

BaptistWay Bible Series for October 18: Walk by the Spirit

October 5, 2009

Ask any professional organizer and you will hear: It's all in the lists. You want to get something done? Make a list. Do you wish to remove the clutter from your life and your mind? Then make a list of those things that really count, and live by it.

Paul believes in lists as well. In Galatians 5, he compiles two: one of things to avoid (vv. 19-21) and another of things to embrace (vv. 22-23). Paul reasons with his friends. He carefully lays out the truth of the gospel, urging them to live by faith, not by law. He even resorts to name-calling, labeling them "foolish" and "bewitched." Now he boils it all down to a list.

Some scholars suggest chapters 5-6 contain the practical application of the ideas found in chapters 1-4. In this context, these two lists become even more significant in helping believers "live out" the truth.

What the Bible says ...

These lists represent and describe two opposite ways of life. These "two ways" appear throughout the Bible: right vs. wrong, good vs. bad, light vs. dark, truth vs. lie, life vs. death and Spirit vs. flesh. Paul does not use "flesh" to describe the body. He employs the term to identify those sinful actions and impulses that control one's life. In contrast, "Spirit" refers to God's presence that produces good things in our lives.

The works of the flesh are clearly visible in the lives of those who chose this path of living. The 15 evil things found in 5:19-21 are by no means exhaustive, but they aptly describe the works of the flesh. Some suggest a progression in the very order of the terms, moving from sensual sins, to

religious sins, to social sins and culminating with personal sins. A closer look at the list suggests no particular arrangement. Paul may intentionally have presented them with no order or symmetry to underscore the chaos and confusion one experiences when choosing this way of life.

In contrast, the believer who follows the Spirit-led path produces a harvest of good things. These nine virtues naturally fall into three groupings: 1) love, joy, peace; 2) patience, kindness, goodness; and 3) faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. When Paul concludes this list with the words “against such things there is no law” (v. 23) he means there is no need for law when these things are produced in one’s life. Those who belong to Jesus have “crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” (v. 24). This very choice clears the way for a bountiful harvest of spiritual fruit in our lives.

What the Bible means for me today ...

The choice for us today remains the same: live to fulfill our own desires or live to fulfill God’s will for our lives. These vice/virtue lists are as relevant today as they were in New Testament times. Both describe two very different ways of life and the ultimate outcome of each one. Both produce results. These results plainly are visible for all to see.

We must guard against extremes as we live. The message of Galatians is clear: freedom is threatened on one hand by legalism and by license (anything goes) on the other. Both extremes must be avoided.

Those who choose to walk by the Spirit of God are not immune from temptation. Paul’s concluding words in chapter 5 provide an appeal for diligence: “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other” (vv. 25-26). To “keep in step with the Spirit” denotes making progress. Though no one is perfect, one should grow to become more like Jesus.

We must guard against the three areas of temptation found in verse 26. A conceited attitude has no place in the life of one who seeks to produce the fruit of the Spirit. Remember, pride does indeed come before a fall. Likewise, does a combative, provoking person reflect any of the nine virtues described in Paul's letter? Yet, it seems many believers and churches today see one another as rivals instead of partners.

Envy is an interesting word. When I am envious, I desire something you have. The underlying emotion is so intense, that I would rather see you stripped of what belongs to you more than I would desire it for myself. Have you ever been envious of the blessings you see someone else experience? If those blessings could not be yours, would seeing that person suffer be sufficient?

A final observation brings us back to Paul's analogy of fruit. Fruit is to be eaten, not put on display. Do you know anyone far from God? Offer that person God's love. This love that continues to grow in your life is meant to be shared with others. Know anyone who is discouraged? Help that person understand that joy does not depend on the "ups and downs" of life, but is grounded in God himself. You have experienced this joy, so give it away. Know anyone who is angry? Kindness, goodness and patience have taken root in your life. Give them away to someone who needs them. Pray this fruit takes root in the lives of others as well.

Having trouble remembering all these things that grow and take root in our lives? Remember, it's all in the lists.