

Inheriting the Kingdom

Another vegan meal?" asked Ada's son Bronte, standing beside her as she bent over the kitchen island, scooping the green pea spread onto whole grain bread.

"I'm just trying these sandwiches out," she replied as her husband, Dewain, walked in.

"Well, I'm hungry, woman!" Dewain said in jest.

Ada added tomatoes and romaine lettuce and handed a sandwich to her husband.

"Hmmm. Not bad," Dewain said in between chews.

"That's because you're hungry," retorted Bronte.

A few minutes later, Ada offered Bronte a sandwich.

"Well?" she asked.

"It's OK. But you know what's missing?" replied Bronte. "Meat!"

"We're having the Jordan's over next weekend, and they are vegan," said Dewain.

"Aren't they Christian?" asked Bronte. "The Bible doesn't condemn eating meat. Why would you go through all this trouble and money? Are you all thinking of going vegan?"

"No," smiled Ada. "We wanted to show them some love and hospitality."

"I told them we would be happy to fix a fabulous vegan dish for them," added Dewain. "We plan to spend more time with them. They seem like a wonderful couple."

"So, what is the menu for Saturday?" asked Bronte.

Ada, looking at her tablet, replied, "We will start off with roasted pepper lettuce cups. Then the entrée will be white bean fettuccine alfredo with peas and sundried tomatoes."

1. *What are things people do that are examples of giving into a selfish desire?*

2. *What can happen to individuals, churches, or communities if this is what characterizes them?*

3. *What does God want us to be characterized by instead?*

The Problem

Galatians 5:13-15, KJV

13 For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.

14 For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

15 But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another.

Galatians 5:13-15, NIV

¹³You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

How should we understand the relationship of a believer to the laws given by God to Moses? Paul addressed this issue in several of his letters, including the one he sent to the Galatians. Paul had planted churches in the Gentile region of Galatia during an earlier missionary journey. Since then, these churches had been infiltrated by Judaizers—Jewish Christians who believed that Gentile converts must follow Old Testament rules, particularly circumcision.

Paul noted that the intent of being released from an obligation to obey the law wasn't so that believers could do as they pleased. It was instead to replace it with a much better law, one often called the "law of love," which is fulfilled when someone lets one of Jesus' greatest commands be their guide, to "Love your neighbor as yourself" (vs. 14).

Instead of following this law, Paul says that some of the Galatians were "biting and devouring each other" (vs. 15). This image of wild animals savagely attacking and killing one another is a graphic picture of what happens when believers do not love and serve each other.

4. *What issue was Paul addressing in this passage?*
5. *What did Paul urge believers to use as their guide?*
6. *What seemed to be happening instead?*

The Conflict

Galatians 5:16-21, KJV

16 This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.

17 For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.

18 But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law.

19 Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness,

20 Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies,

21 Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:16-21, NIV

¹⁶So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and 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.

But how do we maintain a relationship with Jesus that results in loving others rather than in giving in to selfish desires? Paul said this is something that comes from walking by the Spirit. However, believers have a choice—they can choose to give in to the desires of the flesh, or they can decide to submit to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The concept of walking (vs. 16) is best understood as a decision to head down a certain path and the efforts made to stay on that path. Spiritually, it is a choice about who or what is the navigator. The decision a person makes in this

matter affects both their character and their relationships with others.

Paul noted that what the flesh desires and the Spirit demands are in conflict with each other. If we give in to selfish indulgences, then it is our flesh and not the Spirit that is driving us. The evidence of which one we are following is obvious when we do things that God says are immoral, ungodly, or self-centered. The law is beneficial at this point—it exposes our sin (Rom. 7:7) and lets us know we’re headed down the wrong path. The acts of the flesh Paul listed are both choices and traits. A person makes a deliberate choice to engage in these actions. But they begin to characterize that person if he or she continues to make that choice. Someone who persists in giving in to selfish indulgences can become consumed by those choices, and “not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21).

7. *What is the relationship between the Spirit and the flesh?*

8. *What are some indications that someone is giving into selfish indulgences?*

9. *What choice did Paul urge believers to make? Why is it important to make that choice?*

The Alternative

Galatians 5:22-26, KJV

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

24 And they that are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.

25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

26 Let us not be desirous of vain

Galatians 5:22-26, NIV

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

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

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

glory, provoking one another,
envying one another.

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

The alternative to giving in to the desires of the flesh is to walk by the Spirit. Paul contrasts the “acts of the flesh” with the “fruit of the Spirit.” Notice that the word “acts” is plural, while the word “fruit” is singular. Therefore the nine characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) should be seen as a collective unit. This means that it’s not OK for me to say something like “God gave me a lot of joy but not much self-control, and that’s just the way it is and always will be.” The fruit of the Spirit is not obtained by self-effort, but is what happens when we quit indulging in selfish desires and instead submit to the Spirit and what He’s prompting us to do.

There is no law that tells us how well we are doing in this respect. But the degree to which we are evidencing this fruit can be an indication of how effective we are in resisting the temptation to give in to our fleshly desires. The good news is that the more we learn to walk by the Spirit and to follow the law of love, the more our desires will change. Those who continue to live by the Spirit will in effect experience a crucifixion of the flesh, along with “its passions and desires” (vs. 24).

Paul ended by warning believers not to be conceited regarding this. Knowing that the fruit of the Spirit is not obtained by self-effort but instead is the result of walking by the Holy Spirit and keeping in step with Him should result in humility, not arrogance, envy, or pride. It should result in a commitment to let Jesus’ command to love others as we love ourselves be our guide.

10. *What changes can we expect to experience if we continue to walk in the Spirit?*

11. *Why did Paul use the term “fruit” and not “acts”?*

12. *What are some indications that we are on the right path?*

Let Love Be Your Umbrella

I find it interesting that Paul included the word *love* twice in today's passage. The first was in the context of one of Jesus' greatest commands, to love others as we love ourselves. The second was in the context of the fruit that comes from walking by the Spirit, love being one of nine characteristics listed.

It occurred to me as I thought about this that love is both a motivation for walking by the Spirit as well as a result of doing so. When love is the driving force in our relationships with others, it can be an umbrella that keeps us from being overwhelmed by the temptation to indulge in the selfish desires that can drench us. But it is also one of the qualities that result when this umbrella is put to good use.

I think about this often as I consider the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit and how well I'm doing in showing them. When it comes to joy, for example, do I bring the mood of others down because of my grumpiness, or do people look forward to having me around because of my positive demeanor? When someone does something that irritates me, do I respond with anger or frustration, or do I respond with patience and understanding? Am I critical of others, or do I treat them with kindness? Am I more likely to push my own ideas and convictions on others, or do I accept differences of opinion and avoid disparaging those who don't agree with me?

Am I letting love be my umbrella? Am I putting it to good use?

13. *Describe some situations where you experience conflicts between your fleshly desires and what the Holy Spirit is prompting you to do.*

14. *Why is love both a primary factor in determining how best to respond to situations like these as well as a fruit that can come from making the right choice?*

15. *What can you do so that you are less likely to engage in acts of the flesh and more likely to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit?*

One Step at a Time

Jesus is not asking us to change overnight. What He is asking us to do is to stay on the path He's led us to, to walk that path with Him, and to move forward on it one step at a time. As we move along that path, He wants us to resist the temptation to take a different route by giving into selfish indulgences and to let the law of love be our guide by loving others as we love ourselves.

► *What is one way you can let love be your guide this week in a situation where you could easily give into a selfish indulgence?*

KEY VERSE

For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.

—Galatians 5:13, KJV

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

—Galatians 5:13, NIV

DAILY BIBLE READINGS FOR NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

Week of August 7 through August 13

(See *The Quiet Hour* and *Cross* devotionals on these passages.)

- Mon.** Proverbs 2:1-11—God Guards the Paths of Justice.
- Tues.** Matthew 5:3-12—Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness.
- Wed.** Matthew 5:13-20—Righteousness in God's Kingdom.
- Thurs.** Isaiah 26:1-11—God Keeps the Steadfast in Peace.
- Fri.** Nehemiah 7:73-8:3, 5-6, 9-12—Rejoice in God's Word.
- Sat.** Romans 12:9-21—Rejoice in Hope.
- Sun.** Romans 14:10-23—Righteousness, Peace, and Joy.