

## May 29 Lesson 13 (NIV)

### THE FRUIT OF FREEDOM

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** Galatians 5:16–26

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Galatians 5:16–26

#### **GALATIANS 5:16–26**

<sup>16</sup> So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

<sup>19</sup> The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; <sup>20</sup> idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions <sup>21</sup> and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. <sup>24</sup> Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

#### **KEY TEXT**

*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*—Galatians 5:25

## **God Frees and Redeems**

Unit 3: Liberating Letters

LESSONS 9–13

### **LESSON OUTLINE**

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- B. Lesson Context

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## HOW TO SAY IT

BacchanaliaBah-keh-nail-yuh.

GrecoGreck-oh.

## Introduction

### A. Familiar Narrative

Any great story—word or film—will include components of plot development and narrative flow. These components include the beginning, rising action or conflict, a climax, falling action or conflict, and the conclusion.

Yet narrative flow is not enough to hold a story. Gripping stories have engaging, almost lifelike, characters. When conflict exists between such characters, the story’s narrative builds toward its breathtaking climax.

A story’s narrative conflict and climax usually reflect an inner turmoil we can identify with. Paul understood that his readers experienced spiritual turmoil. In what serves as the dramatic climax (but not the end) of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, the conflict between Spirit and flesh comes to a head.

### B. Lesson Context

Central to Paul’s argument in this lesson is the nature of “the flesh.” However, the nature and implications of the flesh are not static in the New Testament. Even the dozens of uses of the word in Paul’s writings indicate slight differences and nuances. To claim a singular understanding of “Paul’s view of the flesh” would be mistaken.

Paul uses the word to speak of physical matter of living creatures generally (1 Corinthians 15:39) and the human body specifically (6:16). In other instances, flesh is regarded negatively. Paul referred to it in the context of circumcision (Galatians 6:12; Philippians 3:3), rebellious human nature and desires (Romans 8:3–12; Ephesians 2:3), and temporal lineage in contrast to an eternal one (Romans 4:1; Galatians 4:23, 29).

As used in today's Scripture text, flesh refers to the carnal, unredeemed self and its rebellious nature and desires (see Romans 13:13–14). In order for believers to live fully as children of God, the ways of the flesh must die (see Galatians 2:19–21).

The entire epistle to the Galatians has been building to this lesson's Scripture text. With a proper understanding of God's law and promises (Galatians 3:1–22) and true freedom in God's Spirit (4:21–5:14), Paul puts all the pieces together.

## I. Stating the Sides

(GALATIANS 5:16–18)

### A. Spirit and Flesh (vv. 16–17)

#### **16. So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.**

Paul envisioned one option for the Galatian believers: to *walk by the Spirit* of God. By using a metaphor, Paul described the kind of life required of disciples as a walk (see Romans 13:13; 2 Corinthians 5:7; Colossians 2:6–7). The metaphor referred to the ways first-century students might follow in the steps of their rabbis (teachers of the Jewish law). As students did so, they would listen to the teaching and allow it to change their hearts and minds. If the Galatians followed Paul's exhortation, their whole way of life would change.

As the Galatians walked in God's Spirit, they would avoid defilement that comes from a heart out of tune with the Spirit. This would consist of *the desires of the flesh* (see Mark 7:18–23; 1 John 2:16). Paul did not suggest that the Galatian believers should invite the Spirit of God into their already established way of life. Rather, he wanted them to allow the Spirit to determine their motivations and behaviors (see Galatians 5:25, below).

#### **17a. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh.**

The way of *the flesh desires* that the working of *the Spirit* in a believer's life would be thwarted. That Paul described this as a desire alludes to the sinful acts of coveting (see Romans 7:7; 13:9) and lust (Matthew 5:28). Acts of the flesh involve more than these two sins, but all acts of the flesh imply the flesh's sinful desires.

The conflict between the flesh and Spirit was evident to Paul. The desires of the flesh lead to death, but the desires of the Spirit lead to life (Romans 8:5–8). In other letters, Paul described this conflict as being between the old, sinful self and the new, righteous self (Ephesians 4:20–24; Colossians 3:9–10). Without the presence of God's Spirit working against the flesh, a person will act in sinful and selfish ways (see Galatians 5:19–21, below).

#### **17b. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.**

A person cannot at the same time embrace fully the ways the flesh and the ways of the Spirit. Their ways *are conflict with each other*. As a result, a believer—while filled with God’s Spirit—may experience a spiritual frustration (see Romans 7:17–25). God’s Spirit has already provided a way out: freedom from the ways of the flesh (8:10–11, 16).

In this sense, the battle has been won and believers are to follow the Spirit (see Galatians 5:25, below). Therefore Paul’s conclusion is clear: believers are not to *do whatever* the flesh desires. Instead, believers follow the Spirit’s way of life.

## B. Spirit and Law (v. 18)

### 18. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Paul introduced a new point of conflict between *the Spirit* and *the law*. Given the context of the epistle (see Lesson Context, lesson 11), Paul was likely speaking of the demands of the Law of Moses.

Paul previously connected the demands of the law and the ways of the flesh (Galatians 3:2–5). He had reminded the Galatians of their freedom from the law. As a result, they were no longer “under a curse” (3:10) nor “in custody under the law” (3:23). As they followed the Spirit, they would not experience the bondage of the flesh and the law (5:1).

Paul’s exhortation was the fulfillment of the words of the prophet Jeremiah. God’s people would be marked by their following of God’s law on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). This promise took hold through a life committed to be in tune “with the Spirit of the living God” (2 Corinthians 3:3).

## II. Chasing the Flesh

### (GALATIANS 5:19–21)

#### A. Acts (vv. 19–21a)

### 19. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;

To provide examples of how *the flesh* might be made *obvious* in people, Paul gave further examples of these kinds of *acts*. What follows are lists of vices (Galatians 5:19–21a) and virtues (5:22–23). Such lists were never intended to be an exhaustive catalog for the readers but were representative (compare Roman 1:29–31; Colossians 3:5–9).

Indulgent and self-gratifying sexual acts with another person outside of a marriage relationship make up *sexual immorality* (see 1 Corinthians 5:1). In addition to hurting others, these acts harm the guilty person (6:18). *Impurity* results from improper sexual acts. This term was also used in conjunction with purity codes of the Law of Moses (Leviticus 5:3; 7:21; etc.). God desires that his people acknowledge the holiness of their bodies and act accordingly (see 1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

Extravagant sexual vice, uncontrolled and shameless, is *debauchery*. The term implies lack of self-control, even to the point of shocking others without regard for decency (see Ephesians 4:19).

### 20a. idolatry and witchcraft;

Paul's second grouping concerned idolatrous acts of worship. *Idolatry* involves replacing worship of the one true God. In essence, this act exchanged God for a lie (see Exodus 20:3–6; Leviticus 19:4; Isaiah 44:9–20; Jeremiah 10:14; Romans 1:25).

Modern audiences need not think of idolatry strictly in terms of acts of worship to physical images. Rather, idolatry should be considered in terms of what diverts peoples' attention, effort, and resources away from the desires of God (see Isaiah 2:8; Jeremiah 1:16; Micah 5:12–13; Acts 17:29).

*Witchcraft* is the attempt to use physical objects and rituals to manipulate the spiritual world. Examples would include ancient pagan practices of magic, incantations, and drug use.

**20b. hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions**

Paul's final grouping concerns a person's treatment of others. *Hatred* refers to a spirit of hostility toward another person, God, or both. *Discord* is a general description for the feelings of hostility among people—quarreling and disharmony (see 1 Corinthians 1:11; 3:3). Feelings of *jealousy* speak to the strong feelings that may arise from seeing the success of another person. *Fits of rage* are strong bursts of anger stemming from an impetuous mindset. *Selfish ambition* results when hostile groups advance their own interests. These kinds of acts are the opposite of the self-giving love initiated by God's Spirit. *Dissensions* continue interpersonal strife to the point of causing division (see Romans 16:17–18). *Factions* point to false beliefs that lead to destructive differences within the community.

**21a. and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.**

The semicolon after the word *envy* indicates that it goes with the previous grouping of selfish behavior. It refers to the desire to deprive others of what they have.

Paul ends the list of vices by describing two public displays of overindulgence and self-destruction. *Drunkenness*—intoxication from alcohol—harms the body and clouds a person's mind. A drunk person might lose control of his or her better judgment and participate in *orgies*. These are public displays of indulgence, gluttony, and immorality (see Romans 13:13; 1 Peter 4:3). The underlying Greek text reflects the name of the mythical Greek god Comus, the god of festivities. The Roman festival Bacchanalia was observed in honor of the gods and celebrated through rampant drunkenness and sexual immorality.

That the vice list concludes with *and the like* confirms that Paul had not compiled a comprehensive list. Rather, he wanted to highlight specific works of the flesh applicable to the Galatians.

## **B. Warning (v. 21b)**

**21b. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

The first two phrases of this partial verse indicate that this was not the first time Paul had taught the Galatians concerning these topics. Perhaps he had instructed their behavior during his initial encounter with them on a missionary journey (Galatians 1:9; see Acts 13:4–14:28; 16:1–3).

To *those people who live like this*, the listed vices of the flesh, a strong warning is evident. People gain their eternal inheritance of life through faith, not ethical behavior (Galatians 3:11–12, 18). But right behavior serves as an indication of the presence of God's Spirit. People who fail to act in accordance with the Spirit *will not inherit the kingdom of God*.

Occasional failure to live in this regard was not Paul's concern. Instead, he was concerned with individuals who mock God's Spirit as they continually live in the flesh (Galatians 6:7–9). Persistent disregard for the Spirit indicates that transforming faith is not present. A life led by the Spirit will not continue the status quo of living apart from God's path.

### III. Showing the Spirit (GALATIANS 5:22–26)

#### A. Fruit (vv. 22–23)

##### **22a. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,**

Having given his list of vices, Paul now provides an in-depth listing of virtues appropriate to the life of a Spirit-filled believer. Greco-Roman philosophers created virtue lists based on the cardinal values of their culture. However, Paul's virtue list had a different basis: love for others indicative of the presence of God's *Spirit* (Galatians 5:13–16).

Paul described the Spirit-filled life in agricultural terms, calling the attributes of such a life *fruit* (compare his other "fruit" thoughts in Ephesians 5:9; Philippians 1:11, 22; see John 15:1–17). The metaphor alludes to the Spirit's role in producing this harvest—a shift from human striving to the Spirit's supplying. Only through submission to God's Spirit will these fruits be evident in a believer's life (see Matthew 7:16–20).

This list of spiritual fruit begins with the greatest of all Christian virtues: *love* (1 Corinthians 13:13). This love is different from the feelings of affection between friends, family members, or romantic partners. This kind of love demonstrates itself by sacrificial self-giving (see John 15:13; Romans 5:8). The entire law was fulfilled by this love (Galatians 5:13–14; compare Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43–45a). The destructive ways of the flesh are neutralized by radical, self-giving love.

A Spirit-filled sense of *joy* does not depend on circumstances. Rather, this joy remains steadfast and prevalent during difficult situations (see 2 Corinthians 8:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; Hebrews 10:34; James 1:2–3).

Spirit-filled *peace* does not imply the absence of distress. Rather, peace finds its basis in the conviction of God's all-sufficiency. Believers demonstrate peace as they work toward taking part in God's restoration of the world. This begins with the restoration of the relationships within the church (compare 1 Corinthians 14:33; 2 Corinthians 13:11).

##### **22b. forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,**

The next grouping of spiritual fruit describes a person's attitude toward others. *Forbearance* expresses patient treatment of others, even in response to wrongful treatment.

*Kindness* speaks of a person's loving disposition toward others. People can show this temperament because God's actions toward humanity provide the ultimate example (see Romans 2:4).

*Goodness* is an attribute that marks the collective people of God (see Romans 15:14). The concept might imply a willingness to do good for others by acts of radical generosity (see Matthew 20:1–16).

Such fruit addressed the difficult work of building right relationships among believers and establishing appropriate witness to unbelievers (Colossians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:12). That

Paul's teaching emphasized this work was because of factions that had formed among the churches of Galatia (see Galatians 1:6–9). Therefore, formation by the Holy Spirit was required for the Galatians to become one in Christ.

The underlying Greek word translated as *faithfulness* can also be translated as loyalty. It probably carries that meaning in this verse. Specifically, it refers to the faithfulness required between believers (see Galatians 4:12–16; compare Philemon 5).

**23. gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.**

While the previous grouping of fruit focused on a person's treatment of others, the final grouping concerns a person's demeanor. *Gentleness* implies self-restraint, even in the midst of a disagreement (see 2 Timothy 2:25; 1 Peter 3:15–16). Paul would encourage the Galatians to put this fruit into practice as they worked to restore their community (see Galatians 6:1). When the fruit of *self-control* is present in a believer's life, desires and passions do not rule that person.

**B. Expectations (vv. 24–26)**

**24. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.**

Christians are not to be passive while bearing the Spirit's fruit. While the Spirit has a role in the growth of the fruit, the Christian must end anything that might hinder the growing conditions of the fruit. This requires that Christians put to death selfish desires (see Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5).

Paul's imagery unites Jesus' followers with his experience on the cross. Following Jesus and expressing faith in him requires believers to *have crucified* the desires and ways of *the flesh*. Doing so does not require that believers experience physical crucifixion. Rather, the language reminds believers to put to death sinful practices so that new life might be found (Romans 6:1–14; Galatians 2:20). Paul wanted the Galatians to live not for themselves, but for the one who died for them (2 Corinthians 5:15). As we live in the Spirit, we avoid all sinful tendencies, including the *passions* and "sinful *desires*, which war against the soul" (1 Peter 2:11).

**25. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.**

Considering Paul's similar imperative in Galatians 5:16 (above), this statement serves as the bookend to this section of the letter. By including himself in the subject (*we ... us*), Paul identified with the situation of the Galatians. What he asked of them applied to himself as well. To *live by the Spirit* necessitates a resulting walk *with the Spirit*. Following the Spirit's lead brings a life of righteousness, demonstrating the transformational fruit of the Spirit (Romans 8:4–5).

**26. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.**

Paul's concern for the Galatians' unity is evident. If they lived by the flesh, the Spirit's fruit would be absent and divisions would deepen. The *conceited* glory sought by some Galatians would lead to discord among the whole community. When this provoking occurred, people were diverted away from the ways of the Spirit and resulting good works (contrast Hebrews 10:24). Selfish acts of our sinful nature are contrary to the humility required of Christ followers, demonstrated by Christ (see Philippians 2:3). A life filled with God's Spirit would show fruit and build unity among believers.

## Conclusion

### A. Narrative Conflict

If the Galatian epistle were a narrative, Flesh and Spirit would serve as the main characters. In this scenario, the conflict between the two played out in the lives of the Galatians. However, the Spirit has already won—the resolution of the story has been made complete! Therefore, Paul wants his hearers and readers to act accordingly.

As followers of Jesus live in step with the Spirit, we will bear the Spirit's fruit. When this life is demonstrated in a community of believers, the result is a unified people of God. Mutual submission in love becomes the ultimate example of the Spirit's presence. This narrative is timeless; it is just as applicable for modern audiences as it was for the first-century Galatians!

### B. Prayer

Our Father, thank you for your Spirit. We want the Spirit to guide our lives and our interactions. Strengthen us to avoid sinful distractions so that we might live holy lives filled with unrelenting joy and love for others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

The sweetest fruit comes from walking in God's Spirit!<sup>1</sup>

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