

# WALK BY THE SPIRIT

## SERIES: FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT



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Galatians 5:1-21  
First Message  
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*Galatians 5:1-21*

I was trying to do one thing, but something else happened instead.

I think I was around ten years old at the time. It was a Saturday, and my family made plans to go on a bike ride to a local ice cream shop. It would be a lot of fun. Anything that ends with getting ice cream counts as fun.

I must have been feeling mischievous because I decided to pull a prank on my brother. We had gotten all the bikes out of the garage, and everyone else had gone inside to get what they needed. I knelt down next to my brother's bike and let the air out of his tires. This was going to be funny.

A few minutes later, everyone came back, and we were about to leave when my brother noticed that his bike tire had no air. Here's where my plan backfired. My dad was confused because my brother had ridden his bike the previous day. He concluded that the tire must have a hole in it. Since we didn't have any extra tubes to replace it with, the bike ride was off. No fun. No ice cream.

I was trying to do one thing: play a funny joke on my brother. But something else happened instead: the family ice cream bike ride was ruined.

If you are like me, this kind of thing happens pretty regularly. We want to live a certain way. We want to eat well, but then we have five brownies. We want to reach out to our neighbors but are too tired. We want to be a certain kind of person. Maybe we even try to be a certain kind of person. But we end up failing even our standards.

It turns out that it is not easy for us to set our sights on a certain kind of behavior and follow through with it. All the New Year's Resolutions discarded by February make that clear. That alone should make people consider the biblical story; at least, it gives an explanation for why we cannot seem to live the way we want to.

This morning we're starting a new series on the Fruit of the Spirit. That phrase comes from a single verse in the book of Galatians, which lists nine different qualities of life that are described as the fruit of the Spirit. These words describe the way most people would like to live. We want to be kind and good and patient and faithful. But it is really hard to do.

Throughout the summer, we will explore one of these words each week. But this morning, we want to set the stage by looking at how to get to the fruit of the Spirit. What often happens is that we aim for these things—a life characterized by the fruit of the Spirit—but end up with something else instead.

Our passage in Galatians today helps to explain why that happens.

The problem is that you can't start with the fruit. This is the simple idea we want to get our minds around today. If you want to grow fruit, you do not begin by trying to make fruit happen. You have to start with something else, which leads to the fruit. You actually try to do something different and end up with what you wanted in the first place.

Last week we saw Jesus describe himself as the vine. He said that if his followers want to be fruitful, they need to stay connected to him. This week the apostle Paul will say something very similar in a slightly different way. He will reveal what we need to aim for if we want to see fruit. He will also describe what happens if we don't get it right. Similar to last week, it's a simple invitation: walk by the Spirit.

Many of us in this room have been trying to walk by the Spirit for some time. Some of us will make new efforts this summer. So throughout the summer, we want to hear from each other. Not quite every week, but most of them, we will do something we call Life Together, where we open up the floor and let you share something that God is doing in your life. We will keep the sermons shorter so we have room for more sharing.

This morning we will start with a general question about how you have recently seen God moving in your life. So while I'm speaking, if something comes to mind, tuck it away, and we will have a chance later in the service for you to share that.

This morning: an instruction on what to aim for and a warning for what happens when we miss. But first, a bit of background on the book of Galatians.

## Galatians background

The book of Galatians was one of the first of the New Testament books to be written, probably around 49 or 50 AD. The apostle Paul wrote this letter to a very young church struggling with a basic issue. What does it take to be counted among the people of God? How do you know if someone is a real follower of Jesus?

For the Galatians, they started following Jesus very soon after his resurrection. It was a mixed community of people who had grown up Jewish and Gentiles who had begun to believe in Jesus. The issue for them was the Jewish Law and specifically the ritual of circumcision. That was a very convenient external indicator.

Isn't this the way we work? We love to have a quick and easy way to figure people out.

When I started college, I had long hair past my shoulders. A lot of people thought they had me figured out as soon as they saw me. But most of them were wrong. Their first thought was not that I had spent a year travelling around the Midwest with a ministry band.

We like to judge by externals, but they usually don't work. That's one of the reasons the apostle Paul warned the young church in Galatia.

### Galatians 5:3:

**I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.**

Paul says that if you choose the route of the Law to determine what it means to be a Christian, you have to go all the way. It is a dangerous path to focus on externals.

On the other hand, if you throw away all the external clues, what are you left with? If we are going to be a community who follows Jesus, something has to set us apart. What does it even mean to be a Christian if you

can't tell a Christian from a non-Christian? There has to be something.

Here is what the apostle Paul says:

### Galatians 5:6:

**For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.**

Faith in Christ Jesus is what marks a follower of Jesus. That is it—nothing you do. There is no external marker. There is no way to earn salvation. It is simply faith. Don't trust externals.

This summer, we'll be talking about many external behaviors. We will need to constantly remember that these qualities aren't what makes someone a follower of Jesus. It is always faith. And faith leads to something else that tends to produce a life characterized by the fruit of the Spirit. That is where the apostle Paul goes next.

## Instruction

There is a simple instruction in the book of Galatians. If you have faith in Jesus, this is the thing that you should try to do to live out that faith. It is not an external marker but a way of living out your faith. Here is what Paul says in Galatians 5:16:

### Galatians 5:16:

**But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.**

Walk by the Spirit. That is what we aim for. That is the action that we set our sights on—walking by the Spirit. All of the external behaviors we will talk about this summer are consequences of this one command: walk by the Spirit.

Let's talk about walking for a bit. It took most of us around a year of our lives to learn to walk. During that early time, we got used to how our muscles worked. We learned balance. We gained strength. And finally, with a few tentative steps, we began to walk.

Many of us are good at walking by this point in our lives. It turns out that walking is, in fact, a very difficult skill. One scientist points out that during the course of walking, "Humans maintain their balance through a complex system of kinesthetic awareness and

proprioception that works together to control more than 600 individual muscles.”<sup>1</sup>

Walking is a very complicated physical activity. During the course of walking, we are never entirely balanced. With each step, we are constantly catching ourselves and regaining our balance. Some people refer to it as controlled falling. I am always one step away from falling on my face.

That is why teaching robots to walk like humans naturally is so difficult. All of that kinesthetic awareness and 600 muscles are enormously complicated. Robots work well when they can try to maintain balance. But constantly losing it and regaining it is very difficult.

I want to show you a video of some robots that have come as close as possible. They are manufactured by Boston Dynamics. Here’s a video showing two of their robots doing some basic parkour (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tF4DML7FIWk>).

Except for the last part of the video—the backflips—nothing here is all that complicated. Scott Grant and I could easily do this obstacle course together, and you wouldn’t be the least bit impressed. But as far as robot movement goes, it’s pretty good.

These robots walk by computer.

Followers of Jesus are told to walk by the Spirit. Controlled fall by the Spirit. Step by step, you are slightly off-balance each moment, but just before you crash to the ground, the next foot moves in place to keep you going. Walk by the Spirit.

Walk by the Spirit is what we aim for. It is a relational way of living life. Remember: the Spirit is not a set of ideas or a principle. Walking by the Spirit is not a methodology for life. It is a relationship with a person—the person of the Triune God.

This is the command we have to keep in mind as we talk about the fruit of the Spirit. We never aim for the fruit. We aim for walking by the Spirit. The fruit is what happens as a result.

Remember the story I told earlier? I was aiming for a fun prank, but I ended up ruining a family outing. If we try to aim for kindness, gentleness or self-control, we won’t get there. We’ll end up with something else entirely. The only way to see the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is to follow this command: walk by the Spirit.

Before getting to the actual fruit, the apostle Paul tells us what it looks like when we do not walk by the Spirit. He describes the life that is not in step with the personal Spirit of God. This isn’t controlled falling. It’s just falling.

## Warning

This is our warning. The last part of this passage paints a picture of what happens when you aim for something other than walking by the Spirit. It’s a grim picture.

### Galatians 5:17-21:

**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. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 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.**

We have a list of 15 behaviors characterized as the “works of the flesh.” For the next nine weeks, we will look at the next verse, which contains nine behaviors characterized as the “fruit of the Spirit.”

Those two things are set against each other in opposition. The works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. But they are not the same kind of thing. You work for the works of the flesh. The fruit of the Spirit happens because of how God designed life. It is an entirely different orientation toward life.

Here’s a simple question that can illustrate the difference. Would you rather be an ox or a tree? Would you rather be attached to a yoke and work hard, straining against the weight of making something happen? Or would you rather be a tree like Psalm 1 describes: “planted by streams of water, yielding its fruit in season, its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”

The works of the flesh are something that you do. You have a desire, and you give in to it. What happens as a result is described as the work of the flesh.

The fruit of the Spirit is totally different. It is not what happens when you fight that desire with all the self-discipline you can muster. It is what happens when you walk by the Spirit. You do not get the fruit of the Spirit by fighting the flesh. You get the fruit of the Spirit by walking by the Spirit. Don't fight the flesh.

When we start to follow Jesus, we know we want our lives to look different. What often happens is that we try to avoid these kinds of behaviors. We see them in ourselves, so we spend our effort avoiding them. But fighting the flesh doesn't work.

That is sin management. It is actually just another work of the flesh. And it is not how a tree produces fruit.

The way to avoid the works of the flesh is not to try to avoid them. And it is not to aim for the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit happens—by the supernatural work of God—when we walk by the Spirit—when we choose relationship with Jesus.

This is what we'll be exploring for the rest of the summer. Walk by the Spirit, and you will overflow with the fruit of the Spirit.

## Conclusion

Imagine that you were to walk up to someone on the street and show them two lists. The first has the 15 behaviors described as works of the flesh. The second has nine words we will hear described as the fruit of the Spirit; you're probably familiar with some of them. What would that person say if you asked them which list they would like to describe a community they are a part of?

Goodness, gentleness, and self-control? Or envy, anger, and division?

We know what most people would choose. The problem is not describing how we want to live. The problem is getting there. And in our passage this morning, we've seen that if you aim for one thing, you'll most likely end up with something entirely different.

If you aim for fruit, you won't get fruit. You will probably end up with the works of the flesh. The only way to see the fruit of the Spirit in your life is to have

the Spirit himself in your life. We grow the fruit of the Spirit as we walk by the Spirit. Each step is a controlled fall. Every moment we might feel out of balance. But it is always the Spirit who catches us in time as we keep moving and take yet another step.

## Endnotes

1. rbirk, "Why Can't Robots Walk Like Humans?," *Innovate (Future Science Leaders)*, December 22, 2018, <https://www.futurescienceleaders.com/yvr2/2018/12/22/why-cant-robots-walk-like-humans/>.