

The Works of the Flesh and the Fruit of the Spirit

Galatians 5:13–6:2

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At an inn in the town of Lystra three men sat around a corner table. All three were well-known disciples of Joshua Messiah, members of what the town called a new cult, the Way.

The short gray-haired man with the enormous beard was clearly restless. “This is taking too long,” he barked. “I’ve got things to do.” He kept looking around the room nervously.

The two men who sat at the table with him were about the same age, but the contrast could not have been more pronounced. One was tall, a bit younger, and muscular with very dark skin, clearly of African, possibly Egyptian decent. The third man was in every way normal but for his hair. His hair was dusty blonde, his eyes blue—unmistakably a barbarian from the Northern lands.

The fair-haired man said, “Relax, Malachi. The man has to settle his account. He said he’d be with you in a few minutes. What’s the rush? We’ll see him off and have the rest of the day.”

“Frederick, you know I’m a busy man. I have a trade business to oversee and a church. And things are not going well in either. I really don’t want to sit here and waste time.”

“Don’t be in such a hurry, Pastor,” the African said. “We haven’t had much time to talk with you since that teacher from Jerusalem got here over two months ago. And he’s the second missionary they’ve sent this year. You seem to disappear when they are around. Why can’t we spend a few minutes talking while he’s haggling over his bill in the next room?”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to talk, Alexander,” Malachi said, surveying the room quickly one more time. “But what would you know about the responsibilities of free men like me? You’re a slave.”

“Hold on, Pastor. I may be a slave, but you know I’m Nicholai’s chief servant. He has given me charge over virtually everything in his household. But why should

you bring that up anyway? Both Fredrick and I are elders. What difference does it make that he and I are slaves?”

“Yeah, I know, Alex” said Malachi, looking around the inn, “it’s just that. . . Hey, Fredrick have you thought any more about when you will be circumcised?”

“Well, yes, I have, Pastor” said Frederick.

The tone of Fredrick’s answer caused Malachi to flinch. “You haven’t changed your mind now have you? I haven’t talked with you in a while.”

“Well, pastor, I can’t lie to you. I have been reconsidering. It’s something I’ve wanted to talk to you about. That letter you read from the Apostle Paul two weeks ago. . . wow, I can’t seem to get it out of my mind.”

Malachi was clenching his fists, but before he could say anything, Fredrick was holding up his hands to clam down his easily agitated pastor. “I know, I know. The esteemed Jonathan from Jerusalem got up immediately afterwards and refuted all of Paul’s arguments with his own Scripture proofs and. . . “

Malachi raised his hand and firmly shook his beard: “Don’t make fun of Jonathan, Frederick. He is a well-respected, learned man in Jerusalem. He knows the Scripture and the traditions just as well, if not better than Paul.”

“Okay, fair enough. Forgive me. But I wasn’t convinced that he had bested Paul. Remember, Malachi, I was one of the first group of God-fearing Gentiles to hear Paul preach when he came through here less than two years ago. And you and I, Malachi, were two of the first men ordained as elders when the Apostle Paul came back through here on his way back to Antioch. You and I have served together, we used to eat together at the Lord’s Table, until that first teacher from Jerusalem arrived. Since then I’ve been an outsider. One of the main motivations for me agreeing to be circumcised, as you well know, is so that I can be a full member of the people of God again. Now, I’m not so sure. Paul says that I’m a son of Abraham by faith in the Messiah. Why should I have to *do* something else, especially this, to have the assurance of God’s favor and a secure place in his church?”

“Look,” Malachi said, “You know the answer. Paul failed to tell you the whole truth. He watered down the good news, made it easy for you Gentiles to accept. True freedom, life and happiness are found when you submit to the covenantal requirements of God given to Abraham and Moses. If you go the whole way, Frederick, and you too Alexander, and cut off the foreskins of your unclean Gentile

flesh and begin observing the entire Jewish law, not just part of it, you will both find life and peace and power in the fellowship of the true people of God, the people who observe the whole law—even when it hurts.”

Alexander cut in. “Wait a minute, Pastor, you seem to think that getting circumcised is some courageous religious accomplishment.”

“Sure. It is. It separates the strong from the weak—the Gentiles who are without hope from the true people of God. I know that sounds harsh to you both, but what do you expect, you’re both Gentiles.”

“So you won’t really respect us until we submit to the knife? Is that right?” Alexander was speaking in soft tones, trying his best to conceal his mounting frustration.

“We’ve gone over this before, men. You know where I stand on this,” Malachi said.

“Well, until now I guess I wasn’t sure, Malachi,” Frederick was now emboldened by his fellow elder Alexander’s straightforward comments. “It’s hard for me to believe that you don’t agree with Paul and the others as they argued from Scripture and the words of Joshua Messiah himself? Since the reading of Paul’s letter in the assembly I have become convinced that your Jerusalem teachers are misleading us. The Gospel that Paul and the other genuine apostles preach is not the same as the one Jonathan and now apparently you are pushing. They preach the cross of Christ. They proclaim that Joshua Messiah was cut off on the cross for the life of the world and raised on the eighth day—the *eighth* day, Malachi—in fulfillment of the prophetic symbolism of circumcision. We are justified before God because of Messiah’s faithfulness, not because of our law keeping. The law works death, Jesus works life, resurrection. Circumcision was the rite instituted by the Lord to point to the need for an eighth day resurrection from the dead, the old flesh had to be cut off and die, so that the new could emerge. Messiah fulfilled the prophetic typology of circumcision. Coming in the likeness of sinful flesh, he was cut off on the cross and on the eighth day the new flesh of his resurrected and glorified humanity rose from the dead for the life of the world, a new creation. Literal, physical circumcision can never again be practiced for the same purpose as it was given. The rite was fulfilled in the death and eighth day resurrection of the Seed of Abraham, according to the flesh.”

Malachi cut in, rolling his eyes. “Since when have you become a rabbi and theologian, Frederick from Lord-knows-what barbarian tribe?”

Frederick was visibly shaken. His eyes turned down. Malachi began to rise.

Alexander then put his hand on his friend Fredrick's shoulder and said to Malachi, "Wait a just a minute, Pastor. Has it come to this? Name-calling and racial pride? I've never heard you insult anyone like that before. Hold on; don't go. We really need to talk about this."

"I've experienced this kind of treatment before," Alexander said. "Remember, I have been in Jerusalem representing Nicolai on business during the early days of the church. Don't forget I was there before and after the resurrection of Joshua Messiah. I never saw him, but I witnessed what happened in Israel. And I've seen this kind of attitude before."

Malachi interrupted, "What are you talking about, Alex?"

"Why do you keep watching the door, Malachi? Are you expecting someone?"

Malachi murmured, "No. . . not really. I hope not anyway."

That made Frederick look up. "You don't want to be seen with us, do you? That's why you're so restless."

Now it was Malachi's turn to lower his eyes.

"Brother Malachi," Alexander had changed his tone. He placed his hand on his pastor's arm. "I still count you as a brother because I don't believe you've finally settled this matter in your own mind. No Gentile believer has yet to be circumcised in our congregation. It's not too late to reconsider."

Malachi stared at the table.

Alexander maintained his tender manner of speech. "I know you've been to Jerusalem, Malachi. I know you've observed the arrogance of the Jews there. Forgive me for speaking plainly, Pastor, but you don't want the ways of unbelieving Jerusalem imported to our church in Lystra, do you? Please, hear me out. I listen to you preach every week—or at least I used to before these teachers came from Jerusalem—now please hear me for a just a few minutes. If Paul is correct, and I believe he is, those Jews who refuse to see or acknowledge that Joshua Messiah is the faithful seed of Abraham and that he fulfilled the prophetic significance of circumcision as well as all of the ritual laws of Israel, these seem to miss completely the point of these laws. The Israelites until now obeyed them in order to continue the faithful seed of Abraham and David in preparation for the

Messiah. When faithful to the Scriptures, the Israelites would understand the humiliation involved in circumcision, indeed in all of these ceremonies distinctive to the Jews. They were being called to confess and live as people who were powerless but by God's grace and help. They were being called as priests and kings to die to themselves and serve the world in preparation for the Messiah's work. But as you know, throughout the history of Israel, circumcision and the laws of ritual purity became a badge of pride and self-promotion for Israel. Instead of circumcising the foreskin of their hearts, they trusted in their own power and strength. They believed that these rituals commended them to God. That practicing them was a matter of great spirituality. They boasted in the flesh. By the time the Joshua Messiah came on the scene virtually the entire Jewish nation, except for a few faithful souls, had buried the true meaning of the law of God beneath a rubbish heap of oral law tradition. And the nation was proud and arrogant, so much so that they executed their Messiah.

Malachi spoke, but not with confidence: "Alex, be careful you are close to speaking blasphemy."

"No, Malachi," Alexander said. "I only repeat what our Lord himself has said. You know I'm right. And I will add this: I saw what happened in Jerusalem following his ascension. Although many Jews repented and came into the Messiah's new community, gladly leaving behind the law that had now been fulfilled in Messiah Joshua, there were others who could not go the whole way. They continued the worst of the pharisaical teaching about the meaning of circumcision while combining it with some sort of commitment to the Messiah. The result was the "party of the circumcision" or the "party of the law-keepers." And, in keeping with the horrible error of the errant, unbelieving Jews, they boasted in circumcision and their ritual purity, claiming to be the true, continuing people of God. It is agents of this party that have now come into Galatia seducing us to trust in the flesh, to find assurance of peace with God by means of circumcision.

"But look what has happened," Alexander continued. "With pride in the flesh comes rivalry and dissention. It happened at the time of Christ—Israel could not abide Rome's predominance in the world. She thought she deserved that place. Therefore, she hated Rome and refused to do her priestly service toward her. Preferring, instead, to try to politically undermine Rome's power by means of treachery and conspiratorial stratagems. Pride in the flesh always brings with it rivalry. Trusting in the flesh causes divisions, between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, the powerful and the weak. So look at what Israel was like at the time of the

Messiah's ministry. Everyone hated everyone else. Jews hated Gentiles. Pharisees hated the common people. The common people hated the Pharisees. The Sadducees hated the Pharisees. The pure bread Israelites hated the half-bread Herodians. The Jews hated the Samaritans. Jerusalem hated the Galileans. And on and on. Enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy—works of the flesh, just as Paul has told us. This is what the missionaries from Jerusalem have brought to the churches they visit.

“Remember how it happened in the church at Antioch. Paul has already narrated the story for us in his letter. Certain men came from James in Jerusalem, preaching circumcision rather than the cross, and what happened? Jews were now too good to eat with Christian Gentiles. Too proud. They belonged to a more holy group, the circumcised. They were the justified, the one's right with God. But not the Christian Gentiles. The church was divided. Hypocrisy reigned. Love grew cold. It was a rats nest of a community. Why?

“Whenever the flesh gets the upper hand, when people think that they have the power to please God, that their religious rites are works of heroic spirituality that set them apart from other people as better and more pleasing to God, then they cannot love or serve anyone else. Everyone else is a rival.

“Malachi, remember what the Jews from Iconium did to Paul when he first preached here. They stoned him and threw him out of the city for dead. I wasn't there, but I know you and Frederick were part of the small group of believers that gathered around him and prayed that he would not die.”

Alexander's hand was still on his Pastor Malachi's arm. Frederick was looking at Malachi. But Malachi was shaking his head, still staring at the table. Then Frederick reached out, took Malachi's other arm and smiled at him. He also reached under the table and firmly squeezed the big black man's knee. For those in the inn that saw the three it was an extraordinarily odd picture in the Roman Empire. Three men with their heads a handbreadth apart. A Jew, a blonde barbarian, and an African black man, all three's arms and hands interlocked. No one said a word.

Finally, Frederick, his exotic blue eyes scanning the room quickly, worked up the courage to speak. He whispered to Malachi. “I hope I am not out of line saying this, Pastor. I don't mean to judge too harshly. I know I'm a barbarian by blood and Jonathan is a well-respected man among your people. But surely you have seen the way he lives while he is here. He will not stay with any of the church families. He lives like a nobleman at our expense. Our church can barely afford to

fund his appetite. And the talk around town is that he has been less than honorable with the women of the town, if you know what I mean. When you read that portion of Paul's letter where he catalogued the works of the flesh can you really tell me that you did not think of Jonathan?"

Malachi spoke softly, "I did, Frederick. I did."

Alexander looked at Frederick and motioned toward the door. Frederic nodded and spoke to Malachi. "We're leaving Malachi. We'll let you escort Jonathan out of the city. If we are here when he gets back it may be awkward for you. You take care of him and we'll talk to you again soon."

Malachi said, "Yes, of course. Thank you." Alexander noticed Malachi's eyes watering up and so quickly said, "The Lord be with you, Pastor." Then he took Frederick's arm and left the inn.

Galatians 5:13—6:2

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. 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.