



SERIES 2 EPISODE 3



MORE THAN RULES

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

—Galatians 5:24 NIV

Paul sounds quite a bit like a Stoic philosopher in this verse. Like the Stoics, he warns of the danger of living by our passions. But his prescription for this diagnosis is radically different. Rather than rational, philosophical reflection, he emphasizes union with Christ. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus” are the ones who “have crucified the flesh.” To crucify our superficial desires means to find power over them so we can instead do what we really want to do as disciples of Jesus. We receive that power in the Holy Spirit.

This same teaching on the Holy Spirit addresses the conundrum of the Galatians and the Jewish “agitators” who had visited them. These teachers agreed that Jesus was Messiah but also said that his disciples must become Jewish if they want to be part of God’s covenant family, keeping all the requirements of the Torah, including circumcision.

This argument is not bizarre; it’s an intuitive step for these early believers. God’s covenant was with Abraham, with the people of Israel. Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. All of the twelve apostles were Jewish. It’s easy to see how the agitators would see keeping the Torah requirements as compatible with Jesus’ teachings and even incumbent upon his followers. Yet, for all that, Paul says they are preaching a different Gospel!

LAW AS THE COURSE OF LIFE

For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law.

—Galatians 3:21 ESV

The Torah is fundamentally good, but it was never meant to give life.

“To be sure, law is not the source of rightness, but it is forever the course of rightness.”

—Dallas Willard⁶

If we’ve received Jesus as Messiah, we’ve received the life of God. God himself is the source of deep inner goodness. We don’t need to keep Torah to have life.

This raises a dilemma. What do we do about all those “works of the flesh” if we don’t require people to follow the rules? People who insist upon rules are generally (and understandably) concerned about moral chaos.

Paul argues that, even if the rules are good, they serve only as a diagnosis, not a prescription. They help us know that we do bad things, but they don’t actually keep us from doing those bad things. They identify what’s wrong with us, but they don’t heal us.

FREEDOM

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

—Galatians 5:1 ESV

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

—Galatians 5:13 ESV

The word translated “opportunity” is a military term that more literally means “base of operations.” Freedom (from keeping Torah requirements) is not meant to serve as a base of operations for our superficial and sinful desires. Instead, we are meant to serve one another in love. That love comes from the Spirit of God.



SERIES 2 EPISODE 3



An external rite like circumcision cannot accomplish what God can accomplish in our hearts through the gift of his Holy Spirit. This is why Paul is so agitated about the agitators: They have a bad theology of the Spirit.

What we need is a change of heart. For that, we need the Spirit of God. If you put your faith in Jesus as the Messiah, you have the Spirit of God. You don't need to keep the Torah to have the Spirit.

FULFILLING THE LAW

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

—Galatians 6:2 ESV

The love that the Spirit puts in our hearts fulfills what's most important about the Law anyway. All of the rules and regulations were trying to get at what it looks like to live in love under the care of God. We can do that now because God is living inside of us in the Holy Spirit.

But like the agitators, Christian communities often turn to rules as the way to solve problems. When there's an issue, we think that we just have to control people's behavior. But this approach cuts against genuine character formation, which requires taking responsibility for the kind of people we are becoming.

"As a child of the King, I always live in his presence. By contrast, the way of law avoids individual responsibility for decision. It pushes the responsibility and possible blame onto God. That is one reason why people who must have a law for all their actions lead such pinched and impoverished lives and develop very little in the way of genuine depth in godly character."

Dallas Willard⁷

A helpful example is tithing. There's no reiteration of the Torah command to tithe in the New Testament not because tithing is a bad idea, but because we are called to a transformation of our character: a radical generosity fueled by the Holy Spirit, in freedom.

The whole point is to change who we are as human beings, not to get our behavior to conform to a specific rule.

SOCIAL APPLICATIONS OF LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

—Galatians 5:25–26 ESV

Paul is addressing so many internal dynamics. But his first and primary application after his whole detailed teaching on works of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit is a social application within the body of Christ. If you want to keep in step with the Spirit, the first thing is to pay attention to how you are treating your brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the workplace, how we treat the people around us is the indication of our spiritual vitality. You can tell the root by the fruit. Our words and actions as we interact with others demonstrate what's in our heart.

SOWING AND REAPING

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

—Galatians 6:7–10 ESV



SERIES 2 EPISODE 3



Paul repeats the same pattern again in this passage: A teaching on the Spirit, followed by a social application.

The sowing and reaping metaphor gives a new image for the same things he's been saying: You really do need outside help. You really do need the Spirit of God inside of you. You really do need to be active in that. Our interaction with the Holy Spirit is where the life comes from.

The application: Do good to people. Go around doing good things, to brothers and sisters in Christ, and to everyone.

In the workplace, the way you interact with other human beings should be your first focus. Your true north is to ask, "How am I loving and serving other people during the work day?"

When we make loving others our focus, we realize how bad we are at it and how much we need God's grace, how much we need that outside help to make a difference.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

In your daily experience, what would "crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires" look like in practical terms?

The Law is good, but not the source of life. Explain this distinction in your own words.

Why does an overreliance on rules indicate a bad theology of the Spirit? What can the Spirit accomplish in us that rules cannot?

What does it look like to take responsibility for your own formation of Christlike character, rather than "pushing the responsibility" back on to God? How is tithing and generosity an example of this?

Paul repeatedly gives social applications for our internal change of heart. What does "doing good to everyone" look like in your workplace?