

“The Fruit of the Spirit: Introduction”

Galatians 5.16-26

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

September 16, 2018

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23) It might have just been a passing comment that Paul made, in that letter he sent to some young churches in what is now the country of Turkey. He might not have had any idea that his words would endure the test of time, that we might be sitting here now, pondering their significance for our lives. He had been talking to them about freedom, *Christian* freedom, freedom from the Jewish law, freedom from empty rituals, freedom from very long lists of “do this” and “don’t do that.” The Christian life is not about slavishly following a list of rules. No, it’s about living by the Holy Spirit, letting the Spirit of God work in your life, empowering you, strengthening you, directing you, as you grow more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Living by the Holy Spirit involves not gratifying “the desires of the flesh,” as he calls it, those habitual patterns of destructive behavior that we fall into when we’re not vigilant, and he names about 15 of those here, perhaps just the ones that came to his mind as he was dictating this letter to his scribe. “I warn you,” he says, “as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” Some lessons have to be repeated more than once before they sink in.

Then it comes: the “fruit of the spirit,” his list of nine Christian virtues, that stand against those fifteen or so “works of the flesh.” These are not the only nine Christian virtues that are named in the New Testament, and they may simply have been the ones that came quickly to Paul’s mind as he was dictating ... but it’s a good list. It’s a well-rounded articulation of what our lives ought to *look* like, as followers of Jesus, in *any* era of human history. He is quick to say that “there is no law” against such things – meaning, *look, folks, what I’m telling you is entirely consistent with the teachings you are already familiar with.* He then adds, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” – meaning, if you have given your life over to Jesus, then your heart of hearts doesn’t *want* to pursue those destructive habits and patterns that you may once have enjoyed. Even if you dally around in them, indulge yourself from time to time, you’ll *know*, instinctively, intuitively, that *that’s not who you want to be, that’s not what you want to be doing.* Christ calls us to something *better* than that, a more wholesome kind of life. So, we turn away from those destructive behaviors and give our lives over to what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do. “If we live by the Spirit, let us also *walk* by the Spirit,” let us actively *pursue* those Christian virtues which the Holy Spirit has planted in our hearts.

“Planted” is a good word for what the Holy Spirit has done to us. When we become Christians,

when we turn our back to the ways of sin and death and offer our lives to the service of Jesus, bowing down before him, calling him “Lord,” the Holy Spirit comes along and sprinkles some seed in our hearts. Like a farmer, in the early spring, planting seed in the fields, seed which will germinate and blossom, producing a crop that will be enjoyed months down the road – or, in our case, perhaps *years*. It doesn’t happen overnight. Here around Mason, I enjoy watching the corn and the soybeans grow and flourish every summer. I’m always amazed at how quickly they grow, and I wish that the seed that the Holy Spirit plants in our hearts would grow as quickly. But, alas, some of that spiritual seed takes time to sprout; sometimes there are weeds or brambles that get in the way; sometimes we don’t nourish it with enough spiritual nutrients or water or sunlight. There’s a natural process of development, but the process can be hindered if we’re not doing what we need to do to create the right kind of *environment* for the seed to flourish. There are things we can *do* to help that spiritual seed *grow*.

There are, as I said, nine types of spiritual fruit that Paul mentions here. There is some variation among the different English translations of the Bible, but for the most part there is a pretty consistent list. If you grew up Catholic, you may have learned that there are *twelve* fruits of the Holy Spirit; the traditional Latin version of the New Testament includes an additional three (generosity, modesty, and chastity). We’re going to stick with the original nine – *love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* – and we’re going to take a week to look at each one of these in turn. What does each word *really* mean? What are some examples of what it *looks* like in daily living? Where else do we hear about each of these Christian virtues in the Bible? Can we find some biblical illustrations for each of these? And – perhaps most importantly – what can we *do* to help *develop* each of the nine? How can we help each one of these fruits blossom and flourish in our lives? One week, on each virtue – that will keep us plenty busy all the way till Thanksgiving!

I need to stress that the Holy Spirit plants the seeds for *all nine* of these in our hearts, and invites us to develop *all* of them. This is not a matter of picking the ones that come easily to you and ignoring the rest. There’s an “*and*” there between #8 and #9, not an “*or*”. It is not love *or* joy *or* peace, etc., but love *and* joy *and* peace, and so on. This is different from the “spiritual gifts” that Paul also teaches about, that list of spiritual abilities that God gives us. Each of us typically only has a few of those – perhaps the gift of discernment, or the gift of prophecy, or the gift of healing. This is different. The Fruit of the Spirit is something that we are given *in full*. The Holy Spirit plants seeds in our hearts for *all nine*. That means that we don’t really have a choice in the matter; we are *expected*, as Christians, to develop each one, to remove the weeds that are causing some of them to stagnate. A mature Christian is someone who clearly manifests *all nine*. I know I’m not there yet, and I bet you’re not either, which is why it’s worth exploring them all. There’s not one of these virtues that’s unimportant to *any* of us

Think of it, if you will, like the skills you need to have if you want to play a game well. Maybe you’re into baseball, and you can hit that ball with *power*, and *precision* ... but you’re lousy in the outfield. You might do a great job at a Home Run Derby, but if you can’t throw and you can’t catch, who’s going to want you on their team? Or you play basketball, and you can sink a basket from halfway across the court, but you can’t dribble to save your life, and every time you try, the other team snatches the ball away. You might spend a good deal of time on the bench! It’s the same concept here. If you want to be a strong, well-rounded Christian, someone who is trusted and respected, a true “pillar of the

church,” you need to develop your game in all *nine* of the fruits. You might have a lot of Christian love, a good heart, truly caring, but you have no patience whatsoever, and *everybody* knows it. Something is preventing that “patience” fruit from flourishing within you, and the Holy Spirit wants you to deal with that weed, to improve your game and make you a better, stronger, more well-rounded Christian.

Which brings me to the inserts in your bulletin. You’ve got a list of the nine fruits of the Spirit, and next to each fruit are the numbers 1 through 9. Here’s what I’d like you to do. Look down that list of nine. Off the top of your head, based upon what you know about each of these so far, *which one do you think you manifest more abundantly than any of the others?* I’ll give you a moment to think about that. Is there one that you feel like you *excel* in, or that comes more easily to you, or that other people have said they see in you? Imagine that your life is represented by a fruit tree, and there are nine different kinds of fruit on that tree: which fruit is there more of than any other? What I want you to do is to fill in the circle on that row that has the number 1 in it. Fill it in like you’re taking a standardized test; fill in the whole circle with a pen or a pencil. I know, some of you are feeling self-conscious about this; maybe you’re afraid your neighbors might be watching. If you’re uncomfortable doing this here, take the sheet home and do it in private. Seriously, I really want you to do this. Give yourself a “1” in that fruit that you think shines more brightly in you than any of the others. Don’t feel awkward or embarrassed, but rather celebrate the fact that the Holy Spirit has given you that fruit in abundance!

Next, I want you to think about which one of these you have the *least* of. This one gets a 9. If, for example, you don’t have much self-control, well, take that pen or pencil, and fill in the 9 on that line. (This will you, by the way, which week in this series you *really* need to be here for!)

Okay, you’ve identified your most abundant and least abundant fruit. There are seven left. Go ahead and rank yourself in the remaining seven. Which one do you have more than any other? That one gets a 2. Which do you have least of? That one gets an 8. Now you’re left with five. Give one of them a 3, another one a 7; then one of them a 4, and one of them a 6, and the last one gets a 5.

Okay, that’s the first part. Easy enough, right? Now we’re going to *test* this. How accurate are your perceptions of yourself? This is why you have *two* sheets in your bulletin. Take the second sheet and give it to someone who knows you *really well*. It might be your spouse, or your best friend; maybe a sister or a brother, or an adult child, or a parent. Someone who knows your habits and your idiosyncrasies; someone who will be totally *honest* with you. Someone you *trust*. Give them the blank sheet, and ask *them* to assess *you*. Where do *they* think your fruit is well-developed, and where do they think it’s lacking? If you’ve got good self-awareness, your assessment and their assessment should line up pretty closely. If they are wildly different, well, maybe God’s trying to tell you something. If you want to give it to more than one person, go right ahead; we have plenty, and we can make more.

I want you to have fun with this little exercise. It might be a bit revealing. That’s probably a good thing. God’s vision for each of us is that we are manifesting *all nine* of these fruits. Every one of us probably has some work to do, and this exercise will tell you where you need to start. Next week, we’ll start walking through these slowly, one at a time.

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