

LIVING UP TO YOUR SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL

Galatians 5:24, 25

What is your spiritual potential? With reference to Christian service, each of us has a different potential. Our potential in service will vary with the gifts that God has given to us, and with the opportunities that come to us. But in Christian character each of us has the same potential. The potential for us is Christ-likeness. We have the potential of producing a full harvest of the "fruit of the Spirit". As we considered each of these qualities in some detail --- love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, meekness, faith, temperance--you may have thought, "such is beyond me". Not so! That is your spiritual potential. You are potentially fruitful.

Would you dare do a little personal assessment? What percentage of your spiritual potential are you now reaching? How would you measure your fruitfulness? Can you see signs that you are moving toward Christ-likeness? Have there been changes in your relationship with God, in your relationship with others, in your relationship with yourself, that would encourage you to believe that you are moving toward your potential? This is an important consideration. Growth in the Christian life is growth in these very areas. The fruit of the Spirit should be developing and maturing in our lives.

It is with this potential for fruitfulness in mind that the Apostle comes to our text today. Your being fruitful is dependent upon the two truths stated in these two verses. To the degree that these two verses are applied to your life, to that degree you will be moving toward your potential. You are not going to make one giant leap, and suddenly achieve your spiritual potential, but you need to be moving toward it.

I. IF YOU ARE GOING TO LIVE UP TO YOUR SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL, YOU MUST REALIZE THAT THE FLESH HAS BEEN CRUCIFIED.

Paul supports his words about the "fruit of the Spirit" with a bold affirmation. "And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts." By "flesh" the Apostle refers to the old man, your human nature in its sinful state apart from the influence of God. To those who are acquainted with the "flesh" it is obvious that something must be done with the flesh if there is to ever be the fruit of the Spirit in a human life. Not one of the qualities produced by the Spirit is native to the flesh. The flesh does not naturally "love" God. Instead it just naturally resists and opposes God. The flesh does not naturally "joy" in God, but rather it just naturally delights in self and sin. The flesh is not naturally meek, or faithful, or temperate. It will by nature be just the opposite. So if there is to be a fruitful life, something must be done with the flesh.

Paul affirms that this has been taken care of. He says the Christian has treated the flesh like the world treated the Lord Jesus. The world "crucified" Jesus, and the Christian has "crucified" the old man, the flesh. The verb used by Paul is past tense verb which refers to a point action. He sees this as something that has been accomplished in the life of those who belong to the Lord Jesus.

Maybe we can gain some insight into this if we will recall the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus. that was involved? First there was a judgment reached with reference to the Lord Jesus. In its own blind way the world came to the conclusion that Jesus was not worthy to live, that he should be put to death. This led to the actual crucifixion. In the same way a Christian is a person who has reached a point of judgment upon his old nature. He has come to the settled conviction that the old man deserves to die, that he should be crucified. He concludes that flesh will never be able to please God, that in it there dwells no good thing. Was this not part of your becoming a Christian? One reason some men never come to Christ for salvation is that they never reach this judgment about themselves. They keep holding on to the hope that they might by their own power be able to produce what God requires. But every genuine Christian has come to this judgment at some point in his life.

But then after reaching that judgment, the world in a final act of renunciation nailed him to a tree. They renounced Him once and for all. In the same way the person who becomes a Christian makes such a renunciation. The old flesh is renounced. The Christian dies to any claim of the flesh upon his life. He gives himself over to a new master, even Christ, and determines to obey only Christ. While the Apostle refers to this as something that has happened in the past, at the point of Christian conversion, it does have an ongoing application. The crucifixion of the flesh does not remove the flesh. It will still be there to struggle for the mastery of your life. Paul referred to this continuing conflict earlier in the chapter (v. 17). So there is a sense in which one must reaffirm his judgment upon the flesh and his renunciation of the flesh with each new day. This is what Jesus had in mind when he called upon his disciples to bear their cross daily (Luke 9:23). He was calling for a daily reaffirmation of the part of his disciple that the flesh has no claim upon his life, but rather that now he belongs to and is obligated to obey only the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you are to ever live up to your spiritual potential, this must be true in your life. If you allow the flesh to master or influence your life in any area, you will not be producing the fruit of the Spirit. Wherever the flesh is allowed to dominate, it will prevent the development of Christ-like character.

Let me raise a question at this point? Is it possible for a Christian to become a "carnal Christian"? This term is used quite commonly to refer to a professing

Christian who is living a flesh dominated life. They are under the daily control of the old man. Will you let me make an assertion? Such a view of the Christian life is in conflict with the bold assertion of this text. If a person who belongs to Jesus comes under the domination of the old man again, in my view, God will soon remove them from the earth scene just like the keeper of the vines cuts out a branch that does not bear fruit. While the "flesh" will continue to seek dominance, and may at times gain control in one area of life, God will not allow the old to overcome. He moves His people into the practice of a daily death to the old. His people are moved to face each new day with an affirmation that they belong to Jesus Christ, and they are dead to the old man. Realizing this is essential in living up to your spiritual potential.

II. IF YOU ARE GOING TO LIVE UP TO YOUR SPIRITUAL POTENTIAL, YOU MUST RELY UPON THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.

"If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." The Christian has not only participated in Calvary, they have been to Pentecost. The great assumption about every Christian is that he lives by the Spirit. The "if" in this sentence does not suggest doubt. Rather it assumes a fulfilled action. We might translate it, "since we live in the Spirit". The Holy Spirit comes into the life of the Christian at the moment of conversion to be the seal of God. He marks the Christian as God's special property. Christ dwells in the Christian through the Holy Spirit. So actually when we invite Christ to live in our hearts by faith, He comes to live within by the Holy Spirit.. It is true that you may not have invited the Holy Spirit to take up residence in your life, but if you extended an invitation to the Lord Jesus, when He came in, the Holy Spirit came in. Christ could not have come in apart from the Holy Spirit. He is the spiritual presence of Christ in the world. So the Christian lives spiritually by the Holy Spirit. All of the Christian life is "in the Spirit".

Paul's appeal then is that since we do live by the Spirit, we should also daily walk by the Spirit. This is a call for an on-going course of action. To walk means to walk in a line, to march under a battle order. So it means that our daily conduct is to be under the rule and control of the Spirit.

How does this work experientially in my life? As the indwelling Spirit, he produces in the Christian an impulse toward the Christ-like thing in every situation. For example in your response to God, He will produce in you a desire to love God, a desire to delight in God, a desire to enjoy the favor of God. Then when you respond to that desire with a commitment to do it, if you will depend upon Him, the Holy Spirit gives to you the power to love God, to delight in God, and to enjoy the peace of God. That stepping forth to do what He has given you the desire to do, is walking in the Spirit.

To use another example, when you come up against some fellowman who tends to be a source of irritation, the Holy Spirit will produce in you a desire to be longsuffering, kind, and helpful to the man. When you step out to fulfill that longing with a dependence upon the Holy Spirit to enable you, then He does give you the inner strength to be longsuffering, kind, and good.

To further apply this, in your own life, the Holy Spirit will produce within you a desire to be a person of faithfulness, meekness, and self-control. The impulse in that direction is surely from Him. And then when you respond to that impulse with faith in the Holy Spirit to enable you to fulfill it, He does. This is walking in the Spirit.

The application of this is so important in your daily life. The realization of the spiritual potential in your Christian life is dependent upon your learning how to walk in the Spirit in the day to day matters of life.

CONCLUSION:

Let's go back and think about that assessment with which we began our discussion. How much of the spiritual potential in being expressed in your Christian life? Are there evidences of Jesus Christ in your life? Let me put it yet another way. Suppose I were to ask the people who have been close to you for the last two weeks, if they have seen evidence of Christlikeness in you? Would they say you are being dominated by the flesh or by the Spirit? If you suspect that they would deny that they have seen Christ-likeness in you, then it calls for some radical action. There is something seriously wrong. You need to reaffirm beginning right now that the old man deserves only to die, and that it has no right to control your life. You need to reaffirm that beginning right now you will follow only the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, and that you will depend upon Him to make you like Christ. The miracle to a Christ-like life will begin to become a reality to those who know you best.