

## Part 11: A Spirited Community

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It seems we are destined for one of two experiences in life. We will either be alone, or we will be annoyed. Introverted or extroverted—it seems the inevitable force behind our social interactions.

Yes, it's great that we get to stream our own movies and create our own playlists, work in our own homes, and curate our own digital friends. But sometimes we want others to enjoy music with us, learn alongside us, and work with us. Yet the moment we move towards others we are reminded of how bad Dave's taste in music is, how loud Dorothy chews, and how painful that last conversation with Seth was.

We are all faced with a cost-benefit-analysis. What's worse: the aloneness of our own world, or the annoyance of others?

But Paul wrote the letter of Galatians not only into our fractured social culture, but into the tensions and trauma that typified the churches of Galatia. The solution of the gospel which saved Jews and Gentiles together, is also the solution to the problems these Jews and Gentiles now have in their own life together.

Because the gospel has to do with faith in Jesus—the community of faith is united chiefly in Jesus. That means there's no orthodox menu for the church potluck, no required style of music on the shared playlist, and no social or economic barrier to join the family of God.

Paul has made it clear—Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, none of those are required for entry into the kingdom of God. Paul says, if you are in Christ—then you are Abraham's offspring, children of God and siblings of those who share the same faith.

When it comes to our standing before God—by faith we are robed in Jesus' perfect righteousness. Yet, when it comes to our standing before others—we are anything but perfect. Paul knows this, and you know this.

Yet, the same gospel that restores us into fellowship with God through the Spirit contains the same promise and power to restore us into fellowship with one another. The gospel provides us hope for the authentic community we all crave.

If what Paul is saying is right, then he's calling these Jewish Christians who loathe the culture of the Gentile Christians to love them. And he's telling these Gentile Christians who have been shamed and discriminated against to move back towards those who sinned against them.

We have a phrase we use when people of differing opinions get together. We call it, "a spirited community." Things get hot, and things get a bit spirited. But that's why the title of my sermon this morning is: "A Spirited Community."

How can those who are so different from one another live together despite our weaknesses, warts and weird tendencies? Because the same Spirit that restores us to God restores us to one another. There's no community like this community.

Our main point this morning is this: **Life in the Spirit is Life Together**. Today, Paul will show us that an authentic and Spirited community must: **Walk in the Spirit Together, Deal with Sin Together, and Stand Alone Together**.

I pray that the gospel we share in this church produces such fruit as this in our own body this morning. Paul is getting practical here because the gospel is practical. Having told us that in regards to our justification before God we must stand firm—Paul now tells us that in regard to our life together we must walk in the Spirit.

This is our first point this morning: **Walk in the Spirit Together**. Read with me, **Galatians 5:25-26**, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another."

This walking together comes with two qualifiers. First, notice Paul's use of pronouns here: if we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit, let us not become conceited, provoking one another, or envying one another.

To use a modern phrase, Paul just said the quiet part out loud. To walk together means we must be together with other believers. Paul doesn't command--Paul assumes that a Christian saved by grace in Christ is also a Christian placed by grace into the corporate life of the church.

When Christ died for the church—he died to create the church. We do not join a church in order to be saved. But we are saved in order to be joined to the church—to be restored to a community of fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul already told us that he's writing to the churches (a word which means assemblies) in Galatia.

These churches in Galatia were walking together—but only with people who they liked. The culturally Jewish Christians had taken over the church and quietly forced the culturally Greek Christians out of the fellowship. In function each church had split into two churches. But after Paul corrects their doctrines of salvation he doesn't say: "Now that you've got salvation right—keep it up. You're fine." The power of the gospel to save anyone by faith is what enables the church to be a beautiful representation of unity in Christ and diversity in life. The unity we share before God in our salvation is displayed to the world with beauty in our congregations.

We walk together with the church—but secondly, we walk together as the church only when we do so in the Spirit.

Paul gives a conditional statement knowing that the condition is already met. "If we live by the Spirit." Paul has just spent the last five chapters making the case that we only live by the Spirit. If we have faith in Jesus, then we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

If we live in the Spirit, then we must together keep in step with the Spirit. If we are going to make it together as a church—we need to remember that what brings us together is nothing but the life we share in the Spirit.

This is what theologians call, “animation.” The venn diagram of what theologians and cartoons have in common is very small—but here’s the one exception. Both see the wonder of animation. Kids, when you watch a cartoon, someone drew an image. And it didn’t matter how beautiful or detailed that image was—it didn’t move. But then, someone or something animated it. Something brought those flat and inactive pictures to life—it added color and character and movement. For the Christian, your life is animated by the Spirit.

There’s a bit of a pun wrapped up in Paul’s language here. In both Hebrew and in Greek, the word for “Spirit” is also the word for “breath,” or “wind.”

Now, I don’t mean to make unfair assumptions, but I’m assuming that everyone here this morning is alive. This is remarkable because since I started preaching, I never once reminded you to breathe. Yet, you did it. Why? Because—you’re alive. And that’s what living people do. They breathe.

Paul’s logic and connection between our individual salvation and our corporate belonging to the church is just as tight. If we live by breathing, let us keep breathing. And therefore, if we live in the breath of the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit by breathing. The life we have in the Spirit animates the life we have with one another. We share the same life. It is natural, but we need to be reminded of it.

This is why we want to be careful to not build community in our church around things which are not our identity in Christ. It is good to have places to connect to people your same age, same gender and same station in life. We gladly provide some of those places—but the nature of the church is not the life we share at work, or the life we share outdoors, or the lifestyle we share regarding education—it is the life we share in the Spirit. And if we want to do well at being alive—we ought to together keep up with it. Keep walking in it, which means we keep walking with one another.

And notice how life lived together in the Spirit creates a community that is generally empty of one’s prideful sense of self: “Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying on another.”

This is where the church is a wonderful display of true and authentic diversity. Paul assumes that my life and my gifts might provoke you, and that your life might cause me to envy you.

Yet, he says we ought not to become conceited. What does it mean to be conceited? It’s an idea that is expressed in the two Greek words that stand behind it: “empty thoughts.” To be conceited is to have empty thoughts, it’s to be puffed up about nothing. It’s to be full of oneself.

And if we are full of ourselves, then we are always going to be frustrated and frustrating. Think of it this way. Let’s say that we have all been given instruments and have practiced at home for a year to perform a concert. The night of the big show finally comes, and we anxiously await the rise of the curtain. You’re sitting there with your clarinet. The conductor steps up, silences the crowd, and begins to lead.

You know, because you’ve been studying, that you’re supposed to wait four counts and then come in on a sustained half note. But as soon as the conductor dropped his baton on the first note—Kyle on the cymbals just blasted right in. The never of that guy. Meanwhile, he’s looking at you like you’ve never read a piece of music before in your life. But then the moment comes, you begin your half-note, which is supposed to be played quietly. Your moment of being heard has arrived. But then Sharon behind you on her stupid trumpet starts playing a string of eighth notes, loudly, and with much vigor. And at this

point—you're beside yourself. The poor bassoon player hasn't even played yet—but you can see he's upset because he just stood up and began to walk off stage.

Now, this is hopefully a humorous illustration because, if you rehearsed well, and if you understood what was going on you would never show up to a concert and expect your part to be the only part. You would instead expect that there are different parts, and different players. They may play louder, softer, more, or less. But if the piece of music is driven by the perception of an individual—it's a life of endless frustration. But a humble, and therefore a happy, musician realizes that it's not about the whole band following them—but it's about the whole band following the conductor.

That's what makes diversity sing. And that's what the Spirit does in the church. He neutralizes our pride and our offenses and submits all of us to what God is building and doing, not what we are building and doing.

The Spirit gives us life, and the Spirit leads us in beautiful diversity using our gifts and talents together not for our own gain—but for the glory of God. That's what the church is about. The church is freed from having to keep up with the Jones' because we are more focused on keeping up with the Spirit.

But even for the best family, and the best orchestra, there are moments of painful mistakes, forgotten cues, and real problems. Which is why a Spirit filled community must: **Deal with Sin Together.**

**Galatians 6:1-3**, "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself."

Growing up in school I learned fire drills and how to stop-drop-and-roll. Those a generation older than me learned how to take shelter during a nuclear holocaust. But both were given words of preparation: If this...then this. We get those same rules on an airplane, "If we lose cabin pressure, in the rare event of a water landing...."

But the truth is, I've never been on fire. I don't think you've ever been bombed. And most of us don't expect to crash in an airplane. However, this is not the tone Paul makes here.

Paul's grammar doesn't indicate this may or may not happen and maybe you should know this ahead of time. Paul's grammar makes an assumption—if you are in God's church, if you belong to God's community of grace—you will have a moment happen when someone is caught in sin. It might be you. It might be someone else. But it is going to happen.

Do you have the same expectations for life in the church? Because if you don't expect this, then you won't listen to Paul. And if you won't listen to Paul, then when this happens you won't remember what to do. And if you can't remember what to do, then you and me, and all of us are in trouble.

Because our world has ways of dealing with people who break rank and fall out of favor with their community. If you forget to set your lineup for Fantasy Football—you'll be kicked out. If the gossip girl at school finds out that you and your boyfriend are pursuing a Christian ethic love and not our culture's ethic—you'll be shamed. If you for a second waiver on the talking point of the day online—you will be cancelled.

Our world will deal with what they think is sin—even if they don't have language for it. But how does the church deal with sin?

Brothers and sisters, this is why we practice, and the church has always practiced, church membership and church discipline. Because when I fall, if I fall, when you fall, if you fall—I want someone who is spiritual to be there for me. I want someone who can restore with a spirit of gentleness because they've been filled with the Spirit of gentleness to be there for me.

Jesus introduces church discipline in Matthew 18, and we can summarize the process this way: If you find a believer who is living in unrepentant sin, you ought to lovingly remind him that sin kills and the gospel gives life. If he doesn't listen to you, get one or two other members and together gently reprove him firmly, warning him of the danger of sin and point him to the grace of God. Finally, though, if he refuses, the whole church is to call the sinner to repent and if he has ignored the reminder, scoffed and the reproof, and ignored the church—you are to remove him from the fellowship. Why? He has shown to have no life in him. Living people breathe. Living Christians repent—even if it's hard to notice.

Paul's message here is focused on what happens in those first two cases: reminding and reproof. This is Paul's crash course on first-responding training for the church. And the lens he fits our eyes with is the lens of restoration.

If someone is caught in transgression—we work to restore them. Paul used “transgression” only one time before in Galatians the context was why God gave the law. He said the law came because of transgression. That meant, that for the person living under the Old Testament law, when you sinned—the law showed up. And what did the law do? It demands and it damns. But here, for the community that lives under the law of Christ—when someone is caught in sin who shows up? Not the law to condemn, but their brothers and sisters to restore him.

John Bunyan once wrote, “Run, John, run, the Law commands, but gives us neither feet nor hands. Better news the Gospel brings; it bids us fly and gives us wings.”

The gospel frees us from what the law couldn't. And in the church of Jesus God has chosen to bring that message of flight and freedom to those who are caught in sin through the loving restoration and care of their brothers and sisters in the church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once warned of a fake Christian community and described it this way: “The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy.”

But here, the heart of the church towards the sinner reveals the heart of Jesus towards sinners.

Paul gives four postures we must keep in mind here as we do this. First, we must be optimistic. We are restoring—not resurrecting. We expect Christians to respond Christianly. We expect the work of dealing with sin to bear the fruit of God to lead people away from it and back into grace. Second, we must be sober—sin kills. You don't pull a man out of a river and do nothing. You beat on his chest, and you breathe into his mouth, and you shout “breathe.” Third, we are to be gentle. Just as an animal caught in a trap is both hurt and fierce, so too are those in sin. We must be gentle, and move with patient grace.

Fourth, we must be humble. We want to treat others the way we want to be treated if the roles were reversed—because chances are they will be.

One quick word to those who are caught in sin, or who may be in the future. The Lord is after your joy and your life. You might feel trapped in sin—but the Lord would have you submit yourselves to a spirited community armed with gentleness, stepped in humility and expectant of grace. This seems fearful—but it brings freedom and life.

By being prepared to do this, and to receive this—Christ is displayed to a world in beauty. Might the world see in our care for each other the care Jesus gives to sinners who come to him. As Jonathan Edwards once wrote, “They that find Christ [discover that] though he be so glorious and excellent a person, yet they find him ready to receive such poor, worthless, hateful creatures as they are, which was unexpected to them. They are surprised with it. They did not imagine that Christ was such a kind of person, a person of such grace. They heard he was a holy Savior and hated sin, and they did not imagine he would be so ready to receive such vile, wicked creatures as they.”

Walk together, deal with sin together, but lastly—**Stand Alone Together.**

Read with me: **Galatians 6:3-5**, “For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load.”

The way we care for each other in the church prepares us as the church to stand before God on our own. And here, Paul returns to the idea of empty thoughts. What does it look like to have empty thoughts? It’s when someone thinks himself to be something and yet he is nothing.

Empty thoughts are eyes that never look at themselves. This is the kind of person who always sees where others need help, but never where they have their own needs. You’ve heard the adage that “the carpenter’s home is never finished.”

In other words, the carpenter is always out helping other people with their own projects, but back home his own house isn’t taken care of. This shouldn’t be the case in the church. While we need to have eyes and a heart that bleeds for the wellbeing of others—we also need to be wise to the status of our own heart.

There is a corporate responsibility we have to help one another with their burdens. But there is also a personal responsibility each of us has for our own burden.

When I get to judgement day, and I stand before God and I point to all the people I’ve helped. And if you point to all the Bible studies you’ve led, or meals you’ve provided—all you’ve managed to do is invent another law. Another external standard that you hope will justify you. It would be boasting in something which for you—is nothing.

So how do we not fall prey to this? We test our own work. What does that mean? It doesn’t mean we are constantly under examination. It doesn’t mean we have an endless series of mid-terms that we need to pass. This passage is in the book of Galatians, not outside of it.

The work which Paul here calls us to test as our own is nothing more than the work of God in us to save us and fill us with his Spirit. If we have been filled with the Spirit, we grow. We want to sin less. We let others into our own lives. We desire to restore people in grace because we've been restored in grace.

Paul uses two words in this passage. First, he says, "bear one another's burden." That word is a word which can be used to describe a big boulder. It's something that is impossible for you to lift alone. As the church, in the church, we must help one another lift what they cannot lift on their own. God didn't design a Christian with enough strength to live on their own. To be in the strength of the Spirit is to be in the power of the Lord's people.

But, when Paul says, "each must bear his own load." He uses a different word. One which describes the contents that would go into your backpack when you go hiking. In the Christian life, there are things none of us can lift. That's the burden that Christ lifted for all of us on the cross. Then there are things which we can only lift together—that is the mission of God in the life of the church. But lastly, there are things which only you can lift. That is your own personal responsibility before God to keep the faith, to follow him, to stand firm in Christ and walk boldly in the Spirit.

It is a weight, it is an individual weight, and yet it is a remarkably reasonable weight. You've got to do it. And you will do it. How do I know this? Well, because Jesus has saved you. Jesus has filled you with his Spirit. And there will be times where you'll want to set it down, like Frodo and the Ring. It will feel too heavy, the road will seem too long. But that's when God gives you the wonderful fellowship of the church, we come and we say, "We can't carry your load, but we can carry you. So up. Up you go."

The life of the church is a life that calls each individual to live out of their personal hope in Christ. We want to help each other breathe in the grace which is theirs so they can live out the life which is theirs.

This is what a Spirit-ed community looks like. This, by God's grace is where sin goes to die, where sinners go to live, and where we live together in all our weaknesses so that the power of Jesus might be made known to us and seen by the watching world.