

“INDICATIVE AND IMPERATIVE”

In the passage we studied last week, Paul said that we are not to use the freedom to which we have been called in Christ to give an opportunity for the flesh. Our freedom from the law has not been given to us so that we might live ungodly lives. Instead, we have been set free from being under the law in order that the law might be our guide and pattern for life. As Charles Spurgeon put it, “Law is the road which guides us, not the rod which drives us.” [cited in Ryken, 223] The law is not opposed to the Spirit-led life. The law itself is righteous and good. It is the revelation of God’s moral will. The problem with the law is the fact that it does not give us the power to fulfill what it requires of us. In our fleshly nature, the nature that belongs to us as fallen humanity, our efforts at keeping the law can only bring the curse of the law upon us. But in the Spirit, we are granted the power to follow the course that is charted for us by God’s law. The Spirit of God indwells every Christian, causing us to be born again and uniting us to Christ by faith. And he empowers us to walk in the paths of God’s commandments. For this reason, the gospel is just as opposed to antinomianism, or lawlessness, as it is opposed to legalism, or religion that is based upon a works principle. Paul addressed this in last week’s passage by saying that the Spirit and the flesh are in opposition to each other. And he continues to develop this idea in the passage that we are studying tonight. In these verses he illustrates how the flesh and the Spirit are in conflict by setting the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit side by side, calling our attention to the sharp contrast between them. *And the main point that he is making here is that those who have*

been granted new life by the power of the Spirit should live under the control of the Spirit, not under the control of the flesh.

As we begin our study of this passage, I want to call your attention to the two words that Paul uses in these verses to show the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit. He speaks of the works of the flesh and the fruit of the Spirit. It is significant that he uses two different terms here. We might wonder why he would not speak of the ‘works’ of the Spirit. Wouldn’t that make the contrast even more clear? The reason seems to be due to the fact that throughout this book, Paul has consistently used the term “works” in a negative sense, referring to efforts done in the flesh. He wants us to understand that the virtues that are cultivated in our lives by the Spirit are not brought about by human effort. Now this is not to say that we are passive in the cultivation of these virtues. We need to actively strive to bear this fruit. But we always need to remember that it is the Spirit who gives us the desire to live for God and who empowers us to do so.

In the first half of our passage, Paul describes the works of the flesh. The list of vices that he gives here serves as a sampling of the kinds of behaviors that naturally flow from our fallen nature. And we know that this is not intended to be an exhaustive list by the fact that it ends with the words “and things like these.” Verses 19-21 provide us with a picture of man in rebellion against God. These are the kinds of sins against which those who are led by the Spirit must fight.

This list of vices can be broken down into four main categories: the first three sins (sexual immorality, impurity, and sensuality) are perversions of our sexuality; the next

two (idolatry and sorcery) are perversions of religion; the next eight (stretching from enmity to envy) describe the ways in which sin affects our relationships with others; and the last two (drunkenness and orgies) have to do with a lack of self-control. Paul begins his list with sexual sins because such sins were so prevalent in the Greco-Roman world in which he lived. It was a world in which sexual immorality was rampant. It even extended into religious life, as cult prostitution was a significant element of pagan religion. We might think that our culture has reached new depths of sexual depravity, especially when we think of the way in which the availability of pornography on the internet has caused so many people to become ensnared by lust and sexual sin. But we should take note of the fact that Paul's world was not all that different than ours in this respect. And this can be an encouragement to us. It can help us to see that our battle against sexual temptation has been fought before. It is not inevitably a losing battle. God has the power to protect his people from sexual sin, even when we are living in a society that is as sexually-debased as ours. He has done so in the past, and he can still do so today. The promise in verse 16 is certainly true in this area: if you walk by the Spirit, you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

The next two sins on the list, idolatry and sorcery, have to do with the ways in which fallen man tries to make gods of his own devising, gods that he is able to manipulate and control. There are many ways in which we can see these kinds of sins in the world today. There are still plenty of false religions around. And there are still people who are into the occult. But these are not the only ways in which people try to press God into their own

mold and keep him under their control. Most of the people in our culture believe in some kind of god, but many of them prefer to believe what they want to believe about god rather than believe what he has revealed about himself in his Word. This amounts to making gods of your own devising.

The eight sins that come next are social sins, sins of division and strife. This reminds us that our sinfulness not only results in alienation from God but in alienation from each other as well. In our flesh we are prone to bickering, envy, hatred, jealousy, and a whole host of other sins against our fellow men. And these are sins that we as Christians need to be especially careful to not give an opportunity to.

The last two sins on the list are sins that exhibit a lack of self-control, sins of intemperance. The first, drunkenness, refers to what is sometimes described nowadays as “getting wasted,” while the second refers to the wild partying that often goes hand in hand with drunkenness. In Paul’s day, these sins were often a part of what took place in the worship services at pagan temples. In our day, they are sins that we often associate with frat parties on college campuses.

At the end of this list of vices, Paul issues a warning. He tells us that “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” That is pretty serious. Paul says that if you commit the sins that he has listed here, you will not go to heaven. Does this mean that if you have ever been jealous, or if you have ever gotten really angry at someone, you cannot be saved? Of course not. If that were the case, then no one would be saved. We can see what Paul means here by looking at the form of the Greek verb translated as

“do” in verse 21. It is a participle in the present tense, and in Greek this kind of verb is typically used to refer to a continuous activity. This tells us that Paul is talking about people who make it their practice to do these kinds of things. He is talking about people who live in these kinds of ways, people whose lives are characterized by the works of the flesh. Such people prove themselves to be outside of the kingdom of God by the manner in which they conduct their lives. Their lives are dominated by sin, not by God. In the words of one commentator,

“God’s reign or rule is moral in nature; those who consistently behave in ways that are opposed to God’s nature show thereby that they have not accepted God’s rule through Christ in their lives.” [Fung, 261-2]

Paul is telling us that those who keep on living under the control of the flesh give evidence that they do not truly belong to Christ.

That being said, there is a real warning for us here, and we need to be careful that we heed it. Paul does not issue this warning and then say, ‘But don’t worry, this could never apply to you.’ He means for us to take this warning seriously. As Calvin says, “All threatenings of the judgment of God call us to repentance.” We should hate whatever sin there is in our lives. And if we ever feel that our lives are dominated by a particular sin, we should heed Paul’s warning and turn away from that sin. At the same time, we always need to remember that the point of such warnings is not to cause us to fall into despair but

to lead us to repentance. And we can take heart in knowing that a sense of conviction over sin is itself a sign of the Spirit's gracious working in our lives.

After listing this sampling of vices, Paul turns to list the fruit of the Spirit. And notice that he says 'fruit,' not 'fruits.' This tells us that the qualities listed here are a unity. They are character traits that should be present in the life of every Christian. This also shows us that the fruit of the Spirit is different than the gifts of the Spirit. While not all Christians receive the same spiritual gifts, we do all receive the same spiritual fruit. It is not as though only some Christians receive the fruit of love, others receive the fruit of joy, others receive the fruit of peace, and so on. No, all of the qualities listed in these verses are produced by the Holy Spirit in the lives of God's people.

It is no surprise that Paul would begin this list of Christian virtues with love. Love is the foundational Christian virtue, the one out of which all other virtues flow. Joy refers not to the fleeting happiness of this life, but to the contentedness that is known by those who have received God's gift of salvation. Peace is the quality that Christians have because of the fact that we have been reconciled to God. Patience is a virtue that is closely linked to faith, as we entrust our lives into the hands of God. Kindness is a readiness to help others, as God has been so kind in stooping down to help us. Goodness is moral uprightness, which is displayed in our generosity toward others. Faithfulness is a quality that describes those who do what they say they will do. Gentleness describes those who have a calm temper in their dealings with others and in how they respond to

life's frustrations. And self-control is a quality that is present in the lives of those who are no longer under the dominion of the flesh.

After listing the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit, Paul adds one more quality that is present in the lives of believers: "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires." This is a reference to what is sometimes referred to as the mortification of sin. We still have to deal with the flesh, but we are not to coddle it. We are not to give it an opportunity. We are to put it to death daily. But this is not something that we do in our own strength. It is brought about by the power of Christ's death, as we trust that we really have died with Christ and been raised to new life in him. This is why Paul speaks of crucifying the flesh. Mortification is the moment-by-moment application of the sin-killing power of the cross of Christ to our lives. And crucifixion is also an especially appropriate image for mortification because putting sin to death is a gradual and painful process, just like death on a cross.

In verse 25, we find a concise statement that helps us to explain the relationship between the indicative and the imperative of the Christian religion. The terms 'indicative' and 'imperative' are grammatical terms that are used to describe different types of verbs. An indicative verb states what is; it indicates something. And an imperative verb states what you should do; it issues a command. These terms are sometimes used to describe different aspects of the Christian religion. The indicative of Christianity tells you who you are in Christ, while the imperative of Christianity tells you how you should live as a follower of Christ. As I said, verse 25 shows us how the

indicative and imperative relate to each other. Paul says, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.” The indicative of our faith is stated in the first phrase: we have been made alive by the Spirit. This is Christian conversion. The Spirit makes us alive in Christ. And the imperative of our faith is stated in the second phrase: walk by the Spirit. Notice how the two relate to each other. Because the Spirit has made us alive in Christ, we are to be led by the Spirit in our conduct. In other words, Paul is telling us to become what we already are. The imperative flows from the indicative. We have received God’s gift of new life by the power of the Spirit. We are therefore to act upon the basis of this new life in how we go about our day to day lives.

The verb “walk” in verse 25 could also be translated as “keep in step.” It is sometimes used in military contexts to convey the idea of staying in formation. That is the idea that Paul is conveying here. He is telling us to keep in formation with the Spirit. How do we do this? Well, as you have heard me say many times before, the Spirit typically works through ordinary means to nurture us in our faith. We need to cultivate the habit of diligently applying ourselves to these means, to prayer, to the reading and hearing of the Word, and to the use of the sacraments. These things constitute the sphere in which the Spirit does his work in the lives of God’s people. Listen to what J.I. Packer says about this:

“The Spirit works through *means* – through the objective means of grace, namely, biblical truth, prayer, fellowship, worship, and the Lord’s Supper, and with them

through the subjective means of grace whereby we open ourselves to change, namely, thinking, listening, questioning oneself, examining oneself, admonishing oneself, sharing what is in one's heart with others, and weighing any response they make. The Spirit shows his power in us, not by constantly interrupting our use of these means with visions, impressions, or prophecies..., but rather by making these regular means effective to change us for the better...Habit forming is the Spirit's ordinary way of leading us on in holiness." [cited in Ryken, 240-1]

We do not become holy by striving after intense mystical experiences or by waiting for the Spirit to do some extraordinary work in our lives. We become holy by using the means of grace that the Spirit uses to do his work within us. This is the way to walk by the Spirit. And notice how this is completely consistent with what we have said about the relationship between the indicative and the imperative in the Christian life. We do not carry out the imperatives of Christianity in our own strength. To do so is to try to be perfected by the flesh. We carry them out by trusting that the Spirit has made us alive in Christ and that he continues to apply Christ's saving work to our lives through the mechanisms that God has set up and promised to bless. This is why the virtues listed in these verses are called the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of the Christian.