

## “The Flesh and the Spirit”

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*Galatians 5:16–26 (ESV)*

<sup>16</sup> *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.*  
<sup>17</sup> *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.* <sup>18</sup> *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.* <sup>19</sup> *Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,* <sup>20</sup> *idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,* <sup>21</sup> *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.* <sup>22</sup> *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* <sup>23</sup> *gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.* <sup>24</sup> *And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

<sup>25</sup> *If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.* <sup>26</sup> *Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.*<sup>1</sup>

If you were not a Christian, and you heard the gospel message—the good news that we can be reconciled to God not because of our works, but because of what Jesus has done—I imagine you would have some questions. You might ask, “What’s it like to be a Christian?” You might wonder if being a Christian is an easy or a hard thing to do. You might wonder how your life would improve if you became a Christian.

You might also have another question, if you’re not a Christian and you heard the gospel message: “How do you know if you’re actually a Christian?” After all, it would appear that becoming a Christian is something that is hard to measure. As we have studied the book of Galatians, I have said repeatedly that we become Christians not by anything we do. We don’t have to perform religious rites in order to have a relationship with God. We don’t have to be baptized or say a particular set of words to be saved from our sins. We don’t have to go to church so many times a year, or give a certain amount, or pray a certain number of prayers in order to be God’s children. We become Christians through faith. It’s a supernatural act that God performs in us, to cause us to agree with him. When we become Christians, we agree with God that he is the ultimate authority, the Creator of the universe, and the very reason why we exist. We agree with God that we have gone our own way, ignoring him and rebelling against him. We agree with

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

God that Jesus is who the Bible says he is: the Son of God, the Messiah, who lived a perfect life and died for our sins. We agree that the only way we can be forgiven by God for our sins and credited with righteousness in his eyes is to put our trust in Jesus.

And that's where the question may come. We understand what it looks like when someone is baptized, or when someone confesses sin to a priest. We understand what it looks like when someone says a prayer, or performs some other action. But faith isn't something that we see.

Some people do have very radical conversions. You hear stories of this from time to time. Someone comes to believe in Jesus and instantly they're healed of a drug or alcohol addiction. But my guess is that for most of us, our conversions were pretty quiet. We slowly and quietly came to a point of believing in Jesus. We might not have been overwhelmed with emotion. We might not have felt some kind of supernatural feeling. But we came to a place of trusting God and handing our lives over to him.

In today's passage, we're going to see that the Christian life isn't easy. In fact, in some ways, it becomes harder. When we become Christians, we enter into conflict. God starts the process of changing us, and that means there's a wrestling match between our old selves and our new selves. The old gives way, but not without a fight.

This passage also gives us a sense of how we know we're Christians. If we're united to Christ by faith, and if we have the Holy Spirit inside of us, we'll start to see change. Our desires will change. Our character will change. Eventually, our behaviors will change, too. This growth shows us that we will inherit the kingdom of God.

So let's start to look at this passage. We'll begin by looking at Galatians 5:16-18:

<sup>16</sup> But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Paul has already mentioned the Holy Spirit a few times in this letter. He said, at the beginning of chapter 3, that the Spirit was received by faith, not by "works of the law" (v. 2). That means that God didn't give them the Holy Spirit because they were good, or because they obeyed God. God decided to give them the Spirit. And their Christian lives began with the Spirit (v. 3). Paul also said that God sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts, so that we cry out to him as our Father (4:6).

And he said that it is through the Spirit, by faith, that we wait for the hope of righteousness (5:5), which is the expectation that when Jesus returns and judges the world, God will find us to be righteous.

So the Christian life is, from start to finish, a work of the Holy Spirit. He is the third person of the Trinity. He's not an impersonal force. He's God. He tends to be the more transparent member of the Trinity. Literally, he is spirit, so we can't see him. But he's also transparent in the sense that he doesn't draw a lot of attention to himself. Jesus said of the Spirit, "He will glorify me" (John 16:14). That means that part of the Holy Spirit's work is to point people to Jesus. Without the work of the Spirit within us, we wouldn't believe Jesus and confess that he is Lord. In another one of his letters, Paul says, "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3).

Jesus himself said that in order to even see the kingdom of God, a person had to be born again of the Spirit. When Jesus talked to Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, he said these words in John 3:3-8:

<sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

I think what Jesus meant is that you can't even understand that God is King unless the Holy Spirit first causes you to be a new type of person. The theological word is regeneration. Unless you are a new creation, or born again, or regenerated, you can't even see the kingdom, let alone enter into. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, and, like the wind, he cannot be controlled. In fact, since the same Greek word<sup>2</sup> can mean "wind" or "spirit," Jesus is making a bit of wordplay.

I bring this up because it's important to understand two things that the Bible teaches: One, we can't control God. He is going to do what he wants to do. If he wants to produce good fruit in us, he's going to do it. Two, we must do all that we can do to make sure we're walking in step with God. The Bible teaches that God is sovereign, which means he reigns over everything

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<sup>2</sup> Πνεῦμα (*pneuma*).

and he even controls everything. But the Bible also teaches that we're responsible. That's why Paul can write, in his letter to the Philippians, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12b-13). The only way that we can "work out," or exercise, our salvation, is because God works in us. There's a tension here: we can only follow Jesus if the Spirit first works in us, yet we're told that we are supposed to do all we can to submit to the Spirit's work.

Paul tells us here, in Galatians 5, that we're supposed to "walk by the Spirit." How do we do that? If the Spirit is like the wind, and blows wherever he wills, how can we walk by the Spirit? Well, we can't control how the wind blows, but we can make sure we're in the boat and we have our sails up. And if you're a Christian, you can make sure that you're reading your Bible, praying, worshiping with other Christians, and doing everything else that God has told us to do as his children. These things don't save us, but they are the means that God has chosen to help us grow closer to him. We may not always feel like doing these things, but as we do, God uses them to cause us to grow.

Paul says that if we walk by the Spirit, the result will be that we won't "gratify the desires of the flesh." Here, the flesh doesn't mean "the body." Sometimes, the word is used in the Bible that way (as in 1 John 4:2). But here Paul means "our sinful nature." And that's important to know as we go through this passage. The body isn't inherently bad. When God made the world, he called it good. As Christians, we don't have to deny our bodies, or pretend like all physical pleasures are evil. The problem is our desires.

We might say that "the flesh" represents our first birth. Our bodies aren't inherently bad, but we are born with a sinful nature. We have disordered desires. And on the other hand, "the Spirit" represents our second birth, when we are made into new people through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

That's what Paul is getting at in verse 17. There are two types of desires, one that comes from our sinful nature, and the other that comes from the Spirit. These are waging war within us. When we become Christians, things don't immediately get easier. In fact, things sometimes get harder. We enter into a spiritual conflict that we didn't even know existed. When people aren't Christians, they don't always feel ill at ease. They don't view themselves as sinners. But when

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<sup>3</sup> I owe this observation to John Stott, *The Message of Galatians*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 146.

you come to realize the holiness of God and the depth of your own sin, you start to see this spiritual battle.

This conflict shows that we are not autonomous. We're not neutral. We're led by our desires. And the process of having the old desires driven out by new ones explains why the Christian life can be a real struggle.

This conflict also shows that we are what we desire. This is really another way of saying our identity is bound up in what we worship. We are desiring creatures and we will either desire that which is good or we'll desire that which is sinful. We all want something. What do you want? Do you want what God wants? Or do you want something that God doesn't want for you? Either way, we will desire something, and our desires will master us. They will own us. If we desire the things of God, we will find freedom and life. If we desire things that are contrary to God's will, we will be enslaved and we will find death.

That's what Paul indicates in Romans 8:5-8:

<sup>5</sup> For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. <sup>7</sup> For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. <sup>8</sup> Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

The good news is that if you are led by the Spirit, as Paul writes in verse 18, you are no longer under the law. That means you are no longer trying to earn righteousness and God's favor through obedience to the law. You also are no longer under the curse of the law for your disobedience. As Paul has made clear, if we try to gain a righteous standing through observing the law, we would fail. But if we have the Spirit, we will receive an inheritance as God's children. We'll receive all his blessings: adoption as his children, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life in a new world. Christians are no longer bound by the law of the old covenant; they are members of the new covenant, which was initiated by Jesus when he died on the cross. And members of the new covenant have a relationship with God, they have forgiveness of sins, and they have God's moral law written on their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34).

Then Paul moves on to present us with a vice list and a virtue list. These types of lists were rather common in the Greco-Roman world and they appear in different places in the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> The vices are the “works of the flesh.” We read about these in verses 19-21:

<sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,  
<sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, <sup>21</sup> 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.

When Paul says these works are evident, he means that his original audience, the Galatians, would have known all about them. They would have seen these things all around them, and there’s a good chance they participated in these things.

Paul lists fifteen specific things in this list of vices. I don’t have time to examine each one carefully, but it’s interesting to note that they come in groups. The first group deals with sex, the second group with religion, the third with relationships, and the fourth with substance abuse. The first three, the ones that have to do with sex, are sexual immorality, impurity, and sensuality. Sexual immorality describes any sexual activity outside of marriage. I talked about this in my sermon called “Jesus and Sex.”<sup>5</sup> The word “impurity” is usually linked to sexual immorality (Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5). It speaks to the defiling nature of sexual sin. “Sensuality” or “debauchery” (NIV) refers to complete lack of self-restraint. You might want to think of Hugh Hefner here.

Then there are two items related to false worship. One is idolatry. This is the worship of any false god. This may seem strange to modern ears, but as I’ve said before, everyone worships something. We don’t have to call it worship or have some kind of statue to have an idol. If we make anything the ultimate thing in our life, if we love something more than anything else, if we make sacrifices in order to have it, then that is our idol. The next word is “sorcery” or “witchcraft” (NIV). This, too, seems strange, but the Greek word is φαρμακεία, which sounds quite a bit like “pharmacy.” It refers to the use of drugs in connection with magical practices. A few weeks ago, I mentioned how this could refer to taking drugs in order to induce an abortion.<sup>6</sup> In our time, drug use has been connected with people’s desire to have a transcendent experience,

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<sup>4</sup> For vice lists, see Rom. 1:29–31; 1 Cor. 5:9–11; 6:9–10; Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 4:31; 5:3–5; Col. 3:5; 1 Tim. 1:9–10; 6:4–5; 2 Tim. 3:2–4; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:3; Rev. 21:8; 22:15; and “virtue lists”: Eph. 6:14–17; Phil. 4:8; Col. 3:12; 1 Tim. 3:2–3; 6:11; Titus 1:7–8; James 3:17; 2 Pet. 1:5–8.

<sup>5</sup> Presented on May 24, 2015 and available at <http://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

<sup>6</sup> “Defending Life: An Argument against Abortion,” August 9, 2015, <http://wbcommunity.org/miscellaneous-sermons>.

or an elevated consciousness. Drugs promise an ecstatic, almost religious experience, but there's a dark power behind them. Think about all the drug use in our country, and all the mental health issues associated with it.

The next eight items on the list all have to do with division and things that harm relationships. Enmity, which means hatred, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy all come between people. These things often occur because either people think they're better than others, or they think they're inferior to others and they want what others have.

The last two items are drunkenness and "orgies." The Bible doesn't condemn drinking, but it's clear that drunkenness is a sin. And the word that is translated as "orgies" doesn't necessarily refer to wild sex parties, but it refers to wild feasts where people would eat and drink excessively. That, of course, could lead to sexual exploits.

This list gives us a picture of people who are out of control, selfish, and self-destructive. The things on this list remind us of what happens in the whole story of the Bible when people go astray from God: they worship false gods, they fight with each other, and they fall into all kinds of self-destructive and immoral behavior.

Paul ends verse 21 with a stark warning: "those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." That might get you wondering: does Paul mean if we do bad things, we go to hell? But what about this gospel of grace he's been talking about? Isn't inheriting the kingdom of God all about grace and faith, and not doing good things? Yes, it is. But Paul is giving us a very important part of Christianity: When people come to faith in Christ, they change. They're not perfect, but they no longer continually do the types of things we see on this list. That doesn't mean that Christians never get angry or jealous, or that they can't commit isolated acts of immorality. But it means their lives aren't marked by such activity. They are no longer identified with such things.

Paul says something similar in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10:

<sup>9</sup> Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See also Eph. 5:5.

And then, in the very next verse, Paul gives us some hope: “And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” People who once were sexually immoral and idolaters can be washed of their sins if they turn to Jesus. But they have to change. They have to turn from their sin and turn to Jesus. They no longer continue to identify with practices that are contrary to God.

To be perfectly clear: we don’t have to clean ourselves up to come to God. That’s not what happens. But when God rescues us from our sin, a change comes. The change may occur slowly, but it will come. If we don’t see that change in a person’s life, and he or she claims to be a Christian, we have a reason to worry that they may never have put their faith in Jesus to begin with.

One last thing before I leave the “works of the flesh”: notice how some of those things can apply to all of us. Not all of us struggle with drunkenness or certain forms of sexual immorality. But many of us could struggle with anger or jealousy. And part of the human condition is that we all struggle with idols. Pastor Tim Keller observes that some of these sins apply to religious people—we hear of there being divisions in churches—while some apply to non-religious people. He says, “This list shows us that God does not make the kind of distinctions that we commonly do, seeing sex and drink as more sinful than jealousy and ambition.”<sup>8</sup> This means that we should all be careful.

Then Paul presents us with a virtue list. Over against the works of the flesh are traits that are known as the fruit of the Spirit. We find this in verses 22 and 23:

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

I want to point out a few things about the fruit of the Spirit. One, the fruit is singular. It’s not “fruits of the Spirit.” This suggests that these traits must be taken together. You can’t say, “I’ll be self-controlled, but not loving and patient,” or, “I’ll take some joy and peace, but I don’t want to be kind.” These virtues come together. They are a package deal. We may find that we are naturally more patient, let’s say, than we are joyful, but we should experience growth in all these areas.

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy Keller, *Galatians for You* (Purcellville, VA: The Good Book Company: 2013), 150.

The second thing I want to point out is that fruit is a good metaphor. Fruit grows slowly. It doesn't come overnight. But that growth is inevitable. It will come. We should expect to keep growing throughout the rest of our life.

Third, the fruit is the work of the Spirit. He is the one who produces this fruit in us. We must rely on him. We must pray that he will produce growth in our lives. And, as Paul says, we must walk with the Spirit. We must yield to his power in our lives.

Fourth, these traits are really descriptions of Jesus. When we see this growth in our lives, we know we are becoming more like him.

The first part of the fruit of the Spirit is love. God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). And Jesus loved others. Jesus often gave tough love, but still, he loved others. Counterfeit love is selfish affection, showing someone affection when it makes you feel good. Real love involves serving others and giving them what they need.

Next is joy. We may not think of joy when we think of Jesus. But he said this to his disciples in John 15:10-11:

<sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.<sup>9</sup>

Real joy isn't going around with a toothy grin. Joy can be that. But real joy is a settled state of mind that finds joy in God's love, regardless of the circumstances.

Then we have peace. Jesus himself is our peace, according to Ephesians 2:14. He reconciled us to God. Peace is harmony in relationships. It's rest in God's control and wisdom. The opposite of it is anxiety and worry and division.

Next on the list is patience. God is patient with us. Jesus was patient with his disciples and he's patient with us. So we ought to be patient with one another. This is particularly true when it comes to growth. We are all not growing at the same rate and we're not all at the same stage of growth. Some of us are seeds in the ground. Some of us are becoming ripe. We have to bear with one another.

Then we come to kindness. Kindness can refer to generosity, especially to those who are not loving or kind in return. It's the opposite of enmity and envy. In Romans 2:4, Paul says that

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<sup>9</sup> See also John 17:13.

God is patient and kind with sinners, and this is meant to lead us to repentance. Jesus was kind with sinners. Will we be kind, too?

Goodness. We know God is good, and Jesus is good. It refers to one's moral quality. People who are good care about the welfare of others.

God is also faithful (1 Thess. 5:24; 2 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 2:13). God keeps his word. He upholds his end of covenants. Jesus is always true to his word. We can count on him. If we are to become more like him, we will become dependable and trustworthy.

Jesus is also gentle. He said, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29). He acted humbly. Even though he is God, he didn't show off. Instead of seeking his own glory, he sought the Father's glory. We need to seek God's glory, not our own. Being gentle doesn't mean being a wimp; it means being humble.

Jesus was also self-controlled. Think of the ways he fought against temptation. He was always in charge of his emotions, his desires, and his actions. Christians, too, need to be self-controlled. Peter said that God called us to himself and,

<sup>5</sup> For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, <sup>6</sup> and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, <sup>7</sup> and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. <sup>8</sup> For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:5-8).

Paul says that there is no law against the fruit of the Spirit. With all of his talk about law earlier in this letter, he probably means that the Spirit produces virtue that satisfies God's demands for righteousness. We are no longer under the law. Instead, we are led by the Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit is the opposite of the works of the flesh. In order to experience the fruit of the Spirit, we have to put our old selves to death. That's what Paul means in verse 24:

<sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

This reminds me of a quote from John Owen, the seventeenth century British theologian. Puritans used to talk about killing, or mortifying, sin. Owen wrote, "Do you mortify; do you make it your daily work; be always at it whilst you live; cease not a day from this work; be

killing sin or it will be killing you.”<sup>10</sup> Paul says that we have to kill not just bad behaviors. Instead, we have to put to death the root of those behaviors. We have to kill our sinful desires. We have to figure out why we want to do certain things. The reason is that we find more joy in doing sinful things than in obeying God. When we want to do sinful things, it’s because, at that moment, something else other than the true God is our object of worship. In order to crucify the flesh, we have to love God more than our sin.

Tim Keller suggests that when we find ourselves wanting to sin, we should pray. He says,

*To crucify the sinful nature is to say: Lord, my heart thinks that I must have this thing, otherwise I have no value. It is a pseudo-savior. But to think and feel and live like this is to forget what I mean to you, how you see me in Christ. By your Spirit, I will reflect on your love for me in Him until this thing loses its attractive power over my soul.*<sup>11</sup>

Paul finishes with these words, in verses 25 and 26:

<sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Christians are reborn because of the Spirit’s work. And they must continue to walk with the Spirit. We can’t rest on our laurels. And we’re not supposed to be selfish, either by provoking one another, which means thinking we’re better than others, or by envying one another, which assumes that we feel inferior to others. Instead, we should remember that we are all one in Christ and we have the same inheritance (Gal. 3:27-29).

The fruit of the Spirit produces real community. It helps restore broken relationships. It binds us together. The works of the flesh break apart relationships. They cause people to be selfish and isolated. What kind of people do we want to be?

This should serve as an encouragement and a warning to Christians. We should be encouraged that, if we are indeed in Christ, the Holy Spirit will produce good fruit in us. But the warning is that it’s possible we never were in Christ in the first place. The Bible teaches that we can make false professions of faith. In 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul writes, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith.” If we see that the only fruit being produced in us are the works of the flesh, we should be concerned. We can only produce good fruit if we’re abiding in Christ.

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<sup>10</sup> John Owen, *Mortification of Sin*, in *The Works of John Owen.*, vol. 6, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburg: T&T Clark), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Keller, *Galatians for You*, 156.

We are the branches and he is the vine. Jesus said, “<sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned” (John 15:5-6). Now is the time to abide in Christ. Now is the time to lean on him and let him produce good fruit in us. Cry out to God. Ask him to give you the Holy Spirit. Ask him to make you into a new person.