

The Fruit of the Spirit: Love

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Galatians 5:16-26

05 22 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Worship Series Introduction (Before Pastoral Prayer)

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control . . . we all desire these attributes in our lives. However, these are the very qualities often undeveloped in our Christian character. Our half-hearted attempts to lead holy lives leave us feeling frustrated and defeated.

Our summer worship series is entitled *The Fruit of the Spirit*. We will explore how to cultivate these vital attributes of the Christian life. During the next weeks, we will discover how the fruit of the Spirit is a natural outgrowth of our relationship with God.

The key verse for the series is **Galatians 5:22**. It lists nine ways the Holy Spirit's presence is made manifest in Christian disciples. In order to appreciate this passage, however, we need a broader understanding of Paul's letter to the **Galatians**.

Background Information on Galatians

Galatia was a Roman province in Asia Minor. During his missionary journeys, Paul founded a series of churches in the region. However, problems soon arose. The apostle wrote this letter to the Galatians to address a serious issue in the congregation.

Paul's understanding of the Christian gospel can be summarized in one statement: **"Justification (salvation) by grace through faith."** Through the cross and empty tomb, God has created a way for humanity to be justified or saved. This free gift of grace is something we do not earn or merit. Instead, we receive it through faith in Christ Jesus as our Savior and Lord. In Romans 3:22-24, Paul wrote:

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.

This was the gospel that Paul preached to the Galatians; and this was the gospel that they had believed.

After Paul left the region, however, some misguided teachers began promoting a false doctrine. They insisted that Christians still had to follow all of the Old Testament rules and rituals of the Jewish faith, including a kosher diet, feast days, circumcision, and more. These legalistic missionaries said that Christians had to earn God's acceptance by following the Old Testament law. Many within the churches began following their false teaching, and the crisis threatened to split the church.

When Paul heard about the situation, he was furious. Galatians is Paul's only letter than omitted a traditional section of thanksgiving. Listen to his angry words:

✓ *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ*

- ✓ *You foolish Galatians. Who bewitched you?*
- ✓ *If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*

THEN Paul really got mad! For those who insisted that new Christian converts be circumcised according to the Jewish law, he wrote: “*As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!*”

Paul reacted so strongly because this false teaching attacked the very heart of the Christian gospel. Salvation does not come by the law through works; instead, salvation comes by God’s grace through faith.

Paul’s message to the Galatians is still relevant to the church today. Time and again we attempt to earn God’s love through works and deeds. However, the first and last word of the gospel is **grace**. If we long to grow in Christ, and cultivate the fruit of the Spirit, then we need to allow God’s grace to accomplish this within our lives.

Paul’s conflict with the false teachers forms the backdrop for Galatians. It also informs our understanding of the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22.

Scripture: Galatians 5:16-26

Introduction

Last month my daughter came home from school for a weekend visit. Katie loves Anjou pears, and she was excited to see the **bowl of pears** her mother had bought at the store. She started to take a big bite only to discover . . . they were artificial! The fake fruit only possessed the illusion of reality.

Human efforts can never create divine results. Our best attempts only produce fake fruit. If we want to harvest the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, then we need to cultivate a vital, life-sustaining relationship with our Lord.

Sinfulness versus the Spirit

Paul began our Scripture lesson today with a simple but essential call: “*So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*” The Amplified Bible expands the verse to say:

But I say, walk and live habitually in the Holy Spirit—responsive to and controlled and guided by the Spirit; then you will certainly not gratify the cravings and desires of the flesh—of human nature without God.

Paul describes two radically different lifestyles: the life of sinfulness and the life of the Spirit. We choose whether to live as citizens of this world or the world to come.

1) As human beings in a fallen world, our natural inclination is to gratify the desires of the flesh. In Paul’s letters, “*the flesh*” does not refer to our physical bodies. Instead, it describes our sinful nature that actively opposes God’s rule. Galatians 5:19-21 gives a snapshot of this worldly lifestyle:

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.

This sounds like a description from tonight's *TV Guide*! The prophet Jeremiah wrote about the people in his sinful society: "*They have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush.*" (Jeremiahs 6:15) These words are truer today than ever. What were once secret sins of shame are now public boasts of pride.

However, evil words and deeds are symptomatic of a much deeper disease that the Bible calls **SIN**. Our sinfulness is not the sum total of the bad things we do and the good things we leave undone. Instead, it is broken relationship with God. On our own, we cannot save ourselves or lead holy lives.

2) Thanks be to God! In Christ Jesus, God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. At the cross, our sin was put to death. At the empty tomb, we were raised to new life. All those who profess Jesus as Savior and Lord experience forgiveness of sins and life everlasting.

THEN we are called to **radical discipleship**—a lifelong adventure led by the Holy Spirit. We are challenged to live as citizens of God's kingdom rather than this fallen world. Paul's call reflects our own desire to lead holy lives that are pleasing to God. So the critical question becomes: how do we live and walk by the Spirit?

Abide in Me

Many here enjoy the hobby of **gardening**. I cut the grass and trim the shrubs at our house, but my wife takes care of the flowers. Each season we enjoy a variety of plants with rich colors in our yard. However, I've never seen my wife actually GROW anything. Anyone with an introductory knowledge of botany knows that none of us can.

It is GOD that gives the growth. Our duty is to prepare the soil and tend the plants so that they can grow. We provide the proper conditions for God's work.

In the fifteenth chapter of John, Jesus described how to obtain and maintain a vital relationship with God. In John 15:4, Christ said: "**Remain in me, and I will remain in you.**" (NIV) *The Living Bible* paraphrases this verse as "**Live in me, and I will live in you.**" Other translations read, "**Abide in me, and I will abide in you.**" (RSV, KJV)

We are to remain, live, and abide in Christ. The focus is upon constancy and continuity. Abiding in Christ describes a healthy, ongoing relationship with God. We are to remain in the Lord's presence and live in his love. In turn, Jesus promises that his Spirit will live in us.

Jesus illustrated this point with an **agricultural analogy**. He said, "**I am the vine, you are the branches.**" The vine draws nutrients from the ground and carries the sap to the branch. The branch ABIDES in the vine. Cut the branch away from the vine, and it withers and dies. Only when the branch stays in vital relationship with vine can it live.

Abiding in Christ means a constant, continual relationship. Spiritual health is similar to physical health. You cannot exercise for one hour a week or eat one healthy

meal a month and expect to be in good health. It requires a daily discipline of acquired **habits of holiness** to keep the soul healthy.

John Wesley referred to these disciplines as “**means of grace**.” They are spiritual exercises that God established for us to help us grow and mature in faith. Wesley divided the “means of grace” into two categories: works of piety and works of mercy:

- ❖ **Works of piety** include the inward care of our own soul through prayer, Bible study, fasting, and healthy living. He also included the sacraments of baptism and communion along with Christian fellowship.
- ❖ **Works of mercy** address outward acts of ministry and mission, including good works, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned, and feeding and clothing the poor. In addition, he included words of financial stewardship: make all you can, save all you can, and give all you can.

The Fruit of the Spirit

When we abide in Christ, the Lord abides in us. Like the branches of a grape vine, the natural result is that we bear fruit in our lives. Then Jesus said, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much **fruit**; apart from me you can do nothing.”*

You don’t need to be a master gardener to understand this simple concept. Suppose you carefully plant healthy **tomato** plants. Then you fertilize, water, and weed the plants in appropriate amounts. You protect the plants from disease and insects. Do you know what will happen? You’ll get tomatoes! The plants naturally bear the fruit.

Jesus emphasized this lesson when he said, *“Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit!”* (Matthew 7:17-18)

In the same way, those who abide in Christ naturally (and supernaturally) **bear the fruit** of Christian living. An ongoing relationship with the Holy Spirit cultivates holiness in our lives. Abiding in Christ makes us more Christ-like. It’s crucial to understand that discipleship is an ongoing, lifelong process of growth and maturation.

This **organic image** is a critical point in cultivating the fruit of the Spirit. Do you ever find yourself picking and choosing what characteristics you need to produce in your life? *“Hmmm, I need kindness, gentleness, and self-control, but I’ve got all of the rest of them down pat—especially humility!”*

Like the Galatians, we begin to think of holiness as a **checklist** of things we DO—a result of human effort. We apply this same attitude towards spiritual fruit. We view Paul’s nine characteristics of holy living like **Boy Scout merit badges**. They are something we are called to work on and earn.

Oftentimes, I talk with Christians who are focusing on one of these attributes. They say, “I need to be more patient,” “I need to learn how to hold my temper,” “I need to practice self-control in diet and exercise,” “I need to quit worrying so much.”

Did you note the common pronoun in all of these statements? It’s “I!” If this is our approach to cultivating holy practices in our lives, then we will fail.

We become like Charlie Brown in the batter's box, saying to himself: "If I grit my teeth, then I can hit the ball." You recall the results—an inside fastball spins him around and leaves his clothes scattered on the ground!

A Lifelong Process

Part of the challenge of cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is that we are such an **impatient people**—which is rather ironic since the fruit of the Spirit includes . . . patience! In an instant gratification world, we want what we want NOW.

Those involved in agriculture know differently. Growing fruit is an exercise in patience. You don't plant one day and harvest the next. It takes time—and lots of it. Growth occurs incrementally, invisibly, daily, slowly.

The plant grows, sinking roots into the soil and shoots into the air. Leaves unfurl in the sun's warmth. Buds develop and eventually bloom. Pollination and fertilization occur. The fruit develops and begins to grow. Like the first steps on the Christian walk, the fruit is often immature and green. Slowly it grows to maturity.

Recall Jesus' words about abiding in him. This constant, ongoing relationship with God slowly BUT surely produces holiness in our lives. Sometimes the growth is imperceptible; but the Lord works within our lives to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit.

The Fruit of the Spirit: Love

In Galatians 5:22, Paul included nine aspects of the fruit of the Spirit. During the coming weeks, we will examine each of them in turn. The list is more illustrative than exhaustive. In his other letters, the apostle includes other characteristics of the Christian life. However, these nine elements are certainly central to holy living.

The first characteristic that Paul lists both in order and priority is **LOVE**. This should surprise no one who is familiar with the Christian Gospel. Love is central to our relationship with God and one another.

1 John 4:8 simply states: "God is love." John 3:16 then reveals: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son; whoever believes in him shall inherit everlasting life."

We live in response to God's love—we love because we have first been loved. Jesus said that the Greatest Commandment is to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The second commandment is like the first—love your neighbor as yourself. In *The Gift Goes On*, Sandi Patty put it this way:

*The Father gave the Son,
The Son gave the Spirit
The Spirit gives us life
So we can give the Gift of love
And the Gift goes on.*

Love describes our life in the Spirit and how we walk by the Spirit. God is head over heels in love with us; and we are invited to respond to God's love.

Think about the most intimate, love-filled relationships in your life. These people enable us to more truly become who we were created to be. They bring out the best in us.

Now consider this for a moment: do you have to MAKE a first-time mother spend time holding her infant? Do you have to MAKE a five year old play with his first puppy? Do you have to MAKE elementary school friends play with each other? Do you have to MAKE newlyweds spend time together? Do you have to MAKE lifelong friends enjoy a conversation with one another? Do you have to MAKE a couple that has celebrated their 50th anniversary sit together in comfortable silence?

Love is an attractive force that gladly draws us into its embrace. We cannot wait to spend time with someone we love. In the same way, our relationship with God is not so much command as invitation to a lifelong long affair.

Conclusion

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control . . . we all desire these positive attributes in our lives. However, these are the very qualities often left undeveloped in our Christian character. Our half-hearted attempts to lead holy lives leave us feeling frustrated and defeated.

Galatians reveals we have the entire process backwards. In order to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, we need to live and walk by the Spirit. THEN these attributes of holiness will naturally grow in our lives.