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What Does Holiness Look Like?

Galatians 5:13-26

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We're in a series called "The Whole Life of Christ in Us". We should expect that the process of having the whole life of Christ taking shape within us will, at times, be uncomfortable, challenging, and difficult. Jesus described following him as taking up one's cross – in other words, taking up the implement of our own death, the death of our old self, our former self, and our former ways of looking at life and the world. *The Whole Life of Christ in Us* will not merely be a rubber stamp of what we already believed before we committed ourselves to being a Christ follower. In *John 6:66-67*, we hear, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." After many followers left due to his hard teaching, Jesus asked the twelve disciples, "Do you also want to leave?" highlighting the choice people have: to stay with Christ even when His teachings are difficult, or to walk away because they're angry or upset by something that challenges them.

Today, we're focusing on living **a virtuous life, or the holiness tradition**. In *1 Peter 1:15-16*, we're told, "***Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'***" One of the things that weighs heavily on me, in the times in which we're living, is **a lack of holiness and virtue**; that individuals and organizations, including churches, businesses, and political movements, can value **charisma over character**. This can lead to people having leadership and power who don't have the character or personal virtue to use it wisely and well for the common, greater good, but instead, use their power and influence to take advantage of – and even abuse – other people, or to enrich themselves.

Pastor James Emery White noted, on a recent podcast, that the internet prioritizes visual appeal and verbal ability over character and conduct. This makes it easier than ever for people to gain influence without the moral foundation to sustain it. It's especially disheartening when Christian leaders – authors, speakers, builders of large ministries – are later exposed for serious failures of character. It causes us to lament, whatever became of the virtue and holiness to which all Christ-followers are called?

**What does holiness look like?** If you took a walk through your neighborhood today, every yard would look the same. They're white, covered in snow. But take that same walk six months from now and the differences will be obvious. Some people invest time, care, and resources in their yard or garden, and it shows. Others do not, and nature simply does what it will. Different choices produce different outcomes. Roses and tomatoes require more devotion than if you want moss and dandelions.

In a similar way, the Bible describes **two vastly different ways of living**. *Psalm 1* contrasts the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. In *Matthew 7:13-14*, Jesus speaks of the narrow road that leads to life, and the wide road that leads to destruction. A third example is found in *Galatians 5*, which compares **life according to the flesh** (which is living self-indulgently) **and life according to the Spirit**. In the letters of Paul, the flesh and the Spirit are two realities that actively oppose each other. As with a garden, living by the Spirit requires greater devotion, time, and effort, but the resulting holiness and fruit of the Spirit that are produced are lovely and life enhancing. Paul says that each of us has the freedom to choose how we're going to live, and the results of that choice are easy to see in a person's life.

Listen to God's Word speaking to you. **Galatians 5:13-26:**

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. **For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'** If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. **Live by the Spirit**, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now **the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing**, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: **those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.** There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus

have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. **If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.** Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.”

When I hear these words, **I grieve the public devaluation of holiness, virtue, and character**, especially when measured against a standard as clear as *Galatians 5*. In *Galatians 5*, Paul gives us two lists, two grids by which we can evaluate a life, and whether it is ungodly or godly, unholy or holy, virtuous or lacking in virtue.

Paul does this by contrasting **living according to the flesh and living according to the spirit**. Paul’s contrast is stark. Works of the flesh include enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy. In contrast, the Fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those aren’t vague ideals. They’re observable habits, and we can ask ourselves, of the actions in these two lists, which more accurately describes my life? We can look at the words, behavior, and actions of any person, and compare them to these two lists, and it becomes clear where he or she falls.

What feels different, today, is a **loss of shame**. In Christian moral formation, shame is not humiliation — it’s the recognition that something is wrong. When shamelessness is rewarded with applause or power, the moral ecosystem collapses. We may say, “We live in a fallen world,” and that’s true. But when Christians celebrate behaviors the Bible calls the works of the flesh, something has gone wrong.

The danger isn’t just hypocrisy; it’s moral formation in reverse. When we repeatedly excuse or minimize conduct that isn’t holy and reflects the “works of the flesh,” we retrain our consciences. Over time, people stop seeing patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control as marks of strength at all, and they engage in and support “*idolatry, enmities, strife, quarrels, dissensions, factions,*” and other unholy behaviors Paul described. The fruit of the Spirit has never depended on Caesar. The early church did not overcome Rome by mirroring its vices, but by embodying a radically different way of being human — marked by the virtues of the fruit of the Spirit.

We can all ask ourselves, “**Am I seeking to live out these virtues? And do I expect them in others?**” **Would you rather live in a world dominated by the behaviors Paul describes as works of the flesh, or the fruit of the Spirit? Which are you encouraging in your life, habits, choices, and daily practice?**

There's a fundamental incompatibility between life determined by the flesh and life led by the Spirit of God, which is why, over the past four weeks, we've talked about the importance of living what we believe, being empowered by the Spirit, being centered on the Word, and praying without ceasing. Doing those things enables us to live a holy life. The way to overcome self-indulgence and the temptation to sin that's always lurking close at hand is to live by the Spirit. The opposition between selfishness and the Spirit is so sharp – Paul says, “*For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh*” (*Galatians 5:17*). If you picture them like two football teams, the desires of the one are bent on intercepting the desires of the other and causing frustration. Each is always seeking to thwart and overcome and defeat the other.

It's important to understand what Paul means by the “flesh” (Greek, *sarx*). He's not saying that physical things are evil. **He's saying that the desires of the flesh are not to be the standard by which we guide our lives.** Paul says, “*The acts of the flesh are obvious*”; they can't be hidden (*Galatians 5:19*). Some of them have to do with sexual immorality or a lack of sexual purity. Eight of the fifteen have to do with conflicts of one kind or another, and not managing those conflicts in a godly, mature, Biblical way. Though inward in origin, the works of the flesh manifest themselves in action noticeable in public.

Jesus said something similar in ***Mark 7:20-23***, when he shared that, “*It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.*” Paul issues a dire warning about living according to the flesh and having a life where these kinds of behaviors and actions are public and obvious: “***Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.***”

We choose daily, and even moment by moment, encounter by encounter, whether we will live “*according to the flesh*” or “*according to the Spirit*”. Paul says that to focus on the former is death; to focus on the latter is life. To walk by the Spirit requires following the guidance of the Spirit in all aspects of our life. We make hundreds of choices and decisions every day. The Holy Spirit is eager to act with power in the lives of people like you and me, and in the church, but we must give the Spirit the opportunity to lead us. If we do, the Spirit will lead us to love.

The fruit of the Spirit, like the works of the flesh, is also clear and unambiguous. They are the attitudes, behaviors, and actions one sees in the life of a person who is living by and led by the Spirit of God. **Notice how many of the virtues are marked by restraint and steadiness. Patience** is the quality of long-suffering toward those whose conduct may even be calculated to produce anger in us. **Faithfulness** is reliability in a world where we may often be disappointed by the lack reliability or faithfulness in someone else. **Gentleness** is the avoidance of unnecessary anger or rash selfish behavior. **Self-control** is the ability to discipline one's impulses and desires. These are qualities found in a spiritually mature person. Life in community is never easy, so those who are led by the Spirit will be helped by the Spirit to demonstrate these qualities, even when others do not.

It's in those circumstances that we find it most difficult to practice the fruit of the Spirit that we most need to demonstrate their presence in our life. In times of misunderstanding, disagreement, or conflict, if our behavior is marked by *"hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy,"* we're revealing to the world that there's more of the flesh than of the Spirit at work in our lives.

**In many ways, all the fruit of the Spirit are different manifestations of love. Love wills good for someone else and is concerned for the well-being of others and looks for ways to serve.** Some people mistakenly seem to believe that love means, "You must agree with and support everything I choose to do, and if you don't, you don't love me." When our understanding of love matures, we know that's not true. It's possible to love someone, care for someone, and want what's best for someone, without agreeing with all the decisions or choices someone is making or has made. Most parents and grandparents understand that. God is love; however, the fact that God loves us also means God has expectations for us that we can either meet or disappoint. God is forgiving, but that doesn't mean we're automatically forgiven for everything we do and say that's wrong; we need to acknowledge, confess, and repent of our sin.

It took Paul a long time to understand that the way he was living his life was not pleasing to God, and yet, God didn't give up on him – even when he was full of selfish ambition and self-righteousness. Thanks to an encounter with the risen Christ, Paul understood that he was disappointing and grieving the heart of God, and Paul

experienced and responded to God's love and began living a Spirit led, Christ exalting life. As with Paul, sometimes it takes something dramatic, or even painful, for a person to realize that they have been deceiving themselves and they haven't been aware of it.

At the end of *Galatians 5*, Paul returns to the contrast of flesh and Spirit, stating in *Galatians 5:24*, “*Those who belong to Christ Jesus [one of Paul’s expressions for Christians] have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*” That means we’re no longer at the mercy of our selfish passions and desires. They no longer guide or dominate our life. Then, in *Galatians 5:25*, Paul uses a term with a military origin, which some translations render “**keep in step with the Spirit**”. If you’ve ever seen soldiers marching together, you can envision what Paul is saying – we want our life, our choices, our behavior, to be in step with the Spirit of God.

All of what the Bible says about living according to the flesh (our own selfish desires) versus living according to the Spirit is a way of talking about **holiness**. ***Hebrews 12:14* exhorts, “Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.”**

In David McCullough’s book “John Adams”, writing of the difficult summer of 1776, it says, “Little that had happened through the summer had distressed Adams quite so much as the behavior of American troops, and especially reports that Massachusetts men had ‘behaved ill.’ ‘**Unfaithfulness**’ was something he could not abide, and in his spells of gloom he pondered whether the fault was in the times. John wrote to Abigail, ‘*Unfaithfulness in public stations is deeply criminal. But there is no encouragement to be faithful. Neither profit, nor honor, nor applause is acquired by faithfulness...There is too much corruption, even in this infant age of our Republic. **Virtue is not in fashion. Vice is not infamous.***’ One day, as he and Benjamin Rush sat together in Congress, Rush asked Adams in a whisper if he thought America would succeed in the struggle. ‘Yes,’ Adams replied, ‘*if we fear God and repent our sins.*’”<sup>1</sup>

One can ponder how our own lives – and how our culture and times – might be different, if millions of Christians began, today, to fear God, to repent of our sins, and to discipline ourselves to being fully led by the Spirit, producing a bumper crop of spiritual fruit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

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<sup>1</sup> David McCullough, *John Adams*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2001, 160.

gentleness, and self-control. May God grant that we will demonstrate and experience such fruit in abundance.

**Blessing: Romans 12:1-2**, *“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, **holy and acceptable to God**, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

### **Questions for Discussion or Reflection**

1. If you had to describe or define holiness, what would you say? What does holiness look like?
2. According to Paul, what results from living according to the flesh? How much relational damage is caused by living according to our selfish desires?
3. How would you describe what Paul means by “living by the Spirit, being led by the Spirit, and keeping in step with the Spirit” (*Galatians 5:16, 18, 25*)? What is the relational impact of living motivated and empowered by the Spirit?
4. How can you grow and cultivate the fruit of the Spirit more intentionally?
5. Of the nine different manifestations of love in the fruit of the Spirit in verses 22-23, which of these are strong for you? Identify one or two you desire to improve in.
6. What can you do to pursue a life of increasing holiness, in which the Spirit has greater influence and the influence of “the flesh” is diminishing?