

“THE FRUITFUL LIFE”

11. The End of Self?

Galatians 5:16-26

Well, we've got the end of this little series based on Paul's words in *Galatians 5*. In this pivotal chapter, Paul writes about “*the acts of the sinful nature*” (vv19-21), the things that we find ourselves doing naturally because of our broken humanity and the infection of our world by evil. They are not the things that God wants of his creatures. It is not the way he intended us to live when he created us, but since evil leaked into his perfect world after the disobedience of the first humans, he has had to watch those he loves struggling with this issue. And, as Paul says here, those whose lives are full of these acts “*will not inherit the Kingdom of God*”. Fortunately, God has a rescue plan and, through the life, death and resurrection of his Son Jesus, he has made it possible for us to escape the clutches of evil and enjoy the benefits and blessings of his kingdom rule.

Those who accept his invitation to become citizens of that Kingdom, those who take seriously the teaching of Jesus and want to follow him, will also want to display in their own lives the nine qualities that Paul refers to as “*the fruit of the Spirit*”. We've been looking at those nine qualities over the past few weeks – “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*” – and we've seen that they are not a menu from which to choose the ones we like or the ones we think we could actually manage to display. Nor are they a check list through which we work until we've got most of them right and we're then a “proper” Christian.

We take these qualities as a package – all or nothing, really – and do our best to live them out. They are set out here in direct contrast to the “*acts of the sinful nature*”, qualities that will fill the gap left by those acts as we gradually succeed in getting rid of them from our lives. And we have seen that they are basically attitudes which we need to cultivate, attitudes out of which spring our words and actions. If we don't get our attitudes right, then we will never succeed in changing our behaviour. But it is not easy, and we need constantly to be asking for God's help and seeking the strength and power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to live as God wants us to. We cannot do it under our own strength, but it is vital that we make a conscious decision to want to change. As we saw last time, that is why self-control is such a vital ingredient in this fruity mix. It's to do with gaining the upper hand over the things which otherwise seem to come all too naturally to us.

We saw, too, that Jesus called his disciples to “*take up their cross daily*” in their efforts to follow his way. Anyone taking up their cross was on their way to be nailed to it, so this is an image used to suggest that we need to put the sinful nature to death, to try and deal with it once and for all. It is interesting that Paul takes up that same image here in this chapter. Immediately following on from his description of the

fruit of the Spirit, he writes that “*those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires*”. If we are truly to live the lives that God wants us to – basically so that we can get the best out of the life he has given us – then we need to take those words very seriously indeed. We are perhaps used to the idea of crucifixion as it is so central a part of our faith – Jesus was crucified for us and we use the words often and maybe unthinkingly. But it is a horrific picture to use. And it is also very, very appropriate in this context, because of the finality of our dealing with our sinful nature. It really does mean the death of our self, the end of our capitulation to the sinful desires and passions that are so much a part of who we are. Crucifixion is used quite a few times by Paul in his letters to drive home this point – and the point is that crucifixion is **Purposeful, Painful** and **Permanent**. Let’s explore what that means for us.

1. **PURPOSEFUL**

You cannot really crucify someone by accident. You could possibly crucify the wrong person, but the actual act of crucifixion is calculated and deliberate. The victim is laid down on the cross and nails are driven into the wrists so that there is no hope of escape. A decision has been taken by the judge or whoever and the person is executed. It’s horrible, but it’s an intentional act.

So with our crucifixion of the sinful nature. It is something we determine to do. Maybe as a result of reading something in the Bible, or of listening to a sermon or talk, or of a deep conviction by the Holy Spirit – whatever the means of bringing us to this point we find that we have to make a decision. That is where we start this process. You and I must recognise that there is a need to deal with our sin – whether it’s one of those “big sins” from Paul’s list, like sexual immorality or orgies that we get so het up about, so self-righteous about; or whether it’s one of those sins that many of us probably think shouldn’t be there at all, like jealousy, envy, selfish ambition or fits of rage. After all, we all do those, don’t we? And some of them are actually central to the way our society operates.

Paul is clear, though. Just like the fruit of the Spirit being a single package, so these acts of the sinful nature are **all** to be eradicated from our lives. And we need to identify in our own lives those things that need to be dealt with, those things that we need to get rid of. Then we need to decide whether we are really going to go for ditching them. And we need to be serious about that. As we said a couple of weeks ago, you can’t just drift into this renewed life by continuing as usual and hoping it will all get better in the long run. Spend a bit of time thinking about your life, about the weak spots, about the things you know deep down you shouldn’t be doing, saying or thinking. And then make that purposeful decision to deal

with them. The Bible calls that “*repentance*”: acknowledging where things are wrong and determining to do something about it.

2. PAINFUL

Now this shouldn't really need emphasising, as I'm sure we are all aware of this. But crucifixion is an astonishingly painful method of execution. Most methods of execution that have been devised – from beheading to the electric chair, by way of guillotines, firing squads and lethal injections – are pretty instantaneous if done properly and skilfully. But crucifixion is a long, slow, unimaginably painful way to end someone's life. Firstly, of course, there is the nailing: the long nails driven through the wrists with a series of bone-crunching hammer blows. Then there's the raising of the cross upright and allowing it to clunk down into the hole, jarring the bones, ripping the flesh around the nail wounds. And then the victims are simply left to die, their lungs suffocating under the pressure exerted by hanging from their wrists, their strength gradually fading as the blood runs from their wounds, even the pecking of carrion birds that cannot be shooshed away. Records from the time of the Roman Empire indicate that death could take hours and sometimes even a couple of days. I have played Jesus a couple of times in the Lichfield Mysteries and I can tell you it's quite painful even when everyone is trying not to hurt you, so what it must have been like for those on whom the Roman soldiers were taking out their frustrations is difficult to imagine.

And dealing with our sinful nature will also be painful for most of us. Long-cherished habits may have to go, things that we are used to, things that are pretty well part of who we are sometimes. They may be things that are quite obvious to others, or they may be those secret sins in which you find a strange source of comfort. There may be painful repercussions for relationships as you acknowledge that they might be contributing to sexual immorality or you have to tell someone that you are no longer wanting to be involved in their factions and dissensions. You may need to give up stuff that you recognise is selfish ambition, but that will affect your carefully constructed career plans or financial forecasts. (There's nothing wrong with career plans, by the way, nor with ambition – it's just being aware when that has become a **selfish** ambition.)

As we've said before, trying to do this is going to be a struggle. There will be conflicts as your sinful nature tries to retake ground. But stick with it. Work through the pain and the difficulties with the help of Jesus and the power of his Holy Spirit. Pray about it. Read and absorb the promises of God's word. Seek the help of other Christians to whom you can be accountable. Take it seriously. Jesus took it so seriously that he was actually physically crucified for you. And be aware that the place taken by the sinful nature in your life will be filled with the fruit of the Spirit, a much more attractive and a much more

comfortable addition to your life than all these other things that Paul writes about here. Remember, too, that the sooner you get started on this, the sooner it will be sorted. Make that decision today.

3. PERMANENT

And, of course, crucifixion is final. This is a permanent thing. The Roman soldiers would not expect the victim to get down off the cross and go off to commit more crimes. Nor would the judge sentence someone to so many hours crucifixion, after which they'd be taken down and set free. Crucifixion was for keeps. And we should not expect that of the crucifixion of our sinful nature either. Despite the decision we make to deal with it, this transformation doesn't happen overnight. John Brown, a 19th century commentator, makes this telling point: *“Crucifixion produced death not suddenly but gradually ... True Christians ... do not succeed in completely destroying the sinful nature here below, they have fixed it to the cross and they are determined to keep it there until it expire.”*

You see, so often our failure to gain the victory over persistent sins is because we keep going back and, as it were, staring with pity at the crucified sinful nature, often even perhaps trying to take it down or loosen the nails a bit. We have not been serious about dealing with it, not truly repented, or we don't maintain our repentance. We need to be aware that this is to be permanent and be aware of those areas where we are weak or vulnerable. If there is something that you covet – let's say a particular car you've got your eye on – you need to take steps to ensure that you're not being constantly tempted: don't keep walking past the showroom. Pray for the help of the Holy Spirit in ordering your life so that there is no opportunity for a particular temptation to come your way. Make sure that your decision to deal with this is permanent one.

And then, of course, don't forget that after death comes resurrection. Just as Jesus was crucified and then raised to life, so as our sinful nature is crucified we can enjoy the benefits and blessings of new life, a life lived with a renewed sense of purpose and a renewed hope for the eternal future. The death of Jesus and his resurrection have set us free to *“live by the Spirit”*. That's not something wishy-washy and passive – simply a protection from coming punishment – fire insurance Christianity, or what Bonhoeffer called *“cheap grace”*. Rather it is something positive and active. Having crucified our sinful nature with its passions and desires, we are to turn around (what repentance actually means) and stride purposefully away, keeping up with the Holy Spirit and following where he leads. We need to put into practice those positive attitudes, to demonstrate that fruit of the Spirit, to make an effort to fill the gaps left by the old,

crucified, sinful nature with those things that can help us – prayer, Bible study, worship, living out the commands of Jesus Christ. *“Living by the Spirit”* expresses an abiding fellowship, our inheritance as children of God, citizens of the Kingdom. *“Keeping in step with the Spirit”* requires constant application and help from God.

So, let me ask you a couple of questions. Are you prepared to repent of those things that you know are getting between you and God, things that are preventing you living life as God wants you to with fulfilment and a sense of satisfaction? Are you prepared to crucify your old nature and walk confidently away from it with the Holy Spirit as your guide? That’s what Paul is asking us to do here and his language makes it clear that for the serious Christian there is no option whatsoever.

We’ve spent a few weeks now thinking about this fruit of the Spirit. Look at your own life and see where that is starting to take shape. Pray that God will help you to display that *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”* that should mark us off as true followers of Jesus, true citizens of the Kingdom of God. May we all start to see a change in our lives and in the lives of those with whom we worship, work and witness here.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) Do you find Paul's use of the imagery of crucifixion appropriate? Why/why not? Does it help you to think about repentance?
- 2) How can we identify those things in our lives that need to be sorted out? Is it possible to overlook some sins? How can we deal with that?
- 3) Which of the nine characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit do you find most difficult? Why?
- 4) What do you understand by the phrase "*keep in step with the Spirit*"? How do you do that?

5) Have you found this series encouraging or challenging? What are you going to do in response to what you have heard?