

Galatians 5 v13-25

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[0 : 00] Open your Bibles to Galatians chapter 5, Galatians chapter 5 verses 13 to 25.! I want to begin this morning by telling you what a Christian is not. It's really important! It's really important in life to know what something is not as well as what something is.

And I think in Galatians we have learned what a Christian is not. And so a Christian is not someone who turns over a new leaf. A Christian is not someone who kind of develops a new philosophy of life. A Christian is not someone who develops a kind of special interest in going to church and feels that they should get a bit more religious. A Christian is not someone who's just trying hard to do better. In fact, a Christian is not really someone who does anything at all.

That at its root, a Christian is someone who has a growing realization of what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. As you come to the Lord's Table later this morning, as believers, isn't it, we come to the Lord's Table with nothing to give, no rewards to claim, no gifts that we can offer. We come to receive, don't we? We take the bread, we drink the wine. Because a Christian is someone who has a growing relationship of what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. That in the death and the resurrection of Jesus, God has completely, utterly, absolutely and eternally accepted us. And that there's nothing, nothing that we can do to make God love us more. And there's nothing, nothing that we can do to make God love us less. It has all been done. It has been done. That's when Jesus cries on the cross, tatalestai, it is finished. It's done. It has all been done in the death of Jesus Christ. And that is the great freedom which the Apostle Paul has. And the great freedom that the Apostle Paul has been brought to. And if you have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ and have received from Christ and are relying on him, you are free as well, you are free from having to justify yourself, from defend yourself before God. And I am free and you are free from having to justify myself before you and you before me.

God has come to dwell in our lives, in our hearts by faith. And so we live by faith and not by sight.

And we live by the Holy Spirit. But there's only one problem with that. Here's the problem. I'm going to call it the university entrance exam problem. And you often hear this from people who've come close to Christianity and they've got some kind of understanding of what the Christian gospel teaches, but they haven't really fully understood it. So here's the problem, the university entrance exam.

[3 : 28] Let's say you have a 16 year old son and you say to them, don't worry, you've already been accepted into university. And so it doesn't matter what you do with your schooling. It doesn't matter what grades you get in your A levels. It doesn't matter how good they are or how bad they are. It's okay, you have entrance into university already. What will happen? That's how the argument goes.

So the 16 year old begins to think I've been accepted into university and they will not be motivated to work, will they? Are they going to become addicted to their phone or clash of clans or computer games or parties or YouTube shorts or whatever else it is that teenagers do this day? They're not going to work.

And that's exactly the problem for the new Christians in Galatia. And they put their faith in Jesus Christ. The transformation has come, but they've also got troubles. And look at verse 15 of Galatians 5.

And then look at Galatians 5 verse 26. And this church was having trouble. And the biting there is backbiting.

And they were backbiting and gossiping and speaking about one another behind each other's backs. They were struggling with jealousy and arrogance. Things that you find in every Christian group. And so there's a group of new teachers that come into Galatians 5. And they use the university entrance exam argument. And they offer an illustration.

[5 : 16] And they say the problem with this message is that it leads to people just kind of living whatever they want. And so if you want to get serious, if you want to get ahead, you need to go to God's law.

And you need to put yourself and come under God's law. They said there's only two ways to live. You're either a pagan and you're living for yourself. And you're gratifying the desires of your flesh. Or you're under the law and you're trying to obey God.

And the Apostle Paul says, no, there's not just two options. There is a third way. And it's not the way of self-gratification. And it's not the way of moral reformation trying your hardest.

But it is the way of keeping in step with the Spirit. And so the key verse for the section today is verse 25. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

Let us walk by the Spirit. If the Holy Spirit has come into your heart, into your life, and made you alive to God, says the Apostle, you will begin to be transformed from the inside.

[6 : 30] True spiritual transformation cannot, does not come from the outside. It does not come from obeying laws, or any external observance, or ceremony, or liturgy, or anything.

But it comes from keeping in step with the Holy Spirit. And this passage is one of the deepest, and the clearest, and most practical sections I can think of in all the Bible on how to live the Christian life.

I'm sorry we haven't got long to talk about it this morning, but I want to give you two coat hangers to hang your thinking. And you can go and think through these verses. Let me commend this book to you, God's Spirit.

It's a book on the fruit of the Spirit. It is written by our own Reuben Hunter. He's one of our own. And it's written on these verses. It's a brilliant little book, short little chapters, looking at the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

If you need to think more, and we all do, get hold of this. I think it's about 6.50 on the bookstall. But do pick that up. So, two coat hangers to hang our thinking this morning. What does this transformation look like? What it looks like, first of all?

[7 : 35] What does keeping in step with the Spirit look like? And then secondly, how does it happen? So, first of all, what does it look like? I'm going back to verse 13. You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters.

But do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love, serve one another.

The whole law, Paul says, is fulfilled in this one word. You should love your neighbour as yourself. It's one thing to say that Christ has set us free.

It's one thing to say, I'm completely accepted and I stand loved by God. It's an entirely different thing to live out that freedom. And so, until now, Paul in Galatians has been demonstrating what it means to be free.

And now he starts to talk to us about how do I use this freedom. And this is what it looks like. God has made you free so that you and I will serve other people.

[8 : 44] It's very, very simple. Incredibly simple. Faith in Jesus Christ does not just bring us into connection with God, but it brings us into a particular relationship with God's people.

And so, here's the truth, which is shocking in many ways. You cannot walk with God unless you walk with God's people. You cannot. If you do not walk in love with God's people, you cannot say that you're walking in love with God.

And so, the primary way that we express the gospel of freedom and forgiveness is serving other people in love. This is the mark of freedom, brothers and sisters.

This is the mark of the reality that the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, that we use our lives, that we make our decisions, very practical day-to-day decisions as to what will serve other people.

Not in some grand gesture of self-sacrifice, that everyone will look on and say, well, aren't they fantastic that they're so giving to others? No, in the slow, invisible, quiet, daily death of small inconveniences.

[10 : 05] Paul says that is how you show that God is real in your life. And it's doing the opposite of what comes naturally.

That's what Paul's point is in verses 16 to 17. Let's read those. Where he says, but I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh. For these are opposed to each other to keep you from doing the things that you want to do.

In the King James Version, it says, the flesh lusteth against the flesh. The flesh lusteth against the Spirit. It's a great translation.

Except, whenever I say lust, and whenever we use the word desires, we immediately think of sex. And that's not what it's about here, actually. It's speaking about the deep, inner motivation of desire and longing that we all have.

[11 : 11] And the word flesh also makes us think of sex or the body, but that isn't what it means here either. Every time Paul uses the word flesh, he's speaking about our human nature.

And here's what the Bible is saying to us. That our human nature, naturally, you left to yourself and me left to myself, is hostile to God. That is intrinsically, radically, permanently, defiantly, pervasively hostile to God.

That's who you are. That's who I am. The Apostle says in Romans chapter 8, for the mind that is set on the flesh or on the human nature is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law.

It cannot. Our human nature is, when it's acting true to form, is self-seeking, disobedient, and defiant towards God.

And here's the truth. Every part of our human nature is touched with this. And there's no part of us that is not affected by it.

[12 : 19] And you might say, well, that's really strong, Paul. Really, really strong. But remember what Jesus said. Jesus said in Mark chapter 7, for within, from out of the heart, of man and woman, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness.

Sometimes we say things, don't we? And we think to ourselves, I don't know where that came from. Well, the Bible tells us exactly where it comes from. It comes from our nature. All of those evil things come from within ourselves.

And Jesus says they make us impure. If you're anything like me, you have a terribly flattering, optimistic, sentimental, and superficial view of yourself.

We all want to think of ourselves, don't we, as basically innocent. But the proof of that hostility, between our nature and God, is that when the Holy Spirit comes into our lives, when we place our faith, and our trust, and reliance on Jesus, and God takes resident by his Spirit, your life becomes a struggle.

It's wonderful. I mean, Paul is writing to Christians here. And when somebody becomes a Christian, they say, before I started to follow Jesus Christ, I never struggled with temptation, I just gave into it.

[13:50] But now I've become a Christian. Now I'm seeking to live for the Lord Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit has taken residence in my heart. I find it's a real struggle. It's a real battle. And so when the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts, he brings with him affections for God.

And so you now begin to desire the things of God. And that comes into direct conflict with our flesh, with our own sinful desires. So for the Christian here this morning, we find that there's a battle within us.

Because my nature battles against the Holy Spirit. Verse 19, what does it look like? Well, the works of the flesh are plain, aren't they? Here's another list.

What a list this is. Verse 19, Now the works of the flesh are evident. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, anger, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.

And I warned you, Paul says, as I warned you when I was with you, that those who practice these things, those who keep going with these things, shall not definitively inherit the kingdom of God.

[15:11] Now I think that that list in verses 19 and 20 cover just about all of us. Can I ask for a show of hands, is there anyone this morning who is not covered by this list?

I shouldn't do that. It's a great list, isn't it? Look at the sins here. Look what it talks about. Some of the sins there are, sins of religious people.

Some of them are the sins of irreligious people. If you look at the first two, the first couple are to do with sexuality. Some of them are to do with substance abuse.

And then there's, and the killers aren't there, there's the killers of selfishness, jealousy, anger, fits of anger.

The point is this, if you are led by the spirit, you are not under the law. That is the law of God. You shall not, you shall not, you shall not.

[16:14] It can't do anything to transform us. It can't transform this, these inner issues. That only happens through the leading of the spirit.

And so let me just pause here and look with you at verse 18. Because that phrase there, led by the spirit, should get an award for one of the most abused phrases in all of the Bible.

And so people use it today, don't they? You often hear it, isn't it? I'm being led by the spirit as if it's a kind of internet connection with God. Where I download fresh information from God and he gives me guidance today.

And it usually comes, when you talk to people like that, it usually comes in the thoughts, in the case of, I had this feeling, or I felt this nudge, or I had this thought.

And when that happens, we say, I was led by the spirit. But actually, the phrase led by the spirit only comes up twice in the New Testament. And when we read this phrase, led by the spirit, it has got nothing to do with guidance at all, but it's got everything to do with godliness.

[17:28] And so being led by the spirit is not having a hotline to heaven, but it is God's spirit in our hearts resisting our fallen nature.

And so to be led by the spirit means actually to be in battle. It means to go to war. Here's the point. And the works of the human nature, the works of the flesh, they're not all sexual by any means, but they are all self-centered.

Because sin is self-love to the core. My nature, my flesh, whispers to me all the time, and it says, you're free.

You're free. Sounds terrific. Don't put yourself out for others. Think very carefully. What is in this for yourself? I need to be indulged.

And if you indulge me, my flesh says, I will be good to you. I will be good so long as it doesn't cost me very much. And we need to hear this this morning because we're so devious naturally, and we're so slippery in our sinful nature.

[18 : 44] And we know that our sinful nature is so slippery it will try and counterfeit the fruit of the spirit. So long as we remain in control. That's the issue.

Who is in control? You see, if I remain in control, I may not be sexually promiscuous, but I can be filled with pride, can't I? Or I may not appear proud, but I'm going to harbor all sorts of deep envies and jealousies towards you.

But if we keep in step with the spirit, we are not controlled by our sinful desires. We're not controlled by an external institution. We're not controlled by what other Christians think, but we're controlled by the spirit.

And that is why religion is so, so powerless here. It cannot help you. Religion cannot help your heart. It cannot change your heart.

All the law keeping, all the ceremonies, all the attendance in all the world cannot change by fundamental egocentricity. Only God's spirit can do that.

[19 : 54] And so you see, when you want to serve God on your own terms, you're not keeping in step with the spirit, but you're giving expression to your sinful nature. When you make decisions based on your own convenience, or when you expect the church or the group of Christians around you to accommodate to your wishes, you're giving expression to your sinful nature.

This is what it looks like. The sign, the real sign of transformation by the spirit is serving others in love.

Using the freedom that you and I have in Christ not to get what we want, but to do what we know will help others. And so I'm afraid that many people think today that belonging to church is like joining a club or becoming a member of something.

Last night, I took the dramatic snap of becoming a member of the co-op. I've been going to the co-op for 18 years. It's been a kind of casual relationship.

I've been more of an adherent. But last night, me and the co-op got committed. I went to the self-service checkout, and for the first time I noticed that I could become a member just by scanning on my phone.

[21 : 13] I was given the option to scan as a member. I took my phone out of my pocket nervously. I went onto the camera. I clicked on the link, and I slowly entered my details.

There was no emotion. There was no crisis experience. I was sent an email which said this. Thanks for becoming a co-op member, Paul. At co-op, you're not just a member.

You're an owner. We don't have shareholders. The people who use us own us, like you. I've got no clue what that means. Absolutely no clue.

I don't know what difference becoming a member of the co-op is going to make to my life. It saved me 20 pence on last night's shopping. But I've got no real expectations of the co-op, and they've got no real expectations of me.

When people say, you know, the kind of interview before you're preaching is that, Paul, tell us a little bit about yourself. Well, my name's Paul. I've got a wife called Claire. I've got three children. I'm Welsh and I'm a member of the co-op. No one's going to say that, are they?

[22 : 17] I'm not going to be deeply involved in the co-op. I'm not going to be engaged with the people there. I'm not going to start going in and giving pep talks to the staff. And there are many people that think that Christianity is like that.

They think coming to church is like that. And Paul says, no, no, let us keep in step with the Spirit. And I've been really struck this week that Galatians 5, there's not a singular command.

It's a plural command. And so to keep in step with the Spirit, here's what you really, I want you to grasp this this morning, that this is not something that you can do on your own. And it's not something I can do on my own.

You are not a special case that can do it on your own. No one can do it on their own. Because we can only do this with one another. So in Greek, it is literally keep in row together with the Holy Spirit.

Keep in row together with the Holy Spirit. So it's through our mutual fellowship. It's through how we are different members in the Christian community, bearing with one another, loving one another, serving one another, that we keep in step with the Spirit.

[23 : 34] And the only way that we can do this is by holding on to each other and serving one another. That's how we keep in step with the Spirit. And so that puts a nail in the coffin, doesn't it, of me and my Christianity, of kind of living an isolated Christian life.

It's impossible. You cannot do it. That's the first thing. That's what it looks like. Secondly, how does it work? How does it work practically? Look at verse 22, please.

These are wonderful verses. In fact, let's read verses 22 and 23 together. All right? Verse 22 after me. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Against such things there is no law. They're wonderful things, aren't they? Paul calls them what? He calls them the fruit singular of the Holy Spirit.

And these characteristics have not come about by years of earnest moral effort and hard work and self-improvement. These characteristics of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, they've not come about through religious observance or ceremonies.

[25 : 00] They've come from God and they come, don't they, in the arena of the heart and they are entirely supernatural. If you want to see what the works of the flesh look like, if you want to see what the works of the flesh look like, do what comes naturally.

But Christian growth and transformation is fruit. It's fruit. It's organic.

It's like what happens on a tree. Do you remember in John's Gospel when Jesus says to his disciples in the upper room, he says, I am the vine, you are the branches.

He who abides in me, he it is that bears much fruit. Because apart from me, you can do nothing. And so how do we bear fruit?

The way that we bear fruit is by holding on to the Lord Jesus and he lives his life through us. And these nine fruits that Paul mentions here, they all belong together.

[26 : 05] Love, joy, peace. Love is basically opening ourselves to each other and treating that other person with the love of Jesus Christ. Not because of what it will bring you, but because of the intrinsic value of that person.

It's choosing to do what will be for the spiritual benefit of that person or that group. Sometimes they will like it, sometimes they will hate it. It doesn't really matter. Joy is taking an intrinsic delight in God.

It's joy in knowing that God has loved me in Jesus Christ and there is nothing in all the universe that can separate me from the love of God. Peace is simply knowing that God is wise.

He is the wise one. And God is in control, isn't he, of all the circumstances of my life this morning. These are all ways of serving one another.

Look at patience. Patience comes from the knowledge that everything that happens to me, both good and evil, comes to me from the hand of God, of a God who loves me.

[27 : 07] and that waiting is a very important instrument in the hand of God to make me like the Lord Jesus Christ. Naturally, I don't want to wait.

Naturally, I'm impatient. But God uses the circumstances of my life to make me wait, to make me like Jesus. And we have to be patient, don't we, because the fruit of the Spirit, sometimes it feels like there's nothing happening.

And there is a slowness of growth in grace. And it's totally frustrating. And it's given to me by the Holy Spirit to help me depend on God.

And I found this really encouraging, the thing that we live in the church in a real program age. So you do this and it will result in that. You hold this course and it will result in that. You do this, you do that, you do it.

It ain't like that, is it? It's really not like that. It's organic, it's sometimes slow and imperceptible and yet, the fruit appears. Kindness and generosity, they've got nothing to do with our abilities or our gifts or our IQ and success.

[28 : 22] You can give all your money you want to charity, you can preach a thousand sermons, you can have thousands of people come to faith through you, you can invent a cure for disease and you can be completely barren of the fruit of the Spirit.

But here you've got this communal reality that God sows the seed of His Word in our hearts and it takes root and it bears fruit.

And if you live by the Spirit and you keep in step with the Spirit, this change, this fruitfulness is inevitable. It will happen to us. and you will become less aggressive, less touchy, less self-protective, less self-focused.

And you will find as God's Word and as you live amongst His people, you become more joyful, more self-controlled, more willing to be engaged with others and serve others. It will happen.

I think it's a real argument for sticking in a church for the long haul. It's one of the frustrations in London church life that people come and they're here for a short time and you begin to see change and then they go off and it's a blessing to other churches.

[29 : 38] But it is a remarkable thing that I can look around this room in the last 23 years and tell you of the character change of God's people. Maybe a good thing for you, if you've been a Christian for a long time, to ask, am I actually less abrasive than I used to be?

Am I less consumed with anger? Am I more forgiving? Do I hold resentments for as long as I used to? Am I increasing in peace? The other thing is you can't pick and choose this fruit.

The fruit in the Greek is singular. It's one thing with nine facets. Which means you can't say today, well I'm alright and ate, but I'll let myself lag behind on the one.

If you fall behind in one, you fall behind in them all. And that is why the apostle finishes, and I want us to finish you as we come to the table with these words in verses 24 and 25. Those who belong to Christ, Jesus, have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. And so if I'm to be truthful with you this morning, I look at my heart and I see an abundance of the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit.

[30:56] It's there, but it's very, very tiny buds. And so what the apostle does at the end of this section is he takes us back to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. And he says, God accepts you not because of any legal standard, but through the death of Jesus Christ.

And that means this, that everything I do is covered by the righteousness of Jesus. But God takes delight in any movement in this direction to serve other people.

And so it does not matter this morning how stumbling, how inadequate, how hopeless it really is. Every time you try and take a step to keep in step with the Spirit, it delights God because His death covers me.

The best solution I can think of is when you go to a school concert. And those of you who are parents, you might remember if your kids learned instruments, you might remember their first musical performances.

they're in an orchestra, we went to them, and in many ways it's utterly unbearable. Those early days of the violin, an orchestra makes funny squeaks and squawks, and very often you haven't got a clue what they're playing.

[32:28] But every parent there loves every second of it. It's like when your child brings to you a painting that they've done or a drawing and on one level it's horrific.

It's awful, isn't it? And yet you're so proud of it, you put it on your fridge. And that is how God looks at you this morning if you are a believer. He looks at every step you've taken at seeking to save someone else.

Every step that you've taken to strengthen and to build this church and no matter how weak and no matter how mixed it is, and he's delighted by it. And so as we come to the Lord's table this morning we remember that the Lord Jesus he knelt in the garden to pray for you.

And he goes to the cross of Jesus Christ for you. And in the upper room he gathers his disciples and he says this, this is my commandment to you love one another as I have loved you.

And that's what he's given us to do. And that is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. And so if we live by the Spirit let us keep in step with the Spirit.

[33:52] And can you notice just again right at the end of the chapter look at the pronouns verses 25 and 6. It's corporate. If we let us one another one another how do we keep in step with the Spirit when we need one another?

It's a beautiful thing isn't it as we come to the Lord's table and that the Son of God loved me and he gave himself for me and yet I cannot understand that without looking around this room.

And I cannot live that out without looking around this room and seeing the people God has called me to love and God has called me to serve. Thank you.