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Sermon Series: *Peace, No. 2*

A Fruit of the Spirit

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Galatians 5:22-26 (NIV)

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

We're in the book of Galatians this morning, if you'd care to turn there with me in a Bible – the fifth chapter of Galatians.

Adam Clarke, a British theologian from the early 1800s once observed, "Nothing is so destructive to the peace of humanity – and to the peace of the soul – as religious disputes. When they prevail, religion, in general, has little place."

To put it another way, religion is the most effective source of conflict the world has ever known.

And that is so, so true, isn't it?

A store over in Nicholasville has a sign on its front door that says, "No Soliciting, No Politics, No Religion, No Fundraising, No Salesmen, No Exceptions."

We all know the reason for the sign: any one of those things has the potential to be divisive and cause conflict. But of *all* of those things, none has the potential to create more trouble than disputes over religion or faith – what you believe about God, which is not particularly surprising, since the stuff of faith involves those things we hold closest to our hearts.

When people question or challenge those, well, that hits close to home.

The fact is, conflicts between religions are major sources of upheaval in our world today, just as they have always been: Yahweh vs. Allah vs. Buddha vs. Brahman vs. humanism vs. government vs. self – and on and on and on.

But then, of course, on top of those conflicts *between* faiths, there are also conflicts *within* faiths, aren't there? What, precisely, you believe and how you live out your beliefs. What's right and what's wrong and how those rights and wrongs are determined. If disputes *between* religions don't get to you, disputes *within* religions will, and Christianity, unfortunately, is no stranger to that.

These days, there are divisions between Christians due to doctrinal issues. (Who was more correct: Chrysostom or Aquinas or Luther or Calvin or Arminius or Wesley?)

There are divisions between how people understand time's beginning and time's end. (What brand of creationist or evolutionist millennialist are you?)

There are divisions between people due to behavioral requirements. (Should Christians drink, smoke, dance, chew or go with girls or guys who do?)

And then there are plenty of other topics ripe for dispute:

Do you wear a mask or not?
Do you get a vaccine or not?
Styrofoam or paper plates?
A gasoline car or an electric car?
Chemo or immunotherapy?
Aspirin or essential oils?
Home or public school?
Liberal or conservative?
KJV or NIV or NLT?
Guitar or piano?
Hymns or choruses?
Paper or plastic?

These sorts of issues can be divisive enough on their own, even if speaking only about personal preferences. But when issues like these become *spiritualized* – when people try to make them essentially spiritual in nature by saying something like "God says you must choose" – well, the conflict which is created can make us lose our peace very quickly can't it?

Once again, Adam Clarke: "Nothing is so destructive to the peace of humanity – and to the peace of the soul – as religious disputes."

In response to this, some people tend to idealize the early church. They think that if we could get back to the way the early church was, we'd find some sort of utopia of peace.

But the truth is, tons of conflict existed in the early church. In fact, it's primarily because of early church disputes that we have a big chunk of the New Testament, and the Apostle Paul's letters especially – like this one to the church at Galatia.

Paul visited the area known as Galatia (which is today within the country of Turkey) during all three of his missionary journeys.

On his second visit, he found that false teachers had infiltrated the church there and succeeded in bringing confusion and division with teaching that was, as Paul describes in Galatians 1, directly subversive to the gospel and opposed to Christianity's fundamental truths (Gal. 1:6-9).

This letter that he writes to them addresses three of those issues.

The **first** is the authenticity of Paul's own apostleship, which the false teachers were calling into question.

The **second** is the sufficiency of faith in Jesus for full salvation, which they were also challenging by trying to convince the people that to be fully saved one had also to keep the law of Moses.

And then, the **third** issue has to do with Christian behavior, partly related to the legalistic keeping of the

law, but then also related to the flip-side of that: errant understandings of grace.

That third issue is what Paul is dealing with in our text today.

Paul is telling them that a person cannot find salvation in legalism, meaning the strict keeping of the Mosaic Law, but also to be careful not to slip into presumption upon grace or *antinomianism*, to use the theological word.

The false teachers were teaching *legalism*, which more or less says we have to earn our salvation.

That's wrong.

But it's easy to go too far and wind up in *antinomianism*, which says that, since we're saved by grace, basically anything goes.

That's why Paul is presenting here the difference between *Christian liberty*, which grace does bring (a freedom from having to dot all the i's and cross all the t's of the Mosaic Law), and *license*, which actually *presumes upon grace*.

This is like when Paul asks the Roman believers, who, having received Jesus' grace, were also wrestling with this issue, "*Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?*" And Paul answers, "*Absolutely not!*"¹

So then, what does constitute Christian behavior?

How is one to navigate between the law and lawlessness?

And what does that look like? What sorts of marks characterize Christ-followers?

Those are good questions, and Paul answers them by drawing a contrast between flesh and spirit, and specifically between the *works* of the flesh and the *fruit* of the spirit.

The first, works of the flesh, may promise much, but lead to death.

The second, the fruit of the Spirit, may seem unremarkable at first, but they lead to life.

Because of the fall in Eden, every person starts off in this condition Paul calls "the flesh." We are born into brokenness. We are born with frailties, ungodly desires, damaged feelings, and misunderstandings. And if those things are simply left to guide and control our lives, they will produce the sorts of things Paul lists back in verses 19 through 21 of Galatians 5, "*sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, rage, selfishness, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like.*"

Those are the works – the normal outcomes – of humanity's as-born state, and Paul clearly says (v. 21b), "*those who live like this will not inherit the Kingdom of Heaven,*" which is no real surprise, since this is not the sort of world or state of affairs that God wishes to create.

You see, in one way or another all of these behaviors are indicative of a soul that is longing for something to bring it peace – to make it complete. Which makes sense, you see? Because God made us for Himself, and we are

only complete and at peace when we find Him and embrace Him.

Until we do though, we search for something, *anything*, to fill what Pascal called, the "God-shaped void that exists in each of us."

All of these works that Paul mentions there in verses 19-21 are the results of that misdirected search. They never fulfill what we're looking for, and ultimately, they lead to death.

This is an inconvenient truth to our culture today, which actually embraces and even celebrates some of these practices. But to be faithful to Scripture, it's a truth that must be shared in loving concern.

Try as we might, we cannot *save* ourselves, we cannot *fulfill* ourselves, and we cannot *provide* for ourselves the inner peace we are born lacking. Our culture is trying desperately to do this, but even our best efforts will not accomplish it.

Nothing short of God Himself will do it.

Which is where the Good News comes in.

God has made the way to fulfillment, to joy – to *eirene*, which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *shalom*, which means an all-encompassing harmony and peace.

And here's the way:

You see, once someone admits they need forgiveness and they receive Jesus, the Savior, they begin to walk a new path – a path that involves God's Spirit living within us.

God's Spirit begins to speak to us about things that aren't right – things that need to be adjusted, that need to change in our lives. God's Spirit speaks to us about these works of the flesh, for example, that we may have been involved in on one level or another.

God's Spirit doesn't co-exist well with those sorts of behaviors. So, when we come to Christ, we begin to sense these feelings of "ought."

We ought not do this or that anymore.

Things we used to do and never thought a thing about: now, we get this strong sense that those things aren't right.

That's God talking to us, you see?

People say, "Hey, if you come to Jesus then you'll have peace." Well, yes, you'll be reconciled to God the Father if you come to Jesus.

But coming to Jesus also introduces this refining, transforming process of God's Spirit within us that does create conflict.

Now, if we'll go along with what His Spirit is saying, we'll have more and more and more peace.

But if we won't go along with God's Spirit's voice and direction, then we'll actually have more conflict within us.

That conflict comes when the Spirit says, "Do this," and we respond, "No."

So the way to peace, you see, is to always say, "Yes" to the Spirit's voice. The more we say, "Yes" to that

¹ Romans 6:1-2

voice within us, then the more room and leeway we give God's Spirit within us, and the more we change—the more we become like Jesus.

What does that mean? It means we no longer keep producing the works of mere flesh, you see, and instead in their place, we begin to produce, what Paul calls, the "fruit" of God's Spirit.

God's Spirit within us actually changes our *motives*—the *reasons* we do what we do. God's Spirit changes our *desires*—the things we *want* to do, and all of that results in changes to our *outward behaviors*.

God's Spirit transforms the Christ-follower from the inside out. He purifies the source of the spring, so the water that comes out is clean.

Instead of producing the works of the flesh, under the influence of the Spirit we begin to produce these characteristics that Paul gives us in his *second* list there in verse 22. Paul says, "*the fruit [the produce, if you will] of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*"

The contrast here can't really be overstated.

Those fifteen works of the flesh paint a stark picture of evil, but *these nine* are a catalog of grace that is beautiful and harmonious and attractive!

As opposed to the works of the *flesh*, these are the types of behaviors and attitudes which describe *precisely* the state of affairs that God *does* wish to create in the world, because these reflect His character and the character and tone of His Kingdom.

This is what the Spirit longs to do within every follower of Jesus.

Now, it's important to note this: God does all of this transformation and re-creation. We don't do it. God does the work.

At the same time though, it doesn't just happen automatically.

As with every work of God in life, there is some engagement required on our part.

We know that's the case here because of two things Paul says, the first being in verse 24 where he writes, "*Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*"

When we choose Jesus, we are choosing to do away with the works of the flesh in our life. No one can have both Jesus and sin. It's the way of Jesus or the way of the world. One or the other.

When we choose Jesus, we're repenting of the ways of the flesh—we're turning and walking in a different direction.

Receiving and following Jesus requires a choice on our part.

But then, Paul says, we have another choice to make. In verse 25 there, he writes, "*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*"

Now, we all know what it means to keep in step with someone. We watch what they're doing (how fast they're going, how they're walking and moving) and we choose to do as they do—we choose to match their gait.

We don't get out in front of them. We don't lag behind them. We stay right with them.

To do that, letting someone else set the pace, requires a choice on our part.

To do that with God's Spirit requires that same choice.

We are given God's Spirit when we receive Christ and His forgiveness, but to *wholly* receive—to *fully embrace* and *welcome* God's Spirit such that we commit ourselves to keep in step with Him, that's something more, you see?

That requires us to make a second choice. That requires our saying to God, "I realize I need Your Spirit to guide me and lead me into the kind of life that pleases you. So, here and now, I choose to be obedient to your Spirit's direction. I choose to keep in step with Your voice, because I want, and I want to want, *whatever you want for me.*"

That's deciding we're going to keep in step with God, which Paul says we must *choose* to do.

And so that begins another sort of journey, doesn't it?

The Spirit, then, will begin saying to us things (sometimes sort of out of the blue) like, "Why don't you stop doing this?" or, "How about you start doing that?" And each time He does, well, we have to make good on our *choice* to keep in step with Him.

If we say "Yes," to Him, then we keep in step.

If we say "No," then we don't keep in step, and when that happens, the work God is doing in our lives is hindered—slowed down, because we have gotten out of step with Him.

Every time we say "Yes" to what God's Spirit wants to do in us, we are saying, "I am confirming my choice to follow Jesus, and I'm confirming the choice I've made to be done with the works of the flesh and to produce, instead, the fruit of God's Spirit."

Every time we're tempted to do something that is not of the character of God, we choose either to give in to the temptation or be obedient to God's Spirit's voice.

We have to choose this way of life, you see, and we have to keep choosing the leading of God's Spirit, just as Jesus had to choose it.

The more we choose it, the more grace we enjoy, the more of God's character develops in us, and the easier it becomes to choose God's way.

But the opposite is true too: the more we choose *against* it, the easier it becomes to fall back into those patterns of the works of the flesh, and if we fall back long enough, that can cause us to fall right out of relationship with Jesus.

So God does all the transforming work—the burden of the job is all on Him.

But the choice to keep in step with Him: that's ours to make.

So, the moral of the story here is simply this: Peace is a fruit of the Spirit. It is a result of both the Holy Spirit's *presence* and of His *prevailing guidance* in our lives.

Peace is living in harmony with God, and that comes from, first, our choice to follow Jesus, and second, our choice to keep in step with God's Spirit.

If we reject God and His offer of forgiveness in Jesus, and if we reject His Spirit's voice and guidance – if we push God away like that, we will never know peace.

We will try all sorts of things – experiments and behaviors – to try to find peace, but nothing will ever be able to fill that void that only God can fill, and so we will only become more hurt and miserable and fearful and conflicted.

We will become like that thirsty person who drinks salt water to try to quench their thirst. It may look and even seem as though it could, but in the end, it just makes one thirstier.

The only, only way to peace with God and also with other believers is through our keeping in step with God's Holy Spirit.

Tom Wright says, "You know, often today, when people emphasize the need for love, patience, gentleness and the like, they usually mean that we just shouldn't mention the parts of Scripture and truth that we disagree on. At the same time, when people are passionate for the truth, they often allow that zeal to move them into anger, hostility, dissension and division, which are, ironically, the very works of the flesh that Paul talks against."

That blend of truth and love which Paul so often urged – and the peace that comes with it – can only happen through the power of, and by our keeping in step with, God's Spirit.

It's the reason there was so much conflict in the church in Galatia: people were not keeping in step with God's Spirit.

So, the question for us today is this:

If you've not yet chosen to follow Jesus, will you make that choice?

And, if you have chosen to follow Jesus, will you choose, now, to wholly receive, and to keep in step with, God's Spirit?

For the sake of pleasing God,
for the sake of a peaceful life,
for the sake of a peace-filled church,

for the sake of our witness to our world of what is possible through God's power,

Will you, today, stop trying to find peace in things that will never give it, and instead, choose to live by God's Spirit.

Maybe there's something specific He's talking to you about right now, some place in your life, maybe something brand new today – or, maybe there's some long-standing issue that you need to address today by saying to God, "Yes, I will do as you ask."

Listen, that's where peace is found. Peace is a fruit: a product of you and me consistently saying, "Sure, Lord, I'll do that – I'll do as You ask. I will keep in step with You."

Please, no matter what He's saying – no matter what He's asking, say "yes" to Him today, until every part of you – every single part or decision or plan that you know of, all that you're aware of – is given to Him.

Prayer: Father, we thank you, first, for the redeeming grace of Jesus and second, for the guidance and the help: this tremendous gift of Yours in the Holy Spirit. You've given us everything we need to have utter peace: with You, with ourselves, and frankly, as far as it applies to us, with everybody around us.

Lord, would You help us to not hold tightly to those things that You are trying to convince us need to be released to You. Would You help us to keep in step with Your Spirit. Would You help us to say yes to you at every turn. If there is just one person dealing with just one thing here today that they are trying to hold on to, but You are trying to set them free, would you do that, so that we may all know the Peace of Christ, the peace of saying "yes" to Your Spirit, the peace You designed for us to live in. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Closing Song: *Let Him Have His Way with Thee*

Benediction:

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will surely do it (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).