



When you were a kid, how many of you enjoyed connect-the-dot activity books? I was an impatient kid, so I really didn't like them. Sometimes they were so obvious, like, why connect all the dots? There were some that were not as obvious, especially the ones for older kids. The really fun thing about the connect-the-dots experience is when you are almost done and you start to see what it is. You come to an "aha!" moment. Something that was really unclear, slowly comes into focus.

We are almost done with our teaching series, The Story, and today in chapter 29 things are becoming more clear. God is connecting the dots. His plan to bring us back to himself, to rescue us, has been realized in the death and resurrection of Jesus. But Jesus didn't leave us alone. He gave us the Holy Spirit to be with us and the church was born. Jesus' mission to seek and save lost people was beginning to take off. But, there would be some major obstacles in taking this message beyond the walls of Jerusalem and the hearts of the Jewish people. Not everybody was happy with this new Jesus movement. The first obstacle was a man named Saul of Tarsus, who later would become Paul. The second obstacle was a debate as to how Gentiles became followers of Jesus.

As we study the life and ministry of Paul and as we dive into this major theological problem of the early church, I want to ask you, Do you know how to live the Christian life? Do you know how to change that bad habit or that secret sin? Can we connect the dots to our modern world? Do we see clearly what Paul is trying to teach the early followers of Jesus? Can we connect the dots and see that there is power available for us to live the Christian life? Before we can start to connect the dots, let's look at Paul's conversion.

Paul's Faith Story

Saul was a Roman citizen, born in Tarsus, modern day Turkey. His parents wanted him to be so well grounded in the best tradition of Jewish orthodoxy that they sent Saul to be brought up "at the feet of Gamaliel," the most important rabbi of his day. Saul was a brilliant student. He had an encyclopedic mind and was incredibly skilled in debate. Listen to how Saul described himself, "*circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless*" (Philippians 3:5-6). Paul put the fun in fundamentalist. His zeal for the law pushed him to take out

his aggression on the newly founded church in Jerusalem. Saul was like the Osama Bin Laden of his day; he hated Jesus and the church and hunted down Christians. The church was a threat to all Saul held dear. The idea that the Nazarene, who suffered a death cursed by Jewish law, was both Lord and Messiah was ridiculous in Saul's thinking. The survival of Israel demanded that the followers of Jesus be wiped out. Saul was an unlikely candidate to become the world's first and most renowned missionary of the Christian church. And, in an instant, Saul's life would be radically changed.

On the road to Damascus, the risen Christ confronted Saul and asked why he was persecuting him. Saul came to believe Christ, whom he had been persecuting, was alive and the exalted Son of God. God exposed the weakness of the Jewish law. God changed Saul's name to Paul and gave him a new mission to accomplish—plant churches where the Gospel has never been preached. After meeting with the Apostles and time alone in preparation, Paul learned that it wasn't in keeping the law that made a person right in God's sight, but faith in Jesus Christ. This was nothing other than a dramatic paradigm shift in Paul's thinking. If this were true, if salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone, then not only Jews could come to faith, but Gentiles too. This was a game changer. The message of hope, life, freedom and salvation was open to **all** who came to Jesus in faith, not only the Jewish people. Paul soon became the leading champion of the cause he had tried to overthrow. He would end up planting 10 churches and writing 13 of the 27 New Testament books. But there was a critical and watershed event the early church needed to work through first. Maybe a joke might help us see the problem more clearly.

The Problem in Galatia

A priest, a Pentecostal preacher and a rabbi would get together twice a week for coffee to talk shop. One day someone made the comment that preaching to people isn't really all that hard. A real challenge would be to preach to a bear. One thing led to another and they decided to do an experiment. They would all go out into the woods, find a bear, preach to it, and attempt to convert it.

Seven days later, they're all together to discuss the experience. Father Flannery, who has his arm in a sling, is on crutches, and has various bandages on his body and limbs, goes first. "Well," he says, "I went into the woods to find me a bear. And when I found him I began to read to him from the Catechism. Well, that bear wanted nothing to do with me and began to slap me around. So

I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him and he became as gentle a lamb. The bishop is coming out next week to give him first communion and confirmation."

Reverend Billy Bob spoke next. He was in a wheelchair, with an arm and both legs in casts, and an IV drip. In his best fire and brimstone oratory he claimed, "Well brothers, you know that we don't sprinkle! I went out and I found me a bear. And then I began to read to my bear from God's Holy Word! But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So I took hold of him and we began to wrestle. We wrestled down one hill, up another and down another until we came to a creek. So I quick dunked him and baptized his hairy soul. And just like you said, he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praising Jesus."

They both looked down at Rabbi Goldberg, who was lying in a hospital bed. He was in a body cast and traction with IVs and monitors running in and out of him. He was in bad shape. The rabbi looks up and says, "Looking back on it, circumcision probably wasn't the best way to start."

All joking aside, circumcision was a huge issue in the early church. If the Apostles didn't get this one theological problem worked out, we may not even have Christianity, but a sect of Judaism. While this problem has long since passed away, the principle behind it is still strongly with many Christians today: Is salvation really a free gift from God in Jesus Christ, or do we have to earn it somehow? Legalism is alive and well in the church today: You must be baptized to be saved; you must speak in tongues; you need to come to church every Sunday; you need to join a Bible study; you should read your Bible every single day; don't drink, don't dance, don't smoke. And don't date girls that do!

Legalism isn't just about how we are saved but how we are sanctified and what really makes us feel acceptable to God. I define legalism as any attempt to make righteousness humanly manageable. Some of us believe it's not enough to have faith in Jesus alone. In order to be accepted by God, we must be really good and try our best. The late Pastor James Boice wrote, "The hardest of all ideas for human beings to grasp is the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. This is because we all always want to add something to it." Are Gentiles saved by faith **plus** circumcision, or by grace through faith?

In Acts 15 the Apostles meet in what's known as the Jerusalem Council. After days of deliberation, they make it clear—Gentiles are saved by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ alone; nothing more and nothing less. But, like today, false teachers crept into the church and wanted to add to the Gospel. Is it what we do that saves us, or is it what has been done? Heresy and legalism always hinders the spread of the Gospel because people can end up believing a false Gospel and legalism is a yoke no one can bare. The book of Galatians was written in response to the Jerusalem Council. It argues for the reasons behind this strategic decision.

Since we don't have time to cover the entire letter, I want us to focus in on a really important passage of it, Galatians 5:13–26.

Life in the Spirit

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other (verses 13–15).

In these life-changing verses Paul explains why the Gospel is more effective than the Jewish law. For us today, let's replace the word "law" with "religion" or even "legalism." When I use the word religion I am referring to man-made rules, morality, and works based on righteousness. Paul has a lot to say here about freedom. Christ has freed us from sin, Satan and death, but this freedom, he says, can also be used as an opportunity for the flesh. In verse 13, the word "indulge" can also be translated "opportunity" and in the original language means "a military base of operations." The word "flesh" is our corrupt and sinful nature. Paul is saying the sinful nature, the flesh, is always looking for a beachhead in your life. It wants to rob your freedom in Christ.

Verse 14 says the law is fulfilled in our love of our neighbor. We are free in Christ, but not free to do whatever we want. True freedom has limits. Gospel freedom comes when we trust in Christ and are filled with his love so that we can love others. John Stott describes this freedom as, "freedom from my silly little self, in order to love responsibly in love for God and others."

The book of Galatians was written to Gentile Christians who were under the influence of teachers who were saying you've got to completely obey the law, all the Mosaic law, obey it at every single point. We are talking hundreds of rules! Being "under the law" (v. 18) means a person relies on the law. Paul is not disregarding the law. He's already summarized it in verse 14. But if a person lives **under** the law they think: by my performance I can earn my salvation; by my performance I can get over my sin; by my performance the fruit of the Spirit will grow; by my achievement then I'll know I'm worthy of something.

Paul is saying that living this way is the source of everything that is wrong with your life. This is what is opposed to the Spirit. He goes on to describe exactly what life in the Spirit looks like. Look at verses 16–18:

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

If you have been a follower of Jesus for any amount of time, you can relate to this struggle he's talking about. There is a constant fight going on inside each one of us between the flesh and the Spirit. The other day when I got pulled over for talking on my phone, even though I was wrong, I didn't want to walk in the Spirit at that moment! The word "walk" in the original language means to "keep walking" and to "imitate." It's a continual action in progress. Our problem is we try to do the Christian life in our own power and strength. We think we are smart enough and strong enough to overcome sin and the flesh. If you think that way, you are fooling yourself. Paul says it's **by** the Spirit this fight is won. The Holy Spirit gives us the power to live for God, to do right, and to lead us in to paths of life, holiness, and truth.

But, we also have another force in our lives—the flesh. The flesh longs for the things of this world; it desires to do what is immoral and sinful. It wants to keep us under the law. The flesh wants to be "gratified" the text says. It doesn't want to die or fade away but it constantly looks for opportunities to take enemy ground. *The Message* translation says the flesh is "a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage."

Paul gives us a gruesome 15-word description of what happens when the flesh gets an opportunity to set-up shop in our lives. Remember he is writing to Christians. Look at verses 19–21:

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

This is not an exhaustive list of all the ways we get into trouble. That's why Paul says in verse 21 "and the like." The human race is really really good at being evil. Just watch the news. This list can be divided into four categories: sexual, religious, relational, and substance abuse. This is what life looks like controlled by the sinful nature. This is life under the law. Your sexual appetite is out of control, your religiosity is twisted, your relationships are all messed up, and you're an addict. We are all in the same boat here. It doesn't matter if only one of those on the list are applicable to you or all 15! We've all lived in the flesh more than we want to admit.

I want you to notice two things about this list: they are habitual and destructive ways to live. Verse 21 says "those who live like this" or "those who practice such things" or "those who make it a habit." The "acts of the flesh" are the habitual ways we live in the flesh. Paul is not talking about an occasional relapse into sin. What Paul is talking about here is a life continuously lived in sin. We will all struggle in one area or another and fall. But the key here is that for the Christian there must be a struggle and an ongoing fight with our sinful nature. If you get frustrated and

angry about your sin, that is a good sign that you are fighting the flesh. Christians who are free in Christ will still sin. The difference is they don't give up; they fight and they struggle forward to holiness.

The "acts of the flesh" are not only habit forming but they are destructive. The flesh wants to destroy your life. It wants you to give up and surrender to its control. Each of these vices pretend freedom, but really their purpose is to consume and devour you. That's life under the law, religion and legalism. In verses 22–26 Paul shows a better way, the only way—life in the Spirit:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

Jesus said in Matthew 12:33 that a tree is known by its fruit. I have this tree in my backyard and years ago when we moved in, I didn't know what it was. Then Spring came and delicious cherries started to grow. It's a cherry tree. It's awesome. Likewise, the Spirit produces good and lush fruit. This fruit is God's activity in the life of a Christian. Spiritual fruit are gifts of God. They cannot be earned or produced by our own human effort. But, spiritual fruit can be cultivated. This is both a work of God and our work. I like to say God is not opposed to effort! Fruit takes time, energy and commitment. Like a farmer, we need to prepare the soil, plant the seeds, water it, pull weeds and prune. But only God can make spiritual fruit grow. This fruit can be categorized into three relationships: Our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves.

Our relationship with God is the fruit of love, joy and peace. Love is stated first because it's the most important. A few verses earlier Paul wrote, "*the only thing that matters is faith working through love*" (Gal 5:6). Some believe there is only one fruit (singular) of the Spirit—love—and the result of love is joy, peace, patience, and all the rest. I like to think of the fruit of the Spirit as a cluster of red ripe grapes, one fruit, love, but many individual grapes. When we love God will all our heart, soul, mind and strength, God gives us joy and peace as well.

The second relationship of spiritual fruit is our relationship with other people—the fruit of patience, goodness and kindness. Patience is best defined as long-suffering in the face of difficulty. Kindness is a continuous desire to extend God's grace to people. Goodness is a willingness to be generous to people. Faithfulness is the loyal friend and person who you can trust. Gentleness, like meekness, is power under control. When your vertical relationship with God is right, your horizontal relationships with others are bearing fruit as well.

The third relationship of spiritual fruit is our relationship with ourselves—the fruit of self-control. In Paul's thinking, self-control is Spirit-empowered moderation. This is not will power. The fruit of self-control guides us especially when it comes to eating, drinking or sex. Self-control is the ability to always choose the important thing over the urgent thing. In Paul's thinking, this fruit should be abounding in the Christian's life. Since you have the resurrection power of Jesus in you, these should be there. What fruit is God growing in your life lately? What fruit do you want him to be growing? Ask him today to do that.

Paul then ends this passage by explaining exactly how this fruit grows in a person's life. First, we must crucify the flesh. To crucify is to hand someone over to be killed. The crucifixion Paul is talking about is a past event with present results and implications. In Galatians 2:20 Paul said that we are crucified with Christ, but now in Chapter 5, we do the crucifying. The moment we give our lives to Christ, the flesh is crucified. Christ's death and resurrection once and for all dealt with your sin. Sin was crucified ultimately by Jesus' work on the cross. At the same time though, we are called to take action and crucify the flesh. This means rejecting the path of the flesh by crucifying it and following the way of the Spirit.

Second, we must “keep in step with the Spirit.” In verse 25, instead of “walk,” Paul says “keep in step.” It's actually another military word he uses to describe marching orders. Keep in step means to stay in formation. Earlier, Paul tells us in verse 18 that we are to be “led by the Spirit.” To be led by the Spirit means something is being done to us. A shepherd can only lead his sheep to green pastures. He can't make sheep eat. For those of us who are followers of Jesus, the Spirit does the leading, but we need to do the walking. We have to voluntarily submit ourselves to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is how you came into the Christian life and how you live it. We live the Christian life, we walk in the power of the Holy Spirit.

By God's grace, Paul was able to connect the dots between his Jewish upbringing and faith in Jesus. He came to the radical conclusion that **Jesus + nothing = everything**. What about you? Have you connected the dots? Or is Christianity a bunch of rules? Deep down for many of us, we think God is disappointed with us. When we struggle with sin, miss our devotional time, get angry at our kids, or whatever, we wonder if God still accepts us. When we do that, we are basing our justification on our sanctification. That's dangerous. We must learn to base our sanctification on our justification. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you are right with God (justified). You and I are now in a process of becoming more like Jesus (sanctified). But, there is lots of work for God to do.

How do we live and walk as a Christian? How do we change inside deeply and permanently? When you become a Christian the same power that raised Jesus from the dead comes into you. The spiritual deadness that was in you—the fear, guilt, struggles, joylessness, everything apart of the flesh—can be overcome by the victorious resurrection power of Jesus. This same power is also how you live the Christian life. This is seen in the fruit of the Spirit. You have power available to you.

Are you settling for too little change in your life? Are you settling for too little power in your life? Hopefully, we've all changed to some degree but, looking at what's available, there's further to go! So don't settle. In the freedom of Christ, love everyone and keep in step with the Spirit.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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