

THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL LETTERS TO GOD’S PEOPLE THE GOD WHO CHANGES US *Once Works, Now Fruit*

You may remember a movie from a number of years ago called *The Stepford Wives*. A group of men somehow turned all the women in Stepford into “perfect wives.” The only problem was these women were no longer “real people.” They were robots. When God fashioned man from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life, He did not create a Stepford community. God’s plan was not for a planet of human robots programmed to serve, honor, and praise Him. El Shaddai – God Almighty wants His children to love Him because it is our hearts’ desire! Therefore, God gives us free will, the power to make decisions of our own rather than having God or fate predetermine what we do. The freedom to make our own decisions can be risky business.

And this bring us to the dilemma in the life of every believer. Paul explained it this way in **Romans 7:15 (ESV)** ¹⁵ *For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* This problem for the believer comes about because of our two natures. Every human being is given the free will to do as we please. When God saves us He does not destroy our fleshly nature we received at our natural birth and turn us into a robot. However, He does place within us a new nature born of the Holy Spirit. These two natures (carnal and spiritual) dwell side by side in the believer and I can testify from personal experience, there is a constant battle going on between these two natures. For example, the spiritual nature whispers I should love someone who has hurt me while the carnal nature cries out, ‘go ahead, this is your chance to get even.’

Our Heavenly Father wants to develop us into mature believers who grow stronger in our faith and walk daily in step with His Spirit. I am sure you have heard this story but it is the perfect illustration concerning our struggles. There was a man who saw a butterfly still in a cocoon struggling to be free. The man decided to intervene and help the butterfly with its struggle. He broke the cocoon giving the creature its freedom. To the man’s dismay, he realized that his intervention of freeing the butterfly from its struggle before the proper time had caused the butterfly’s wings to be malformed and this living thing was never able to fly as God had intended. You must expect a struggle between flesh and Spirit as long as you are in the world but God’s Word promises victory! Jesus said in **John 16:33 (ESV)** ³³ *I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”* Paul in his letter to the Galatians spoke concerning the two natures within every believer.

We walk by the Spirit, not by the flesh.

Read Galatians 5:16-18 (ESV) ¹⁶ *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.* ¹⁷ *For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh,*

*for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*¹⁸ *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*

Even though Japan had surrendered to the allies in 1945, ending World War II, one soldier, Hiroo Onoda, held out like a hermit in uniform for decades. Even when he received the word of the war's end, he did not believe the war was over and camped out in the Philippine jungle waging war on the local population until 1974 when his Japanese commander came to inform him he could stop fighting and released him from his military duties. Sadly, Onoda had continued to fight a war that had already been won. It sounds so foolish but many Christians live the same way as Onoda. We do not accept God's truth that the war is over. Christ has won! ***Colossians 3:1 (ESV)***¹ *If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*

Being born again takes a moment of faith, but becoming Christ-like is a lifelong metamorphosis that will only be complete when we see Jesus face-to-face. We must never underestimate the power of sin. We must not attempt to fight the battle in our own strength. We don't have to do that since God is on our side. Our spirit can overcome the flesh. Satan is a crafty tempter, and we have an amazing ability to make excuses and yield to temptation. It is a trait we inherited from Adam and Eve!

Wiersbe explains, "The solution is not to pit our will against the flesh, but to surrender our will to the Holy Spirit. *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law* literally means, 'But if you are willingly led by the Spirit, then you are not under the Law.' The Holy Spirit writes God's Law on our hearts so that we *desire* to obey Him in love. ***Psalms 40:8 (ESV)***⁸ *I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.*" Being "led by the Spirit" and "walking in the Spirit" are the opposites of yielding to the desires of the flesh."

We cast off the works of the flesh.

Read Galatians 5:19-21 (ESV)¹⁹ *Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

The list can be divided into sensual sins, religious sins, social sins and personal sins. Notice Paul adds to the list *and things like these* letting us know that the list is not all inclusive. There are similar lists in ***Mark***, ***Romans*** and ***1 and 2 Timothy***. The flesh is able to manufacture sin but it can never produce the righteousness of God. ***Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)***⁹ *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?* We don't need to go through definitions of these sins. Our carnal nature understands them very well.

We might be concerned with verse 21 which says: *that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.* Surely it does not mean that if we sin after we have accepted Christ as Savior that we will not go to heaven? No! McGee explains this way, "Our Lord gave the illustration of the Prodigal Son who

got down in the pig pen but didn't stay there. The only ones that stay in a pig pen are pigs. If a son gets there, he will be very unhappy until he gets out. If you can continue to live in sin, you are in a dangerous position. It means you are not a child of God.”

Jesus explained in *Matthew 7:20 (ESV)*²⁰ *Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.* Good fruit comes from a good tree, but bad fruit comes from a bad tree. Everything in nature reproduces after its kind, and this is also true in the spiritual realm. True faith in Christ changes the life and produces fruit for God's glory.

After having listed the **works** of the flesh, Paul lists the **fruit** of the Spirit. Notice the contrast: works of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit. The works of the flesh are what we do. The fruit of the Spirit is what God does in us.

Please understand that Christians have always been drawn from all kinds of sinful backgrounds. Even after a sinner becomes God's child, the struggle with evil desires will continue. In fact, the closer you become to Christ, the more you will recognize sins in your life that you might not have considered to be sin before. It is our 'assignment' as God's child to avoid continuing in sinful practices. However, those who say that they are Christians but persist in these practices with no sign of remorse will not inherit the kingdom of God. Such people, even if they are church members, need to reevaluate their lives to see if they have truly accepted Christ and have been filled with the Spirit.

Sin is a delicious looking yet poison apple in the life of the believer and the best antidote against sin is to walk in the Spirit. We need to be much in conversation about spiritual things with others and with God. We need to view the events of life in the spiritual realm rather than the carnal. We should commit ourselves to the guidance of the Word of God – the place where the Holy Spirit most often makes known the will of God to us concerning our lives. *Romans 8:5 (ESV)*⁵ *For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.*

Instead of trying to overcome sin with human willpower, we must take hold of the tremendous power of Christ that is available to us. This is God's provision for victory over sin—he sends the Holy Spirit to live in us and give us power. And when we fall, He lovingly reaches out to help us up. When we are controlled by the Spirit, we will follow the footprints of Jesus and **bear the fruit of the Spirit.**

Read Galatians 5:22-26 (ESV)²² *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,*²³ *gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*²⁴ *And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*²⁵ *If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.*²⁶ *Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.*

I noticed that the word used here (fruit) is singular. However, Paul had called the 'sin list' works of the flesh. Theories abound as to why "fruit" is singular and not plural. Some scholars do use the plural when describing these verses. It has been suggested that the use could be just like we sometimes use the word fruit in the plural today (i.e. She bought fruit at the farmers' market). Christian blogger Steve Shirley

suggests this thought, “These sinful ‘works of the flesh’ can be produced by any person. In contrast, the nine traits that make up the ‘fruit of the Spirit’ can only be produced by the Holy Spirit. So ‘works’ (plural) by anyone, ‘fruit’ (singular) by only one person the Holy Spirit.”

We see all sorts of artificial fruit fashioned by human hands – some seemingly more beautiful and perfect looking than genuine fruit. But, trying to eat that artificial fruit is out of the question. In nature, we can plant and cultivate a tree but ultimately only God produces the fruit. It is the same in the spiritual world. Paul said in *1 Corinthians 3:6 (ESV)* ⁶ *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. Only the Spirit of the crucified risen Lord can cause our lives to bear the fruit of the Spirit.*

Cultivation of the fruit is important. Paul warns that there must be a right atmosphere before the fruit will grow. Just as fruit cannot grow in every climate, so the fruit of the Spirit will not grow where sin abides. The Spirit can do His work in and through us only as we respond to Him. *If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.*

When we keep in step with the Spirit, we will be filled with fruit of the Spirit, that is *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*. Charles Stanley explains,

This nine-fold fruit of the Spirit is not what we *do*, but who we *are*, and it is primarily on display in Christians when circumstances are unfavorable. Two characteristics help us recognize these traits in our lives.

Fruitful believers are not controlled by their environment. Everyone experiences trials and pain, but those who are filled with the Spirit do not lose His fruit because of their situations. They keep their joy even when difficulties overwhelm. If someone speaks harshly, they respond with kindness. Because the Holy Spirit is in control, He is free to produce His fruit no matter what the circumstances are. Even though such believers may feel pain, anger, or a desire for revenge, they choose to trust the Lord to protect them and direct the outcome.

Fruitful Christians recover quickly after a fall. These believers are not perfect, but they are sensitive to the Spirit's conviction and are quick to return to the Lord in repentance. In fact, they are actually grateful for the correction and praise God, not only for revealing their weakness but also for drawing them back to obedience.

No one produces these amazing qualities in himself. Trying harder to be godly will never work. Character transformation occurs when we submit to God, giving Him complete control of our lives. Only then will the Spirit be free to produce fruit that remains even in the deepest, darkest storms. Each believer decides who rules his life, by either actively surrendering to Christ or deliberately going his own way. Even those who try to avoid the issue by making no choice at all unknowingly opt for self-rule. The fullness of the Spirit and godly character await those who choose God over self.