

To be human is to desire. It is to love. This has for centuries always been understood as a basic understanding of what it means to be human. This necessitates the question of what do we do with our desires? Do we obey them? Suppress them? Are all desires the same? For most of history, it was understood that our desires must be tamed and edited—that is, until around the Enlightenment. For reasons we don't have time to go into, there was a shift of authority that moved from external authorities to internal authority. This is what Charles Taylor called the "age of authenticity." Where now all authority, of right and wrong and good and bad, is located within my own preference and removed from the collective wisdom of generations of traditions.

Into this environment, you get a world built on the need to be "true to oneself." Or as was stated in Shakespeare's classic. "This above all: to thine own self be true" (*Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 3). Does anyone remember who said this line? A little while ago, I was reading a book and the author mentioned this line. I, too, had forgotten where it was from and who spoke the line. But what is problematic about this statement that we hold so dear is that the line was said by Polonius, who, in Shakespeare's play, is the fool! Polonius is the comedic relief in the play that is largely comedic because of his foolish speech.

And it is some variation of this line, whether it is "be true to yourself" or "you do you" or some other variation, that has become the rallying cry of the modern world. Before we consider this to be the problem of the younger generations, don't think that too quickly. In many respects, this is the very ethos of the American ideal. A country that is founded on the concept of freedom from any and all restraints so that we can simply be true to ourselves.

What has resulted is that this line, spoken by the fool in *Hamlet*, is continually being pushed to the core of what it means to be human in today's world. So how did we get to a place where a line spoken by the fool becomes a variation of the rallying cry of a generation?

Ultimately, this claim that is at the center of what it means to be human is simply a manner of dealing with our desires and our longings. This leads us to one of the core issues at the center of the human problem. What do we do with our desires? It would seem that today, unfettered desire is the gold standard of living, and to restrict any desire is an oppressive thing. In this environment, the Self becomes deity, authority, and the center of living.

Paul is going to join this centuries-old discussion about desire and will offer a perspective of the individual, which recognizes that if we are to live out of our identity in the gospel, we must learn to order our desires properly by walking with the Spirit. Turn with me to Galatians 5:13.

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh..." (Gal. 5:13a). Here we see Paul making a claim to the Galatian's freedom. Back at the beginning of this chapter, Paul made the initial call to freedom, "It is for freedom that Christ set us free." And now, he is expanding his discussion to look at how the Galatians may use their newfound freedom.

But before we jump in, we need to clarify an important term. Just as words in English can have multiple meanings, so can words in Greek. And here, the Greek word for flesh is one of those words. Sarkos = The Flesh: The Body/Physical Material, Ethnicity, Rebellious Human Nature (More than simply human nature—base desires). Peter would define "the flesh" as corrupt desire. Eugene Peterson would translate it as "The corruption that sin has introduced into our very appetites and instincts." We could define sarkos this way: Our fundamental sinful human drive for self-gratification above all else. Specifically, in the way it deals with pleasure, power, and recognition.

Paul's concern is that in the Galatians new found freedom through the gospel, they would indulge the flesh, feed that primal base desire that is aimed away from the things of God. Now, I believe that this part of us is actually not something that would be argued by a religious or non-religious person. That there is something deep within us that desires. All agree that deep within us is some form of primal drive, something that ultimately cannot be ignored. This is part and parcel of the human experience. To be human is to desire.

If this text had a thesis statement, this verse would be it. Because what Paul develops in the rest of this chapter is the tension between "the flesh" and "the Spirit." What Paul understands is that within us is a hierarchy of desires, some good and some bad. Both are organized by either the flesh or the Spirit. The task Paul is calling us to is to order them by the Spirit.

Now, I think the point is this, across the ideological spectrum, we all agree that we have a hierarchy of desires that at some point we must learn to self-edit, organize, order, tame, etc. If we considered how we normally order our desires on a spectrum, the spectrum would run between these two axis: suppression of all desire and indulgence of all desire.

Suppression of all desire tends to happen when desire itself is repressed, and the very concept of desire is considered to be evil or bad. This flattens all desire to a bad thing that must be avoided. But this fails to recognize the God-given beauty in desire that we are, in fact, meant to experience joy and pleasure.

Licentiousness and indulgence of all desire tends to happen when we believe that all desire is a good thing. And that to infringe on satiating any desire is not just wrong but an affront to what it means to be human. This fails because it doesn't recognize that not all desires are good desires.

Thus, Paul is wrestling with the Galatian believers communicating that in our freedom, we now have the opportunity to point our desires toward union with Christ and become people of love. Or, we have the opportunity to point that freedom toward the flesh and indulge only our base desires. This brings us back to the advice of Shakespeare's fool, "To thine own self be true!" and our modern conception that all desire is a good desire. Clearly, this hasn't always been the way to understand desire because Paul is explicitly contradicting this here.

Prior to the Enlightenment, the West primarily understood desire and the human condition through the lens of Augustine, who leaned into the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus. Augustine was an African theologian and philosopher from the 4th century who has shaped much of our theological heritage in his wake.

His understanding of the human problem was that it was a problem of disordered loves. To summarize much of his thinking and work: As image-bearers of God, we are created in love and by love. We are created to be lovers first and rational thinkers second. This is profoundly different than the way our modern world understands this conception of the human. Since the Enlightenment, we have inverted this system believing we are rational thinking things before we are lovers. As Descartes said, "I think therefore I am." (Cognito, ergo sum). More on that in a second. This is where Augustine is helpful to us all. Augustine says that the problem isn't that we don't love or don't love enough. The problem is that we love the wrong things in the wrong order.

It is not a problem to love your dog; that is actually a good thing. But if you love your dog more than you love your spouse or your children, that will wreak havoc on your life. It is not a problem to love your job. But if you love your job more than God, that will wreak havoc on your life. The problem is that our loves, our desires, are disordered. And when we organize our lives or our societies around disordered loves, we create and perpetuate systems that cause harm to ourselves, others, and the world. Our disordered loves are largely due to "the flesh," the manner in which our desires are malformed.

That leads us to continue in Paul's thinking. "...rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (13a-15). The Law was a temporary concession that enabled us to direct our desires toward God's ideal. It was a means of properly ordering our loves. And so, after so much of the letter, Paul breaks down the need for the law. Paul doesn't want his readers to think it is a flippant dismissal of the law; rather, the law that could never liberate us is pointing us to that which is proper.

Paul's argument is that if you seek to love your neighbor as yourself, the law is fulfilled. This is the summary of the Torah, of the law, is that we would love our neighbor as ourselves. You can't help but hear the echo

of Jesus' teachings here either. Clearly Paul is evoking Jesus' response to the greatest commandment.

As we read this, it can be easy to assume this discussion about love appears out of nowhere. It seems at face value to be a tangent at best. But that is not how Paul teaches. Here's the connection, the flesh is anti-love. The flesh is aimed inward at the self. It is love and desire turned in on itself. In the teachings of the New Testament, love is not a feeling; it is not an emotion. It is a decision of the will. The general understanding of the love in our world is that of emotion, romance, consumption, etc. But that is not love; that is most often lust.

Love is a decision of the will. A decision to will the good of the other. It is something you can command. Love is to put the good of another ahead of your own. This is the command of love. If love is an emotion, you cannot command an emotion. And our flesh, our base, primal desire is aimed against that. It repels at the idea of elevating the good of another above our own. Thus, we have to reorient ourselves and our desires to be aimed at something greater.

This takes time; it takes effort; it takes decades, if not a lifetime, to tame. We have to break free from the tyranny of the now if we are going to understand how to actually shape our loves and longings into the way of Jesus. Spiritual formation is not a next week thing; it is the trajectory of a life aimed toward union with Christ. The question then is, how do we navigate these desires? How do we order our loves properly so that we become more and more a person of love in Union with Christ? "*So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh*" (v. 16).

Paul's one-line summary of spiritual formation toward becoming more Christlike and navigating our complex desires is by "walking" by the Spirit. Paul will unpack this more and more in the coming verses, but in one summary, it is to locate our living and walking with the Spirit. Notice how active the language is here. It is not a passive thing, but rather we "walk" or "live" with the Spirit. It is a consistent, perpetual, time-again and time-again practice of finding our lives wrapped up in the Spirit.

In order for us to live in tune with God's leading of a life aimed toward "life and life to the full," we must learn to "walk with the Spirit." And this means we take up a new form of living. A new lifestyle that organizes who we are around being in communion with God and the Spirit. These are basic transformational-type things. If I want to be a runner, I have to take up the lifestyle of a runner. I will have to change the way I eat, the way I sleep and rest, the manner in which I exercise; everything will be in some way reorganized around becoming a runner.

The same is true of us learning to "live by the Spirit." We can get so down on effort and so afraid of "earning our salvation" that we throw out any effort to the spiritual life and just flippantly hope that we change. But that is wrong. As Dallas Willard once wrote in *The Great Omission*, "Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning."

It is by faith alone that we are saved, but Paul here is talking about spiritual formation and growth; this will require our effort in cooperation

with the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that does the transformation, but we must cooperate with the Spirit. Because here is why effort is necessary in ordering our desires.

For 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. vv. 17-18

Paul identifies the tension that we are feeling. The flesh, those primal desires for pleasure and that which is in rebellion to God, is contrary to the Spirit—our deepest desires. There are literally two sets of desires that are in contradiction to one another. Each angled at disrupting the other.

This is why the advice “to thine own self be true” is horrible advice, because we are all a mixed bag of desires that are in conflict with one another. And Paul goes so far as to say, “you are not to do whatever you want.” Is this not the most contrary command that Paul could give to a modern secular American?!

This is utterly offensive to our world if we were told this in a context other than the church setting. I would guess that if anyone came up to you at any point this week and just said, “You are not to do whatever you want.” You, if you are anything like me, would be defensive and offended right away.

We have to go one layer deeper again with our understanding of desire. And here are why these desires are so in conflict with one another. Our deepest desire is not always our strongest desire. This is true in a thousand different ways: We want to be in shape, but we want to eat whatever we want. We want to be faithful to our spouse, but we want to center our life around our own desires. We want to be like Christ, but we want to live for ourselves. We want to have a life of prayer, but we also want to stay up and binge a show every night before bed.

The tension in these desires is that they are both authentic to who we are. So if we are to navigate these desires and be led into our deepest desire, we must have some manner of ordering these desires, and authenticity cannot be the criterion because that does nothing to resolve this tension.

I think we can all understand this pretty easily. In the heat of any given moment, many times, all we can think about and feel is the desire to sin. But because as followers of Jesus, our orientation has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, our deepest desire genuinely is to honor God with our life and body and then love our neighbors as well. But these deepest desires are sabotaged by our surface-level “fleshly” desires that time and again are actually our “strongest” desires.

And then, in verse 18, Paul says, “*if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*” The law cannot liberate us from our falsely ordered desires. But what the law can do is point us to the good desires. This is important! Because again, the law is not a bad thing; it was a temporary thing for a certain period of time. The Psalms are filled with moments in which the author raves about the beauty of the law because it can point us to the good. But you cannot, no matter how hard republicans

or democrats try toward their own political aim, you cannot legislate a change of heart. But the Spirit can, in fact, transform the heart. So if you are led by the Spirit, the law no longer is necessary.

Now, Paul will transition to describe and define the product of a life lived according to each set of desires: Organizing our lives around the flesh and, in contrast, if we order our lives around walking with the Spirit.

A Life Ordered by the Flesh

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

Paul is very pragmatic here. A life ordered around the flesh is a life that results in this list. And if we are honest, this pretty much reads like our world today, doesn't it?

Sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery—the sexual malaise that is our modern world. Idolatry and witchcraft—the litany of idol pursuits in an effort to bend the world toward us. Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy—social media, politics, consumerism, any sort of public dialogue. Drunkenness, orgies, and the like—Netflix and HBO Max, etc. Paul is saying that if you launch the trajectory of living a life solely based on the desires and impulses of the flesh, this is the life you will reap.

Paul closes this bluntly, “...those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Remember, “inheriting the kingdom of God” is not about going to heaven when you die, as is often the interpretation. No. The Kingdom of God is already here. It is present and available. This is the gospel announcement. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated, and we have the opportunity right now to live into that reality. But a life ordered around the flesh will cause that Kingdom of God space to retract away from you. Because the kingdom of God is ordered by a different reality that is here now, that is not the kingdom of the flesh. Like oil and water separate by their nature, so too, the kingdom of the flesh and the kingdom of God separate by their essence.

A Life Ordered by the Spirit

But another way is offered, the way of life ordered by the Spirit. Read on with me in verses 22-23.

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

If you follow the work of the Spirit and orient your entire life to connect with and live from the Spirit, what results is a life as described here.

If we allow the Spirit to be that which permeates our lives, and we organize the whole of what we do around the Spirit's leading, what will become true of our community and us is that we will inherit a real-time living into the Kingdom of God marked by love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

This is a beautiful way of life that is on offer for us today. In many ways, it is the exact opposite of what the world has on offer for us. This is the list that I pray is becoming true in my life and our life as a community. This is the trajectory of life led by the Spirit. What a beautiful invitation that is before us. What a beautiful opportunity for us to reorganize our life around this reality.

We experience the Kingdom of God when we walk by the Spirit. So how do we do this? What does it mean practically to organize our life around "walking with the Spirit"? Because if we stop the conversation here, it is all too common to allow it to devolve into romantic language that doesn't actually alter anything about our daily living.

Putting it to Practice

Well, Paul doesn't end here either. Let's read on to what he says we are to do in the final two verses.

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. vv. 24-26

For those of us who call ourselves Christians, those who have decided to make Jesus the anchor point of our lives... "we have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." This is Paul's claim. This is right in line with the first thing Jesus said if we are to follow him, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.

And this is in direct opposition to the ethos of our world that we talked about at the top end. The command is not, "to thine own self be true." Jesus' command is to take up a cross and die to yourself, crucify the flesh, not obey its every impulse. If we are to "live by the Spirit," we must "keep in step with the Spirit." This is how we crucify the flesh, by the slow life's work of continuing to keep in step with the Spirit. Notice that there are four verbs in this passage on how we go about living by the Spirit: (16-Walk by the Spirit, 18-Led by the Spirit, 25-Live by the Spirit, 25-Keep in step with the Spirit)

This is the work of the apprentice of Jesus. This is the work of how we crucify and kill off our flesh. Or, in the words of Augustine, how we properly order our desires. Jesus is after the reorientation of our loves and our longings. In discipling or apprenticing under Jesus, we slowly take on a lifestyle that is akin to the one of Jesus. And by that, the Spirit transforms our deepest longings.

Listen to what philosopher James K. A. Smith says,

Jesus is a teacher who doesn't just inform our intellect but forms our very loves. He isn't content to simply deposit new ideas into your mind; he is after nothing less than your wants, your loves, your longings.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

As followers of Jesus, who have been reborn into the life of Jesus, we have access to the Spirit's ability to transform us. This is work that the church has been doing for centuries. And the primary way that the church has navigated opening themselves up to the work of the Spirit and being led by the Spirit is through the classic spiritual disciplines. These are practical, time-tested ways that we can open our lives up to the work of the Spirit and slowly crucify our flesh.

Things like: Sabbath, silence, prayer, Scripture, slowing, fasting, community, study, etc. The practice of crucifying the flesh is often mundane, slow work. The disciplines I've just listed are not always the most exciting things to process. But it is in the mundane everyday-ness of following Jesus that we slowly crucify our flesh. It looks much more like a reorientation of habits. It is the slow work of a thousand small decisions that slowly starve our flesh and create space, over time, that opens our lives up more and more to the Spirit.

But the first step, and often the daily step in crucifying the flesh, is to begin through confession. In naming and confessing our own complicity in partnering with the flesh, we expose the flesh to the light, and it begins to shrivel. You cannot fix what you don't recognize as broken.

So what I want to do to close is lead us in a prayer of confession. This prayer is taken from the "Book of Common Prayer," which is a resource the Church has developed over centuries to help aid in our discipleship and prayer life with God. Personally, this is a prayer that I pray through every morning as I begin my days with God. As I mentioned, it is but a starting step. It is not the whole solution, but it is a start. A life marked by confession exposes our flesh and gives space for the Spirit to enter into our lives, beginning out of a recognition of our own necessity for something greater.

Prayer of Confession

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.

We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws.

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace, there is no health in us.

O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults.

Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy Name. Amen.

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