

Fruit of the Spirit

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Galatians 5:1,13-25 NIV

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

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. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Psalm 16 NIV

Keep me safe, O God
for in you I take refuge.
I said to the Lord, "You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing."
As for the saints who are in the land,
they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.
The sorrows of those will increase
who run after other gods.
I will not pour out their libations of blood
or take up their names on my lips.
Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;
you have made my lot secure.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
surely I have a delightful inheritance.
I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.
I have set the Lord always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,
because you will not abandon me to the grave,
nor will you let your Holy One see decay.
You have made known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.
*Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.*

Maybe Pastor Larry got me into trouble by promoting me as speaker. I'm afraid he raised your expectations unduly; I certainly don't consider myself as effective a preacher as he is. Now, I'd like you all to make sure there's a hymnal handy in the rack. We're not going to sing, but if you notice your neighbors dozing off you can poke them with it. By the way, it has been calculated that if all the people that sleep in church Sunday morning were laid end to end, they would be more comfortable.

It's always a question what message to bring when coming as a guest preacher. One way to solve that problem is to preach from a lectionary, which is a list of Scripture readings assigned for the different Sundays of the year. One lectionary used by many denominations is the Revised Common Lectionary. Using such a lectionary is a good idea for at least several reasons. First, it suggests a wider range of Bible passages than what you might pick out on your own. You get exposed to what John Wesley called "the whole scope and tenor of Scripture." Second, the lectionary keeps the preacher from riding his favorite hobby horse. When the preacher has to work from a set list of readings he is less inclined to preach on the same topics over and over. Third, in some cases it's nice to know that your friends who attend other churches may have heard the same Scripture lessons you heard on Sunday, and maybe there will be an opportunity to "compare notes."

For today, the fourth Sunday after Pentecost, the Revised Common Lectionary gives us several readings including two I have chosen for this service. The Psalm is Psalm 16, which was our call to worship [Focusing Our Hearts]. The Epistle is from Galatians 5, where Paul speaks of the fruit of the Spirit. I'm concentrating just on verses 22 and 23, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

Now the usual sermon has three or four alliterated points. That means the points always start with the same letter. For example, if you preached a sermon about the gospel of God's love in Christ, your four points could be:

- The *Need* for God's Love
- The *News* of God's Love
- The *Nature* of God's Love
- The *Nurture* of God's Love.

That's called the Perry-Kohler method of preaching. I took a seminary class with Dr. Perry but I'm not going to follow that method today, because in Galatians Paul list *nine* of the fruit of the Spirit. So this one will have nine *non*-alliterated points (but don't worry, I will not spend more than thirty minutes on each one). And we'll be working in Psalm 16 at the same time.

Let's start by reminding ourselves these are the fruit of the Spirit — the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in our life. As you know, in each of the biblical languages there is only one word that covers all three meanings: wind, breath, and spirit. The Holy Spirit is the wind, or breath, of God and it signifies his *life*. The fruit of the Spirit are the outcome of the *life and work of Christ* in our midst, both as a body and as individual believers.

I get concerned about folks who want to define Christianity in terms of doctrines, beliefs or institutions. Those things are important, but Christianity is really nothing other than the *life of Jesus* working through his people, and *our life in him*. Last Sunday Shirley and I had a conversation with two young men who are trying to break out of alcoholism and addiction into faith. Part of our advice to them was to read the Gospels, because we meet Jesus there. The work of the Spirit is the work of Christ. So let's look at Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit.

The first entry in Paul's list is *love (agape)*. Love is probably the most misunderstood term in the Christian vocabulary. Our culture associates love with *feelings*. People seek *love* as a way of finding "happiness" for themselves, and if a relationship doesn't make them happy they discard it. I did that once myself — I went through a divorce before I came to the Lord. Later, after I began to grow in Christ, I saw how wrong I had been. I was looking selfishly for my own satisfaction in the relationship, and I walked away when some things happened that made me feel worthless and inferior. Love is a commitment. I know now that I can't say, "I love you" and then walk away ignoring the need of the other person. Love is obedience — it's doing the right thing whether it feels good or not.

Agape in the New Testament is based on the word *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible. The word is translated "lovingkindness" in older Bibles, or just "love" in some newer ones, or "steadfast love." It really means "covenant-love," the love God has for us — and we have for him — because of his *covenant* with us. God made an agreement with his people, "I will be your God and you will be my people." Love is holding to that commitment, and keeping our side of the agreement — to be God's people and live by his plan for us.

This may sound harsh and austere, more like law than love. Isn't there some kind of "good feeling" in love, for the Christian? Yes, for God's loving covenant is, "*I will be your God* and you will be my people." The Father always keeps his part of the bargain, and knowing *that* ought to give us a good feeling! Even God's law is based on grace. He gives us a way to live obediently, because otherwise a sinful lifestyle will destroy us.

In Psalm 16 we said, "You are my Lord." That's the Christian's loving affirmation of this commitment that brings us such an assurance of God's love in Christ.

Paul's second word is *joy*. I will never forget worshiping in a prestigious church in Boston some years ago. The preacher mounted the high pulpit with great ceremony and began his sermon, [*scowling*] "I want to speak with you today about the *joy* of being a Christian." Sometimes we mouth joy but we don't show it, or live it.

I'm not going to get deeply theological here, but there are two sides to joy — the inner and the outer. Both are the work of the Spirit of Christ in us. Outward joy is a good thing and we do well to follow the apostle Paul's admonition: "Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:18-20). This isn't mindless, Mardi-Gras-type hilarity. It's obedience to God's directive, which is so much more satisfying.

I don't know how many of you are able to sing freely and enthusiastically, like the Unity Singers. But it might be a good idea to listen to yourself and see whether your singing really reflects that *inner* joy you have in the Lord. For, on the inside, joy is a deep satisfaction with life as God has laid it out for you. And that satisfaction just has to spill out. Isaiah called for the people of God to "put on the garment of praise" (61:3). As Terry Tekyl writes, "The attire of appreciation should be our uniform."

Yes, we have problems — we run into things that begin to convince us we have gotten a raw deal in life, and try to steal away our joy. When we put ourselves into the center of the universe, joy goes away. When we see the Lord in the center, joy returns. You're familiar with Joni Eareckson Tada who was paralyzed in a diving accident some years ago. Having that happen to you would rob anyone of joy. But she once wrote, "I now *will* to be the way I am," because it's through what happened to her that she found how God could use her to help others, as a speaker and writer. That's real joy, and it's even greater joy to meet with the Lord and give him praise. In Psalm 16 we said, "You will fill me with joy in your presence."

Peace is the third quality in Paul's list. After love, peace is probably the second most misunderstood word. Francis Schaeffer used to say that the big goals of Americans are personal peace and affluence. There are two "standard" definitions of peace: (a) the absence of fighting or war, and (b) having our perceived needs met. Neither of these represents the fullness of the Bible's understanding of peace.

The Hebrew word is *shalom*, and it means "completeness" or "wholeness." Peace is *health*. The New Testament equivalent is *salvation*. Our English word is related to the word *salve*, something you put on a wound to help it heal. We're at peace when we are *healed* of those things that keep us from being what God wants us to be.

Most of the conditions that rob us of our peace come from violating God's covenant, "I will be your God and you will be my people." When we try to solve our problems by ourselves, we've reversed the formula by making ourselves into gods. We lose our peace because we've shut out the Prince of Peace. For us to be healed, God has to be God. We can't take refuge in ourselves and our own resources. In Psalm 16 we spoke those words so necessary to finding peace: "In you I take refuge."

The next fruit of the Spirit that Paul lists is *patience*. Don't ever pray for patience. In Romans 5:3, Paul says that "tribulation worketh patience." If you pray for patience, you may get tribulation!

In a perfect world everything would go our way, and nobody would cause problems for us or make demands on us. Of course, such a perfect world wouldn't be so perfect for anyone else. It wouldn't be so perfect for people with a different agenda, or people who need us even at some inconvenience to ourselves. Because other people have their own needs, we'll never have our perfect world, and we'll just be miserable if we keep hoping for it.

I'm sure everyone has his favorite story of things that have tried his patience. I told you I went through divorce, now thirty years ago. In my first marriage I had one little girl, age four. When I remarried I found

myself “instant dad” of five more children, the oldest being two teenage boys. The day we moved to my first pastorate in Illinois, the boys were going barefoot. Too late, I learned their shoes were somewhere in the inner reaches of the moving van. . . . Then there was the time the kids got up on the parsonage roof and threw tomatoes down on Hallowe’en trick-or-treaters. I learned about it during a church board meeting, when a neighbor came in to tell us. Talk about culture shock. I couldn’t deal with it in my own strength. Actually, it was because of this that I finally turned to the Lord — yes, it’s possible in some denominations to become a minister without knowing Christ.

Well, as you may have guessed, over the years things changed between me and the five. I finally learned to “cut them some slack” and stopped being so impatient with them. And after my wife became terminally ill I officially adopted them — there were already nine grandchildren by that time. I’m going on sixteen grandchildren now, and Shirley has eight, so we know how important patience is as a fruit of the Spirit. By the way, if you’re wondering about my little girl from my first marriage, she and I are co-authors of a Christian fantasy novel we hope to get published.

The fruit of the Spirit only grows in us when we get ourselves out of the center and let Christ take his rightful place there. When that happens, things don’t bother us like they used to. We understand we have the life we have because God has assigned it to us, and he’s in charge of every circumstance. Psalm 16 expresses the patient attitude quite well: “Lord , *you* have assigned me my portion and my cup.”

The next quality on our list is *kindness*. I don’t need to say much about this. We all know a kindness, or a “mercy,” when we receive one. I couldn’t tell you how many times people have been kind to me when I certainly didn’t deserve any favors. Jesus told us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. If you look at his illustration, you find that God shows his perfection through his impartial mercy: “he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” There are lots of people out there — and maybe in here, too — that need our merciful kindness. Paul reminds us to “do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). As Psalm 16 says, “The saints . . . are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.”

Goodness comes next on Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit. There’s more to goodness than being good. The Bible words for *good* also carry a certain sense of being *beautiful* and *satisfying*. In the creation, God saw everything he had made “and behold, it was very *good*.” Of course we need to be good in the moral sense, but we’re also to be good in the sense of, “Wow, this is really *good* food!” Is this why Paul says, “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt?” Jesus told his followers they were the salt of the earth.

I think there’s nothing more boring than a bland Christian — and nothing more tiresome than a Christian who wants to talk about himself all the time and never asks you anything about yourself. I’ve been invited to eat out, or in the home, with many Christian acquaintances over the years and it’s amazing how often, afterwards, I have reflected on how much I learned about *them* and how little they found out about *me*. (Of course, sometimes that was just as well.)

It’s the work of the Spirit of Christ in us to make us not only decent and upright people, but also *interesting* and *interested* people — colorful, thoughtful and responsive, the kind of folks other people like to be around. Getting close to God makes us both godly and good; as the Psalmist says, “Apart from you I have no good thing.”

Number 7 on the list of the fruit of the Spirit is *faithfulness*. Some older translations call this *faith*, but in the Bible faith is primarily faithfulness. Protestants and Catholics have debated for centuries over the relationship between faith and works. That whole issue goes away when we understand *faith* as *faithfulness*. I’m going to say something here that will shock you. How do we know somebody is a Christian? Is it because they said a prayer one day, or because they believe certain things about God and Christ, or because they behave a certain way? I’m suggesting we’re Christians if we *stick with Jesus*. Christianity is *Jesus*, and being Christian is knowing *him*. We can believe all the right stuff and make all the right moves, but at the end of the day we don’t want to hear Jesus say, “Depart from me, I never *knew* you.”

Again, it comes back to the covenant God made with us: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Faithfulness means sticking with our brothers and sisters in the faith. In a day of distractions there are lots of things that could pull us away from our Christian community and send us off to do our own thing, like the Lone Ranger. Did you ever try to fire up your grill with just one charcoal briquette? You see the point — to have any fire in us we need to stick with Jesus and those who belong to him. The loyalty we have to the body of Christ is a fruit of his Spirit at work in us, so that we can say, with Psalm 16, “I will not be shaken.”

The next-to-last word is *gentleness*. This is often translated as *meekness*. Being meek isn’t a highly prized quality today, but maybe we misunderstand what the Bible means. Do you remember who the meekest man in the Bible was, other than Jesus? Numbers 12:3, “Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth.” Some translations say *humble*, but that hardly describes Moses, the man who stood up to Pharaoh, stood up to the Israelites, and even, in effect, stood up to the Lord — that was the time he told him, “Either forgive this sinful people or ‘blot me out of your book.’”

God had called Moses to do a job and Moses wasn’t going to be stopped by circumstances. That was his meekness. Psalm 37 says, “The meek shall inherit the land,” a verse Jesus quoted in the Beatitudes. In 1911 Charles Kennedy wrote a play called “The Terrible Meek” (I saw it in a church once). If the meek are going to inherit the land there is certainly something terrifying about them.

Some years ago I befriended a K-Mart checkout clerk. I’ll call him Pragesh. He and his family were from India. Pragesh had three jobs: he worked for K-Mart, he worked as a chemist, and he worked for the Postal Service. His wife also worked for a small manufacturing company where everyone spoke their language, Gujarati. Their oldest daughter also worked as a clerk for K-Mart. Pragesh’s family invited us twice to share a meal with them; the first time it was in their rented apartment, the second time in a brand new home in a west suburban development. Both times we sat on the floor because they didn’t use chairs or even have them. Pragesh and his son, who was expected to become a doctor, took me into the little “chapel” room in their house where they would “play their guard” — pray to their god, a figure with an elephant’s head. There are lots of meek people like Pragesh in our midst. They come here, they take the lowest-paying jobs, they work day and night, and in five or six years they own their apartment building, a business or a new home.

Psalm 16 says, “The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods.” These folk are destined for eternity without Christ unless they meet him *here*. But they show us how powerful meekness is, even in the life of an unbeliever. The principles of God’s kingdom work for everyone who follows them — not just Christians — because they’re built into God’s management of the universe. So the meek of any kind are *terrible*, because they will take over the earth.

Meekness is living by God’s plan instead of trying to invent your own — acting in humility and responsibility and determination, instead of from resentment or competitiveness or trying to take the easy way out. Meekness is doing things God’s way with the help of his Holy Spirit. As we prayed in Psalm 16, “*You have made known to me the path of life.*”

Now we come to the last quality on Paul’s list, *self-control*. Paul begins his list of the fruit of the Spirit with *love*, and he ends with *self-control*. When it comes to living the Spirit-filled life, *self-control is the bottom line*. When we can’t control ourselves, all sorts of destructive things creep into our lives — resentment, jealousy, self-pity, defensiveness, self-justification, anger, vindictiveness, all the “works of the flesh,” the sour and rotten fruit of our emotions gone haywire.

The Fruit of the Spirit in Psalm 16:

Love — *I said to the Lord, “You are my Lord.”*

Joy — *You will fill me with joy in your presence.*

Peace — *In you I take refuge.*

Patience — *Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup.*

Kindness — *The saints . . . are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.*

Goodness — *Apart from you I have no good thing.*

Faithfulness — *I will not be shaken.*

Gentleness — *You have made known to me the path of life.*

Self-control — *I have set the Lord always before me.*

As long as I was in the center of my own universe, that was my life — if you could call it one. I had to get to that place where I could say, in the words of Psalm 16, “I have set *the Lord* always before me.” When I began to get the focus off myself and put it on Jesus, things began to change — a process that’s still going on, as I move closer to that wholeness, that healing, that salvation God wants me to live in.

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” And Paul adds an interesting line — “Against such things there is no law.” It’s amazing how easy it is to behave as if there *is* a law against love, against patience, against joy, or against self-control. But that’s a lie of the enemy of our souls, who wants to snatch away our victory over the tyranny of our self-centeredness. Jesus comes to make us free by binding us to himself in a death to all of the false values of our sick world, and then lifting us with him to a higher level. “Made like him, like him we rise — ours the cross, the grave, the skies.”

So I come back again to that shocking statement: Christianity is *Jesus*, working in us through his Spirit to grow and mature this fruit in us. It can be summed up in 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” If you’re here today and don’t know this Lord Jesus who is the Spirit, or if you know Jesus but want to open your life anew to the fruitful work of his Spirit in you, we invite you to speak with us after the service and we’ll find a place to talk and pray together.

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