

## **“Marching in the Spirit” based on Galatians 5**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on June 29, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

Today, we baptized young Carter, and I asked you, the congregation, to make a commitment. I asked you to promise to guide and nurture him in word and deed – by what you say and what you do. I asked you to nurture him with love and with prayer to share the good news, helping him to follow Jesus, and helping him grow as a member of our church family. This is the promise I have asked you to make for every child, and the promise that my predecessors asked of you also.

You see, in our tradition, we do not have the role of “godparents,” as assigned at baptism. We do not ask two people to be responsible for helping raise a child in the faith. This practice dates back to long ago in our church history and when it began, it was meant to support the parents with someone to offer religious instruction on what it means to profess your faith in Jesus and call yourself a Christian. Likewise, in some cases, the godparents became the people who would take in children, if, God forbid, anything should happen to their parents.

Sadly, the concept of giving parents help in raising the children in their Christian faith has, like so many things, become institutionalized, professionalized, and privatized. It’s up to the institution of the church with its pastors and designated leadership to offer opportunities for children to learn the faith without imposing upon parental priority.

Most Protestant denominations skip over this concept entirely. Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran churches, for the most part, all still have the role of godparent. But often, this is little more than formality, as an honorific title given to a close friend.

In fact, in 2021, one Roman Catholic diocese in eastern Sicily even stopped altogether the practice of assigning godparents. They did this to reduce the Mafia influence on the selection of these godparents. The role was too often given to someone who would show loyalty to the mafia, rather than faithfulness to Christ. They tried this nearly a decade earlier, but it was blocked by a cardinal who later faced charges of money laundering. This once vital role meant to support and uplift children in faith has become ignored, or misused, by most Christians.

Look, I know there are a lot of problems in our world and especially in the church today. I’m not going to pretend that this is some recent development caused by our failure to take being a godparent seriously (or anything else, for that matter). I won’t suppose that we could, if we all wanted to, go back to when everything was better, because honestly, from the beginning, Christians have struggled to be Christ-like. If you want proof, look at the bible, because most of the New Testament, is made up of letters, mostly by Paul, writing to Christians struggling to be like Jesus.

But let me ask you this anyway: “What if?”

What if we took this role of helping parents seriously? What if each of us, to an individual, saw our responsibility in the church to be modeling the life of Jesus for others? What if each and every member of this church thought of themselves as being a true godparent, thinking about the influence we have and the influence we should have with others. This is not only about the youngest among us, but even each other, our peers. What if how we sought our answers about the person and work of Jesus and how we participate in church in general was guided by this idea?

What if, in all of our differences among each and every one of us, we sought to walk through our lives as if we were being led by God in a march? What if we saw our walk of faith as a walk of togetherness with one another?

I'm going to focus on the most challenging parts of Galatians, Chapter 5, but I want to quickly recap the start of the chapter because it starts with one of the most well-known verses of scripture since the Reformation. Paul starts the chapter saying, "For freedom, Christ has set us free." These words inspire us, and make us think about our freedom as Christians because no one can put on us the bonds of enslavement to the law. Paul goes on to say, "Therefore, stand firm and do not be entangled again in the yoke of slavery." Paul then talks about the circumcision controversy, which can be summed up as him telling them that if you really want to be bound by the law and justify yourselves by keeping it, then you have fallen away from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What Paul is talking about here goes far beyond whether to circumcise, or not. Paul is talking about the idea whether or not what you do is what justifies you? When you hear this word "justify," it's one of those church words we need to take out of our church word dictionary. Instead, when you hear the word, think about when you use this word in everyday life right now in 2025.

"Sure, what he did was wrong, but it was justified. Just look at..." "She knew better, but it was justifiable, considering..." "They were just reacting, and it was justified, because..." When you hear "justify" and "justification," hear "excuse" and "excuses." We are excused by faith apart from works.

What Paul is saying to us is a bit scary, even horrifying, and yet, it is meant to be comforting. It is horrifying because we like to have agency and control over our lives. We want to think that if we do action 1, then the result will be reaction 2. We want this to be in our control. Yet, the reason it is comforting is because we all make mistakes a lot of the time. I know I do, but maybe I shouldn't speak for you.

Paul is telling them that just because you have been circumcised, or just because you have done something right before God in the law, it does not mean that whatever you've done wrong should just be ignored and forgotten. You don't do anything to earn God's favor, as if God can be manipulated for your own gain.

The freedom in Christ is the freedom "from" having to do things to earn God's love and favor. Sacrifices are not necessary, as they were used by custom in the religion of pagan Rome. Those sacrifices were done to gain the favor of a particular god and were calculated to achieve the results the sacrifice really wanted. Likewise, this freedom does not mean you can seek your own interest and expect that because of God's favor, whatever you do to achieve your goal. It's not as if whatever you do is totally acceptable because you are already "justified." Paul here says that we are all called freedom, but this freedom is not a starting point, or an opportunity for the flesh.

Now, we're going to mess with our church dictionaries again. I want you to take this word "flesh," and put away those churchy definitions. Sometimes, "flesh" is used by some to say Paul is railing against "sexual desire." Paul is not limiting it here. Sometimes, "flesh" is used as the material that is the opposite of "spirit," as if the physical is evil and only the immortal soul can be saved. Remember, that in the Old Testament, the soul and body are one.

No, flesh here is about the innate desire for immediate gratification and personal gain. This is against the Spirit because the Spirit is the unifying Holy Spirit in and among the people of God. The flesh is about our selfish nature, putting ourselves first, while the Spirit is God's selfless nature in us. Paul is not rejecting that we are embodied individuals made by God. No, he is an emphatic voice for the bodily resurrection that is promised.

Neither is Paul limiting the flesh to our lust and personal sins, because his focus is on how lust and personal sins destroy the community. Notice the commonality within Paul's examples: The works of the flesh are the things that divide people when we make no effort to control them. The gifts of the Spirit are things that when let loose, unite us.

This is why after talking of freedom, Paul says to enslave ourselves to one another for love. He says that all the law is fulfilled in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." We must not bite one another and swallow. No, we must not devour one another because then the end result will be that we, ourselves, will be consumed.

This eating metaphor reinforces my point about "flesh" in this letter, because the works of the flesh that he lists here are all things we do to "use" other people, or "consume" others. The flesh is a relentless drive for self-gratification at the expense of others, while the Spirit, provides for mutual benefit. In this, indeed, Spirit and flesh oppose one another.

If we lean toward the Spirit, we might not do what we think will make us feel good right now. And if we lean toward the flesh, we might not do things we know will help the world and our community. But if we live by the Spirit, we can march with each other without delusions, without calling out one another, without competition and envy. (Though it is translated elsewhere as "guided" or "follow" or "keep in step" or just "walk," Paul uses the word "march" here, and I think it is intentional to indicate a communal march.)

Beloved, if we say we love God, then we must love our neighbors. And if we say we believe the Holy Spirit is in and among us, then we must make every effort to be faithful to Jesus because the reason we are justified is the Messiah's faithfulness to us. We are called to respond to this grace.

Beloved, you do not have to earn God's love. Nor did you earn the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Son. No, we do not earn our fellowship in the Spirit. These are given to us freely – given to us while we were still sinners – because the Father sent the Son to share in our humanity for us. God did not need to do this, but God chose to share God's life with us, first by the Son living in our limits, dying for us, and rising for us. Then this life was shared when he ascended for us so the Holy Spirit could come down to us and fill us with these gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control. These are the signs that the Spirit is present in and among us.

When we give in to the works of the flesh, the things we do that objectify the people around us. This crowds out the Holy Spirit. As Carol Ann told our children, we need to be open to the Holy Spirit. This is important because when we give in to the works of the flesh, they mute the gifts that the Spirit pours into us. Our job is not to achieve something or do something to have the Spirit. Our job is refrain from the works of the flesh and thus make room for the Spirit. If we refrain from promiscuity, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, poisoning, hostility, strife, zeal, tantrums, selfish

ambition, rebellion, partisanship, grudges, intoxication, public disturbances, then we will recognize that the Holy Spirit is in us and see the Spirit at work in others.

Now there are a lot of charged words in that list, and translators are all over the place with words in English that are very accurate in one sense, but they lose something in how we understand them. A perfect example is the word usually translated “sexual immorality.” This word in Greek is ‘porneia.’ This is an often-debated word. Sexual immorality is a vague term that varies from culture to culture, and age to age. Even at the time of its writing, it meant different things to Jews and Greeks. But at the center is the idea that using people for sexual gratification is wrong.

For Christians, sexual conquest means not seeing the other person as a sibling in Christ. This is why I always translate this word as “promiscuity,” because for us, I believe this English word captures the whole range of ‘porneia,’ from the casual sexual adventures that always have an impact on the parties involved, to the actions of sexual predators, which our culture rightly condemns as dangerous today, but which were too often celebrated in Rome and other past cultures. This is why the vague “immorality” word doesn’t really work.

Next is the word we translate as impurity – ‘*akatharsia*.’ This is not simply ritual purity and cleanliness, nor is it about maintaining your own purity. This is about making sure your actions do not impact on the purity of another, or mess with their ability to practice their faith.

The third term, ‘*aselgia*,’ is often lumped in as another sexual term, and translated as, “sensuality.” This word is more akin to license – thinking we can do whatever we want, regardless of how it affects others. It’s the opposite of self-control that the Spirit brings.

Idolatry, of course, is something we know as the worship of images and false gods. However, we make idols of many things, even good things in our lives, and give them power over us, causing us to make excuses and lose sight of God’s image in others.

The next one is ‘*pharmakeia*’ and it is often translated as “sorcery” and that’s probably the best translation, but the word is more akin to using dark arts or even medical arts for manipulation. It’s about getting someone else doing what you want them to do for you. This is poisoning them.

Then there is ‘*echthrai*’ which is a word that the author Madeleine L’Engle used to name the enemy spiritual forces against people and God. This is a word that means “enemy” or “enmity” and indicates a “hostility” directed toward people or God.

Next is the word ‘*eris*.’ This word is “strife” or “conflict” or “argument.” This is when we seek out victory over someone else in an argument, rather than knowing the person with whom we are arguing and loving them.

Then Paul uses the word ‘*zelos*’ and the KJV translates it as “emulations,” which is odd, while others use “jealousy.” This is the Greek root word for “zeal” and “jealous” in English. This word comes from the idea of getting heated up, usually in defense of a possession, a relationship, or a belief.

Next is ‘*thymoi*.’ Often translated as “anger” or “wrath,” this is a word rooted in the idea of setting something on fire and shares a common root with the word for “sacrifice” because animal sacrifices were burned. This is a word for tantrums, or outbursts of anger toward others.

Next is *'eritheia,'* a word that shares a root with the Greek word for “mercenary.” It's about quarrelling or doing things for personal gain, or selfish ambition. It's about doing whatever it takes, being someone for hire, who will do whatever is needed. Side note, you can feel a lot of the “mafia” stereotypes in these words, and so if you want a good picture of the culture of Ancient Rome, just watch a mafia movie and imagine that way of life as the predominant culture.

Next is the word, *'dichostasia,'* and this word means “dissent” or “sedition” in the sense of choosing your own interests over the best interests of the community. It is a kind of “rebellion.”

With that, Paul then lists, *'haireseis,'* and this is the root of our word “heresy,” and is often translated as “faction.” This is a word that means creating a party that is opposed to another major or even prevailing viewpoint and then becoming committed to allegiance to that viewpoint over all else, even if it means dividing the group to win. It is about factionalism, and in our day and age, partisanship may be a good translation.

Next is the difficult to say, *'phthonoi,'* and it is a word for a feeling of ill-will that corrupts or decays a relationship. It is envy, or desiring what another has, to the point of being unable to relate to the person. It's that concept of saying, *“I can't stand them. They have that house and just...”*

The word *'methai'* is the root word for methyl alcohol and methamphetamine. It means intoxicated or drunk. This is about being in a state where we cannot control our actions around others.

Last in the works of the flesh is *'kemai'* and this is the word used for street festivals in which the leaders and participants said and did as they wished without regard for public order.

Now that was the list of the works of the flesh, and you can see that all of them are geared towards things that cause division among people. Then Paul gives us the gifts of the Spirit and they offer a contrast to the works of the flesh.

First is *'agape,'* and this was the little used Greek word for a preferential love, that the Christians adapted to mirror God's everlasting, never-ending, always pursuing, merciful and faithful love.

Then he lists *'chara'* or joy, and this is more than happiness. It is the feeling of gladness or calm delight that you have found favor and can relax. You can be confident in how you approach others because you are assured of your favor.

Next is *'eirene'* which is the word for peace. In the Greek sense, this is an absence of conflict due to unity across differences. In the Hebrew sense, it is the peace that comes from wholeness.

Then Paul lists *'chrestotes,'* and this is the moral excellence that comes from being useful. It is more than being nice. It's about being nice, but also helpful.

Next is *'agathosyne'* or “goodness,” and this is ideal goodness. It is big goodness with a capital G. This is about being someone who is looking out for others.

Paul then lists the word *'pistis'* as a gift of the Spirit. This is the word we usually translate as “faith,” but which encompasses a range of meaning that includes “belief,” “faithfulness,” “trust,” or “allegiance.” It is a commitment of one person to another person or to God that ranges from simple belief all the way to total allegiance.

Then comes '*prautes*,' translated today as "meekness." This is humility, a humble strength and an unwillingness to take advantage of others. It is a gentleness where you refuse to act harshly toward others.

Lastly, Paul lists '*enkrateia*' or "self-control." This is the idea of having control over your actions, not choosing those works of the flesh. It's about not making others live up to your ideals, when even you still remain imperfect.

Beloved, that was a long list, but we need to know what these words are so that we can recognize the works of the flesh, which divide community, and the gifts of the Spirit, which bring us together to march with God in one community, no matter how diverse its members are. We should be looking for the fruits of the Spirit in this world to see God at work among us. Likewise, when we see the works of the flesh at work in us and in others, we need to recognize that they are crowding out the Spirit's action.

We need to do what we can to let the fruits flourish in us, as if we take seriously the idea of setting a good example and the role of being godparents to the children around us and to one another. If we managed our behavior and cultivated these gifts, we would be the best godparents, because we would be enslaved to one another as good examples.

As we think about Carter this morning, let us recognize our responsibility to him and one another, and stop making excuses and march together in all of our beautiful differences. Because despite how we are different, we can be a community, marching in the Spirit together with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control. Amen.

#### Galatians 5:13-26 (Fresh Translation)

"For you all were called to freedom siblings, only this is not freedom as a starting point for the flesh. Instead, on account of love, be enslaved to one another. For in one word, all the law is fulfilled. It is in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." However, if you bite one another and swallow it down, look out, or else you might be consumed by one another.

"Now, I say, walk through life by the Spirit, and you should not complete the desire of flesh. For the flesh desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. For these are opposed to one another so that you might not do the things you might want to do.

"Now, if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now, the works of the flesh are apparent. They are promiscuity, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, poisoning, hostility, strife, zeal, tantrums, selfish ambition, rebellion, partisanship, grudges, intoxication, public disturbances, and things similar to this. It is these to which I forewarn you, just as I said before that those doing such things will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control. There is no law against these things. Now those of the Messiah Jesus have crucified the flesh with its sufferings and longings. If we live by the Spirit, then we will also march by the Spirit. We should not become deluded of our own glory, calling out one another, jealous of one another."