

Today our Epistle lesson is from Paul's Letter to the Galatians. And there is a strong theme in Galatians would have been readily apparent in the first century, but that's hidden from us in the 21st century.

In Galatians, Paul often uses the language and the image of a rite of passage that young men went through in the Greco-Roman world. When boys were 15 or 16, they would put on the toga of manhood, the *toga virilis*. After that point, they would assume more adult responsibilities in their culture.

Last week we heard from Galatians 3. In that chapter, Paul was using that rite of passage ceremony as an illustration of the new lives Christians need to lead after their baptisms. They put on Christ like a new toga, a new garment, and they need to seek to live lives of greater spiritual maturity.

But Paul uses that same motif other places in Galatians, including in our Epistle reading today from chapter 5. Here Paul contrasts the "works of the flesh" with the "fruit of the Spirit."

But before we look at the contrast between these two lists, the "works of the flesh" and the "fruit of the Spirit," I need to address a common misunderstanding we have in our 21st century context.

We hear "the flesh" and we make a big mistake. In our hyper-sexualized 21st century culture we hear "the flesh" and think of our bodies. We often think of it in sexual terms, "sins of the flesh."

But the biblical term is much broader than just bodies, or our drives, or our sexual urges. "The flesh" in Paul's terms refers to everything that in us that is opposed to God. Everything that is rebellious is our "flesh."

The flesh can include our minds, our wills, and our emotions, anything that is in opposition to God's will.

So when Paul refers to "the flesh" versus the Spirit, he's not talking about our bodies versus our souls. He's not talking about two parts our ourselves warring within us.

Instead Paul is talking about the things we want to do our way, "the flesh," versus the things God calls us to do, "the Spirit."

So when Paul says, "Live by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh"¹ he's saying, 'live in obedience to God, not in rebellion.' Live according to God's intentions.

So what does God intend for us? We are called to love. Paul says, "Through love become slaves to one another."²

¹ Galatians 5:16

² Galatians 5:13

In other words, you have to put aside your own selfishness and love and serve each other.

Paul is asking us, 'Do you want to live as the Spirit intends?' If so, you must "love your neighbor as yourself."³

Or do you want to live in self-indulgence and follow the flesh? If so, then the world becomes a feeding frenzy. You'll end up biting and devouring one another.⁴

And that's often a real dilemma in our American society. At our best, we rise to the occasion. We pitch in. We help each other. At our worst, it's everyone for themselves. I've got mine. You get yours.

The same goes for the church. At our best, we follow the Spirit. We love and support each other. At our worst, we let our flesh get in the way. And we bite and chew on each other.

It's like an engine. It doesn't matter how well engineered the engine is. If there's no oil, then the machine is going to grind down and destroy itself. We need the oil of love to keep things running. If we don't have love, then we're going to fall apart.

So how do we know if we're living "in the flesh" or "in the Spirit"? How do we know if we're living according to God's desires or according to our own rebellious and sinful nature?

To answer that question, Paul gives us a couple of lists. These lists are not meant to become all-inclusive checklists. But like the yellow line down the middle of the highway, these lists can be helpful markers for the Christian pilgrimage.

Paul contrasts the "works of the flesh" with the "fruit of the Spirit."

Paul starts with a list of the works of the flesh. And there's a big piece we miss in our culture.

Paul is going back to the motif of those teenage young men who have received their togas and are now transitioning into adult responsibilities. In the Greco-Roman world, there were a number of essays written to these young men urging and exhorting them to live as men and not boys. In our world, we'd say "man up," or put on your "big boy pants." Yes, putting on the toga was a symbol that they had new freedom and new status. BUT that new freedom and status came with great responsibilities.

And so Paul starts listing the "works of the flesh." And the list starts out like a typical list of vices that young men were encouraged to avoid.

³ Galatians 5:14

⁴ Galatians 5:15

And actually, since boys will be boys in the 1st century as much as in the 21st, the list has behaviors you might witness in Lubbock on Greek Circle on a Friday or Saturday night during the school year.

Paul lists things like fornication, impurity, licentiousness, drunkenness, carousing, and sorcery.⁵ That last item, "sorcery" is actually the Greek word *pharmakeia* which is the source of our word "pharmacy." You guessed it—it's all about using mind altering drugs.

These items are very typical of a list of vices that Greco-Roman moralists would urge young adults to avoid.

So when Paul lists things like that, everyone in his culture would probably yawn and say, 'Paul, that sounds just like a lot of other lists of behaviors that adults encourage young people to stay away from.'

But what's amazing is what Paul says next. Paul takes the typical list and adds some other items. And these are NOT items about wild living or immature or excessive behavior on a Friday night. These items are all about things that were causing problems in the Galatian church.

So there'd be an incredible punch to these items. Paul's audience would be expecting the traditional items. But Paul adds to the list things like enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy.⁶ Thus these latter items would hit the Galatians like a huge punch.

These are works of the flesh that divide the Christian community and cause problems within the church. Paul has been encouraging the Galatians to love one another.

But enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy, break down loving relationships. They are destructive to bonds between Christians. They are a danger as much in the 21st century as they were in the 1st.

Thus we need to listen very carefully to Paul. Enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy are works of the flesh, and are not from God's Spirit.

C.S. Lewis talks about these latter works of the flesh as stemming from the worst human sin, pride. He writes,

"Pride which has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began. Other vices may sometimes bring people together: you may find good fellowship and jokes and friendliness among drunken people or unchaste people. But pride always means enmity—it is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God."⁷

⁵ Galatians 5:19-21

⁶ Galatians 5:20

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, ch. 8

Thus C.S. Lewis makes a distinction between sins of wild living and sins which cause division and enmity. These works of the flesh are a danger. In fact, he says, we can get too self-righteous and focus on condemning sins of excessively wild living, and miss the fact that we are in the grip of even more dangerous sins.

When we do so, Lewis writes, "The devil laughs." Why does the devil laugh? C.S. Lewis continues:

"(The devil) is perfectly content to see you becoming chaste and brave and self-controlled provided, all the time, he is setting up in you the Dictatorship of Pride—just as he would be quite content to see your (inflammation) cured if he was allowed, in return, to give you cancer. For Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense."⁸

In Galatians, Paul is warning us that the works of the flesh are destructive of love, and destructive of community. Thus Christians should turn away from such things and embrace God's ways.

Paul lists these works of the flesh. Then he says, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."⁹

That's a wonderful term Paul uses: "fruit of the Spirit." Works of the flesh come from us.

But think about fruit. Where does fruit come from? Forget about the produce aisle at Market Street or H.E.B. That's just one stage in the modern distribution chain for fruit.

Where does fruit really come from? It comes from God. It grows slowly. It is nurtured slowly but surely by God, until it ripens and comes into its fullness.

It's the same with spiritual fruit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are gifts from God. Those are fruits we have to allow him to nurture in us.

There's no instant gratification here. You don't plant an apple tree and expect to harvest apples the next week or the next month. It'll take years.

Even the world's best horticulturalist can't create fruit. You can only try to provide conditions in which fruit can be allowed to grow. And you try to avoid things that will prevent fruit from growing.

Seeking to grow in spiritual maturity, seeking to live by the Spirit, seeking to serve others, seeking to follow God... Those are the things that will slowly allow God to produce long-term fruits in our lives and in the life of the church.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, ch. 8

⁹ Galatians 5:22-23

Paul is encouraging us to grow into our identity as Christians.

Forsake the selfish ways of the flesh.

Be open to growth in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Live by the Spirit. Let the fruit of the Spirit grow in you.