

“The Fruit of the Spirit”
Galatians 5:16-24
June 25, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

We are beginning today a series of sermons on the fruit of the Spirit. Our plan is to introduce this topic today by looking at the passage from Galatians in which Paul speaks of this, and then to take one week on each of the nine qualities Paul mentions. That will result in a total of 10 sermons that will take us through the balance of the summer. What we are looking at with these nine qualities that Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit is Christlikeness. These qualities describe what God is doing in each of our lives to make us more like Christ. Jesus possessed all these qualities in complete perfection, and all of his followers will one day as well. That’s why John Stott reported that he prayed the following prayer every day: “Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself and cause your fruit to ripen in my life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

It is quite a valuable thing to know what God is up to in our lives. If you think that God’s goal is to make your life comfortable, you are setting yourself up for disappointment, because that is definitely not what God is doing. If you think God is working to make you extraordinarily successful in all your undertakings, again you are mistaken. God is working in the lives of his followers to build within them these Christlike qualities. Acceptance of this truth is an important corrective to one of the common idols of both American culture and of the evangelical church. The idol I’m speaking of is the performance idol. It is easy to be wowed by the person who can point to significant accomplishments, while not giving much value to matters of character.

“The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill” was a popular Christian podcast a couple of years ago. It told the story of an evangelical church in Seattle named Mars Hill that experienced meteoric growth and fame. Here was an evangelical church that grew rapidly in the soil of a strongly secular culture. Its pastor was a very gifted communicator who was often seen on the biggest stages of evangelical leaders in our nation. Then the church imploded even more quickly than it grew when this pastor’s character flaws and abusive behavior were exposed. As it turns out, character is more important than giftedness and performance. God has always known this, and that is why he is at work building the character of Christ within us all.

Let me pause and ask you parents, “Do you as parents know that character is more important for your children than performance”? Do you know that it is far more important than good grades, athletic or artistic performance,

popularity? We plan to explore this summer the nine components of Christlike character that we refer to as the fruit of the Spirit. So let's get started.

I. Fruit Killers

The first word of verse 22 indicates a contrast. **“But the fruit of the Spirit is...”** In order to understand the fruit of the Spirit, we must first grasp the alternative. The verses preceding verse 22 describe that alternative, and there are two of them: legalism and license. Much of Paul's letter to the Galatians has been devoted to his warnings about the dangers of legalism. Legalism says that God will like me more and bless me more if I keep the right rules. So it shifts attention away from the centrality of Jesus and puts it back on us and our performance. Precisely what those right rules are changes over time. In Paul's day, the rules were Jewish-centric. Gentile Christians were being told that if they wanted a full experience of God's blessings, they must first become Jewish. This included obedience to three primary Jewish rules: male circumcision, Sabbath-observance, and observance of Old Testament dietary laws.

The rules are different in our day, but the dangers of legalism are very much present still. There is a cultural and political legalism that evidences itself in the very destructive cancel culture we are experiencing. It exists on both the right and the left, insisting that having the wrong views turns someone into a non-person. Legalism is always a threat to the church as well. Rules such as making the approved school choice for your children, or voting for the right people, or embracing the right worship style can easily rise to a level of legalism. What does Paul say about this in our text? He says that legalism arises from our sin nature, a nature he refers to by use of the word “flesh.” It's not just lawless deeds that arise from the sinful nature, but legalism as well. That's why Paul mentions in verse 18, in the middle of a discussion of the desires of the flesh that are against the Spirit, **“But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”**

Legalism is not the only expression of our sinful nature. License is the other one. If legalism wants to keep all the rules in order to feel better about oneself, license is willing to break all the rules in order to accomplish that goal. License simply gives in to the desires arising from the sinful nature. The result is seen in this list of fifteen **“works of the flesh.”** These sins can be divided into four different categories. The first three are sexual sins: “sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality. The next two are related to religious worship: idolatry and sorcery. The largest grouping, consisting of eight sins, could be classified as social sins that deal with our relationships to others. Included here are the sins of “enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, and envy. Finally, the last two are sins related to drunkenness. It is

clear that these sins are merely a sampling of such works, as indicated by his concluding words, **“and things like these.”**

I note how all these sins are a form of falsehood. Sexual sin is a false intimacy, looking for love in all the wrong places. The second category—the sins associated with worship—could be described as false worship. The third and largest category, the relational sins, is centered around false glory. What I mean by that is all of these sins are attempts to look good and to feel good about ourselves. We take our glory any way we can get it. And then the last category speaks of false refuge. In other words, the sins of the flesh seek to deal with the brokenness of life through our own efforts. This is actually the mark of legalism as well.

So what we have here is a clear alternative. On the one hand, we can live life as if there is no God to help us. It is all up to us. Such an approach to life leads either to legalism or license or some combination of the two. On the other hand, there is the life of faith, and it is that life that produces the fruit of the Spirit. Paul speaks repeatedly in this section about the work of the Holy Spirit and our need to depend upon him. He tells us to “walk by the Spirit” (v. 16, 25), to be “led by the Spirit” (v. 18), and to “live by the Spirit” (v. 25). These are simply ways of urging us to depend not on ourselves but on God’s Spirit working within us. It describes the life of humility, as opposed to pride.

II. Fruit Production

Now that we have explored the first word of verse 22, the word “but,” let’s move to the next important word, “fruit.” It is of significance that the word is singular, even though we would expect it to be plural because of the fact that he names nine qualities and not just one. The singular is intentional, both by Paul’s intention and that of the Holy Spirit who inspires his word. God’s Spirit produces in us all nine of these qualities. Together, they constitute Christlikeness, and God is at work in our lives in all nine of these areas.

A second thing this word teaches us is that these qualities are a product of life and not of manufacturing. You can’t make an apple or a banana. They are not the product of an engineer’s careful plan and a well-executed production line. Rather, these qualities grow where there is life, where a person has come alive to God by faith.

Third, just as fruit requires time to grow and ripen, these qualities don’t grow overnight. As a matter of fact, they grow and ripen over a lifetime. I notice the contrast here with the works of the flesh. The promise of most of these works of the flesh is that they provide instant gratification. It should be said, though, that this gratification is like Narnian Turkish Delight in that it tastes sweet initially but quickly turns bitter. By contrast, God’s work in our lives

unfolds over long periods of time. If you sit and watch a peach grow and ripen for an entire 24 hours, you will notice no change whatsoever. Its progress is not noticed in hours but in weeks. Similarly, our progress in Christlikeness is not noticed in weeks, but in years. One application of this longer timeframe is to be patient with people.

A fourth feature of fruit is that it develops through hardship. Consider the fruit tree in the winter. Even though it looks dead, important things are happening to prepare it for fruit-bearing. I understand that peach trees, for example, need a certain number of chill hours over the winter to bear fruit in the following spring and summer.

Fifth, just as fruit must be cultivated, so we have a role in the ripening of the fruit of the Spirit. The fact that this is called the “fruit of the Spirit” doesn’t mean that we are to be completely passive. That’s why Paul includes these imperatives of walking by the Spirit and being led by the Spirit. A couple of applications come to mind about this. First, we are to submit to the Spirit in the challenges and trials he allows into our lives. Instead of complaining about difficult people and circumstances in your life, ask God to use those things to form Christlike character within you. Whether it’s a difficult co-worker, neighbor or spouse, or a painful health challenge, allow those things to grow and ripen God’s fruit.

A second specific application that comes to mind is simply to pray, as John Stott did, for this fruit to ripen in our lives. I have begun praying this each day myself, and I want to invite you to join me at least through these summer months when we give our attention to this, to pray for the fruit of the Spirit by name. In order to do that, it would be helpful for us to memorize these Christlike qualities right now. Memorizing is helped by dividing these nine qualities into categories, and they divide naturally into three categories of three qualities each. John Stott divides them as follows. “The primary direction of ‘love, joy, peace’ is Godward, of ‘patience, kindness, goodness’ manward, and of ‘faithfulness, gentleness and self-control’ selfward.” I’m going to ask you to recite these silently in just a moment, so pay attention. It’s easier to remember three things than nine things, so let’s work on remembering just three things in each of these categories. We start with God, and he tells us that the greatest commandment is to love him. Then you’ll just have to remember joy and peace after that. Then it helps me to remember the first one of this second set that describes the qualities of our relationships. I remember it by remembering that its first letter is the same as the previous quality, the letter “P.” It’s “patience.” And then I remember how wonderful it is to be with those who are full of kindness and goodness. The first quality in the final triad begins with the letter “F”—faithfulness. I remember that by simply remembering that “final” and “faithfulness” begin with that same letter. And then I simply remember the benefit of these last two in living life: “gentleness and “self-control.” So let’s practice these now, and remember to pray for these things daily.

III. Fruit Outcomes

The first few verses of the following chapter is not disconnected from the fruit of the Spirit. Rather, it seems to me that Paul is giving some practical examples of what this fruit-filled life looks like. First, **“if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness”** (6:1). Are there people in your life who need spiritual restoration? God can use you for that purpose. It’s not a matter chiefly of knowing the right words to say, but rather of having the nine character qualities we’ve just reviewed. This one also requires a forgiving heart rather than a condemning and critical heart. Once again, the fruit of the Spirit makes us the kind of people who forgive and are patient with others.

Second, the fruit of the Spirit enables us to **“bear one another’s burdens”** (6:2). How is it that we help others with the heavy burdens they must carry? Oftentimes, it is simply by showing up and by offering a helping hand. When we bring meals, we are bearing one another’s burdens. When we help someone with a project, when we volunteer to babysit, and when we do any number of other small tasks to help relieve the burdens of others, we are fulfilling this task. And doing so requires the character traits of the fruit of the Spirit.

Third, **“But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load”** (6:4-5). It’s talking about taking responsibility, about growing up and not blaming others for your problems or waiting on others to bail you out. It’s talking about being a man or woman with enough character to take the risks of assuming responsibility.

CONCLUSION:

Will you take up the challenge this summer to pray for the fruit of the Spirit to ripen in your life? As you do so, remember that these qualities describe what Jesus is like. So may God help you to know him better as you pray for these to be shared with you! He is full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And so is his heavenly Father. And may God bless you to bear more family resemblance to him!