

The Works of the Flesh and the Fruit of the Spirit – Gal 5:16-26

Introduction – There is a way of trying to be holy that is wicked to the core and it is a way of life that runs in our circles, in religious circles. In the religious circles of Galatia, Paul battled one manifestation of this, which he condemned (Gal 1:6-10, 3:1-3, and all of Galatians). Today, we live in a post-Christian culture that tries to retain some form of moralism whether it is religious respectability or secular respectability. This amounts to salvation, or sanctification, or enlightenment, or cultural acceptance by means of keeping a law. When that law is based on self-righteousness or self-justification, it is the law of the flesh and it always leads to the works of the flesh. This is not the way of Jesus and His Spirit.

Spirit or Law to Battle the Flesh? (vv16-18) – Each one of us, when we come into the covenant, continues to battle the flesh. Even those who are filled with the Spirit experience the hard battle with the flesh (v17). For the Galatians, the temptation was to use the law (defined by the Judaizers – which had become external, ceremonial conformity) to battle the flesh. That was their sort of religious respectability. Under such law, we attempt a means or system of holiness or acceptability by means of outward conformity. But if we are led by and walk in the Spirit, then we are not under the law (v18). The problem is that the unconverted heart can only turn to law (some self-keeping standard) for salvation. These standard-bearers are not trying necessarily to lead the followers into a frenzy of wicked behavior, but this is where it will go. Religiosity does not deal with the flesh; rather, it caters to it.

Works and Fruit – It is important to note that these are not simply different lists in content. They are two different kinds of lists. One is a list of works, the other a list of fruit. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life (Rom 3:23). The first list is a paycheck; the second is all gift and the evidences of that gift. Too often we think we need to work harder to bear the fruit of the Spirit and we are missing the point. This is often because we think of heaven and hell as the same kind of place. We either think they are both places that we earn to go (How decent of a person have you been? How hard have you tried?); or we think they are both places that God has indiscriminately assigned to us (a fatalistic, not Calvinistic, view – which can lead to “Well, I can’t do anything about this, it’s just who I am”). The first list is what the flesh earns; the second list is what the Spirit bears. It is a God of justice who sends to hell and it is a God who is both just and the one who justifies who sends to heaven.

The Works of the Flesh (vv19-21) – We are told that these works are evident, obvious and prolific (Matt 12:34-35). They may be arranged in four classes: sexual sins, idolatries and witchcraft, sins of the temper, and sins of the appetite. Adultery is a narrow term while fornication is broad. Uncleanliness and lewdness refer to dirty living, whether physical or spiritual; conversations and activities which encourage unlawful gratification. Idolatry is not simply bowing down to a piece of wood, but includes covetousness and greed. An idol is the thing that answers the question, “I will only be happy if I have _____.” Sins of anger and strife include those that go on in the home even though you hypocritically control them elsewhere. Drunkenness and raucous partying are works of the flesh. All of these sins are woven together, they come in bunches, and this is not an exhaustive list. Those who live like this are damned; those who are characterized by this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

The Fruit of the Spirit (vv22-23) – In stark contrast, Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit. It is important to see that it is fruit, the natural outworking of what the Spirit has put in. This fruit also corresponds to God’s laws for in them we see that God gives what He commands. Love is the glad, sacrificial giving of oneself. We love because God first loved us. And so it is with all the fruit. Joy is a gladness that is full to the brim and regularly pours out when one is jostled. Peace is that contentment that is beyond understanding in light of circumstances. Longsuffering is patient endurance with hope, forbearance and slowness in avenging wrongs. It is an attitude before it is an action; again, this fruit reveals who we are and then what we do. And so these continue and are also woven together, coming in bunches. But there is no “law” that brings these forth; no religious respectability, no external conformity.

Spirit or Flesh? – The most obvious question is of course, which list describes you? Your baptism obligates you to be characterized by the second list. That baptism declares your identity with Christ in His death and resurrection, described in vv24-25 (also Gal 2:20-21). And so, “let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another” (v26). The respectable religious type, the secular “man-is-basically-good” type, the external law-keepers – these all are conceited and they provoke others (“why can’t you be as good as...”) and bring forth envy (“I wish I could be as good as...”).

The false teachings of the Judaizers must be rejected. So must the teachings of traditional family values and common decency. None of these protect us from the flesh. Only the grace of Jesus Christ, by His death, burial, and resurrection, appropriated to us through faith can protect us. And only as we walk in His Spirit will we be able to manifest the fruit of life in Christ.