

Paul's Inspired Method of Sanctification and Spiritual Growth

Galatians 5:22-25; Romans 6:11-12

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One of the reasons for such frustration and confusion in growing and being sanctified in the Christian life is due to the various conflicting and erroneous schools of thought that have been propounded in Christian circles.

There are churches that teach that the Christian simply needs to yield all to Christ (by way of a passive yielding) in overcoming sin, but there is little or no emphasis on the hard work of exercising ourselves to godliness or running the race with agonizing self-control (for fear that such would introduce human effort into our growth in Christ). “Let go and let God.” For these churches, loving obedience and to the commandments of God and strenuous effort to follow Christ is viewed as legalism (they tend to be more antinomian in following the leading of the Spirit).

There are also churches that go to the opposite extreme and teach that growth in the Christian life is one of strict obedience to the commandments of God, but there is little or no emphasis on the inward work of God’s Spirit in powerfully transforming us from the inside out. These churches have an outward form of godliness, but deny the power of God’s Spirit working within (2 Timothy 3:5).

There are also churches that teach that growth in the Christian life occurs as a result of a crisis experience (a second work of grace, like a second conversion experience) in the life of the Christian (whether that experience be called “entire sanctification”, “full consecration”, or “baptism of the Holy Spirit”). According to this view, real Christian growth is not to be expected apart from this singular work of power at a particular point in the life of the Christian. Some churches in this category have also had a tendency to promote the idea that perfection (or near perfection) is attainable in this life despite the struggle that Paul faced with sin (Romans 7; Galatians 5:16-17).

Actually, these unbiblical views of sanctification will all lead to frustration, confusion, spiritual exhaustion, and even hopelessness. Paul rather gives to every Christian by inspiration of the Holy Spirit the true school of thought on growth and sanctification in the Christian life (Galatians 5:24-25). Paul would have every Christian to look back in faith to what Christ has already powerfully accomplished for us and in us in the past (in His death and resurrection and in our new birth) and apply those truths every day in our lives through the hard work of prayer, study of Scripture, and putting off the burdens that hinder us in our race. In other words, we might say, our growth in Christ is a matter of looking back in faith in order to walk in the present by the power of God’s Spirit. In our concluding sermon on the Fruit of the Spirit, let us hear and apply by faith the biblical model of overcoming sin and growing in the fruit of the Spirit day by day in the life of the Christian.

Our main points are these: (1) Our Sinful Passions and Lusts Have Been Crucified with Christ (Galatians 5:24); (2) As New Creatures in Christ, We Must Walk in the Present by the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).

I. Our Sinful Passions and Lusts Have Been Crucified with Christ (Galatians 5:24).

A. The Letter of Paul to the Galatians is a declaration of our liberty in Jesus Christ—not a liberty to do as we please, not a liberty to indulge the lusts of the flesh, but a liberty from the guilt of the law, a liberty from the curse and condemnation of the law, a liberty from the power of sin in ruling our lives, and a liberty to

please our Savior, the Lord Jesus, through loving obedience to His commandments.

1. There were in the churches of Galatia Jewish converts who had made a profession of faith in Christ, but who falsely maintained that in order to be right with God, Jews and Gentiles alike must keep the explicit dictates of the ceremonial and dietary law (circumcision, holy days, ceremonies, eat only clean rather than unclean food, etc.). In so doing, they were adding the necessity of their own obedience and righteousness to faith in Christ as that which makes one righteous in the sight of God. Paul in no uncertain terms declares that all those proclaiming such a gospel are not proclaiming the true gospel; for the gospel is the good news that only Christ's righteousness (in His active and passive obedience) is sufficient for believing sinners, not their own righteousness, love, or obedience (Galatians 1:6-9). And though Paul specifically in that context was addressing Jewish ceremonies, the same would equally apply to anyone seeking to be righteous before God on the basis of Christian ceremonies or commandments found in the New Testament. The principle is the same though the historical context may be different (justification comes not by our imperfect obedience, but by faith alone in Christ's perfect obedience alone).

2. Paul then moves beyond our once-and-for-all justification before God to our gradual and continual sanctification in our day-to-day Christian life in Galatians 5. For you see, dear ones, our liberty in Christ is not limited to freedom from guilt and condemnation, but is being realized in our growing into ever greater conformity to the image of Christ (which will be fully realized when we are glorified in heaven). Thus, in Galatians 5:13 Paul declares that our liberty in Christ is not a liberty to indulge the flesh (the sinful passions and desires within). That is the very bondage from which Christ delivered us in His sacrificial death and powerful resurrection.

3. But the daily experience that every Christian knows in the battle to grow into the likeness of Christ and to subdue the sins that would overwhelm him/her is the reality that we all face (Galatians 5:16-17). This very much reminds us of what Paul states in a very personal glimpse of the same struggle in his own Christian life (Romans 7:18-19). This battle within is evidenced on the one hand by the works of the flesh and its evil desires in Galatians 5:19-21 (*prasso*, continuously practice and without faith and repentance—that is not to say that it is acceptable to do the works of the flesh as long as it is once in a while) and on the other hand by the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 (fruit is in the singular, for all who are justified by faith alone possess the entire fruit that the Holy Spirit implants and grows—it is His fruit—He receives the glory).

4. Listen, dear ones. Paul in the Letter to the Galatians is not only declaring your liberty as one who is justified, but is also declaring your liberty as one who is being sanctified (and set apart from sin and unto holiness) as well. There is biblical hope in Jesus Christ that just as you have been legally delivered from the guilt and penalty of sin through the death and resurrection of Christ, so you have also been legally delivered from the power of sin through the death and resurrection of Christ, and your sanctification is assured because you have been regenerated, born again (the life of Jesus Christ—the DNA of Christ—has been implanted in you and is growing in you). You are no longer bond slaves to your sin (as you were before your conversion), therefore, live in the power of Christ's death and resurrection for you and walk in the power of the Holy Spirit in exercising yourself in godliness (running the race set before you with strenuous effort, for it is God who works within you both to will and to do His good pleasure—it is the life of Christ in the fruit of the Spirit that has been implanted within you—it is already yours—cultivate it through the tireless use of God's means of grace).

B. As Paul completes his list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, remember that this is not an exhaustive list of the fruit of the Spirit. What about the fear of the Lord, humility, hungering and thirsting for Christ, heavenly wisdom, courage, perseverance, etc.? These are also all comprehended under this list—whatever is needed to live a godly life is included as a fruit of God's Spirit graciously bestowed upon undeserving sinners.

C. After revealing that the way to overcome the works of the flesh is by growing the fruit of the Spirit (for without it one cannot be a Christian—for it is the life of Christ), Paul writes, “against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:23).

1. In other words, there is no law against such fruit implanted and grown by the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian; for this fruit is perfectly agreeable to the law of God, which is holy, just, good, and spiritual (according to Romans 7:12). In fact, the very end and goal to which the law of God points is this fruit (1 Timothy 1:5). For this fruit is the very life of Christ; this fruit is the DNA of Christ; this fruit is conformity to Christ.

2. Though the law of God cannot save us (it does not have the power to do so and we have not the power to keep it perfectly—it is the standard of God’s righteousness and not the power to save us—it’s the gospel that is the power unto salvation to everyone that believes), nevertheless the fruit of the Spirit mirrors the righteousness of God’s law, and as we grow in the fruit of the Spirit, we are growing in conformity to God’s righteous law (which Christ Himself fulfilled and kept for us). Though the works of the flesh are against the righteousness of God’s law, the fruit of the Spirit fulfills the righteousness of God’s law (Galatians 5:14).

3. Those that have and are growing in the fruit of the Spirit have nothing to fear from the condemning wrath of God’s law, for it is not a curse to us any longer, but is now in the hands of our loving, gracious Mediator who is the personal expression of the righteousness of that law which He fulfilled and to which we are being conformed and to which we will one day in heaven be fully conformed.

D. Now in Galatians 5:24, we come to the first of a two-pronged, Spirit empowered, and biblical means to overcome sin and to promote true spiritual growth in your life as a Christian. Whereas those unbiblical schools of thought to promote sanctification that I mentioned at the outset of the sermon are contrary to Scripture and lead to frustration, discouragement, and even despair (and I have experienced what many of you have experienced as well), what Paul now presents to us is far more valuable than gold—it is the Spirit-inspired means (in summary form) to overcome sin and to promote true spiritual growth.

1. **“And they that are Christ’s”**. These are they that belong to Christ because the Father gave them to Christ in the Covenant of Redemption before the world began, and Christ redeemed them in time in the Covenant of Grace (John 6:37-39). These that belong to Christ also evidence they are Christ’s by trusting alone in Christ for their justification and trusting, repenting, loving, and obeying the Lord as they grow in their sanctification, in running and finishing the race Christ has set before them.

2. “And they that are Christ’s **have crucified the flesh** (not the physical body, but the corrupt nature inherited from Adam) **with the affections** (or passions) **and lusts**.”

a. When were all of those who belong to Christ crucified? When Christ was crucified on the cross, because He represented us who believe in the Covenant of Grace, we were legally crucified with Christ, so that sin might no longer have a legal right to exercise dominion over us, and so that we might live a life pleasing and glorifying to Jesus Christ (Romans 6:1-2,6; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

b. This is not a legal fiction, just to make us feel better about our struggles with sin. **This is a legal fact, we were crucified with Christ, that sin might not have dominion over us.** Sadly, Christians either are ignorant of this truth or rather judge the reality of that truth by the sin they see in their lives and act as though it is not true, rather than beginning with the reality of their legal crucifixion with Christ. That which is legally accomplished is the basis and ground for our experiential victory over sin in our lives and growth in Christ. That is where Paul begins, and that is where we must begin if we are to have hope in overcoming sin in our lives and growing in the fruit of the Spirit.

c. By faith we are commanded by Paul (Romans 6:11) to legally account (or reckon) our sinful passions and desires to be crucified (hanging as a dead corpse on the cross) and to be dead (lying in the tomb). Dear ones, when we do not by faith legally account ourselves to be a dead corpse on the cross and

a corrupting body putrefying in a tomb with a huge rock blocking exit or entrance to it, we are in effect taking that dead corpse down from the cross and moving that great rock from the tomb to take that putrefying body of sin from out of the tomb and carrying it around on our back with us wherever we go, dragging it from one place to another.

d. Beloved, there is no sustained and consistent growth in the life of the Christian where this truth is not daily trusted to be a legal reality. It is like a criminal on death row being legally pardoned because another paid his penalty with his own life, and refusing to leave that solitary confinement in prison, living as if he were still bound, when he was legally set free. That is the first prong of this biblical means of growing in the Christian life and subduing the sinful passions and desires within. Look back in faith daily, for there is our victory over sin.

II. As New Creatures in Christ, We Must Walk in the Present by the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).

A. “**If we live in the Spirit**” or “**If we live by the Spirit**” (which I prefer, for it is **by** the grace and the power of the Holy Spirit that we live).

1. Paul having declared that we who belong to Christ are legally free and set at liberty from the evil affections and lusts of the flesh in Christ’s crucifixion and death, he now moves from death to life. He assumes those who have legally died have also legally been raised to new life when Christ was powerfully raised from the dead and have also been spiritually raised from the dead when they were regenerated by the Spirit of God (“If we live”). Thus, we who died with Christ live anew in two senses: **legally**, when Christ was raised from the dead we were raised with Him through our covenantal union with Him as He federally represented us (Romans 6:11-12); and **spiritually**, when the Holy Spirit made us a new creature in Christ (Ephesians 1:4-5).

2. If we continue only to look at our sinful lusts and desires, crying out to God over our sin, but not reckoning our death to sin to be legally real, and not reckoning our life in Christ to be legally and spiritually real, we will continue to walk about carrying that dead, corrupting, smelly corpse of sin with us on our shoulder—no wonder that so many Christians are so weighed down by the burden of sin—they will not look back in faith to what Christ has already accomplished (forgiveness of sin, yes—but death to sin, no—and new life to bearing the fruit of the Spirit in loving obedience to Christ’s commands, no). This would be like the widow of one of the sons of the prophets (in 2 Kings 4) who could not pay off the creditors who were demanding payment after the death of her husband, it would be like her refusing to believe the word of Elisha that God would multiply enough oil for her if she would reckon and account the promise to be true and refusing to bring into her house all of the jars and bottles she could find. What would have happened had she not believed and obeyed the word of the Lord? She would have either starved or been enslaved to her creditors. But she believed and lived. That is our problem so often as well. Christ has made full provision for us. He has deposited this unfathomable inheritance into our heavenly bank account, and we continue to walk about as if we were starving paupers (rather than children of the King) or worse as if we were still imprisoned convicts awaiting our death sentence (when the price has already been paid, and we have been set free by the death and resurrection of Christ). How my heart aches for you, dear struggling Christian that you might look back in faith to your legal death and resurrection in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

B. “**If we live in [or by] the Spirit, let us also walk in [or by] the Spirit.**”

1. This is the second prong of that biblical means to live a fruit life of godliness to the Lord Jesus Christ. The first biblical prong—look in faith to what Christ has already accomplished for you who belong to Him. The second biblical prong—apply that faith in practicing daily what is legally and spiritually true of you—look in faith moment by moment to your inheritance in Christ and walk by the power of the Holy Spirit in that renewed and resurrected life of Christ. Now this is the hard and strenuous work of not only faith but

practice—not only trust but also obeying—not only hearing the Word in faith but also applying the Word in loving obedience (James 1:22).

2. For the most part, this series on the Fruit of the Spirit has focused upon the second prong (though we have elaborated on a number of occasions the first prong). The Fruit of the Spirit was secured for us by the death and resurrection of Christ, and it has been implanted in those who belong to Christ. But the application of what was secured by Christ for us and was implanted in us always is the strenuous work of growing that fruit in our lives by the power of God who works within us both to will and to do His good pleasure (we are the ones who “will” and “do” the hard, agonizing, strenuous work of bearing fruit, but it is God who works that ability and power within us). This is not an excuse to be lazy and comfortable, but a reason to run the race all the more vigorously. Without Christ you can do nothing, but you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

Let us neither turn to the **Perfectionists**—who talk as if we can totally eradicate sin in this life. This is denying the reality of the battle we face and denying the truth of God that Christians continue to struggle with sin in this life.

But let us neither turn to the **Defeatists**—who talk a good talk, and yet only go half-heartedly to war against sin, never expecting they can actually see the resurrection power of Jesus Christ in overcoming sin in their life and growing in the fruit of the Holy Spirit, because they have lost sight of what Christ accomplished in His death and resurrection for His people. Dear ones, let us never forget: we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us!

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