
Fruit of the Spirit Bible Study

Galatians 5:16-26. 4 sessions of about 45 minutes, or one longer session. For small groups and personal study.

The fruit of the Spirit is Paul's name, in Galatians 5:22-23, for the character the Holy Spirit grows in people who belong to Christ: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Paul sets it against "the acts of the flesh" in 5:19-21. He calls it fruit, in the singular, a word that often works as a collective. The grammar alone does not say why. What the passage does show is the contrast: the flesh has acts, the Spirit bears fruit, and verse 25 calls believers to keep in step with the Spirit.

READ TOGETHER: GALATIANS 5:16-26

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh craves what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are opposed to each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. ¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and sorcery; hatred, discord, jealousy, and rage; rivalries, divisions, factions, ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us walk in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying one another.

Scripture from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), public domain.

BACKGROUND

Where the passage sits in Galatians

Galatians is Paul's answer to teachers who said Gentile believers had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to belong to God's people. Tyndale's study notes frame the letter's question this way: "Is a person saved by faith alone, or by a combination of faith plus works?" Paul argues for four chapters that it is faith in Christ.

That raises an obvious worry. If the law is not the way in, what stops people from living however they like? Chapter 5 is Paul's reply. Tyndale's notes put it plainly: "Christian freedom is not a license to sin." Freedom, Paul says, is for serving one another in love.

For you, brothers, were called to freedom; but do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh. Rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is fulfilled in a single decree: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:13-14)

Flesh and Spirit

"Flesh" here does not mean the body, as if the body were bad. Paul uses it for human life on its own terms, turned away from God. That is why his list in 5:19-21 includes jealousy, rivalries and factions alongside sexual sins and drunkenness. Some translations render it "sinful nature".

Tyndale's notes summarize the contrast: "Living by human effort cannot overcome sin, because the sinful nature can produce only sinful actions (5:19-21). By contrast, living in the power of the Holy Spirit produces good fruit (5:22-23)."

Acts and fruit

Paul calls the first list "acts" or works, plural. He calls the second "fruit", singular. Commentators often point to the difference. The acts of the flesh are things people do. Fruit is something that grows, and it grows as one crop.

Jesus used the same picture the night before he died. A branch does not strain to produce grapes. It bears fruit by staying joined to the vine. Galatians says "walk by the Spirit" and John says "remain in Me". Both put the source of the fruit outside the believer.

Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. Just as no branch can bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. I am the vine and you are the branches. The one who remains in Me, and I in him, will bear much fruit. For apart from Me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5)

THE NINE FRUIT

Paul does not define them, so each note stays close to how he and the rest of Scripture use the word. Several of them are first true of God.

Love (5:22)

Paul has just said that the whole law is fulfilled in one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (5:14). Many readers see love as the root of the other eight. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 describes it with several of the same words, patience and kindness among them.

Joy (5:22)

Biblical joy does not depend on things going well. Paul wrote "Rejoice in the Lord always" from prison (Philippians 4:4). It is gladness rooted in what God has done, and it can sit beside grief.

Peace (5:22)

In Paul's letters peace is first peace with God through Christ (Romans 5:1). In Galatians it also has a social edge. The acts of the flesh include "discord", "divisions" and "factions" (5:20), and peace is the opposite of all three.

Patience (5:22)

Older translations say "longsuffering". It means putting up with people for a long time without striking back. It is God's own character first: "slow to anger, abounding in loving devotion" is how he describes himself in Exodus 34:6.

Kindness (5:22)

Kindness is goodness turned toward other people in a gentle way. Paul says God's kindness is meant to lead people to repentance (Romans 2:4), and he tells believers to be kind to one another, as God in Christ forgave them (Ephesians 4:32).

Goodness (5:22)

Goodness is moral goodness that shows up in action, often generous action. Paul closes this section of the letter with it: "let us do good to everyone, and especially to the family of faith" (6:10).

Faithfulness (5:22)

The Greek word is the one usually translated "faith". Most translations here render it "faithfulness", because it sits in a list of character traits. It means being trustworthy: keeping your word, staying loyal to God and to people.

Gentleness (5:23)

Older translations say "meekness". It is not weakness. Jesus calls himself "gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29). Paul applies it straight away: if someone is caught in sin, restore them "with a spirit of gentleness" (6:1).

Self-control (5:23)

Self-control is the last on the list and the plainest answer to the end of the flesh list, "drunkenness, orgies, and the like" (5:21). Paul still calls it fruit of the Spirit. Even the self in self-control is helped by God.

Keep in step with the Spirit (5:24-26)

Paul ends with "Against such things there is no law" (5:23). No law forbids this fruit, and no law can produce it. Then he gives the command that holds the passage together: "Since we live by the Spirit, let us walk in step with the Spirit." The first warning that follows is about envy and conceit, not about anything dramatic.

SESSION 1 OF 4

Called to freedom

Read Galatians 5:13-18. See what freedom in Christ is for, and what Paul means by flesh and Spirit. Also read: Galatians 5:1; Romans 8:5-9.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. According to verse 13, what is freedom not for, and what is it for?
2. What two things are opposed to each other in verse 17?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Paul has argued for four chapters that the law is not the way to be right with God. Why does he now quote the law in verse 14?
4. What does "flesh" mean here, if it does not simply mean the body?
5. Verse 16 is a promise as well as a command. What does it promise?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Where do you use freedom as an excuse, and where do you use rules as a substitute for love?
7. What would walking by the Spirit look like in an ordinary day this week?

SESSION 2 OF 4

The acts of the flesh

Read Galatians 5:19-21. See the life Paul sets against the fruit, and what it does to a community. Also read: Colossians 3:5-10; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Sort the list in verses 19 to 21 into groups. Which are about sex, which about religion, which about relationships, which about excess?
2. Which group is the longest?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Why might Paul put rivalries and factions in the same list as sorcery and orgies?
4. Paul says those who "practice such things" will not inherit the kingdom. Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. What hope does Paul hold out there?
5. Why are these called "obvious"?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Which items on the list do churches tend to take seriously, and which do they tend to excuse?
7. Is there a rivalry or division you are part of that needs to end?

SESSION 3 OF 4

The fruit of the Spirit

Read Galatians 5:22-23. Look at each of the nine fruit, and see whose character they describe. Also read: 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Exodus 34:6; Matthew 11:28-30.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. Read the nine fruit aloud. Which ones are about how we treat other people?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Which words appear in both lists?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. Paul says "fruit", not "fruits". What difference does that make?
4. Read Exodus 34:6 and Matthew 11:29. Whose character is this first?
5. What does "Against such things there is no law" mean?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. Which fruit have you seen grow in someone in this group? Tell them.
7. Which one do you most need to ask God for right now?

SESSION 4 OF 4

Remain in the vine

Read Galatians 5:24-26 and John 15:1-8. See how the fruit grows: by staying joined to Christ and keeping in step with the Spirit.

Also read: John 15:1-8; Galatians 6:1-2; Psalm 1:1-3.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. In John 15:1-8, who is the vine, who are the branches, and who is the gardener?
2. What does the gardener do to branches that already bear fruit?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

3. How do "remain in Me" (John 15:4) and "walk in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25) say the same thing in two pictures?
4. Galatians 5:24 says believers "have crucified the flesh". Why then does Paul still need to warn them in verse 26?
5. What might pruning look like in a believer's life?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

6. What helps you stay close to Christ day to day? What pulls you away?
7. Galatians 6:1-2 follows straight on. Who in your life could you help carry a burden this week?

ONE-SESSION PATH

The whole passage in one evening

Read all of Galatians 5:16-26. About 45 to 60 minutes.

Observe: what does the text say?

1. What two things are at war in verses 16 to 18?
2. Compare the list in verses 19 to 21 with the list in verses 22 and 23. What strikes you?
3. Read John 15:4-5. What does a branch need to do to bear fruit?

Interpret: what did it mean then?

4. Why might Paul call the first list "acts" and the second "fruit"?
5. If the fruit is the Spirit's work, what part do believers play? Look at the commands in verses 16 and 25.
6. Why does Paul finish with envy and conceit in verse 26?

Apply: what does it mean for us?

7. Which fruit do you most need to ask God for right now?
8. Close by praying for each other by name, for one fruit each person named.

FOR THE LEADER

- Read the passage aloud at the start of every session. Hearing the two lists side by side makes Paul's point better than any explanation.
- This passage can turn into a checklist quickly. People score themselves on nine traits and feel either proud or crushed. Keep pointing back to the word "fruit": it grows from the Spirit's work, over time.
- Keep the background short. One or two sentences on the Galatian dispute is enough to show why Paul talks about law and freedom.
- Session 2 includes sexual sins. Some in your group may carry shame from their past. 1 Corinthians 6:11 is in the reading for a reason: "And that is what some of you were."
- Do not let the group skip the relational sins. Discord, jealousy and factions are on the same list, and they are the ones a small group can actually work on together.
- If someone asks whether 5:21 means a Christian who sins loses their salvation, say that Christians answer this in different ways, and that Paul is describing a settled way of life. The question does not need settling to finish the study.
- If someone shares something that needs more than a group discussion, follow up with them privately and involve your pastor.

WHERE CHRISTIANS READ IT DIFFERENTLY

One fruit or nine?

Paul writes "fruit" in the singular. Some readers take love as the fruit and the other eight as what love looks like, since 1 Corinthians 13 describes love with several of the same words. Others take the nine as one harvest with many parts. Either way, the Spirit does not hand out one trait to one person and another to someone else, the way he distributes gifts in 1 Corinthians 12. Every believer is meant to grow in all of them.

What does "flesh" mean?

Some translations say "sinful nature" and others keep "flesh". Readers agree that Paul is not calling the body evil, since the list includes envy and factions. They differ on how to describe it: an inner sinful inclination, or the old way of life under sin that Christ's death has ended (5:24). Many commentators hold both together.

Does the Spirit grow the fruit, or do we?

Paul calls it the Spirit's fruit, and Jesus says "apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Paul also gives commands: walk by the Spirit, keep in step, do not become conceited. Christians weigh these differently, some stressing God's work, others the believer's response. Most agree with Philippians 2:12-13: work it out, "for it is God who works in you."

What does Paul mean by "will not inherit the kingdom"?

Paul warns that those who practice the acts of the flesh will not inherit God's kingdom (5:21). The verb points to a settled way of life, not a single failure, and Paul writes to people he calls brothers who still struggle. Christians differ on what this means for a believer's assurance. All take the warning seriously, and all read it beside Paul's message of grace in the rest of the letter.

SOURCES

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Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible (1898): Flesh, Fruit, Vine. James Hastings. Public domain. Linked dictionary entries for the words the passage uses.

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