

Conceiving a Spiritual Life

June 30, 2013

Galatians 5: 15-25

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. 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 be guided by the Spirit.

God created us in His image. He endowed us all with a measure of His essence. We are all His most prized investment, His most beloved creation. Yet, God understands that we are weak. He knows that we are flawed, and so God sent us His only son Jesus, hoping that we might listen and learn from his teachings. Jesus taught us that it is impossible to consider the needs of others when we are blinded by our own desire - that by indulging our weakness, we are removing ourselves from God, because we cannot serve God and self.

So why did God make us so superficial, so physical, so defined by the corporeal manifestation of our selves? We have been created in such a way that our physical needs must become our greatest priority, or we will not live long enough to even consider the possibility of conceiving a spiritual life.

You and I exist. We are substantial. We have mass. We displace water. We are physical beings who are in relationship with a physical world. So to help facilitate our relationships with our environment, we have developed our remarkable senses of taste, touch, hearing, sight, and smell. For a long time I believed our senses were in place to enable us to receive information from the world, but this is only half true. Along with allowing us to receive information from our environment, our senses also serve to

filter out information from our environment. We can only hear some of the sounds that exist around us; we smell only some of the smells, and see only a limited amount of the light spectrum. We can't taste everything nor feel everything, and thank God, because our puny little minds are not capable of processing it all. Our doors of perception swing only so wide for a reason.

We are finite creatures living in a world of infinities and we are fragile. Our bodies are soft and they gradually break down. Our survival requires effort. We have needs we must meet. These fundamental human needs, according to the school of Human Scale Development developed by Manfred Max-Neef are few, finite and classifiable. Max-Neef argues that we human beings are not really all that complicated. We are what we are, and what we are today has not changed as dramatically from what we were as we might think. Our needs today are quite similar to the needs of our ancestors, both recent and ancient.

These needs are constant through all human cultures and across historical time periods. What changes over time and between cultures are the strategies by which these needs are satisfied. In Max-Neef's system of classification, human needs are not presented as a hierarchy, but rather as a grouping of inter-related priorities. So this is what we need: We need subsistence (food), protection, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, and freedom. These things we are all looking for, (these needs) continue to be our fixation until we are able to achieve them. Accordingly, when we are unable to meet our physical needs, we become worried, anxious, and fixated. Have someone take away your food for a few days, and I assure you, you will feel anxious. Alienate yourself from the people around you, and I believe you will begin to worry about being alone. Land yourself in jail, and it won't be long before you begin to fixate on freedom.

But like our senses, our physical needs have limits. We feel anxious about our hunger until we are fed... but what if we keep eating? What if the satisfaction of our needs alone proves to be no longer sufficient? So often we want more. More of the good stuff. More of the carousing, the drunkenness, the debauchery and fornication, more of the flesh until we find ourselves immersed in the more unattractive aspects of our superficial selves... We create factions, enmities, jealousy, anger... we encourage dissension, envy and strife... We fall out of relationship with one another and with our God.

So what are we to do? How do we find balance between the limits of our needs and our inexhaustible desires? How much is too much?

Paul says if it distracts you even a little from God, it is too much. Paul says we are more than just our bodies. In fact, he believes our physical identity exists in tension with our Spiritual identity. Imagine a continuum with one side representing our bodies and one side representing our Spirits. The only way we can become more spiritual is to lessen our consideration of our physical selves and vice versa. You know, starve the body to feed the Spirit.

Paul had some hang ups regarding the physical world. He seems to resent our earthiness. I don't think Paul liked to be touched. I don't share Paul's hang-ups. I love this body of mine and delight in the pleasure it brings me. But I, like Paul, recognize that the desires of my flesh do in fact prevent me from having a genuinely virtuous life. My self-interest is not best served by my flesh. I am weak., but God is not, and God has given us the Holy Spirit to lead us in the righteous way.

The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These qualities are offered us as a gift from God. You may feel you already have these things in your life. You may have already developed a satisfactory spiritual discipline. More power to you! But if you haven't, know that you can call upon the Spirit of God to bring these fruits into your life. If you are lonely, pray for love. If you are sad, pray for joy. If you are in conflict, pray for peace. If you are anxious, pray for patience. If you are in conflict, pray for kindness. If you are feeling selfish, pray for generosity. If you are lost, pray for faith. If you are ready to explode at the world around you, pray for gentleness. And if you struggle with the limits of our physical lives... if you find yourself unable to move beyond the needs of your physical life... if you struggle with addiction, anger, or enmity, pray for self-control. And when you pray, pray with conviction, because God knows you and loves you, and God provides for us. God sees to our needs. This is the good news for today. Selah.