

Series: The Fruit of the Spirit

Title: “The Works of the Flesh”

Text: Galatians 5:19-21

Date: October 10, 2021

A study on the fruit of the Spirit should naturally involve a study of the works of the flesh, works listed by Paul in Galatians 5:19-21. Paul’s entire point in Galatians was to contrast the result of flesh-oriented religion and spirit-oriented religion. The false teachers in Galatia, known as “Judaizers,” had a religion based on one “work of the flesh” — circumcision. They upheld the ritualistic requirement as being necessary for a life of godliness. Paul wanted his readers to become Spirit-focused, and relationship-driven.

I recently travelled to another part of the country to visit a family member. When I did, I encountered several rules that normally don’t apply to every day life. Traveling by air meant I couldn’t carry several items I typically have with me. I had to leave my pocket knife at home, and I couldn’t carry a bottle of water through security checkpoints.

In the airport, I was required to follow directions from flight attendants and airplane personnel. A face-covering was mandated in order to prevent the potential spread of disease. At all times, I had to pay attention to directional signage. To claim my baggage and receive my rental car, it was necessary to go to the right places and talk to the correct people.

In short, my trip presented several scenarios in which rule following was a requirement. Can you imagine traveling by air without any rules or guidelines? Safety and efficiency would certainly be compromised.

When it comes to the Christian life, rules are similarly necessary. The Lord indeed has a Moral Law hanging over all of creation (Exodus 20:1-17; Romans 2:14; Matthew 5:1-7:29). Jesus has given us a Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). In addition, our Lord has told us, “If you love me, you will keep my commands” (John 14:15). Can you imagine a Christianity in which there were no rules, no standard of right and wrong? God’s holy character, as well as the well-being of others, would certainly be compromised in such a system.

Many Christians are confused regarding these matters. They falsely believe God’s love wipes away all realities related to His standards of truth, justice, and what’s right. Some even believe it provides a vindication for them to live however they want. They fail to see that the Lord has standards, “rules,” if you will. They live unaware that He wants them to be sanctified, to live a life that is set apart from the world and reserved especially for Him.

Contrary to the opinion of many, the Christian life is not a free-wheeling religion in which one gets to live by His or her own rules. The Lord desires to transform each of us according to His standards of holiness, righteousness, and truth (John 17:17). It is His desire that we serve as bright lights, reflecting His character to a lost world (Matthew 5:16). He wants us to live holy lives that give Him the praise and worship He deserves (Romans 12:1). He has a passion for us to experience the abundant life for which He has created us (John 10:10). For all of these things to be accomplished, it is necessary for us to conform to His Law, or His “rules.”

The breakdown for many in all of this is found in a misunderstanding regarding the exact role of rules in the Christian life. Some make the mistake of thinking they have no place in Christendom. Others are overly zealous for requirements and codes of ethics. The tension is one that has existed since the early church. It seems there is always a spiritual pendulum swinging between legalism on one side and liberty on the other side.

This was the exact problem in Galatia. Paul's readers were being overrun by a legalistic teaching. It is for this reason that he wrote on the subject of the fruit of the Spirit and the works of the flesh. His point in talking about the later topic wasn't to give a cold list of rules. He did not intend to just give a list of sins his readers were to avoid. Instead, His point was to contradict people who had a religion that was defined by empty rules.

Paul's main aim in writing about the works of the flesh was to show that a works-oriented religion could never produce real Christian character. God's people were indeed called to live by God's standards, but the flesh was of no avail. It could never produce the life of God. The fruit of the Spirit could not grow in the sterile ground of shallow rules, religion, and ritualistic requirements.

The Galatians needed to see the folly of flesh-based religion. Many nowadays need to as well. The character of Christ will never grow through mere, mechanical rule keeping. The Lord wants us to live by His commandments, but we can only do so through a relationship with His Spirit. To grow in grace, believers need to be thoroughly convinced of the powerlessness of the flesh. Paul's teaching on the works of the flesh help in this regard. Let's examine his teaching by asking and answering three key questions.

WHAT ARE THE WORKS OF THE FLESH?

In the ancient world, Greek philosophers were famous for producing lists of aspired virtues. They were also known to make lists of character traits to be avoided. Men like Seneca, Cicero, and Epictetus were known for their virtue lists. Hebrew thinkers like Philo of Alexandria were as well.¹

When we read the New Testament, we see Paul employing the same method of teaching. Two of his most famous lists are found in the fifth chapter of Galatians. They are commonly known as "the works of the flesh" and "the fruit of the Spirit." Our focus is now devoted to the first of those lists. Paul named the works of the flesh by saying, "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar" (Galatians 5:19-21).

The Moral Law and the Law of Love

There is a temptation for modern believers to view Paul's list as a mere cold list of sins to be avoided. However, when one looks beneath the surface of what he said, one will see there is special meaning in the list. In a way, it mirrors his fruit of the Spirit. It also

¹ George, Timothy. *The New American Commentary, Volume 30: Galatians*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), [CD-Rom].

reflects God's Moral Law, as expressed in the Ten Commandments. Jesus' Great Commandment can be seen in Paul's list as well.

One can see the way in which the works of the flesh mirror the fruit of the Spirit by breaking both lists down into three broad categories: my relationship to God, my relationship to others, and my relationship to self. In this way, the works of "idolatry" and "sorcery," along with the the fruit of "love," can be regarded as dealing with one's relationship to God. The works of "sexual immorality," "moral impurity," "promiscuity," "strife," "outbursts of anger," "dissensions," "factions," and "carousing," along with the fruit of "patience," "kindness," "goodness," "faithfulness," and "gentleness," can be seen as involving one's relationship with others. Lastly, the works of "hatreds," "jealousy," "selfish ambitions," along with the fruit of "joy," "peace," and "self control," can be seen as inward virtues, and thus virtues that relate to one's relationship with self.

Can you see how Paul's lists relate to the Great Commandment? Is not Christ's law of love focused on the three broad categories mentioned above — one's relationship to God (Matthew 22:37), one's relationship to others (Matthew 22:38), and one's relationship to self (Matthew 22:39)? Consequently, the works of the flesh can be seen as being concerned with the Christ's command to love.

Can you also see how Paul's lists relate to God's Moral Law, as expressed in the Ten Commandments? The first few commandments found in Exodus 20:1-8 deal with one's relationship with God. The next several are centered on one's relationship with others (Exodus 20:9-16) and the final one can be seen as an inward sin one performs on him or herself (Exodus 20:17). As a result, the works of the flesh can be seen as being concerned with the Lord's Moral Law.

Not a Checklist

In studying the works of the flesh, most are tempted to define terms, do an in-depth study on the sins in view, and attempt to make life changes on the basis of their findings. Such an approach goes against the grain of Paul's purpose in writing. He wanted to lead his readers to fulfill God's Moral Law and Christ's Great Commandment by relying on the work of the Spirit in their lives.

While the apostle used virtue lists in a way that could be compared to ancient Greek philosophers and Hebrew thinkers, his motive in doing so was unique. Worldly men gave lists in order to tell people what to do and what not to do, Paul's wanted his readers to discern the source of the virtues He listed. He wanted them to grasp the folly of the flesh and the strength of the Spirit.

We also know this is true because of his use of the word "obvious" in verse 19, as well as his use of the phrase "and anything similar" in verse 21. The word "obvious" was intended to point out the result of the flesh. His readers should have known that mere humanity normally only produced depraved things like the things Paul listed. Why were some trusting in a religion of fleshly rules?

The phrase "and anything similar" conveyed the idea the flesh could have produced more works than the ones Paul covered. His intent wasn't to provide a limited list of virtues to avoid. He only wanted to show the depravity and emptiness of the human flesh. We also know this is true, because he often provided different lists

commending different virtues. Compare his list in 2 Corinthians 6:6-8 with his fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.

Are You living by the Flesh or the Spirit?

Paul's point was simple. Human flesh couldn't produce the life of God. It only produced wicked sins like the ones he mentioned. Those who lived by the flesh would never find strength to fulfill the Moral Law of God or Christ's Great commandment. They needed the Spirit's help. They need to learn to "live by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16) if they wanted to please God.

Paul's message resonates to this day. Many Christians are still attempting to live the Christian life in their own strength. They are unaware of the futility of the flesh. Though they are capable of attaining some standard of external goodness of their own, they seem unable to attain real Christ-likeness. In addition, the power of sin, still seems so strong.

May we remember the words of Jesus — "you can do nothing without me" (John 15:5). May we equally remember the words of Paul in Philippians 4:13 — "I am able to do all things through him who strengthens me." Our mere humanity can never produce the life of God. By itself, it only produces sin, moral filth, and evil. We need God's Spirit! J.C. Ryle has commented on this matter well, saying:

One thing is very clear; — we cannot work this mighty change ourselves. It is not in us. We have no strength or power to do it. We may change our sins, but we cannot change our hearts. We may take up a new way, but not a new nature. We may make considerable reforms or alterations. We may lay aside many outward bad habits, and begin to do many outward duties. But we cannot create a new principle within us. We cannot bring something out of nothing. The Ethiopian cannot change his skin, nor the leopard his spots. Nor can we put life into our own souls (Jeremiah 13:23).

Plain and simple, spiritual transformation is impossible apart from the Holy Spirit. The flesh will benefit us in no way (Galatians 5:2).

WHAT DO THE WORKS OF THE FLESH HAVE TO DO WITH OUR STANDING BEFORE GOD?

After listing out the works of the flesh, Paul made a startling pronouncement. He said, "I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:21). I greatly struggled with the meaning of Paul's words when I was a young Christian. Having been influenced by teaching that maintained a believer could lose his or her salvation, I saw Paul's words as a threat toward Christians who engaged in ungodly behavior. The meaning seemed to be that I could forfeit my standing before God if I fell in regard to one of the works of the flesh.

I vividly remember the emotional anguish I experienced as I wrestled with this matter. On one occasion, I approached a pastor for help. I knew he believed in a doctrine many refer to as "the perseverance of the saints," so I hoped he could give me an adequate understanding of Paul's words. Unfortunately, his perspective didn't help

much. He affirmed that the verse could not refer to the loss of salvation, since other portions of Scripture make such a loss an impossibility (John 10:28; Ephesians 1:13-14). However, he claimed the verse only provided a warning concerning the loss of eternal rewards at the Judgement Seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:13-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:10). In short, he believed Paul's words applied to sanctification, not salvation.

Though I respected the older pastor in many ways, I sensed his interpretation was off. Paul's words seemed to be a clear reference to the eternal loss of salvation. I felt as if my mentor was attempting to reconcile the apparent difficulty within Paul's words in a way that didn't really fit the meaning of the passage.

By Faith Alone, But Not Alone

Later study turned me on to a clue within Paul's words. The Greek word translated "practice" in Galatians 5:21 appeared as what is known as a present active participle. Such verbiage was used to depict continual action. As a result, Paul did not mean to speak of people who made momentary lapses in regard to the works of the flesh. His intent was to describe people who continually and habitually engaged in the vices and sins he mentioned. Those who consistently engage in the works of the flesh reveal that they are still in the flesh. The tenor of their lives gives evidence that they do not have the Spirit of God.

Was not this the teaching of Jesus? In the Sermon on the Mount He told His disciples, "Every tree that doesn't produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So you'll recognize them by their fruit" (Matthew 7:19-20). For Jesus, true salvation results in good works. Though one is not saved by works (Ephesians 2:8-9), works are the evidence that one has been born again (Ephesians 2:10). It is for this reason that James said, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

A rightful emphasis on the priority of faith in salvation has stripped much modern, Christian teaching of this truth. Most believers seem to shirk away from any talk that places emphasis on the priority of works in the Christian life. Calls to holiness and good works are often dismissed as fuddy-duddy teaching belonging to a bygone era of stuffy legalism.

Does an emphasis on good works have any rightful place in Christian teaching and living? Paul's words in Galatians 5:21 seem to say yes. There is an old axiom that will perhaps help us encapsulate Scripture's perspective on these matters. One has rightly said, "Salvation is by faith alone, but a salvation that is by faith alone will never be alone." The implication is that true salvation always results in good works. How can one who is born of the Spirit never project any visible difference through his or her lifestyle?

Judged by Works

The Lord is so serious about this matter that good works will actually be the criteria of His end-time judgment. Many mistakingly believe that a mere profession of faith in God will be enough to justify them before God. Jesus actually taught that mere professions of faith will be useless at the end of time. He said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does

the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). The book of Revelation gives even more detail. In it, John gave recorded of a vision he saw of the Great White Throne judgment, saying, “The dead were judged *according to their works* by what was written in the books” (Revelation 20:12).

Most Christians nowadays are completely unaware that the end-of-days judgment will actually be based on works? Such teaching actually seems a bit heretical. How can one reconcile these realities with the fact that salvation is by grace alone? Does the Bible present contradictory and conflicting truths?

The answer is found in Paul’s teaching on the Spirit and the flesh. When one truly possesses the Spirit, his or her life will produce good fruit. When one lives according to the flesh, his or her life will only produce godless works. Those who are in the flesh will have lives that produce the inevitable result of the flesh. Things like “sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry,” and the like will emanate from their lives, giving evidence that they have not really been born again. The end result for those who are in the flesh will be a frightful, fateful judgment.

Paul’s Point

This brings us to Paul’s meaning in Galatians 5:21. Remember the context of his letter. His aim to correct believers who were trying to be made righteous through ritualistic religion. In short, they were trying to earn favor with God through works. More specifically, they were trying to please God through a work of the flesh — circumcision!

Paul wanted his readers to know that the flesh only produces things like “sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, idolatry” and so forth. If his readers tried to earn favor with God through the flesh, they would fail every time. Only the Spirit of God could produce the life of God. Those who trusted in the flesh, would end up seeing their lives overrun by ungodly sins. In the end, those who lived by the flesh would forfeit their eternal standing before God. They would suffer spiritual death.

Have you ever noticed that some legalistic Christians sometimes end up committing some of the grossest, most crude sins? Why does this happen? The problem rests in the problem that plagued the Galatians — flesh oriented living. Sin is deceitful. It is amazing that one can actually pursue what is intended to be a godly life through the flesh, the same flesh that produces the ungodly “works of the flesh” of which Paul spoke.

Believers must be on guard. They should heed Paul’s warning and make sure they have a walk with God that is grounded in the indwelling presence of the Spirit. The flesh profits us nothing in life (John 6:63). It only produces things like the things Paul mentioned in Galatians 5:20-21. Real godliness only comes by the Spirit.

If one is attempting to live the Christian life in the flesh, he or she will fail. This was Paul’s entire point in listing out the works of the flesh. In a sense, his argument when something like, “Be aware...this is what the flesh produces. You Galatians, why would you try to please God through mere fleshly, rule-oriented religion? The flesh only leads to sin, and sin only leads to eternal, spiritual death. You need something much more than flesh-focused religion. You need to learn to live by the Spirit!” Modern believers who want to see the Fruit of the Spirit become a reality in their lives would do well to understand Paul’s rationale.

HOW CAN WE OVERCOME THE WORK OF THE FLESH?

To close our talk about the works of the flesh, it is important to note Paul's teaching on how one can overcome such works. In short, Paul taught that the cross was the means for overcoming the tendencies of unregenerate humanity. The religion of the legalists was insufficient. It would never produce the life of God. Power, however, could be found in Christ's work at Calvary.

The concept of crucifixion is integral to the Christian religion. The entire faith of believers is built upon the act wherein one individual was crucified on a Roman cross. In the twenty-first century world, the form of punishment was loaded with connotations of great shame and suffering. For the spawning movement associated with the newfound faith, crucifixion became the basis for a message of forgiveness and hope.

When the early church preached, she preached about the crucifixion. The literal event was held up as the pivotal moment in which the Lord provided forgiveness of sins for His people (Acts 2:23). However, the early church also proclaimed a figurative crucifixion that could take place (Romans 6:3-4). The literal crucifixion provided a way for the power of sin to be figuratively crucified in the lives of God's people.

In Galatians, Paul picked up on this concept. For him, it was integral to the experience of a godly life. If his readers were to exhibit the fruit of God's Spirit, it was necessary for them to come to terms with certain realities related to the crucifixion. In Galatians 2:20, he spoke of his own experience with the cross by saying, "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

What did Paul mean when he said, "I have been crucified with Christ?" Was his reference to a literal, physical crucifixion? The apostle had indeed suffered greatly on behalf of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:24-29), but had he been subjected to the same fate of Christ? It doesn't seem so. We have no record of Paul being physically, literally crucified.

Instead, it seems the apostle spoke figuratively of a spiritual work that had taken place in his life. We know his words weren't intended to be interpreted literally, because the original language of Galatians 2:20 strictly meant "crucified alongside." From the historical, gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion, we know that he was executed amongst two criminals (Matthew 27:44). Paul was not present.

The meaning of Paul's words in Galatians 2:20 is made clear in Romans 6:6, a passage I referenced earlier. In that verse, Paul used the same verb translated "have been crucified" in Galatians 2:20 to say, "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be rendered powerless." Paul's words in Galatians 2:20 and Romans 6:6 seem to highlight an important reality in Christian salvation — at the moment of salvation, a supernatural work is accomplished in which the power of sin is broken in the believer's life.

Salvation renders a Christian a new creature in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Wherein one was formerly a slave to sin (Romans 6:17), the one who is in Christ no longer has to obey the sinful and sensual longings of the human flesh (Romans 6:12). Through the indwelling presence of sin may remain until the culmination of all things, it is rendered powerless through the work of Christ at conversion.

A key in Christian living is learning to live in light of these realities. It is for this reason that Paul would later tell the Galatians, "Now those who belong to Christ Jesus

have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:24). Christians who win the victory over the works of the flesh are ones who recognize themselves as being dead to the flesh. By faith, they consider themselves as being of the Spirit. Consequently, they live by the Spirit and their lives produce the fruit of the Spirit.

Are you in touch with these realities? Are you failing to see the produce of the Spirit in your life because you are failing to live by faith in the power of the cross? Recognize and remember that the work of the cross is the basis of all godly living. It is unlikely that you will see the Spirit’s fruit become a reality in your life, unless you have a moment-by-moment dependency on Christ wherein you say with the apostle Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Mere, man-centered, flesh-oriented religion won’t profit you at all. It only produces things like sexual immorality and the like. You need a Spirit-based religion that is grounded in the work of Christ on the cross!