

# Cultivating Life in the Spirit

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[ 0 : 00 ] All right, good morning. How's everybody doing today? Good. My name is Elliot. I'm one of the pastors here. So good to be with you. Hope everyone had a very happy Thanksgiving and that you are ready for the Christmas season to roll in because it is coming whether you want it to or not.

And so we're kind of getting ready for our season of Advent. Before we do that, we're going to spend today wrapping up a sermon series we've been doing over the past several weeks really looking at what being Christ-like, what being fruitful in Jesus looks like.

And so we've spent a lot of weeks talking about the ways that God's life manifests in our life. And as we close the series today, what we're really going to do is just kind of look back over these fruits but really ask this singular important question.

So these fruits, these things that we want to see cultivated in our life, how do we do it? Like how do we, moving forward from a sermon, like how do we cultivate these things in our lives?

So it's not just something I heard sometime on a Sunday at a church, but it's like the real living fruit of Jesus in our lives. Like what would that look like? And what would that not look like to walk in a life that's permeated by His Spirit?

[ 1 : 21 ] And so to do that, we're going to take a peek in a passage that Paul wrote a long time ago to a church that had started to struggle with this. Like it was a church that was running a good race and then started to drift off course in this area.

And one of the things we're going to see today is that, that I think is actually really surprising, is that there are really two primary ways that you can fall out of step with a life that's a life that's filled with the Spirit.

And at first glance, they actually look like totally opposite things. What we're going to see is like one way actually looks like doing everything you can to try to follow the rules and do what you're supposed to.

And the other way kind of looks like doing whatever your heart desires and living however you want. But we're going to find out that actually neither of those looks like what walking in the Spirit is intended to look like.

Tim Keller was fond of saying this, you can run from God both by breaking all the rules or by keeping all the rules. Like have you ever thought about that?

[ 2 : 32 ] Like you, you can actually do things that we equate with following God. Like you can abstain from all forms of sexual sin and still be far from Jesus. You can go and give to the poor and still be far from Jesus.

You can pray and you can come to church and still be far from Jesus. Because if any of those things become something that you're doing to secure God's favor or to make you feel righteous, then they actually take you away from Him because you have a relationship not with Jesus, but with a set of life rules, with a doctrine.

And living the Christian life, and maybe this is one of the biggest misconceptions about it, is not fundamentally just learning a list of do's and don'ts and then trying to do those things.

What we're going to see today is the antidote to a life that seeks to break all the rules or a life that keeps all the rules is this completely different kind of life called life in the Spirit.

So with that, let's jump right in. We're going to be reading from Galatians 5 if you want to follow along in your Bible. It'll also be on the screen behind me if you don't have it.

[ 3 : 47 ] And so it says this, For freedom, Christ has set you free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. Look, I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.

I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified from the law.

You've fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

You are running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven will leaven the whole lump.

And I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and that the one who is troubling you will bear penalty, whoever he is. But if I, brothers, am still preaching this circumcision, then why am I still being persecuted?

[ 4 : 58 ] In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves. Calm down, Paul. For you are called to freedom, brothers.

Only do not use that freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

For the whole law is fulfilled in this one word. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, and they're opposed to each other to keep you from doing the things you want to. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Now, the works of the flesh are evident. But sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalry, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, all these type things.

[ 6 : 06 ] And I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and kindness, and goodness, and faithfulness, and gentleness, and self-control.

Against such things there is no law. And all those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. So if we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.

Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, and envying one another. This is God's Word to us. So this is a super interesting passage for a lot of reasons.

And we're going to kind of dissect it a little bit today to think about what a life in the Spirit looks like.

And I think the first part of this passage might be the most surprising to us because it pretty clearly shows us that trying to get close to God by following all the rules is foolish.

So let's talk about this circumcision controversy that shows up in the beginning of this passage.

Because probably really that doesn't resonate with us much, right?

[ 7 : 26 ] Like I doubt that is a topic of much debate in your circles. If it is, you are in a strange circle. But at the time, this was a really big deal.

So partly because circumcision was not only such a big part of Jewish culture and life and identity, it was part of what was required.

Like what identified you as part of the covenantal people of God? It had deep roots. And then when the gospel starts to spread to parts of the world, to other cultures, like non-Jewish cultures, the question quickly comes up, what part of the law, if any, are these new believers required to do?

Like what is required of them? And frankly, circumcision is not trivial because, well, I mean, to get that done when you're not a baby is, shall we say, an obstacle to the faith.

And so it might shock us that this particular subject was such a big deal to Paul and that he uses such strong language until we realize that this particular issue is a microcosm of the bigger question.

[ 8 : 44 ] And the bigger question is really this, what makes me righteous? What makes me right with God? And we see here that this confidence that righteousness is obtained by following some aspect of the law, that righteousness is obtained by this outward sign of covenant, had actually started to become an impediment to people hearing the gospel, to having a relationship with God.

And Paul was angry because it was keeping people from God and also because Paul knew it was a foolish way to pursue God.

Firstly, it's foolish simply because you can't do it. Romans 3.23 is famous because it is one of the key things you have to understand if you're going to approach God, and it simply says, For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Now again, I know in a room this big, there are probably all kinds of ideas that have been formed across your life and your faith about what it means to get close to God and how you think you're going to be judged and how good or bad a life you think you've lived.

But if I could just leave you with this one, if I could just plead with you this one thing from the authority of God's Word today, please don't let your plan to come before God be confidence in how good you are.

[10:16] Please don't let your plan be, I'm going to be okay because I've been a pretty good fill-in-the-blank. Employee, parent, child, whatever it is, your measuring stick isn't the same as God's.

You're not going to measure up. But confidence in your own self is foolishness. All have sinned. All have missed the mark.

All fall short. It's foolish to do that. But it's also foolish because when you live a life like that, where your number one concern is, Am I doing all the things that identify me with being a good person? Am I being a good person? What you find out is you actually aren't pursuing God. You're just pursuing something He can give you. Or you're pursuing some sense of security that should come from your relationship with Him.

Luke 15 has this really famous story. You've probably heard it if you've been in church at all. It's called the prodigal son, right? And it's a famous story because I think, honestly, it's one of the greatest stories in history.

[11:27] And, you know, the summation of it is pretty simple, right? There's a father, and he's got these two sons. And one of the sons basically comes to him and says, I want my inheritance right now.

And it is as offensive then, if not more so, than it would be you today. I mean, it's literally like if one of your children came to you and said, like basically they're signaling to you, I don't want anything to do with you.

I don't care about this house. I don't care about you. What I want is to just get out of here, and I want my inheritance right now. I mean, it's literally saying the thing that annoys me the most is that you won't just hurry up and die so I can have your money.

And we would probably react in a lot of different ways to that. What's interesting is in this particular story, the father grants it. He gives it to him. And he goes off and does exactly what you think a reckless, foolish person would do.

He lives it up for a very short amount of time until that money is gone, and then he very quickly finds himself living in loneliness and squalor.

[12:33] And when he's at the bottom, as this often happens, he finally comes to his senses and he says, you know what? The least of the servants in my father's house lives better than I do right now.

So I'm going to go back and I'm going to apologize. And like the scene when he comes back is just this perfect picture of the father's love where he's coming back to apologize, and the father runs to meet him.

Like you see that the biggest thing to the father was not the son knowing that I was right and you were wrong. Like the thing he was longing for is just I want to be together again. The thing that was most crushing to him was not that his inheritance, he'd lost this money, it's that his son was gone. And so he comes back and he restores him. And it seems like that might be that's where the story should end. But really the story could be called the two sons because there's another son in this story.

And as this party is going on to celebrate the son coming home, this cat goes outside and broods. He refuses to come in and so the father comes out to him and he just unleashes on him.

[13:44] Now, haven't I all these years not broken the rules? I've done all the things you asked. I've been everything a good son is supposed to be and you never gave me anything.

And now he comes home and you give him everything. Like the most offensive thing to him is that the father would just forgive all of that. I did all the right stuff and now like there's no consequence. Like I think there's a part of us that might even try to resonate with that. Like that just seems really unfair. But the point of the story is to show you that this other son who kept all the rules also doesn't love the father.

Like his biggest concern is not being with this father. It's like I deserve to get what I've done. I did all the right stuff and I deserve to have it now.

And then the story leaves us hanging. Like we don't know if he goes back inside or not. What's his fate? And in this story we see that both like license, like just self-fulfilled, self-gratifying living is condemned.

[14:52] But also legalism is condemned. Trying to earn God's favor by being all the right things just so you can get his stuff. And in this story both are condemned but the second is clearly presented as the more fatal position.

And why is that? Because well a life of recklessness might certainly lead you to ruin. But it often also does give you a chance at humility.

Like that broken state where you've got nothing left is often the place at the bottom, right? Where you have a chance at finding some humility and finding God.

But the life of legalism, the life of trusting that you can live this Christian life yourself leads to self-righteousness. Which again is probably the most lethal place a person can be because there's no hope for humility.

And that's because trying to get to God by following all the rules, it's not just foolish. Trying to get to God by following all the rules is also offensive to the gospel.

[16:02] I mean why is Paul so passionate about not conceding this point of circumcision?

I mean these are big things going on, big clashes between massive cultures. I mean Paul can't he just agree in good faith to compromise, agree to disagree?

But the problem for Paul is that ultimately when you add something to the good news, you're saying one of two things and neither one of them are good. You're either saying number one, I'm quite good enough.

I'm quite good enough as I am. God will find me worthy. Or you're saying Jesus isn't enough. Like what he did wasn't enough to make me righteous.

Neither of those are true. But more than that, what you're also doing when you do that is you're making something that is supposed to be sweet, bitter. I mean for Paul, binding a believer from the freedom they have in Christ is an incredibly serious thing.

[17:10] I mean that language he uses, he says like I wish they would emasculate themselves. I wish they would cut themselves off in the backdrop of the topic we're talking about.

That's incredibly charged language. But the reason Paul's that fired up is because for him nothing should taint the gospel. He compares it to a little leaven, like a little bit of baking ingredient, like might seem like a little bit, but he's like if it gets in there, like the whole thing will be permeated. Like eventually the whole lump will be ruined. For him, salvation, redemption, by God's grace, through faith in Jesus, plus nothing.

Plus nothing. Plus nothing. And he would tolerate no offense to that. Because that is the most glorious news in the history of history.

And if you want to live a life walking in a spirit, you have to know that in your bones. Like you have to ingest that down into your marrow. That's the first step.

[18:17] Now once we do that, I think it does naturally lead to another question, which is, okay, if it's not by works, if it's not by me trying to follow all the rules, if it's all just Jesus, then does that mean I really don't have to worry about my sin at all?

I can just not take it seriously at all? And the answer is, well, no, because a life in the spirit doesn't look like a life in the flesh either. There is certainly a temptation, I think, to look at the grace of Christ.

The fact that his blood, his sacrifice, what he's done is sufficient. As an invitation to not have to fight your sin. Or to acknowledge that you do sin, to say, hey, I'm a sinner.

But to not really feel any pull to change because, I mean, Jesus is going to forgive me, right? Like, nobody's perfect, right? Like, nobody's perfect. Jesus will forgive me.

I think this shows up in pretty much every subculture within America. Let me give you an example of how this showed up in kind of a small-town, country, kind of redneck culture that I grew up around.

[19:35] And now it was in college as well, right? So it was the kind of sentiment that expressed itself something like this. We cuss on them Mondays, we pray on them Sundays.

Like, I love Jesus, and I also love getting drunk. You know, I mean, certainly the gospel does lead us to this place of grace-filled acceptance where you do recognize nobody is perfect.

And Jesus' blood is greater than our sin, and you don't have to live in guilt and shame about every little thing in your life. But this is not what that is.

That's more of an excuse not to change. That's something that says, look, I know I drink too much, and I get a little rowdy, and I do some things that don't honor Jesus, but Jesus will forgive me.

It's like, I know I shouldn't sleep with my girlfriend, but she's looking fine, and I mean, a man is only so strong, and you can't be—I mean, Jesus will forgive me for that. It's just part of being a person.

[ 20 : 39 ] Nobody's perfect. I know that embarrassing or belittling someone on social media isn't living like Jesus would, but frankly, they need to be put in their place.

And Jesus will forgive me if I get it wrong. It's the kind of faith that basically says, I'm going to live a vulgar, self-honoring life six days a week, and I'm going to sprinkle a little Jesus on at the end.

Because that's what we do in the South, or that's what Mama told me to do. I mean, you are meant to be free in Christ.

We're going to see in a minute that freedom is probably more freedom than you think it is, but freedom isn't to be used. It isn't meant to be used as an excuse to do evil.

Galatians tells us pretty plainly, that's not how life in the Spirit looks. Now, the works of the flesh are evident. Sexual immorality—I won't read the whole list again, but all of these things—drunkenness, orgies, all these things— And then he says, I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

[ 21 : 49 ] Can Jesus and will Jesus forgive and make pardon for every sin, past, present, future, for those who are his disciples?

Yes. Yes. But this verse also tells us, if you are constantly living a life that looks like those things in Galatians, like if there is no evidence that the Spirit has control in your life, you aren't demonstrating a life that belongs to him.

Like it's a warning. Like he says, this is a warning that while Jesus' blood covers everything for those who belong to him, you do actually have to belong to him.

And if you belong to him, that kind of life can't help but show itself. The Spirit inside you will show itself. So what's the answer then?

Like if I don't pursue God by following all the rules, and if a life of breaking all the rules and living like I want shows that I'm not actually pursuing him either, what's the answer?

[ 22 : 59 ] I mean, is it some kind of middle ground? Like trust Jesus and try to live right, but don't be too hard on yourself? And it's not some moderate middle way either though.

It's not like something on a spectrum in between. The life in the Spirit is a completely different way of living. It's a way that doesn't, it's a type of life that doesn't originate in the ways of this world.

It's the kind of life that would make someone say, like, what planet are you from? Because this is not how people on this planet live. And that's really what this whole series has been about.

It's been about God desires a life for us that is marked by fruits of the Spirit. But the fruit of the Spirit is love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control.

Against such things there is no law. It's a life that looks like God's life breaking into this world through us.

[ 24 : 13 ] And obviously given the contrast between those works of the flesh and those works of the Spirit, it obviously doesn't look like a life of us just living out our sinful desires. But again, it circles back and says, it also doesn't look like a life of following the rules.

Against such things there is no law. What does that mean? The fruit of the Spirit needs no law.

I mean, like, what are the purpose of laws? Laws inherently restrain evil. But laws cannot create good.

Like, laws are there to keep evil from having its full way, but they can't create goodness in somebody. And because of that, it says, when you live this life in the Spirit, the term law doesn't really make any sense.

Like, why do you need a law to regulate goodness? Like, why do you need a law to regulate gentleness or self-control?

[ 25 : 19 ] Like, here's something, if, like, you're doing counseling with somebody, like, here's something you never have to tell them. You're loving your wife too well. Throttle that back.

You are being too patient and too kind with people. You're showing too many of the markers of Christ. You need to, like, dial that back a little bit.

No, it doesn't make any sense. And that's not how the best relationships in your life are regulated anyway, right? Like, I would argue even boundaries in relationships that are kind of a helpful thing we need are there because we live in a fallen world, right?

But when you have a really good friendship or a really good marriage, it's like it's not really good because you both have a long script of laws that you're following.

It's because you're moving in love. It's because the fruits of the Spirit are showing through. And that means that following Jesus isn't actually intended to be a straitjacket.

[ 26 : 20 ] Like, it's not meant to be, like, a set of instructions that you use to assemble a dishwasher, right? Like, follow A and B and C, and then you get life in the Spirit. Earlier in the Galatians, Paul calls the law a guardian.

Like, someone who watches over you until you can watch over yourself. Just adhering to the law and doing the things of the law is not the fullness of the life that Jesus is looking for.

His life is a life of adventure where you have volition and will, where God wants you to make real choices and trust Him in those choices and where day by day, the things you want, the things that drive you, the things you want to do in life look more and more like Jesus because you're walking more and more with His Spirit.

Like, if you want to know, how will I know what to do in life? Like, if it's not written out on a page, you know, let my kids watch this, don't go to that place, do this thing, talk to that.

Like, if it's not written out, how will I know, like, this life that He wants for you, it's not, you won't know what to do in day-to-day situations by knowing 4,000 pages of dogma and nor will you know it by just some vague ooey-goey feeling inside.

[ 27 : 44 ] You'll know it because you actually commune with His Spirit. Like, you actually talk to God. It's a life permeated by His Spirit, illuminated by His Word and energized by the Gospel.

It's a life where I think, frankly, you start to become the kind of person that most of us on some level probably hope you would be. Brave, secure, honest, bold, steadfast, loving, kind, adventurous.

That's the kind of picture of the life in the Spirit that Jesus is looking for. Not a weight of rules that make you feel terrible every time you break them and not a fetter-less life where you just float around in the whims of whatever you feel or the people that do around you.

A life that has real purpose and meaning and that interfaces with the beauty of who you were created to be uniquely and individually, but that's walking with Him every day.

And all the means of grace that we use, things like prayer, reading Scripture, giving to others, finding time for rest, fasting, confessing our sins to each other, gathering together like we do this morning to be together and to worship.

[ 29 : 10 ] All of these are just meant to be ways that we invite the Spirit in. Like, the point isn't the discipline itself. The reason we do those things is because we are trying to cultivate a rhythm of life that actually lets us walk with the Spirit and feel what He feels and see what He sees and care about what He cares about.

It's not another checklist. It's not another checklist. You know, one of the prayers that I find, I have found myself praying most often, probably most of my adult life, is a simple prayer that goes like this.

God, show me Your glory. Like, one place in the Psalms it says, like, His earnest desire, like His life goal. This is not a life goal most of us would write down.

Most of us would even maybe find it boring. He's like, my life goal is simply to behold the beauty of what you actually are as much as is possible. It might sound somewhat esoteric to you, but like, the reason He says that is because the thing that changes us is being close to God.

Like, seeing something different. And that's what I want to see. Like, I want to see things that inspire me. Like, I want to see who God is.

[ 30 : 38 ] I want to be reminded that the things of this world that scream so loudly that they are the most important are not. That the things that seem the most hopeless are not the most real thing.

I want to see His glory. I don't want another set of life rules. I want to, like Paul did, Paul came to Christ not because someone read him a dissertation, but because he had an encounter with the risen Jesus.

And it shook his life in a way. That's why I think that's what our prayer should be. And as we close this series, that's what we should want as disciples to be constantly changed by beholding God.

And so I think that's really a good final prayer to close this series is to say, God, would you give us the grace to both desire that and to become people like that?

Like, if you haven't, if you feel like you haven't seen God like that in a while, that's a very appropriate prayer. God, let me see you like that. Show me how to walk with you so this thing isn't just some religious thing I do.

[ 31 : 49 ] It's me actually meeting you. That's a prayer that Jesus is longing to answer. And those are the kind of disciples that change the world.

So as the band comes up today, a couple ways we can respond. If you're here and you're not a follower of Jesus, man, I'm glad you're here. Like, it is a big thing to search out the deep things of life and if you're just here trying to figure out what this Christianity thing's about or how to connect with God, I hope some of this has been helpful.

I hope if nothing else, maybe it's dispelled some misconceptions, right? Like, Christianity is not intended to just be a list of rules. It's not a straight jacket that just sucks all the fun out of life. That's not what Jesus is offering you and I'm sorry if that's the picture someone's giving you. But I hope you can also see that coming close to God is not something where you can just bet on yourself either.

Like, however good you think you've been, it's not good enough. But however bad you've been, it's not so big that God can't forgive it.

[ 33 : 01 ] If you want Jesus, if that's the kind of life, if anything in you wants that, you can have it. Jesus says come just as you are. Not when you get it all cleaned up right now.

On the screen there'll be a prayer that might be a way you want to express that or if you'd like to talk with one of the pastors or one of the prayer team after, we'd be glad to do that with you. Maybe you just want to pray right where you're at.

Jesus, if that's like, show it to me. Show me your glory. If you are a follower of Jesus, a life in his spirit is what is meant for you.

And it is better than any alternative. So like maybe as we've gone through this, you've realized you have found yourself falling in that trap of maybe just kind of winking at your sin and living your own way and kind of pretending you're following Jesus or just sprinkling in some Jesus culture into your life.

life, that's not life in the spirit. And what's more, it's not fulfilling. Like, I would almost say if you're going to do that, just leave the Jesus part out because it's not going to make it any better.

[ 34 : 14 ] Or maybe you've fallen in the trap of thinking that Jesus is most pleased with you when you keep all the rules. Like, maybe you know that, like, I know it's not about that, but really you can't help but feeling Jesus, like you feel better about yourself and you feel like Jesus loves you more when you get it more right.

You've fallen into the trap of exchanging your performance for his pleasure. It's not how a father looks at his children. That's not a life in the spirit either.

A life in the spirit is better. A life where you know you are free and forgiven and clean and you follow day by day not because you feel like you've got to get this checklist done to feel better because you just want to be near him.

You're not afraid of him. Today is a day to ask for something more. Let's go ahead and stand together. We're going to come to a time of communion and actually communion again is this this interesting picture of exactly what we've been talking about.

When the old covenant was given Moses comes down from the mountain with a set of rules written on a tablet a guardian for what God was doing.

[ 35 : 42 ] But when Jesus initiates the new covenant he does it at a table with his friends and he doesn't give a set of tablets a set of rules he says I'm giving you myself my very body my very blood that is what we're bonded in now not your ability to keep this covenant along but in my body and my blood that's what binds us.

So when we go to this table it's just an opportunity to remember that and to ask Jesus like this is one of those rhythms of life where you can say right now Jesus just commune with me in some way that I can know you're here that changes me.

So just take a moment lay before God whatever you need to and when you're ready you come to the table and take the elements back to your seat just remember commune Jesus is with you he'll always be with you.

Father we give this moment to you this sacred moment Holy Spirit please show us how to walk in you push out anything in our lives that is something less give us the grace to just even see this life sometimes the hardest thing is just to see it God to see something different than we've known Holy Spirit come we ask in Jesus name heard