

Introduction

Not long ago, I saw a young woman wearing a sloganed t-shirt that was meant to be funny I'm sure. Ironically though, if she's a typical human being, it was true as well. It said, "**My life is a soap opera**" and that's what I'm going to preach about today – the soap opera life.

The Soap Opera Life

In Galatians 5:19-21, Paul records a list of what he calls "**deeds.**" It's a list of 15 vices that the 1st century church circulated and warned Christians about practicing. It's worth our while then to define each one. **Immorality:** illicit sex with a person. **Impurity:** illicit sex generally. **Sensuality:** pursuing physical pleasures without restraint. **Idolatry:** worshipping man made gods. **Sorcery:** black magic. **Enmities:** hostility toward others. **Strife:** rivalry. **Jealousy:** wanting things just because others have them. **Outbursts of anger:** flying off the handle. **Disputes:** demanding our own way. **Dissensions:** opposing others with antagonism. **Factions:** attacking anyone who disagrees with us. **Envy:** begrudging others having things that we don't. **Drunkness:** abusing alcohol. **Carousing:** uncontrolled revelry. The phrase, "**and things like these**" in verse 21 shows that this list isn't exhaustive.

A thought strikes me as I look at these 15 deeds. They're the "stuff" of soap operas. You all know what soap operas are. They're ongoing and episodic works of *dramatic* fiction that radio and television present in serial format – with emphasis on the word "dramatic." Their main characteristic, according to *Wikipedia*, is "**an emphasis on family life, personal relationships, sexual dramas, emotional and moral conflicts.**" Anyway, peruse these 15 deeds and you'll see it clearly. They're the stuff of soap operas.

But know this. The very reason the first century church warned about them was because they were so commonplace. They don't just describe the practices of depraved people like we see on soap operas.

They describe those of typical people as well. That isn't to say that all 15 are practices of theirs. But it is to say that most of them are. That young lady's sloganed t-shirt is likely the truth about her. She likely practices most of the 15. The lives of typical people are soap operas, filled with all the drama their deeds create. I've been an attorney and pastor for 35 years. Believe it or not, I can draw on those 35 years and give you scores of real life stories that encompass each and every one of the 15 deeds.

Here is just a sampling of those stories. **Immorality:** A prosecutor named Michael, who is married with three children, and a prosecutor named Nancy, who is single, are having a torrid ongoing affair, which almost all of us at the courthouse know about. **Enmities:** A neighbor of ours secretly kicks in the front fenders of another neighbor's car because that neighbor had called the police on him. **Outbursts of anger:** The young manager of a turnpike gas station dislikes his job because so many customers come in and scream at him for gas prices being so high. **Factions:** Police are called to a Baptist Church in the Canton area. Why? Because a group of elders and board members, who disagree about the pastor's ministry, have gotten into a fist fight there.

Sadly, I could go on for an hour with stories like those. But they're enough to illustrate it. Typical people have soap opera lives that's are filled with destructive drama.

The Source of the Soap Opera Life

Now, notice the prepositional phrase that follows the word deeds in verse 19, "**of the flesh.**" That phrase identifies the source of the soap opera life. It's "**the flesh.**" That term has several meanings in Paul's letters. In verses 16, 17, and 19, it means the fallen nature with which people are born. It's hard to hear that I know, but it's true. Every person, including you and I, is born with a fallen nature. When I say, "**nature,**" I'm referring to our inner dimensions – our thoughts, feelings, will, and bodily habits. When I say, "**fallen,**" I mean egocentric. So,

every person is born with mental, emotional, volitional, and bodily inclinations, even compulsions, to act self-centeredly – to act as if he or she is more important than anyone or anything else.

I'd explain it more specifically this way. Typical people have three basic goals in life. The first is security, getting their needs met. The second is satisfaction, getting their wants met. And the third is status, being respected. They value those three things, so much so that they're at the ready to do evil in order to get them. That's the natural state of typical people. A systematic readiness to evil dwells in them. They're ready to harm others, including God, or to allow harm to come to others, including God, in order to preserve or promote their security, satisfaction, or status.

My niece, who just became an RN, told me that there was constant tension between the nurses with whom she interned. One of the causes of that tension was this common practice - putting off unpleasant tasks long enough so that the next shift of nurses would have to do them. The goal of those nurses was satisfaction, not having to do unpleasant tasks. And they harmed other nurses to get it.

That demonstrates the source of the soap opera life, the human drama, all around us everyday. It's the flesh, the fallen egocentric nature with which all of us are born.

The Good Life

But there's another kind of life that Paul describes in this text. It's what we today call "**the good life.**" There are four basic worldview questions that every person, whether he or she realizes it or not, asks and answers. One is, "**What is the good life?**" That's the question and Paul gives us the right answer in verses 22-23. In these verses, he records a list of what he calls "**fruit.**" It's a list of 9 conditions or qualities of character, each of which has a set of accompanying feelings.

The first three of those – love, joy, and peace – are foundational conditions, ones from which the other six automatically flow. They

naturally express themselves in the other six conditions. A person who has love, joy, and peace, will also necessarily have patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

So let's define the first three conditions. **Love** is the will to promote the good of a person or thing for his or her or its own sake. Its primary accompanying feeling is compassion. **Joy** is the certain sense that all is well. Its primary accompanying feeling is happiness or delight. And **peace** is the rest of the will. Its primary accompanying feeling is tranquility or calm.

Those three conditions help us grasp what the good life is. It's a state of being in which we experience pervasive and habitual love, joy, and peace. Its details make us realize just how good it is. We're grateful not defensive when criticized, glad not regretful when outshone, forgiving not resentful when wronged, compassionate not angry when opposed, confident not fearful when threatened, and so on. You can see that, in actuality, the good life is far more than just good. It's what Jesus called "**abundant**" and "**full.**"

The Source of the Good Life

Now, notice the prepositional phrase that follows the word "**fruit**" in verse 22, "**of the Spirit.**" That phrase identifies the source of the good life. I said there are four basic worldview questions, one of which we just answered. What is the good life? A second is, "How do we get it." What is its source? Our current culture proposes three basic answers.

One is psychology. We live in a therapeutic society. Many if not most people consider psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychotherapy to be the most effective means for achieving the good life.

A second proposed answer is the dizzying array of spiritualities that permeate our cultural landscape: Hinduism, Buddhism, A Course in Miracles, Wicca, Yoga, Sufism, and many more. Each of those holds itself out as the best path to the good life.

There's a third proposed answer - the self-help movement. It claims

that the secret to the good life lies in exercising our own personal capacities and strengths. This movement has its Christian counterparts, the possibility thinking of Robert Schuller and the favor minded ministry of Joel Osteen being the most prominent examples of that.

I thoughtfully and objectively examined all three of those proposed answers. I found in doing so that spiritualities suppress reality and are harmful. I also found that psychology and self-help can be beneficial. They can help people cope with things in non-destructive ways. But that's a far cry from pervasive and habitual love, joy, and peace. Those proposed answers, in other words, aren't answers. The good life requires substantive changes in us that none of the three can bring about.

Author Rebecca Pippert tells about taking a class at Harvard called "Systems of Counseling." The professor discussed a case study one day in which the therapist helped his patient uncover a hidden hostility toward his mother. Identifying the problem helped the patient. It made him feel as if a great weight had been lifted from him. The professor was about to proceed to the next case study when Rebecca raised her hand and posed this. Suppose the patient now wants to get beyond his hostility toward his mother and to forgive and love her. So he says to his therapist, "**How do I do that?**" Having posed that, Rebecca asked, "**How does psychotherapy help a person with a request like that?**" The professor paused a few seconds when she did and then replied: "**I think the therapist would say, 'Lots of luck.'**" After which he added, "**If you're looking for a changed heart, I think you're looking in the wrong department.**" It was a candid confession from a Harvard psychotherapist. He was right. If we're looking for the good life in psychology, spiritualities, or the self-help movement, we won't find it.

Where will we find it then? The prepositional phrase after the word "**fruit**" in verse 22, "**of the Spirit,**" tells us. It's in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the source of the good life. He and He alone can bring about the state of being that constitutes the good life , pervasive and habitual love, joy, and peace.

But as is usually the case, we have a part to play in He doing what He does. Paul tells us what that part is. It's to do two things.

First, we apprentice ourselves to Jesus. In verse 24, Paul declares who it is that can have the good life. It those **"who belong to Jesus."** **"Belong to"** means **"exist for."** We must exist for Jesus in order to have the good life. Note it. He doesn't exist for us. We exist for Him.

There is only one way to exist for Him, and that is to apprentice ourselves to Him. That means we firmly make the decision to be with Him and to learn and do all that He says. We then arrange our everyday affairs around carrying that decision out.

A remarkable thing happens to those who do that. According to verse 18, they are **"led by the Spirit."** The Holy Spirit comes to inhabit, transform, empower, and guide them.

We play our part in the Holy Spirit creating the good life by doing a second thing. According to verses 16 and 25, we **"walk by the Spirit."** The word **"walk"** is a metaphor that stands for directing our minds and bodies in certain ways. The word **"Spirit"** refers to the Holy Spirit. To walk by the Spirit, therefore, means that we direct our minds and bodies to the Holy Spirit. We do things with our minds and bodies that engage His person and power.

I've identified and explained those things to you, in detail, over the years: solitude, silence, study, fasting, prayer, worship, the Sabbath rest, the memorization of Scripture, purposeful obedience, practicing the presence of God, and more. You and I need to learn how to do those things and persistently do them. It connects us to the Holy Spirit and enables Him to freely transform, empower, and guide when we do.

Conclusion

I close this morning with a question. Is your life like that young woman's who wore the sloganed t-shirt? Is it a soap opera life? If so, I challenge you to apprentice yourself to Jesus and walk by the Spirit. Your soap opera life will eventually become the good life if you do.