

Series: The Fruit of the Spirit
Title: Completion by the Spirit
Text: Galatians 3:3
Lesson 4

When I was growing up, my mom loved decorating our home in styles frequently featured in a magazine called “Country Living.” Our living room contained pine furniture, quilts, decorative oil lamps, and folksy paintings and pictures. The coffee table contained several quaint items. It featured one decoration I particularly disliked. My mom had bought several fake, decorative apples. They were made out of carved wood, but the way they were painted made them look real.

On more than one occasion, I picked up one of the apples, hungry and ready to take a bite. It wasn’t until I handled the fake fruit and brought it to my mouth that I realized it wasn’t real. I often wondered what would have happened if I would have accidentally taken a bite. Maybe I would have broken a tooth!

The inability to discern between real and fake fruit would have been catastrophic! When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he confronted a similar, yet different, problem. The Christians to which he wrote were being deceived by an imitation form of Christianity. Teachers had invaded the church who maintained that Christians needed to follow Old Testament ceremonies and customs in order to please God. They called on believers to produce an imitation form of spiritual fruit. They believed the life of God could be produced from law keeping.

These false teachers are now known as “the Judaizers.” Their name has been drawn from the fact that they made Jewish, Ceremonial Law a requirement for salvation and spiritual maturity. Paul confronted their error in Galatians 2:16 by saying, “...we know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.” Paul’s discussion on the fruit of the Spirit is sometimes detached from this backstory of his letter. To really appreciate his teaching on spiritual fruit, one must see it in light of the error that plagued the first-century church.

A Confusion Regarding Salvation

The teaching plaguing the Galatians was in contradiction to the teaching and work of Christ (Galatians 5:1-6). It was also an affront to the teaching of Paul and the other apostles. In the early days of the church, a meeting of church leaders known as “the Jerusalem Council” made it official that allegiance to the Mosaic Law was not a requirement for God’s New Covenant people (Acts 15:6-21). The Galatians had lost sight of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

Paul was compelled to send his letter because he knew the doctrinal error within the church was keeping many from true salvation. He warned, “Take note! I, Paul, am telling you that if you get yourselves circumcised, Christ will not benefit you at all” (Galatians 5:2). Because some believed circumcision could make them right with God, they did not see their need for Jesus. All in all, the Judaizers’ message was such an affront to the true gospel message that Paul would call it “a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6). The gospel of circumcision was keeping many from the gospel of Christ.

A Confusion Regarding Sanctification

A proper understanding of salvation was not the only thing at stake for Paul's readers. The message of the Judaizers was also muddying the waters of sanctification. Whereas salvation involves the experience of new life and forgiveness of sins through Christ, sanctification is the process of one growing in Christ, the lifelong journey of transformation and spiritual maturation that takes place after salvation. Paul's readers were confused regarding both salvation and sanctification.

Sometimes people overlook this point of Paul's letter to the Galatians. They rightfully acknowledge his concern regarding the Law of God and salvation; however, they fail to see his emphasis on the relation between the Law and sanctification. Astute readers will notice that the letter to the Galatians changes its tone halfway through its fifth chapter. While the first four chapters deal with Christian salvation, the last two chapters deal with Christian sanctification.

Paul wanted his readers to know that the life of Christ was not produced in the lives of believers through mere, mechanical, man-centered commandment keeping. The life of Christ, according to Paul could only be produced through the work of God in a person's soul. Salvation was by the Spirit and sanctification was by the Spirit. Without the work of the Spirit, one's spiritual life could only be likened to a cheap imitation of what God desired.

Galatians 3:3 is a key to understanding Paul's reasoning on these matters. In that verse, he said, "Are you so foolish? After beginning by the Spirit, are you now finishing by the flesh?" The apostle's words highlighted the two phases of the Christian life we have been discussing — salvation and sanctification. The word "beginning" referred to the onset of the Christian experience — salvation. The word "finishing" referenced the growth phase of Christian experience — sanctification.

The words of Galatians 3:3 should be considered in light of what Paul said in his previous verse. In Galatians 3:2, he argued, "I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard?" The apostle's words were a clear reference to salvation. His theme continued into the next verse. The word "beginning" in Galatians 3:3 was a participle that undoubtedly referred "to the moment of becoming a Christian."¹

Paul's language was strong in Galatians 3:3. He used a double contrast in the original language, depicting a strong difference between salvation and sanctification.² Many of his readers realized that salvation was accomplished by the Spirit. They were in tune with Jesus' words in John 3:3 — "Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." They were well aware that salvation was accomplished by the Holy Spirit; however, they were denying the fact that sanctification came by the Spirit. They were trying to achieve Christian maturity and fruitfulness by the flesh.

A Complete Work

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 425.

² Robertson, 291-292.

Paul wanted his readers to grasp that sanctification was a work of the Spirit. The word translated “finishing” in Galatians 3:3 was one that meant “to accomplish,” “to complete,” or “to come to the intended goal.”³ In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the word was used of a builder who finished the construction of a building after laying its foundation (Zechariah 4:9).

Paul’s language provided a great illustration of the Christian life. When one places his or her faith in Christ for salvation, the foundation of a spiritual maturity is established. The full building of the Christian life is erected through the event we call sanctification. Both events — the laying of the foundation and the erecting of the building — are accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

When my wife and I were first married, we sometimes travelled to see my grandfather. Though he lived in the same state as us, getting to his house wasn’t easy. There was no interstate route to travel to his home. To see him, we had to travel mostly on state highways. Most of the roads went through rural areas.

On one particular road, there was a sight that often caught my attention. A skeleton of a large house sat on a wide piece of property. One could see studs, framed-up walls, and thousands of dollars worth of ply-board. Mildew and wear visible from the highway. The empty, unfinished house almost looked like a haunted house.

I was often befuddled by the sight of the home. Once while visiting my grandfather, I asked him if he had seen the home. He had and he explained why it looked the way it did. A husband and wife had set out to build the home. Halfway through construction, they hit financial hardship. They ran out of money, so they couldn’t continue building. The end result was an ugly, ghastly shell of what was originally intended.

Some Christians have a spiritual life that can be compared to the unfinished home I saw. Though the foundation of faith has been settled in their lives, there is still work to be completed. Their work of salvation has been accomplished, but they are lacking when it comes to sanctification. Toxic emotions, ungodly lusts, and relational conflicts mar their lives. The fruit of the Spirit isn’t visible. Their spiritual and moral lives are a mere shell of what they should be.

Such was the problem with Paul’s readers. Many were believers, but they weren’t mature believers. The work of Christ needed to be completed in their lives. They had begun in the Spirit, but they needed the Spirit to do a deeper work. They needed the work of sanctification to be accomplished in their lives. Things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control were absent.

Maturity By the Spirit

Paul used the same language from Galatians 3:3 elsewhere in the New Testament to speak of the process of sanctification. The word rendered “finishing” was used in 2 Corinthians 7:1 to say, “So then, dear friends, since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.” He also used it in Philippians 1:6 to say, “I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 425.

of Christ Jesus.” There is a necessary work of completion and perfection in the Christian life. That work is called sanctification and it is accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

God’s Power and Human Responsibility

Though the work of sanctification is ultimately accomplished by the Spirit of God, there is an element of human responsibility in it. The verb Paul used in the original language of the text was a middle voice verb. It depicted an action one performed on his or her self.⁴ Paul’s verbiage was intentional. He wanted his readers to know that they had a personal responsibility to pursue sanctification. The cause for their failure to see the produce of the Spirit in their lives was personal. They were to blame. They needed to take action, quit believing the lies of false teachers, and personally pursue the Spirit so that the work of Christian growth might be brought to a completion.

If you are a Christian, you probably affirm the fact that you have been saved by the Spirit of God. You are familiar with the realities of the new birth (John 3:3). You have experienced the Spirit’s conviction of sin (John 16:8) and you sense His confirming presence in your soul (Romans 8:16). However, are you depending on the Holy Spirit to accomplish the work of sanctification in your life? Are you looking to Him for growth and development? Having begun in the Spirit are you now trying to be made perfect by the flesh?

In the New Testament, Paul elsewhere emphasized that it is the Spirit who accomplishes the work of sanctification in our lives. When writing to the Philippians, he said, “...it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13). At salvation, the Spirit comes to live within the believer’s soul. That Spirit then works within the soul to perform the work of sanctification.

This does not mean that the believer has no part to play in his or her spiritual growth. In Philippians 2:12, the verse found immediately before the one I just referenced, Paul made this plain by saying, “...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” God’s people are called to work hard to become more like Christ, but they are to do so with a faith that is the Holy Spirit who ultimately makes them like Christ.

Paul’s readers in Galatia needed to grasp this truth. They were trying to be made perfect by human effort. Observance of ceremonial religious laws were their focus, not Spirit-filled living. Paul wanted them to know that the life of God could only be produced by the Spirit of God, not religious regulations or requirements. Paul shared a similar message when he told the Romans that “...the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). He wanted believers to know that Christian sanctification is not accomplished by ritualistic rule keeping. The production of godly virtue only comes by the transformation work of the Holy Spirit in the inner-man or inner-woman.

Sanctification is accomplished by God’s Spirit. Such was part and parcel of Paul’s teaching to the Galatians. They needed to know that they couldn’t achieve the life of God through flesh-driven law keeping. Modern believers need to hear Paul’s

⁴ Robertson, 291.

message as well. Many Christians never produce the Christian character the Lord desires because they never learn to live by the Spirit. The message of Galatian's teaches that the fruit of godly living only comes through an abiding relationship with the Trinity.

How to Be Made Complete By the Spirit

The challenge for many involves the implementation of what Paul taught. Though they recognize the need for the Spirit, they struggle to actually live by the Spirit. Maybe you have experienced this tension. Perhaps the pursuit of sanctification seems way too subjective or mystical. Many need help understanding how to practically pursue spiritual transformation by the Spirit.

I struggled for years with this concept myself. Living by the Holy Spirit seemed super mysterious. The struggle felt like the confusion I experienced when I learned to ride a bike. How one could maintain balance seemed unknowable. In time, I learned to steady myself and I've been able to ride a bike ever since. In attempting to live by the Spirit, I felt a similar sort of confusion.

Many are overcome by the same difficulty. They don't know how to practically live by the Spirit. Scripture provides insight to help. When we study the New Testament, we find there are several means the Lord has provided to assist us in Spirit-filled living. Let's examine four of them and pray He will help us appropriate the influence of the Spirit in our lives through His means.

Scripture

In Ephesians 6:17, Paul called God's Word "the sword of the Spirit." Since it has been inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16-17 and 2 Peter 1:20-21), the Bible is a spiritual book that accomplishes the work of the Spirit. When one reads it, he or she comes into contact with the thoughts and will of the Lord. God's Word is one of God's primary means of accomplishing His work in the lives of His people. It is for this reason that Jesus, when praying for us, said, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17).

If you want to see the produce of the Spirit appear in your life, foster a commitment to the Spirit's book — the Bible. It is endowed with supernatural power to transform your soul (Hebrews 4:12). By reading, memorizing, understanding, and remembering Scripture, you can be changed (Romans 12:1-2). You are prone to wander and subject to failure. The human mind is always subject to the influence of the flesh. Store up God's Word in your mind and you will be more empowered to exhibit the life of Christ. Jesus said, "Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4).

Appeals by preachers for Christians to read their Bibles may seem overdone and stale. However, there is good reason that so many have put such a great emphasis on Scripture throughout the ages. The Bible is a Spirit-wrought book that can accomplish the work of the Spirit in your life. Schedule daily time to read it. Have a plan for memorizing it. Faithfully study it and regularly place yourself under sound preaching of God's Word.

Prayer

Prayer is another means of experiencing the work of the Spirit in our lives. Paul encouraged believers to “pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request” (Ephesians 6:18). In ways that are unfathomable to us, God’s Spirit works in us and for us when we pray. Paul spoke of the way in which “the Spirit himself intercedes for us, with inexpressible groanings” (Romans 8:26). Prayer is a pathway of experiencing intimacy and fellowship with God’s Spirit.

Have you experienced the power of prayer? If you are lacking in things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and the like, commit yourself to praying for such things. As you pray for the Spirit’s virtue, the Spirit of God works in your soul to produce the life of God. It is for this reason that Paul often trained believers to pray primarily for godly virtue (Philippians 1:7-11; Ephesians 1:15-19, 3:14-21).

Inner-Promptings

I recently received an email from a man who wanted to share feedback about an article I had written. He had read something I had said about the Holy Spirit in a published devotional book. I had encouraged believers to read God’s Word in order to understand the mind of the Spirit. He contended that I should have shared more about the way the Spirit works in the lives of believers. He explained that the Spirit often prompts believers through His inner-presence within their souls. His concern was that more believers needed to become more aware of how the inner-witness of the Spirit works.

I don’t know exactly where that man stood theologically on all matters. He may have had some perspectives on the Spirit with which I would not have had full agreement. Some nowadays indeed trust in feelings and emotions as being the primary way in which the Spirit leads. They have a form of spirituality that is detached from Scripture, seeking private revelations of truth and wisdom apart from the Bible. It is important for such believers to know that the Spirit of God will never lead a believer to do anything that would contradict the Word of God. The Bible is the authority for Christian belief and practice.

With that being said, there is a place for the feedback I received. Scripture gives witness that the Spirit has a way of providing inner-impressions for believers. In Galatians 4:6, Paul spoke of the Spirit’s indwelling, saying, “And because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba, Father!” (Galatians 4:6). When one is born again, the Spirit’s presence in the soul has a way of assuring the believer that he or she belongs to God. If you are a believer, you are surely aware of the experience of this reality. I’ll never forget the sense of new life I felt when I became a Christian.

James spoke strongly of the Spirit’s inner-promptings when writing to first-century believers. Many of his readers were living lives marked by sin. He called them to repentance using bold words. At one point, he reasoned with them, inquiring, “...do you think it’s without reason that the Scripture says: The spirit he made to dwell in us envies intensely? (James 4:5). James knew that some of the sinning believers who read his letter had surely experienced conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit.

Modern believers undoubtedly know the experience of which John spoke. The Spirit has a way of checking us and convicting us when we stumble and stray. Have you had such impressions from the Holy Spirit? I once heard a preacher say that once

He became a Christian He could no longer “sin and get away with it.” I can relate. Can you? The Spirit has a way of correcting, guiding, comforting, and teaching God’s children. A large part of fruitful, Spirit-filled living is learning to discern the impressions of the Spirit and follow them.

The Fellowship of God’s People

The gathering of God’s people also has a way of ministering to believers. When the body of Christ gets together, there is aura of edification and encouragement that cannot be found elsewhere (Hebrews 10:24-25). The assembly of Christians is a place of spiritual cheer, consolation, comfort. This is true because the Spirit of God is present amongst His people. He dwells within each believer and each believer has the capacity to minister to other believers by the Spirit.

Paul spoke of these realities in his letter to the Philippians. In Philippians 1:27, he said, “Just one thing: As citizens of heaven, live your life worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or am absent, I will hear about you that you are standing firm in one spirit, in one accord, contending together for the faith of the gospel.” Notice that Paul saw the Spirit of Christ as making the church one, binding it together and giving it strength to fight for the truth of Christ. Fellow believers share an unshakable bond through the Third Person of the Trinity. They have a connection that goes beyond the unions produced by worldly affairs and interests.

Paul alluded to this reality again a few verses later in Philippians. Knowing the disunity within the church, he made an appeal for oneness, saying, “If, then, there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, make my joy complete by thinking the same way...” (Philippians 2:1-2). The Spirit is the bind that ties believers together. If Christians want to experience the transformational power of the Spirit in their lives, they should guard their devotion to the body of Christ.

Gathering for fellowship, worship, preaching, and discipleship is an integral part of our spiritual development. When the word is proclaimed and when believers intentionally exhort one another, the Spirit works within the lives of individual believers. Are you failing to see the produce of the Holy Spirit in your life? Perhaps you need a more meaningful connection to the body of Christ.

Are You Becoming More Perfect?

I recently bought my some new flowers for a holiday. With the flowers, I purchased new pots for planting them. Before I presented them to her, I filled the pots with fresh garden soil and carefully arranged them at the entrance to our home. She was excited to see the pretty new plants.

After presenting the flowers to my wife, I assumed my work was done. I had given her a gift, but I failed to realize it would require upkeep. Several days after I planted the flowers, I noticed they were withering. They needed water!

Many believers nowadays are spiritually weak. They don’t produce much of the fruit God desires. The reason is that they need nourishment. They are spiritually malnourished because of a lack of Scripture and prayer in their lives. They have little discernment in the ways of the Spirit’s promptings. The body of Christ is simply not a priority.

The Spirit uses the aforementioned means for transforming us and producing His character in our lives. God gives means of grace that serve a function similar to the water I pour over my wives flowers. Are you seeking change through these means? Is your life gradually being changed by such realities? Can you give testimony of spiritual fruit? Are you guilty, like the Galatians, of trying to produce fruit by the flesh? Are you relying on mere religious activity, ritualistic observances, or the fulfilling of manmade requirements for the production of Christlikeness in your life? Or, are you pursuing transformation through a relationship with the Spirit of God?

If you have begun by the Spirit, realize that you are made complete by the Spirit as well. Spiritual fruit is only produced by the Third Person of the Trinity. Use His means of Scripture, prayer, inner-promptings, and the fellowship of God's people so that you might exhibit the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, and so forth. Flesh-centered rule-keeping, religious observances, ritual, or the like can never make you are like Jesus. You need the working of the Holy Spirit in your life to become more and more of what God wants you to be.