

Spiritual Formation

Galatians 5:13-25

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If you have your Bible with you, you can turn to Galatians 5:13-25. As you're turning there, you may be mindful that we are continuing our sermon series Gospel GPS looking at pathways for spiritual formation. How does the gospel not only bring good news to us for salvation, but how is the gospel also the very foundation for how we grow and how we develop spiritually as people? Today, we're continuing our conversation a little bit in substance or topic as last week as we think about sanctification, how God grows us, how He changes us, how He works His act of justification, how He works out His loving salvation through Jesus, but also how He grows us. Today, we'll be looking more specifically at spiritual formation.

Read along with me and follow as I read from Galatians 5:13-25.

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

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 you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 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 keep in step with the Spirit. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me?

Our Father in heaven, would you add to the reading of your word? Would you by your Spirit help us to understand? Would you grow our affections, our very hearts and disposition to be shaped by your love? And may we walk in light of your mercy. Jesus, be with us. As I preach, help me do so. Lord, be with us as we hear from your word this morning. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

If I were to ask you the question how are you growing as a person, what kind of things would you say? Or maybe phrased this way, name one or two things in your life that you would like to develop. How would you respond to that? Some of us today may have something to say, and I hope that is true that we would be aware and take note of how we are growing. But others rarely if ever ask these types of questions either because we don't ask them of ourselves or there aren't people in our lives that are asking us those questions.

Today's passage is full, and I am not going to address everything in the text this morning. But the encouragement that we have this morning is for us to interact with it, to kind of let it hit you full-front, just slap you in the face. The encouragement is to consider it and take note of it, and to return to this text later today or even this week to look at it at a slower pace to explore the dynamics of your own heart.

What we are going to do today, my purpose today, is to track how Paul's flow of thought in these surrounding passages are really bringing to bear a crucial point. And that really is spiritual formation. So that's what we're going to talk about today, spiritual formation.

And first, we're going to look at how spiritual formation begins with freedom. Spiritual formation begins with freedom. This is Paul's broader point in the surrounding context. We see that Paul is talking about at least two regarding freedom. The first thing here, we can look at verse 1 and verse 13. Jesus is the source of this freedom. Verse 1, "For freedom Christ has set us free." And then in verse 13 where our text began today, "For you were called to freedom." The experience of freedom is found in Jesus Christ. This means through the good news, the good news that Jesus preached Himself, the good news that He lived out in His life, the very good news that made it possible through His crucifixion and His resurrection the very forgiveness of your sins as well as the very way you are reconciled to God.

Freedom is, therefore, salvation from sin. Yes. But freedom also releases us from the burden to perform, to perform either the works of the law that you're performing what scripture says you must do or manmade prescriptions that we might add to the word of God of what we think is wise or what we think is keeping the law of God. But we're doing this from a place not necessarily of a true free love of God, but rather it's actually in order to have a transaction, to have a way that we are seeking to earn God's love, earn God's favor based on our merit. And the freedom that Jesus is the source of is the exact opposite of that.

We likewise see how Paul is drawing our attention to the fact that love is the purpose of this freedom. Verse 14, "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Wayne mentioned some of this earlier in other texts. But we see even in Jesus's ministry how, when He was asked the greatest commandment, He was holding together in tension love for God and love for neighbor hang all the law and the prophets.

Now, I'll mention more of this in a few moments. But what we can look at in verses 19 through 21 is that what Paul's addressing is two different kinds of love. And here, we see how Paul is addressing an inflated self-love that's misapplied. It's a self-love that actually is cultivating the works of the flesh that we see there in that list whereas a realigned God-love is actually what is moving and cultivating the fruit of the Spirit.

Freedom. I don't have to explain it before our hearts are moved, right? Freedom is a word that strikes a very deep chord within us. And we're rightly moved by stories of physical chains being broken and freedom being claimed as well as emotional and psychological restraint that's being lifted and freedom being experienced. But here, it is incredibly important to look at what does it mean to experience true freedom? Freedom is not just living how we want to live, but rather it's also living in the way we ought to live. Instead of pursuing what we want to live in ways that just benefit ourselves and seek our own pleasures and delights, rather the freedom in how we ought to live frees us to truly glorify God as well as benefitting others.

Jesus Himself in John 8 says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Taken together in looking at freedom, we see that Jesus is the source, and His love is the purpose. And together, we can live this freedom out. We can live in a freedom that walks the path of spiritual formation.

This brings us to the second point of the day. Spiritual formation happens by the Holy Spirit. Now, we spoke a lot about that last week while looking at the crucible of formation, the process of sanctification, the process of God's work of grace in your life that is transforming you from the inside out more and more and more into the image of Christ. Sanctification is that work, and it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that works fully and works completely to cleanse you of all unrighteousness and bring you into the very presence of God.

Verse 22 draws our attention to the fruit that is born in us by the Spirit. To be born again to the truth of Jesus Christ is to live according to the Spirit. The Spirit equips us. The Spirit empowers us to live in light of what it means to be in that right relationship with the Lord. It's the very context of having a restored reconciled relationship to God that we live out by our practices, our customs, how we go about our daily interactions living and walking by His Spirit.

Because of this reality, Paul is encouraging believers just as he's encouraging us today to walk by the Spirit. And he's doing this by contrasting two opposing forces. He's looking at the works of the flesh contrasted with the fruit of the Spirit. And as he describes these two desires that are in opposition to each other, we see this long list. There are 15 examples of what he calls the work of the flesh. The text of course seems to suggest that this list is not exhaustive. Scholars love to discuss how these might be related to each other, how they might be categorized, how they might be made sense of, and wonder why Paul said this one and not that one, and what Paul is potentially not including but may be evident.

These kinds of things are important to discuss, but we can see at the very least that these examples that Paul gives for the works of the flesh certainly involve different types of categories. We see in them examples of sins of sensuality. We see things that are associated with false religion, the things that are seeking pathways in a relationship to God that God Himself has not shown. Likewise, we see these sins and patterns of interactions that well up from within us but certainly impact how we engage in our relationships particularly around conflict. And I encourage you to take time later today or this week to consider that.

But however you organize them and try to make sense of these particular examples, there is an important principle behind what Paul is getting at, and that is that when we are living not in accordance with the Spirit but in accordance to the desires of the flesh, we engage such things out of self-love. And this self-love really is out of things for self-protection, self-control, self-satisfaction. We can pursue that which brings about pleasure and security with whatever means we find necessary to get what we want or to get what we think we need that serves ourselves.

But Paul is contrasting a higher principle. He is showcasing the desires of the Spirit and how they work in opposition, that the very love of God and the love for others is what compels us. Paul even explains that freedom should through this love empower you to serve not yourself but to serve one another.

Author Pete Scazzero in his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* says, "Loving well is the goal of the Christian life." He writes how growing into emotional maturity is important and goes hand in hand with spiritual maturity. He's agreeing with Paul although he may be using different words. But the point that you see is that the fruit of the Spirit is not just lists of facts. It's not just steps to learn, to follow, and to do. Look at those fruit that we see. There are nine things listed, and likewise, it's safe to assume that there may be more. But Paul lists these nine things to showcase the fruit of the Spirit in opposition to the fruit of the flesh.

The fruit of the Spirit is the very character of God born in you to embody. It's not a list of facts to learn or steps to follow. It is the very character of God born in you to embody. The path of the old you is dying, and the new you is becoming more like Christ. It is breathing. It's breathing in the Spirit and letting Him expose those inner motives of your heart, taking note of where you still find weeds and entanglements around these things he calls works of the flesh and exhaling them. It's deep breathing in the Spirit and breathing out the desires of the flesh not because your desires are bad, but because your desires are misapplied and misaligned when they're in opposition to the Spirit.

Walking according to the works of our flesh hinders our spiritual formation. It undermines our freedom and seeks to live a self-focused and self-interested life. But walking by the Spirit empowers our spiritual formation. It properly aligns our freedoms, and it seeks to live a God-honoring and service focused life rather than a self-interested life.

This involves many things, but I'll mention two broad categories. It involves personal reflection. Spiritual vitality cultivates emotional health. Here are some examples. Personal reflection is a growing ability to observe your thoughts, take note of your emotions, and seek to understand those deeper desires that you have as you make connections to where they are in alignment with the Spirit and where they're in opposition and are rather desires of your flesh. Personal reflection is a growing practice of choosing that which is true and good because your thoughts and your emotions are actually aligned with those deeper desires that reflect the desires of the Spirit. You are walking in step. You are stewarding your thoughts and emotions and seeking to be in line with the will of the Lord.

Personal reflection and spiritual formation help you to grow in your desire and your ability to engage conflict in healthy ways. Who has conflict in their lives? Yeah, I see those hands. Conflict is everywhere. Stress is everywhere. The experiences that we have in our own families, the demands of our project and task lists, the things we want to do, the things we have to do, all of these things are vying for our attention.

The last suggestion with personal reflection is that there is a growing desire and ability to be in the presence of others. It's not introversion versus extroversion but just a desire and ability to have a ministry of presence, to be with others where they are in their stresses, where they are in their fears, perhaps even where they are in their sins. And this practice requires a daily application of the gospel to your life and relationships and a daily application of the gospel in your circumstances.

I want us to think about that in terms of a dance, the gospel dance. It's a three-step dance for those of you who may know some dancing. We can have a dance off later on, a little party hop, a little competition if you want. But as it lives out in your life, the gospel dance is a three-step waltz. It's not a two-step. It's not hopping on one foot as one step. It's a three-step process. It involves repenting, it involves believing, and it involves following. It doesn't matter which step you start with. You can start with following, just obeying and doing what the word tells you to do. But you have to then move into believing that Jesus is the source of that freedom, that the very righteousness of God is awarded and perfected and fulfilled in the work of Christ. And this moves you into repenting, moving away from that which is apart from God's heart and moving toward Him. Another example is you can believe and follow, but then it needs to involve repentance.

Here are some examples of how the gospel is undermined by not having a gospel three-step but a gospel-two step. If you merely believe and follow but not repent, then you fall into various forms of legalism. You rightly base your status with God in your faith in Christ, but if you just move to believe and obey, you cultivate pride that you're actually doing okay, that you're getting things done, and that you're pretty good.

Now, if you merely repent and follow but not believe, then you fall into various forms of moralism. Of course, it's good to see where you fall short, but apart from Jesus Christ, your standard becomes the standard. This cultivates pride if you're doing well, but it actually is overwhelming and cultivates despair if you're not meeting your own standard which you've tricked yourself into thinking is the Lord's standard.

Third, if you merely repent and believe but don't follow, then you fall into various forms of taking advantage of your freedom. You misapply the freedoms that you have in Christ. Now, of course, it's good that you are anchoring yourself in the atoning work of Christ for your salvation, and it's right to see where you fall short. But if you do not then take the third step and follow, you cultivate an attitude that lives off a presumption that God loves me, and He doesn't care how I live.

The gospel that truly empowers us by the Holy Spirit for spiritual formation takes all these steps into account. For you today and this week, the question really is where does this apply to you? How does this passage hit you in what you need from the Spirit this week? How do you need to gospel waltz this week? How do you repent and believe and follow?

Paul in this passage is showing us that living by the Spirit empowers you to freedom. This spiritual formation grows your confidence in God's unchanging grace and unending love. It directs your desire that you would actually be purposeful and want to pursue those things that entangle you not because you enjoy them, but because you actually want them rooted out so that you can experience more of God's freedom in Christ through His Spirit. You want the weeds pulled up so that the fruit may multiply.

This brings us to the last point this morning as we think about this text. Spiritual formation multiplies in community. Now this is a double edge because as we are given to the works of the flesh, that multiplies in community. As we are given to walking by the Spirit, that multiplies in community. As we personally reflect upon our own hearts and our own actions, as that gets played out in the hundreds of conversations, the dozens of emails, the Facebook posts, and all the ways that you may engage in real physical conversation or digital conversation, how do you embody the character of God and the love of Christ for the sake of another? Or rather are you being motivated by self-love and serving yourself?

The way this gets multiplied in community is incredibly important because we're not dancing by ourselves. Now, you have a responsibility. In some respect, yes, it is you and your relationship with the Lord. But the gospel that gives freedom that multiplies in community is not just for you. It's so that you can experience more and more of God but that that can be distributed out so that the flourishing and the beauty of God's character is on display, and we're experiencing peace in the community and not the divisions. We're experiencing self-sacrifice instead of self-service.

And these are the ways that Paul elsewhere in Ephesians 4 speaks about how you are to grow up into maturity. He talks about how that is building up the body, the image of the body, the ligaments, the joints, the tendons that hold everything together. This is being built up in love for the glory of God and for the benefit of His church and for that to be of benefit to the world.

As we come to the end of our time this morning, I end with where I began by asking these questions. Where are you growing? Where do you see the Spirit moving in you? Who is in your life who is either observing that and giving words to you that they see this growth? Words such as I see that you aren't where you were last year. Man, you have grown so much over the ten years that I've known you. And for that to be reciprocated and for people to either ask you that question or to bear witness of how they have seen it on display. This is the way that we not only see the splendor of God working in our lives, but we see that thriving in the community of faith.

Columbia Presbyterian Church, we're just one of the churches in this region, in the world, and across this land. We seek how these things might be embodying the character of God so that people may see the goodness and glory in who He is. This can happen in our community groups. This can happen in more intimate closer friendships. But the point is to cultivate it. Experience it when we're here in corporate worship.

We are about to partake of the Lord's supper which is a place where the Lord Jesus invites us. It is the place where His word of truth meets the demonstration of His sacrifice. His self-love is not for Himself only. He embodies what is true love and true freedom for the sake of His people. He pours His life out. We will break bread, and it represents Jesus's body for you, and the juice represents wine for His blood poured out.

As we come to this table, this is where spiritual formation happens. We see the grace of God being delivered to you. It's not that if you take it, it works. But it's for you to embrace and to receive Christ Jesus by His Spirit. It multiplies in your life, and it multiplies in our community as celebration. We rejoice in God working in our lives. We see that we become not only individuals, but we become a community that is spiritually formed that can happen because the reality of your life in Jesus Christ. It begins with the freedom won by Christ and the freedom experienced by abiding in Him. This spiritual formation happens by the Holy Spirit. And this formation is bearing fruit in you.

I know it can be exhausting. It can be frustrating. When you're dealing with yourself every day, you don't necessarily see those incremental changes. Although we long for more growth, the good news to you this day even as we come to the table is for you to receive the reality that the Holy Spirit is bearing fruit in your life. Paul is drawing our attention to take note of it, to be encouraged by that, to seek to allow that spiritual reality to be cultivated in our lives, and we'll see this spiritual formation multiply in our community. Let us be a people and a church that pursues spiritual formation that is anchored to Christ and that is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Let's pray.

Father in heaven, we give you thanks, and we give you praise for your word. Your word is truth, and by your word that is truth, it sanctifies. Help us to abide in your word. Help us to know your love in Christ for us to walk in accordance with your love. Grow us. Spiritually form us that we might abide in Christ and walk by the Spirit. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.