

## From Vices to Virtues

Galatians 5:16-25

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Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

I've heard this sermon before. In some ways, this message is the soundtrack to my youth. The church I grew up in practiced "Do and Don't Christianity." Our preacher wore out the "flesh and the spirit." It was his favorite tune, nothing wrong with that, sometimes the Bible yells at you and when it does you better preach it, because if you don't the well dries up real quick.

But I digress. Passages like this one from Galatians provided the moral code for our congregation. It drew the line between what was accepted and what was frowned upon. This was good and bad. First the bad, it was bad because it introduced God with no mention of forgiveness. It spoke of failure in any of the ways described as fatal without redemption. Finally, it boiled a beautiful faith down to few chosen behaviors. Now the good, having a list makes faith easier. The don'ts really are destructive. Further when you are young the simpler you can make faith the easier it is to follow. I ask you to remember this morning we are reading from one Epistle, it is not Systematic Theology, which is like making a decision from a photograph when there is a video available.

Do and Don'ts works for a while but eventually, you begin to ask "why?" "Why does God say dissensions precludes us from the Kingdom? I now have great answers to these questions. It's not like the scripture does not answer the why, but it was not a part of the sermon at Eastern Valley Baptist Church. If people don't transition from Do and Don't Christianity to a Generous Orthodoxy they are likely to transition to staying away from congregations because as adults they know life demands more than a list.

So while we need to understand the list, more importantly, we need to embrace the reason behind the list. Broadly speaking the list could be described as vices and virtues. The work of the flesh are vices. Vices are behaviors, ways, even attitudes that destroy us. They can create a vortex where they suck others into the destructive forces.

I don't think I have time to hit all of these but let me address a few and better yet explain the why behind the prohibition.

Jealousy. There is nothing wrong with having nice things. Each of us has desires and we work to ascertain them. Nothing wrong with that. Enjoy your life and if having some nice things contributes to that then proceed. Jealousy, however, is not the same. Jealousy is desiring what another person has.

For example, you have a neighbor. Each year during the holidays their home becomes Grand Central Station. The kids come home, the grandkids come back. There are a couple of dinners that look like a Norman Rockwell painting. The big table has 12 people around it. The kiddy table about 10 and then there are 6 family members sitting at a table on the deck. These visits fill up the driveway and spill out onto the street.

Meanwhile, your kids love you but they are spread from here to there. They drop by during the holidays and some of the grandkids make their way over, but rarely at the same time. There is never that moment where all their feet are under the table. You facetime some of them, text others and see some. As you live thru it, you're not really sad you understand they are busy. However, when you roll the trash can to the curb and you see your neighbor's yard looking like a parking

lot---you are jealous. You wish you could have a family like that. Now your kids are healthy, they work, they are solid folks, but that's not enough for you.

The reason jealousy is forbidden is because it is a sign of ingratitude. You don't think God has provided enough. You say you are blessed but you really want more. Jealousy blinds us to God's generosity and ungrateful people may live long lives but they are not particularly happy ones.

Another work of the flesh is idolatry. I remember hearing this one a lot as a kid. Idolatry is when anything is worshiped other than God. But why?

The biblical idols of course were these statues and figurines and we did not have anything like that in Bessemer Alabama. But our preacher had a good idea of what people had turned into an idol. Consider an idol like the north star. God should be our north star and if we are following it we will never go wrong. Yet an idol is something we mistake for a north star and where I grew up the greatest threat to the throne of God was money. Money was to some people an idol. Jesus himself knew that God's chief competition was money—Jesus said “You cannot love God and money” a choice must be made, one is the north star the other is a neon light. To worship money is to not worship God.

Beyond money, we struggle to determine what we idolize. Some idolize their spouse or their children and while love is necessary, worship is too much. Worship is reserved for a Savior. Like it or not some people can worship their loved ones.

For others, it is our U.S. Constitution. I am glad we have a constitution but some people speak of it as if the author was Moses. Do not confuse Philadelphia with Mt. Sinai. Further, we should be careful and not confuse Jefferson, Madison, and Franklin with Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We can have respect for the constitution but it is not our north star, God is, and when they are in conflict our loyalty is to our maker. As Paul describes so well in Philippians “Our citizenship is in heaven” which means as followers of Christ our loyalty is to God above all others.

The reason we should not have idols is they proclaim our lack of faith in God. Idols are something we can see and hold. We like that. God, however, is larger and cannot be held or owned by us. We control idols. God controls us. The ultimate why we turn to idols is we want to be in control. To continue to worship only God is to believe that God’s control is better for us than our own.

I think I have time for one more. How about fornication. Wish I had time for carousing. Kids ask your parents about that one at home. Next week tell me what they said.

Fornication is an old word. Not one we hear much anymore. It means a sexual relationship between two people who are not married to each other. It has many names—extramarital, adultery, and there are more.

But why is loyalty to a relationship so important? That’s an important question. In the days when scripture was written, there was no governmental role in marriage, you did not send a copy of the marriage certificate to the courthouse. A marriage was a promise. Now while there is plenty of paperwork today, at its heart marriage remains a promise. It is our word. So fornication strikes at the heart of

who we are. If we cannot be faithful to our spouse, we are not faithful to our word and if we are not faithful to our word, then exactly who are we? When our word no longer means anything, the foundation for civilization cracks. So why should we be faithful in marriage---because to not be is to break a promise to God and our spouse, it is a confession that our word means nothing.

It is a heavy weight, isn't it? This is where I was taught to finish. What chance does anyone have? If the Kingdom demands this, then all hope is gone. I'm pretty sure this is why Baptist drank heavily. I mean really how do you carry on knowing that envy, jealousy, and quarrels are such barriers to God's kingdom. Sadly this is often read as the recipe, this is God's way when it is only ONE ingredient in the recipe.

But do not despair---for God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world but to save it. Like I said earlier, Galatians in one letter, not systematic theology. God's salvation has nothing to do with our behavior, but it has everything to do with our hearts and God's grace. Our author decided the best way to contrast our vices was with virtues. The flesh produces the self-destructive action vices that ruin our lives and create misery. Yet the spirit is the gift from above, the life preserver thrown from heaven to give us hope and to remove the power of the flesh.

Jesus once told a story about unclean spirits that were cast out (Luke 11:24-26). The spirits were forced out and Jesus says they later returned. When they returned the house was swept and clean, but because the spirits were not replaced they found it easy to return home. Jesus knows psychology. The only

way to remove something forever is to replace it with something better. So here is God's gift to us—to replace the flesh.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,<sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.<sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.<sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.<sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

These virtues point us away from misery and pain and toward a life of satisfaction. I'm going to focus our attention on one of these nine gifts from above. Self-control. Consider the benefits of a life governed by self-control. When tempted to go back on your promise, when tempted to break the heart of the one you pledged to love, you show self-control and say "no." When encouraged to take advantage of another or to achieve success at the expense of another, you show self-control and remember you worship a God who takes care of you.

Joy and Peace get all the headlines because they are listed first. But batting ninth in the batting order is the anchor to the line-up self-control. As with the vices, we are asking "why" why is it preferred to exercise self-control to follow our instincts?

Self-control is under-rated. People finish college because they have self-control. People save money because they have self-control. People let arguments die and

maintain relationships because they practice self-control. People stay away from dangerous drugs because they are able to exercise self-control.

As I said I grew up in “Do and Don’t Christianity.” The reason behind the “Do’s and Don’ts” is that certain behaviors and traits will ruin our lives and other practices will form us more into the one we have chosen to follow. Self-control is just one of the practices but as we turn from vices that breed destruction to virtues that promote life we would be wise to exercise self-control.

As I mentioned, often when this passage is preached redemption is ignored. Forgiveness is not mentioned. But not so today. Most of us have found ourselves falling into more than one of these vices. <sup>19</sup>Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. The passage concludes with and those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. So the person who creates strife, the person who finds themselves angry, the person given to too much Tennessee Whisky will find themselves out. If this was the end of God’s witness we would be in trouble, but it is not.

Those in Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh but does that mean we will never be jealous or angry. If you are familiar with the work of humans you know that we can be a little erratic. So don’t conclude that the author means that any practice of the vices end in our eternal demise. Instead, understand that the vices put the wheels in motion for destructive forces to surround our life. And while the grace

of God assures us a life eternal and abundant, in this world it remains true that whatever we sow, we also reap.

Chances are that our practices and vices have sowed enough seeds that in this life our harvest will have a fair share of weeds. Yet to belong to Christ is to sow another seed. This second crop of joy, self-control, and patience are likely in time and with God's help to overcome the weeds. To be guided by the spirit has its reward.

The results of the flesh/vices are destructive----they breed ungratefulness, untruthfulness, and put our eyes on forces that lead us not on the path of righteousness but on the path of destruction.

So God prescribes another way. Practice self-control and live free. In an age where self-destruction is rampant the ability to control ourselves is the ability to be our best. We can easily find ourselves on a path of destruction, but there is grace. While the vices are destructive because of God's forgiveness, they cannot be fatal. God's gift has assured us that we never have the final word. God gets the last word called forgiveness