

The Struggle To Be My Best Self

On Sunday we resumed our sermon series called “Eight **EPIC** Bible Passages.” Tonight we’ll talk about the 7th epic passage – Galatians chapter 5.

1. Warm up question: To illustrate the kind of challenges life constantly throws at us, Jeff began Sunday’s sermon with a story about a late-night prank phone call. Tell us about the worst/best prank call you’ve ever made or received. (If you don’t have a prank call to talk about, tell us about another prank you experienced.)
2. Read Galatians 5:16-25. Today’s passage is dominated by two lists – one positive, one negative. The negative list reminds us of various destructive ways we often react to life’s challenges. The sins mentioned can be divided into four basic categories.
 - a. Sexual Sins. The words “fornication, impurity, and licentiousness” remind us of various ways we can misuse God’s gift of sexuality. We live in a culture where sexual norms are rapidly changing, and we may not all agree on this subject, but we can benefit from sharing perspectives. So, in that spirit, what personal standards guide you in distinguishing healthy acts of sexuality from destructive ones? Give some examples of standards that guide you.
 - b. Religious Sins. The words “idolatry and sorcery” remind us of ways we can misuse religion. Idolatry is when we try to create God in our own image, bringing God down to our own level, to try to justify our own shortcomings. Anne Lamott says, “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.” When in your life have you been guilty of some form of idolatry?
 - c. Substance Abuse Sins. The words “drunkenness and carousing” remind us of ways we can misuse substances in our life – alcohol, food, prescription meds, money, etc. What personal standards guide you in distinguishing healthy and unhealthy use of alcohol? What standards guide you in distinguishing healthy and unhealthy use of food?
 - d. Relational Sins. The words “strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy” remind us of ways we inflict harm on our relationships with people. In your workplace, do you see these kinds of things happening? Tell us about it. How are you trying to be a positive force?
 - e. Throughout the ages, many Christians have prayed “prayers of examen” (i.e., prayers of self-assessment) and prayers of confession. Jeff said he feels it’s important that we cultivate sensitivity to our own capacity to do evil. Do you agree – why or why not? How much time and energy should we invest in prayers of examen and confession?

3. Sin is a big problem. It drains beauty out of our life, and messes things up for ourselves and others. Some people try to address the problem of sin by turning to “religion as rule keeping.” Others opt for “religion as spirituality.” A wise person once said, “Religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell. Spirituality is for people who’ve already been there.” In your view, what’s the difference between “religion” and “spirituality”? And why does the difference matter?
4. Galatians 5 rejects “religion as rule keeping” and instead embraces a holistic approach to spirituality called “living in the Spirit.”
 - a. Verse 16 exhorts us to “live in the Spirit.” Verse 18 goes on to say, “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the Law [i.e., religious rules].” As best you understand, what does it mean to “live in the Spirit” and how does that differ from “religion as rule keeping”?
 - b. Are you comfortable with the idea that you are not subject to religious rules? Does that mean we’re not subject to the Ten Commandments? Do rules have any useful role to play in the life of a person who is “led by the Spirit”?
5. The term “fruit of the Spirit” suggests an agricultural analogy. The basic idea seems to be that, when we plant God’s Spirit in our soul, and then consistently cultivate that Spirit, the natural result will be a life characterized by “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”
 - a. In your life experience, when did God’s Spirit get “planted” in your soul? In other words, when did your active spiritual journey begin?
 - b. Many of us have personal Soul Care Plans that identify the things we feel called to do to continue to “cultivate” the Spirit inside us. How is your Soul Care Plan coming this year? Do you feel like you are engaging in enough spiritual practices to keep the Spirit inside you strong? Are you feeling led to add anything to your repertoire?
 - c. Jeff compared “life in the Spirit” to living with our palms up, like antenna receivers, actively receiving impulses, guidance, and messages from God. Does that analogy work for you? Think back over recent days and tell us about a situation where you felt you were receiving a message from God about what to do. What happened?
 - d. Let’s go back to where we started tonight. Suppose you’re facing a question about sexual behavior, or food or alcohol, or conflict with another person. As someone “living in the Spirit,” how would you go about figuring out what to do in any of those situations? How would you make your decision about what to do? And without rules to dictate the answer, how could you be confident you are doing the right thing?