

Pako Morning Service: 08/05/2016

Scripture Reading: John 15:1-17; Gal 5:19-26; Sermon: "Keeping in step"

Congregation, I would like to suggest that there are two kinds of people in this world. I am not speaking about male and female, or the colour of someone's skin, shape or height or lack of it. What I am speaking about is that there are people who do not know Christ as Saviour, and hence are controlled by their sinful nature, and then there are those who do know Christ as Saviour and are increasingly being sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

I would suggest that this is the contrast that is set before us in our text today. Note Gal 5:19-21; "The acts of the sinful nature 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...."

By the way, Paul isn't suggesting that every non-believer behaves like this all of the time. Thankfully, by God's common grace they don't. However, except for the hand of law and threat of punishment, or some other dire consequences as a result of such behaviour, there is no brake!

In direct contrast, Gal 5:22-23 mentions the virtues of someone who is a Christian; "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." The contrast couldn't be more stark. We shouldn't be surprised for Paul mentioned in v17 that the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Holy Spirit. That doesn't mean Christians don't sin anymore, but it does mean a Christian cannot continue to live a life of sin as though the Holy Spirit makes no difference.

Now I don't want to go into a long explanation of each sin mentioned in vv19-21, so I shall be brief. "Sexual immorality," usually refers to any kind of sexual sin, but especially to sexual sin between people who are not married to one another. "Impurity and debauchery" refers to any kind of uncleanness. A lack of respect for what is right and good. "Idolatry" means the worship of other gods or anything that has taken the rightful place of God in our lives. "Witchcraft or sorcery" is the worship of what is evil. "Hatred and discord" are character traits that become evident when love has gone out the window.

Jealousy is the wrong kind of zeal which often leads to fits of rage and selfish ambition which in turn it leads to people taking sides causing "dissensions" and "factions" and people envying one another. Finally, there are two more sins of the body, "drunkenness" (getting wasted) and "orgies" often associated with sexual exploitation. In v26 Paul adds another couple "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other."

All in all, it is quite a list. Not exhaustive by any means, but still quite a list. It includes social and sexual sins, sins of both the body and the soul. And when I think about this I am reminded that Paul is writing to the church. He's not writing to some sporting club where the end of season party has got way out of hand. He is writing to Christians. Obviously, Paul is concerned that Christians know the difference between living according to the sinful flesh or by the Holy Spirit. I am also acutely aware, that none of us is squeaky clean.

How often haven't I prayed Psa 25:7; "Remember not the sins of my youth or my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O Lord." Even though we as Christians are controlled increasingly by the Holy Spirit, the sinful nature is so evident, partly because we have committed so many of these deadly deeds ourselves.

Now the thing that I find even more alarming about all this is where it leads if we continue to do them. Paul gives a clear warning in verse 21b, "That those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." Over recent weeks we have been emphasising that our works cannot earn us a place in heaven. However, evil deeds can certainly keep someone out of it! Congregation this is serious. Not only do we need to confess and repent of these sins, we also acknowledge that if it were not for the grace of God we would still be on that path!

Now you might be sitting here this morning and thinking, "Well, I don't feel too good about all of this, because I am guilty of some of these things mentioned." Two things. When Paul refers to "those who do such things" (Gal. 5:21), the Greek verb indicates habitual action, not an occasional lapse. Paul is not talking about Christians who from time to time commit one of these sins against their better judgment. Rather, he is talking about people whose lives are dominated by sin, who are committed heart and soul to immorality, idolatry, sorcery, envy and the like.

Second, don't despair, for the very fact that you are concerned about your sin shows that the Spirit is at work, and that he will enable you to live a life that is more and more pleasing to God. I am reminded of a similar list in 2 Cor 6:9-10, and

then Paul adds in verse 11; “But you were washed; you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” The same is true for us who are in Jesus Christ.

Now let’s look briefly to the person who shows the fruit of the Holy Spirit in vv 22-23; I don’t think it is an accident that “love” is mentioned first. Paul reminds the Corinthians that “love” is the greatest virtue anyone can have. It’s really the sum and substance of what it means to be a Christian for it also describes our loving God and how he first loved us in Christ. Romans 5:5b says, “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

“Joy” – means contentment, particularly rejoicing in one’s eternal identity in Jesus Christ. Likewise, “peace” primarily comes from knowing we belong to our Saviour. And because that is true we can be patient, even in the face of hardship or adversity. Kindness is a constant readiness to help, the extension of God’s grace to the people around us through practical actions of caring. “Goodness,” indicates a willingness to be generous, of course sanctified by the Holy Spirit. “Faithfulness,” “gentleness,” and “self control,” all stem from what God has done for us in Christ.

I also find it interesting that the word fruit actually appears in the singular, so these traits highlight a total lifestyle, controlled by the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is not nine different gems but nine different facets of the same dazzling jewel. When we are controlled by the Holy Spirit we have them all. We may not be gifted in every area, but we do have the fruit of the Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit can be compared to the character of God himself. Love, joy peace, goodness, faithfulness. We see them displayed in the work of God the Son, who was patient in suffering, faithful to his disciples, gentle with children, and loving in his kindness to sinners. So we shouldn’t be surprised that God the Holy Spirit reproduces in us the virtues of Christ. In John 15 actually throws some light on it.

Jesus reminds us that we are branches connected to the vine. Since the Holy Spirit connects us to the vine, surely we can then only produce fruit that is in keeping with the Vine, namely of Christ himself. The fruit of the Spirit we display is God’s goodness working through us by the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ. Some of us have just started showing and producing this fruit for we have only just been connected to the vine. For others, it is more evident that we have been the gracious recipients of life giving grace that produces fruit a little longer. So it’s all of grace – no boasting allowed.

Paul ends v23 by saying, “Against such things there is no law.” The reason there is no law against these virtues is that they are positively lawful, and thus people who practice them fulfill the law. Now I wish to add something. We know that we cannot add our works to the completed work of Christ. However, the Holy Spirit does not produce fruit in the Christian life without our cooperation.

And that is what makes us different from non-believers. There are two things every Christian must do to remain fruitful. The first is to crucify the flesh. Note v24; “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature (flesh) with its passions and desires.” Dying to our sinful nature is one of the most neglected doctrines of the Christian faith, but also one of the most important. Christians should be the last to say that they cannot help but continue to sin in a certain area of their lives. That would be denying the power of the Holy Spirit within you. Paul says to the Romans, “Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11).

The Holy Spirit living within us cannot enter into peace negotiations with the sinful nature. The Spirit’s goal, the work of his sanctification within us is to put sin to death. And not just any death. The means of execution is crucifixion. We must not only take up our cross and walk with it, but actually see that the execution takes place. We are actually to take the flesh, our wilful and wayward self, and nail it to the cross. Consider how appropriate it is for the sinful nature to be crucified. Crucifixion of sin is a painful process. There is always something painful about putting our sins to death.

Our sinful nature loves them so much that we secretly hope that they will live. But that is not possible when the Holy Spirit starts his work of sanctification. The process takes a life time. We will never succeed completely, but we are constantly crucifying the sinful nature and we need to be determined to keep it on the cross until it expires. The question is not if it will die, but only when.

Sin received this death blow on the cross of Christ. We find the death of our own sinful nature in the death of Christ. Galatians 2:20 has said it already, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”. But notice one difference. In chapter 2, we are crucified with Christ; in chapter 5:24, we do the crucifying. ““Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature (flesh) with its passions and desires.” This verse describes a crucifixion carried out by those who are literally “of Christ.” In other words, God’s own people are the executioners. The

verb indicates that it has already taken place. The trouble is that our sinful nature has a way of trying to climb back down from that cross. And instead of trying to nurse it back to health, and struggle with besetting sins, we should be saying, "Oh no you don't. Get back up there on the cross where you belong!" We should be hammering in the nails a bit deeper! If you belong to Christ, you have crucified your sinful nature, with all its selfish desire. Do not resuscitate it. Do not give it CPR. Do not keep it on life support. Just leave it on the cross and let it die.

Now there is a second doing part and that is keeping in step with the Holy Spirit (v25). While we are putting our flesh to death, we are being revived by the Holy Spirit. As Calvin put it, "The death of the flesh is the life of the Spirit." Since you have been saved by Christ you have the Holy Spirit. Don't run ahead, don't lag behind, keep in step with the Holy Spirit. Something the Galatians were failing to do.

Paul had already asked them earlier in Gal 3:3, "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" The Galatians had fallen out of step with God's Spirit by trying to work their way into heaven. Keeping in step means to follow orders. Paul uses a military term. It means to stay in formation. Soldiers march and sometimes run in formation. The only one thing they need to worry about is keeping in step. Their commanding officer will give them their orders where to and how far.

It is the same way in the Christian life. Don't run ahead or lag behind, just keep in step. And we do that by availing ourselves of the means of grace. The Holy Spirit uses the ordinary means of grace to bring spiritual growth, the reading and preaching of God's Word, the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper, and the life of prayer. These things should become a holy habit. The more we keep in step with the Holy Spirit the more fruitful we become and the more Christ-like we become and surely that is our heart's desire.

When we don't avail ourselves of the means of grace, particularly the reading, teaching and preaching of God's word, we lose step! I have come across people who claim to be Christians and I don't doubt that they are, but some of things they do in the name of the Holy Spirit has no biblical warrant whatsoever. I have even challenged some of these people to "Give me chapter and verse" where it says either directly or implied that we should be doing some of these strange things and they cannot.

Finally, this analogy can be applied further for it shows we don't run alone. We run with other brothers and sisters. Ideally, we are on the same page with them, seeking to keep in step with the Holy Spirit. There is no pushing, no shoving each other, no manipulating, provoking or envying each other. Rather, we stay in formation, maintaining our unity in the Spirit. And if one falls, we gently restore them as Chapter 6 goes on to describe.

Congregation, may it be our prayer that we allow the Holy Spirit to increasingly control our lives so that the deeds of the sinful flesh will decrease and the fruit of the Spirit increase. Indeed, may our Spirit controlled lives be a light to our neighbours and world we live in. Amen.