

How are you?

Galatians 5:22-25

November 18, 2012

How are you?

That's where we began ten weeks ago on Rally Sunday, September 9. Not how you? Not how are you? But how are you?

How are you? How are you living your life?

In simplest terms, there are only two possible answers to that question. Either you are living by your own resources, doing what comes naturally, relying on your own innate wisdom and common sense and character, whatever they may be, following the crowd or tradition or common expectation or your own intuition. Or you are living by the Spirit, letting the Spirit direct your lives, guided, empowered, strengthened, shaped by the work of the Spirit in you and among you, following not the crowd or tradition or expectation or intuition, but following Jesus. Either you are going the same way everybody else is going, or you are going a different way, a distinctively different way, the way Jesus is going, the way the Spirit leads you.

We are meant to be led by the Spirit. We are meant to live by the Spirit. And that should not be all that mysterious to us. The Spirit is nothing more or less than the Spirit of Jesus, the ongoing presence of the living Jesus in us and among us. The Spirit is nothing more or less than the Spirit of God, the presence of the living God in us and among us.

The Spirit is breath, God's breath, breathing life into us.

The Spirit is wind, God's wind, blowing us where God wants us to go.

The Spirit is fire, God's fire, energizing us, empowering us, filling us with God's passion, God's desire.

We live by the Spirit, letting the Spirit, letting God, direct our lives, or we go it on our own. Which would you rather do?

The point is not losing yourself, giving yourself up -- or actually that is the point! -- but just as Jesus said, when you lose yourself, you find yourself, and when you give your life up, you really have, for the first time, a life worth having, a life worth living.

The Spirit directs our lives not by taking them over, but by taking us as we are and shaping us into what God intends us to be, into what we shall be.

*Take, O take me as I am, summon out what I shall be,
set your seal upon my heart and live in me.*

That's what we're talking about: offering ourselves as we are, letting God perfect what God put in there is the first place, letting God bring to the surface, bring to shining glory, his own image, his own reflection, in us. And two of the primary means by which God does "summon out what [we] shall be" are the gifts of the Spirit and the fruits of the Spirit.

The gifts of the Spirit are many and varied, and that's the point. The gifts of the Spirit are not talents. Talent, skill, acumen are the raw materials, the stuff we come by naturally, what we are as we are. But God blesses the church, blesses us, builds up the church, builds us up, by giving gifts: gifts of teaching and preaching and healing and caring and leading and serving and helping and encouraging and discerning and challenging.

God's Spirit gives such gifts to all of us and some gift to each of us.

The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all.

In some way. There are all kinds of different ways, there are all kinds of different gifts.

In some way in each person. I have a gift, you have a gift, each one of us has a gift.

In some way in each person for the good of all. My gift is for your benefit. Your gift is for my benefit. Our gifts are for the benefit ... of all!

We will not become what we shall be unless and until we are all using our gifts for the good of all. We need your gift. The world needs the gift God's Spirit has put in you. The health of a church and the effectiveness of its mission does not depend on its pastor or its leaders. Our health, our mission, our fulfillment of what God intends depends on all of us working together, using the gifts God has given us to bless each other and bless the world. The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all.

But the fruits of the Spirit are different. The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person through the gifts the Spirit gives. But the Spirit's fruits are not gifts, but the qualities of being and character, the virtues that the work of God's Spirit produces in us, in all of us. All of us have some gift, but all of us

are intended to produce all the fruits! It's not that some of us are kind and some of us are humble, some of us are good and some of us exercise self-control, some of us love and some of us work for peace.

No! It is these nine qualities together, as a whole, that mark the distinctive identity of God's people, the people of the way, Jesus' way. We are on the way, we are not yet what we shall be, these virtues are not yet perfected in us, but it is the real presence of these nine virtues in us -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control -- that marks us as people on the way.

And when we get there, when we do become what we shall be, we will find it is what was meant for us, meant for all of us, from the beginning. It is a different way, only because we have lost our way. Jesus' way, the Christian way, is nothing more or less than the human way, the way, the kind of life, for which humanity is intended.

And that way is marked by these: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. We have talked about each of them, but now I want to talk about all of them together, because they belong together and because I don't believe the choice of these nine is in any way random or accidental, nor is the order in which they are listed random or accidental. The order is not an order of importance, because all are equally vital, equally important, but I do find the nine virtues to be ordered in a kind of reverse progression, from the last to the first, in three groups of three.

So we begin at the end, in reverse order, with self-control and humility and faithfulness. These are the foundation, the starting point, for Christian character. These are virtues of identity, virtues that clarify who and what we are, that set us on the way, and bring us into relationship with others on the way.

Self-control: we start by giving control to God, by superseding our natural desires with a higher and better desire, denying ourselves for the sake of our love for God and for God's people.

Humility: not needing to constantly measure myself against everybody else, but willingly putting myself last, willingly becoming the servant of everybody else, which I can do, not because I know I don't matter anyway, but because I know I do matter to God.

Faithfulness: going against the flow of whimsical, changeable, unreliable human nature, making and keeping promises, discovering a whole new dimension of the intimacy God made us for, the oneness God made us for.

The second triad, again reversed, is goodness, kindness, patience. These are virtues of purpose and action, virtues that enact and embody the image of God in us, because God is good, God is kind, God is patient.

Goodness: being generous, not just with those who deserve it or appreciate it or can return the favor and not just with those I like, but being generous with all, being good to all, because that is what God does.

Kindness: doing more than what is expected, going out of your way to be generous (which is another word for grace!), offering gifts that cost you something, because that is what God does.

Patience: doing all that is in our power to make things be as they should be, as long as it takes, whatever the pace, until it happens. Doing all we can to make it happen, but trusting that God will make it happen. Knowing that our labor and our struggle and our pain are not pointless, but are indeed the pains of childbirth, pains that we gladly endure with patience as the kingdom of God is born in us and from us.

And the last triad: peace and joy and love. If self-control and humility and faithfulness are virtues that set us off in the right direction, and if goodness and kindness and patience are virtues that confirm by our actions that we are on the right way, then peace and joy and love are where we are going. Peace and joy and love are the life God intends for us. Peace and joy and love are what we shall be. Peace and joy and love are the destination, but, in this case, the destination is the way!

Peace is a way, the way of reconciliation, Jesus' way, making peace not by building walls, but by tearing them down, not by defending yourself, but by offering yourself.

Joy is a way. Joy is following Jesus on the way. Joy is being with Jesus, Joy is Jesus.

And love is a way, the way for which we were made, the way which comes first, before and above any other way. Love, living in and by intimate communion with God and with each other, is both our way and our destination.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. This is what God's Spirit is producing in us. This is the way. This is the way to what we shall be.

*Take, O take me as I am, summon out what I shall be,
set your seal upon my heart and live in me.*