130.

2. **The Superstitious Sins (v20a).** Idolatry and witchcraft are expressly mentioned by Paul and these are also still commonly practiced today. Wiersbe offers a helpful definition of idolatry. “Idolatry is simply putting things ahead of God and people. We are to worship God, love people, and use things, but too often we use people, love self, and worship things, leaving God out of the picture completely.²”

3. **The Social Sins (v20b-21a).** Hatred, discord, dissensions, factions and envy are highlighted by Paul and they lead to division and strife. It is heartbreaking, and a poor Christian witness, to see these appear within communities of faith.

- This list of ‘acts of the flesh’ is left open-ended as Paul concludes it by saying “...and the like” (v21).
- The behaviours listed in these verses have one thing in common – they are destructive and will only ever negatively impact our relationships with other people and indeed with God.
- Paul emphasises the spiritual seriousness of developing a worldly character at the end of (v21). “I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”
- This is a stark warning, words which are intended to shake off spiritual complacency and urge us towards cultivating a gospel character.
- Tim Keller makes a very interesting observation in relation to this list. He says, “This list shows us that God does not make the kind of distinctions that we commonly do, seeing sex and drink as more sinful than jealousy and ambition...We are much better at noticing the works of someone else’s sinful nature than we are at battling our own.³”
- The concluding verses of our passage offer a much better and spiritually rich set of character traits – those reflective of Gospel character. We know this list to be the fruit of the Spirit.
- The American author Wayne Jacobsen once remarked, “The fruit of the Spirit is not what we can make ourselves do for a moment, but what God makes us to be for a lifetime.⁴”
- Many of us may be familiar with Galatians 5:22-23 from our Sunday School days. There are nine fruits of the Spirit and they are wonderful character traits, reflective of the very heart of God.
- Can we imagine a world that was defined by love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? What a wonderful place such a world would be!
- The fruit of the Spirit has to do with Christian character and these are the characteristics that God wants in our lives. Note how Paul started with love and it is worth noting that the other eight fruit are really an outgrowth of love.
- When someone lives in the sphere of true love then they experience joy (the second of the fruit). Love and joy combine effectively together to produce peace (the third fruit).
- It is important to realise that “...there must be a right atmosphere before the fruit will grow (Gal. 5:25-26).⁵” Spiritual fruit grows in a climate based on an abundance of the Spirit and the Word.
- We need to be a biblical people, a worshipping people, a praying people and a God-honouring people. Additionally, we need to deal with the weeds that choke growth – both in our own lives and within Christian communities.
- God desires righteousness, holy living and a focus on his Word. In 1 Peter 1:18 we read some really challenging words. Eugene Peterson, in *The Message* translation of the Bible, writes “Your life is a journey you must travel with a deep consciousness of God.”
- God calls us to pursue purity in our daily living, to become Gospel people with a Gospel character.

² Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians*, p132.

³ Timothy Keller, *Galatians For You* (The Good Book Company, 2013), p150.

⁴ Wayne Jacobsen, quote can be found at <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/1425685> (accessed 2nd December 2025).

⁵ Wiersbe, *Be Free: Galatians*, p136.