

Inheriting the Kingdom

Devotional Reading: [Isaiah 44:21–28](#)

Background Scripture: [Galatians 5:13–26](#)

Galatians 5:13–26

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

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²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Key Text

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

—Galatians 5:13

The Righteous Reign of God

Unit 3: God's Eternal Reign

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List the fruit of the Spirit.
2. Contrast the fruit of the Spirit with the works of the flesh.
3. Make a plan to identify and eliminate one unhealthy fruit in his or her life.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Already Having What We Seek
- B. Lesson Context

I. Living in Freedom (Galatians 5:13–18)

- A. Fulfilling God's Law (vv. 13–15)
- B. Choosing God's Side (vv. 16–18)

Focus Control

II. Rejecting Selfishness (Galatians 5:19–21)

- A. Deadly List (vv. 19–21b)
- B. Deadly Consequences (v. 21c)

III. Pursuing Godliness (Galatians 5:22–26)

- A. A List of Life (vv. 22–23)

What Fruit Is This?

B. A Life to Live Out (vv. 24–26)

Conclusion

- A. Forgiveness Plus
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Galatians Guh-*lay*-shunz.

Gentiles *Jen*-tiles.

Philippians Fih-*lip*-ee-unz.

Introduction

A. Already Having What We Seek

A man walks through his home, searching. *Where are my keys?* he asks himself repeatedly. Then he reaches in his pocket. His keys are there.

A woman rummages through her car, searching. *Where are my glasses?* she wonders. Then she touches her head. Her glasses are there.

Sometimes we already have what we are looking for. Today's text is like that.

B. Lesson Context

Our text is from Paul's letter to the Galatians, written to address a controversy among churches founded on his first missionary journey.

He wrote in response to some people's belief that Christians of Gentile background had to obey stipulations in the Law of Moses in order to belong to God's people ([Galatians 1:6](#); [5:2–6](#); see [Acts 15:1–5](#)).

But Paul pointed out that faith in Jesus, not the completion of the works of law, is the true identifier of God's people ([Galatians 2:15–16](#); [3:1–6](#)). God gave the Israelites the Law of Moses to guide them until he brought the fulfillment of his promises ([3:23–25](#)). That fulfillment was Jesus. His death and resurrection made it possible for people of every nation to be welcomed into God's family. Works of law in general ([3:10–12](#)) and circumcision in particular ([5:2–6](#)) had not resulted in the people living as God called them to live: fully devoted to him in holiness. But in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit, there was freedom and empowerment to do so.

I. Living in Freedom ([Galatians 5:13–18](#))

A. Fulfilling God's Law (vv. [13–15](#))

13a. You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free.

The nature of the controversy indicates the presence of spiritual *brothers and sisters* from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. These disparate groups had been made into a family by God's call. That call is the good news that in Jesus, God had come in the flesh, had submitted to death, and rose to new life.

The result of that call is freedom (see also [2 Corinthians 3:17](#); [Galatians 2:4](#)). That term would have reminded Paul's Jewish readers of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Marking the end of their enslavement, the exodus began the journey to freedom in the promised land. But beset by

sinful disobedience generation after generation, Israel lived more under oppression than in true freedom. That state led eventually to exile and captivity in a foreign land. God promised that true freedom means an end to being exiled from his presence; in the gospel, that promise is fulfilled (compare [Revelation 7:15–17](#)).

13b. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

But *freedom* is not license. Some might have thought that because the requirements of the law were fulfilled, then their freedom meant that they could do as they pleased. Paul negated this thought. Using freedom to repeat the sinful rebellion that led to exile in the first place would hardly be an expression of faith in Jesus, who was unwaveringly faithful to God the Father.

Jesus' faithfulness was expressed in his loving service for others ([Mark 10:45](#)). His followers are compelled to exercise Christian liberty in the same way: *in love serving one another*. To do otherwise would be to provide an occasion *to indulge the flesh*. The term translated "indulge" suggests something like a base of operations (also [Romans 7:11](#)).

We should consider how Paul uses the word *flesh* here. In some places, he uses this word to refer to the physical body (example: [Romans 4:1](#)). In other places, he uses this word to refer to unholy physical desires (example: [Ephesians 2:3](#)). But here the focus seems to be a perspective that is entirely self-centered, not acknowledging God's rule or others' significance.

14. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Many Jewish teachers, including Jesus ([Mark 12:28–34](#)) and Paul, saw the *entire* Law of Moses as pointing to two great obligations: to love God

and *love* others (compare [Leviticus 19:18](#); [Deuteronomy 6:5](#)). Because the Galatian churches faced division, Paul emphasized loving others as the law’s focus. If motivated by their love for God as revealed in Jesus, the Galatian Christians could love one another despite long-standing divisions of their respective heritages.

15. If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

The alternative to the love just described was self-defeating division. Each side attacked the other, like flesh-eating animals. In such a conflict, both sides would be eaten up. In the Cold War that followed World War II, the United States had a policy of nuclear deterrence known as “mutual assured destruction”—appropriately known as MAD for short. It would indeed be madness for the Galatians to undercut *each other* since that would only result in mutual destruction.

We might wonder whether a solution would be for the Galatian churches to divide into all-Jewish and all-Gentile congregations. For Paul, such a division was unthinkable. The singularity of the gospel and of God himself must be reflected in the unity of his people ([Ephesians 4:1–6](#)). A divided church will be a devoured church.

The two groups had to come to terms with the truth that they both belong to God’s people through their faith in Jesus rather than through their obedience to the Law of Moses. This did not mean ignoring their differences in background or experience; but it *did* mean uniting across those differences with Christlike love.

B. Choosing God’s Side (vv. 16–18)

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

But what can give the power to live such a life of loving service? The answer, Paul says, is what only faith in Jesus can provide: God's own Spirit, the Holy Spirit. In Old Testament times, God had sent his Spirit to a few individuals—notably the prophets, who proclaimed his message authoritatively. But God had promised that in the age to come, he would pour out his Spirit without that limit ([Joel 2:28–32](#)). All believers could be thereby empowered to live prophetically in the sense of their lives testifying to the true God and his rule over the world.

With Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, that promise is fulfilled. Those who believe in Jesus as God's true king are promised that God's Holy Spirit will live within them ([Acts 2:38](#)). Thereby they are empowered to do what Israel had failed to do before: live genuinely as God's people.

Paul did not need to tell his readers to receive the Spirit, because they already had. But the Spirit's direction and power can be resisted ([Acts 7:51](#)). So the Galatians needed to be reminded to *walk* (or live) *by the Spirit*. In so doing, they would fulfill God's will as summarized in the command to love. Such a life is the opposite of the life of *the flesh*; that is, the life of sinful selfishness. The flesh provokes *desires*, or any selfish motivation.

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to ensure that you continue walking in step with God's Spirit?

Digging Deeper

Who is a mature believer you can ask for accountability in this regard?

Focus Control

What do you think about your job, your family, or your financial situation? Each topic brings up both positive and negative aspects to ponder. Perhaps you were passed over for a promotion. But the promotion would have meant working for a supervisor who was not as caring as your current supervisor. You have a choice as to what you'll focus on: you can be angry that someone else received the promotion, or you can choose to see the blessing that resulted in remaining where you are.

This type of choice is critical because thoughts can lead to actions. Walking in the Spirit reveals a focus on the things of Christ. And when we're focusing on him, we aren't thinking about the things we could have had, the things that went wrong, or the people who wronged us. What does all this say about your choice of focus?

—P. M.

17. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

These two sets of desires, those of *the flesh* and of *the Spirit*, are fundamentally opposed to each other. We are either motivated by our self-interest or filled with the Holy Spirit who directs us toward Christlike loving service for others.

Romans 6–8 (especially **7:24–8:1**) offers us Paul's own extended commentary on the phrase *so that you are not to do whatever you want*. What we truly want is to be God's people, to fulfill the purpose for which God created us. But the selfishness that pervades our hearts prevents that. However, we receive the power to become the people we desire to be — people who reflect God's holiness — through the gift of God's Holy Spirit (see **8:10–11**).

18. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Paul clarifies that there was nothing inherently wrong with *the law* in and of itself. But the Law of Moses did have its limitations (see [Romans 7:7](#); [1 Timothy 1:8](#)). The Jewish constituents among Paul's original audience were especially challenged to shift their thoughts, speech, and behavior toward a life directed *by the Spirit*.

II. Rejecting Selfishness ([Galatians 5:19–21](#))

A. Deadly List (vv. [19–21b](#))

19a. The acts of the flesh are obvious:

For purposes of contrast, Paul reminded his readers what life in *the flesh*, the self-ruled life, was like as he began what we call a vice list. There are many such lists in Paul's letters (examples: [Romans 1:29–31](#); [Colossians 3:5](#)). We should keep in mind, however, that even collecting all the vices from all of Paul's lists would not include everything that could be named. For the list at hand, the vices fall into four groupings across three verses.

19b. sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;

These terms encompass all forms of sexual activity that occur outside of a marriage relationship. In addition to hurting others, these acts also harm the guilty person (see [1 Corinthians 6:12–20](#)).

Impurity speaks to guilt through such activity. *Debauchery* refers to behavior that is shocking to public decency. Even cultures far from godly standards uphold some standards of sexual propriety (see [1 Corinthians 5:1](#)). But a life of selfishness will find a way to shock any society. Life in the Holy Spirit is directly opposed to the life of flagrant sexual sin ([1 Thessalonians 4:3–8](#)).

20a. idolatry and witchcraft;

The list then shifts the focus to false religious practices. *Idolatry* exalts the created above the Creator, reducing God to something much less than he is. *Witchcraft* is the attempt to use physical objects and rituals to manipulate the spiritual world.

20b. hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions

Next, Paul lists attitudes and actions that work against self-sacrificial love, threatening the church's unity. *Hatred* refers to hostility toward those we identify as enemies. *Discord* is divisiveness, making differences greater rather than seeking to overcome them. *Jealousy* is a strong passion that resents the success of others.

Fits of rage refers to strong anger or wrath. God's wrath is the expression of his holiness against human evil. But human anger is often driven not by holiness but by selfishness. *Selfish ambition* is the forming of mutually hostile groups to advance selfish interests; *dissensions* intensify that unholy tendency. *Factions* point to false beliefs that lead to destructive differences within the community.

What Do You Think?

How does the world's inclination for hatred, strife, and cruelty affect the church's display of sacrificial love?

Digging Deeper

How might [James 1:19–27](#) inform the church's response to such inclinations?

21a. and envy;

The semicolon after the word *envy* indicates that it goes with the previous grouping of selfish behavior. It refers to the desire to deprive

others of what they have.

21b. drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

Paul concludes with two terms that represent public displays of the self-destructiveness produced by selfishness. *Drunkenness* (intoxication from alcohol) suggests individual self-destruction. Drunkenness is part of the wild, party-like atmosphere of *orgies*, a context which includes unrestrained immorality (contrast [Romans 13:13–14](#); [1 Peter 4:3](#)).

B. Deadly Consequences (v. 21c)

21c. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

All these evils are contrary to *the kingdom of God*—that is, to the reign of God brought about by Christ, now and in eternity. If these behaviors had become the mode of the Galatians' lives, they showed themselves to have returned to rebellion against God's rule. Those whose lives are characterized by these vices would have no eternal inheritance except death (see [Revelation 22:14–15](#)).

III. Pursuing Godliness (Galatians 5:22–26)

A. A List of Life (vv. 22–23)

22a. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,

The fruit of the Spirit stands in sharp contrast to the works of the flesh. The word *fruit* is an apt term because like a farmer who plants a crop and reaps a harvest, what the Holy Spirit produces is what God seeks in his people. Since Paul's focus is on doing good toward others,

perhaps this is why the word *fruit* is singular: all these characteristics belong together as one fruit, not many fruits.

As with the previous list, this list groups similar characteristics. It begins with three foundational aspects of the Christ-follower's character: love, joy, and peace. The kind of *love* Paul has in mind is not conditioned on how deserving of love the other person is. Rather, the kind of love in view flows from grace that blesses the undeserving. It is the kind of love that God demonstrates toward us ([John 3:16](#)). *Joy* is an inner disposition of well-being, but it always is expressed outwardly and shared with others (see [2 Corinthians 8:2](#)).

Visual for [Lesson 10](#). *Show this visual as you discuss the Digging Deeper question*

associated with [Galatians 5:22b](#).

The word *peace* reminds us of Old Testament statements about the peace that God granted his people ([Numbers 6:26](#); [Psalm 29:11](#); [Isaiah 9:6–7](#)). More than the end of hostility, such peace means positive goodwill and fellowship. As God has made whole our relationship with him, his Spirit empowers us to make relationships whole with others (see [2 Corinthians 13:11](#)).

22b. forbearance, kindness, goodness,

The second grouping consists of characteristics that undergird relationships. *Forbearance* is patience regarding the failings of others, including wrongs that others commit. As God is patient with us, his Spirit empowers our patience toward others (compare [Romans 2:4](#)).

Kindness names the attitude that seeks to do positive good to others in all circumstances. It serves to nurture and protect others. Again, because God treats his people in this way, his Spirit enables them to treat others likewise (see [Colossians 3:12–13](#)). *Goodness* further develops the idea of kindness, putting the attitude into action. Those empowered by the Spirit do not simply want the good; they actually do good things for others. The Spirit compels us to be loyal to fellow Christians, committed to their welfare no matter what.

What Fruit Is This?

We moved into a new house several years ago, and I was amazed at the beauty of the landscaping. The lawn was lush green, every brick-lined planter had blooms, and the backyard was lined with trees.

Visitors would ask us what kind of trees we had. The problem was, I had no idea. It wasn't until the trees began to produce fruit that I could

identify them. We were fortunate to have an orange tree, a lemon tree, a fig tree, and two pomegranate trees! One of the things that I loved about having those trees, besides their delicious fruit, was the fact that I learned how to recognize those trees because of their fruit-bearing properties.

However, there were some seasons when the pomegranate fruit never sweetened and turned red. The seeds stayed tasteless and white. Sometimes they'd be rotten right there on the vine, and you didn't know it until you cracked one open.

Jesus had pointed things to say about bearing fruit (see [Matthew 7:15–20](#); [12:33–37](#); [Luke 13:6–9](#)), and Paul drilled down to specifics. Bad fruit may or may not immediately be visible. But sooner or later, the nature of what the tree produces becomes known (compare [1 Corinthians 3:12–15](#)). It's impossible to go half-and-half on this (see [James 3:12](#)). Think of your most recent “fruit”—was it one of those listed in [Galatians 5:22–23](#)?

—P. M.

What Do You Think?

How do the Spirit's gifts ([Romans 12:6–8](#); [1 Corinthians 12:4–11](#)) empower you to seek the welfare of others?

Digging Deeper

How will you continue to develop never-failing love ([1 Corinthians 13](#)) so that you can be attentive to others?

22c–23. faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

The list concludes with three characteristics that are to undergird all the believer's actions. *Faithfulness* in this context refers to a willingness

to practice without fail what one believes. As God has been devoted and persistent to fulfill the promises that he has made, so also his Spirit empowers us to be persistently devoted.

A second feature undergirding Spirit-filled action is *gentleness*. The gentle do not seek to assert rights or privileges. As Christ emptied himself of privilege in becoming human, so also do those empowered by his Spirit (compare [Ephesians 4:2](#)).

The word translated *self-control* is also (with variations) found in [Acts 24:25](#); [1 Corinthians 7:9](#); [9:25](#); and [2 Peter 1:6](#). It refers to the ability to keep desires in check. This was a characteristic admired in Paul's time but not widely practiced.

The Galatian Christians could be criticized by their Jewish neighbors for abandoning the Law of Moses and by their pagan neighbors for abandoning the customs of pagan worship. But Paul reminds them that if they live as the Spirit directs, they will produce a fruit that *no law*—Jewish or Roman—stands *against*.

B. A Life to Live Out (vv. 24–26)

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

Believers in *Christ* are joined to him in his death and so are raised to a new life ([Romans 6:1–14](#)). This does not mean that our old *desires* disappear instantly. But it means that over time the Spirit replaces them with Christlikeness. This requires our cooperation to assure that the old life remains dead.

What Do You Think?

How would you explain to a new believer what it means to have “cruci-

fied the flesh” ([Galatians 5:24](#))?

Digging Deeper

How might [Romans 7:22–8:17](#) help inform your explanation?

25. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

The new life the Galatians had in Christ carried an obligation: to put that life into practice. The phrase *keep in step with the Spirit* could also be translated as “get in line with the Spirit.” It means deliberately reordering one’s life to reflect what God has done. It is bearing the fruit of the Spirit as routine practice.

26. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

The Spirit’s work can be destroyed easily by persistent selfishness, the key characteristic of the life of the flesh. If Paul’s original audience chose to seek attention for themselves, then the result would be to disregard and disrespect others. That would destroy the fellowship that the Spirit sought to build. Christians are saved by a Lord who was worthy of glory but chose lowliness to serve others ([Philippians 2:1–11](#)). Following his way by the Spirit’s power directs the Christian to a better way through loving others.

Conclusion

A. Forgiveness Plus

Paul begins and ends his vice list with the commonly named pagan vices but devotes most of his attention in the middle to matters of hostility and disunity. He is driving home a point to Galatian church members that needs to be heard through the ages: When we divide the body of

Christ for self-serving reasons, we serve the flesh. We might tend to minimize such acts by pointing to the blatant evils of the ungodly world around us, but our selfish hostility is just as evil. We paganize ourselves when we refuse to love one another. Do you want a kingdom life, the life that God always intended for his people? Then let the Holy Spirit bear his fruit.

What Do You Think?

In what ways will you serve a neighbor in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

How will the fruit of the Spirit ([Galatians 5:22-23](#)) inform your acts of neighborly love?

B. Prayer

Thank you, God, for your incomparable blessing of freedom and life in the Spirit. We rely on the power of your Spirit so that we can be people who reflect our Lord's resurrection. Amen!

C. Thought to Remember

Freedom means becoming what God made us to be.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Before class, prepare slips of paper, each containing one letter from the words *license* and *liberty*. Have learners gather in small groups. Make enough slips to give the letters of one word to each group. Challenge the groups to arrange the letters to make a word.

After groups discover their word, ask the following questions for whole-class discussion: 1—What is the difference between *license* and *liberty*? 2—How are the two sometimes confused with each other? 3—Which one is more difficult to practice? 4—Which should Christians prefer? Why?

Lead to Bible study by saying, “In today’s text the apostle Paul deals with both ideas. Let’s discover specific examples of license that he condemns and the possibility for true liberty that he lifts up.”

Into the Word

Divide the class into small groups. Distribute a handout (you prepare) with two charts. Half of the groups will complete the first chart, while the other half will complete the second.

The first chart will have three headings: *Acts of the flesh / How this attribute harms others / How this attribute can lead to division*. Have groups read [Galatians 5:19–21](#) and complete the chart.

The second chart will have three headings: *Fruit of the Spirit / How this fruit demonstrates neighborly love / How this fruit can lead to unity*. Have groups read [Galatians 5:22–23](#) and complete the chart.

After 10 minutes of small-group work, call the groups together and lead a whole-class discussion on what learners discovered.

Write the following statements on the board:

A divided church will be a devoured church.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Galatians 5:13–26](#) as learners decide how the Scripture underscores the truth of each statement. Ask learners briefly to respond.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Acts to Avoid” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

Into Life

Distribute blank paper and ask each learner to write the days of the week in a column on the left side of their paper. Then ask them to write instances during the last week when they exhibited a fruit of the Spirit. Next, ask learners to write instances during the last week when they exhibited “acts of the flesh” ([Galatians 5:19](#)).

Have learners turn over their papers and write again the days of the week in a column on the left side. At the bottom of the page, have each learner make a plan to identify and eliminate one unhealthy fruit in his or her life. Ask them to keep this page as a journal to record how they see the fruit of the Spirit at work in their lives during the upcoming week.

Alternate. Display the following self-rating scale on a poster for the class to read:

- 0—Don't see it*
- 1—I have seen it in the past*
- 2—I have seen it often*
- 3—I have seen it this week*
- 4—This is a daily part of who I am*

Ask participants to decide how they see each fruit of the Spirit in their lives. Distribute paper for each learner to list each fruit with their self-rating score beside it. Have volunteers share ways to submit to the Spirit in order to identify and eliminate things that prevent them from developing the fruit in their lives.

Option. Distribute copies of the “Yield to the Spirit” activity from the activity page. Have learners work together in pairs to complete it. After 10 minutes, bring the groups together to discuss their conclusions.