"SPIRITUAL FRUIT"

TEXT: GALATIANS 5: 16-25 CEB

FLESH & SPIRIT

As we continue our series on The Virtues, we today hear Paul telling us that right actions do not come from well-intentioned attempts to fulfill the Law, but flow from those who "live by the Spirit." Paul says that those who are guided by the Spirit "won't carry out selfish desires."

The Greek word is *sarx,* which translates to "flesh." The problem with this is that when we hear *flesh,* we tend to think it's about sex, lust, or pleasure. Rightly understood, *flesh* means materialism—the common pursuits of being invested primarily in this world as opposed to the kingdom of God.

The Spirit and the flesh are *opposed to one another,* says Paul, which means they are mutually exclusive systems. The switch from life in the flesh to life in the Spirit is a total transformation, like going from PC to Mac, or gasoline to an all-electric car. Life runs differently under the influence of the Spirit than it does under the Law.

Life in the flesh is essentially self-centered or self-absorbed. It is the human-natural, normal life —the pursuit of happiness—taking care of business, looking out for number one, minding your own business, and picking up the perks. It is the life in service to material accomplishments and feelings of security. It is wealth, health, and well-being. While we see glimmers of virtue in the midst of this kind of life, it is primarily about *taking,* and its top practitioners are predominantly those who take more than they give.

By contrast, *life in the Spirit* is God-centered rather than self-centered. The self is not one's chief concern, but rather the glory of God. Our citizenship is secured not in *this* world but in t*he kingdom of God*. As we serve the Lord and the goals of his kingdom, we come to live lives that are qualitatively different. We become *givers* because the Spirit leads us to live beyond fear, anxiety, and the loves of this world. Loving God's world and God's creatures becomes our new nature, so we come to desire and do what constitutes "right action." That is life in the Spirit, and it is more concerned with good actions than with sinful ones.

We do better to focus on Virtue rather than sin. Sin is all too easy and essentially unimaginative. The list that Paul names—idolatry, sorcery, addiction, enmity, trouble-making, strife, hatred, fighting, rage, obsessions, jealousy, addictions, perversions, fighting—all are part of the natural world and human character. These things characterize our fallen nature and a life lived in and for the flesh.

[run "The Tree of Life" short video]

The problem with a sin-focused morality is that it makes us morally self-absorbed. There is a false kind of piety comprised of avoiding sins. *If I don't smoke, don't drink, don't cuss, don't sleep around, etc., then I am a good or holy person.* We can't define virtue based upon what a person does *not* do. Virtues—what Paul calls "fruits of the Spirit"—are positive things done to glorify God and to reveal his nature and kingdom. When we live by the Spirit instead of the flesh, we bear fruit, and that is the purpose of Christian life.

NINE SPIRITUAL FRUITS

As we seek to focus on the virtues rather than the vices, I invite you to consider these nine fruits named by Paul in our text. How are they present or absent in your life, heart, and character? How differently would our lives look if we reflected more of them rather than looking like the rest of the world?

1. LOVE (AGAPÉ)

Love says it all. It is the beginning and the end of all virtue. You can rightly say that all virtues are found in love, and you'd be right, but let's understand it if we can. The Greek word is *agapé,* which means self-sacrificial giving. Sorry if you were looking for the love of sixties hippiedom, or the drippy sentimentalism of country music, or the hormonal circus of adolescent eros—sorry, but *agapé* is none of these. This love is costly love, and understanding it rightly demands that the word sacrifice accompany it. All true giving is a kind of loving; as we love, we certainly become givers in many ways.

2. JOY

Joy is not the same thing as happiness. Happiness is something like success—particularly, the successful attainment or accomplishment of what you want out of life. You have what you desired to take. Happiness is self-gratifying, but Joy is not.

Joy only comes as the result of an inner life secured in the power and providence of God. Those who live by the Spirit know Joy whether they are rich or poor, healthy or sick, flourishing or under oppression. The greatest Christians that ever lived are those who were packed into crowded cells beneath the Coliseum, held prisoner until they would be thrown to lions, or lit on fire as they hung from crosses. Where was their pursuit of happiness? Forget happiness, but they had Joy—Joy in miraculous abundance—because as they awaited their gruesome deaths, they rejoiced and sang with joyful hearts, counting themselves blessed by God to suffer for the name of Jesus. If you can't understand this—if you can't fathom what on earth they were thinking—then you're probably living life in the flesh, not the Spirit.

3. PEACE

When we talk about peace, we're talking about more than the absence of war or conflict. Peace is not an absence, but a presence.

Most of modern life is driven by the fight-or-flight instinct. We are driven by the odd amalgamation of our aggressions, fears, and anxieties. Think about it: fear and anxiety are the two things above all else which characterize natural life and a good deal of what we call civilization. The drive to succeed, to avoid pain, and to maximize contentment all constitute life in the flesh.

Even Christian evangelism can come off anxious and fearsome. We Christians have dangled others over the pits of hell in fear, or we have demanded immediate decisions to follow Jesus. This, too, is only a product of fear and anxiety. How much better would our outreach be if we gave them instead the one thing this world cannot give them—the one thing for which every soul longs and which cannot be taken but only received by grace—the peace of Christ.

When we pass the peace on communion Sundays, we are not exchanging anxieties, but instead channeling the peace of Christ to one another. That too is what we give the world when we live by the Spirit instead of the flesh. God has given us his peace; we should make this our first and last communication to those outside of faith. Peace.

4. PATIENCE

The Greek word for patience is literally *long-suffering*. This is a good definition. To be long-suffering is to be willing to put up with things we don't like for the good of others. We "suffer" others for their own sake and not for our own.

The patient Christian does not use or exploit others. We are more likely to be exploited and to gladly endure our exploitation.

Put simply, do you know what an Energy Vampire is? How about an Emotional Vampire? People in our daily orbit who can suck the life out of us, telling us their troubles, problems, or interests. Yes, we should all be long-suffering with them. Maybe they just need to be heard—so why can't you and I offer our patient, listening ears? Patience means enduring another's inconvenience for that one's sake. This also is love.

I am an impatient driver. I'm not proud of that; in fact, I truly long to be one of those drivers who is always unflappable and holds all things in higher perspective. I tell myself, "Noel, getting annoyed or angry will not change the way others drive, nor will it speed up traffic." I'm still working on it, but as I deal with my own impatience, I become aware that we are living in the most impatient civilization ever to exist on the planet. That's us, right now, in the United States—we are the most impatient people that have ever rushed their way around the surface of this planet. Learning patience is part of learning love, and I suspect we all have a lot more to learn.

5. KINDNESS

Kindness, I think, is all about *attitude*. Our attitude matters. If you've ever been greeted by a "frenemy," you know what I mean. They acted kind—shook your hand and smiled—but something in their eyes or greeting let you know as plain as can be that they are bad-mouthing you behind your back.

No, real kindness comes from the heart. It means we have a definite generosity toward others. They're only human and, like you and me, make mistakes.

Kindness means first acknowledging that God loves that person more than you can imagine anyone loving anyone. You and I either stand with God in loving that person or against God by our grudges and/or general enmity.

We all should be more like Mister Rogers, who likes everyone "just as you are." Kindness is a disposition toward positive regard. We feel it when we are living in the Spirit. We labor for it when we live in the flesh.

6. GOODNESS

First of all, is anyone here named "Agatha"? No? Good. I don't think "Agatha" is a pretty word, sorry. It is the Greek word that we translate to the non-descriptive and vague "goodness." Goodness describes a quality of character that is simply *good*. Goodness is what life in the Spirit should make Christians seem like to the world.

Our world doesn't really believe in goodness anymore, only relative goodness. This is a shame, because goodness is real and good whether it is acknowledged or not. The world says, "There is no absolute good, but only the contrast between good and less-than-good." They say our "good" is just a projection of our own needs and preferences. We "project" goodness onto something we choose to value. Our community is one that shares an idea of good, that's all. Codswallop! I say.

We believe in good—absolute good. To say we only know good by its contrast to bad is faulty. You and I don't have to eat apples with worms in them in order to know that eating an apple without worms is good. An apple without worms is good in and of itself, not because of its contrast with wormy apples.

This applies to the whole Earth and every human being. When God created, he said, "It is good!" That means the Earth has absolute value. It is good because God says so. So is every human being.

A big part of learning to love is recognizing all that is from God and all he calls good. When we see the good in all things, we know we are living in the Spirit. Our challenge is to dwell there as well.

7. FAITHFULNESS

Faithfulness is more than loyalty or belief; it is becoming completely God-trusting. When we trust God for all things, we become unanxious, unworrying, unflappable, patient, and devout.

I think of the dozens of people whom I have known at the end of their lives who, looking through the threshold of death, have nothing but smiles and peace. These people don't look at death as the end of being or the end of the universe, but simply as the doorway to their true home. No platitudes, no fakery—they really know with peace in their heart that Jesus is ready to welcome them home. They trust him in their death as they did in their lives. This is life in the Spirit: being able to trust God in every circumstance, no matter what.

8. GENTLENESS

When you hear the word gentleness, you might think of something like a soft touch. I remember commercials with white teddy bears perched on puffy clouds, hugging rolls of soft toilet paper. That's not what gentle means.

Gentleness, rightly understood, is something like nobility, or that which ennobles. The English word *gentle* literally means something like highborn and noble. Shakespeare more than once speaks of "gentling one's condition," meaning going from a very base and lowly state to a higher, more noble one. It is something like refinement, something like royalty, and something like high excellence.

Our nature has been "gentled" by Christ, who makes us his own adopted siblings—heirs to the promises and kingdom of God! Our souls have been ennobled by God, and we can reflect that same quality to others as we see them ennobled and adopted into the family of God.

9. SELF-CONTROL

Martial arts practitioners have a gesture that speaks well to self-control. It is the fist of one hand covered over by the other hand. The suggestion is "this is my power, and it is under control." Or, "I could beat you within an inch of your life, but I choose not to."

This is the basis of all mercy—that power is often best expressed by those who will not wield it coercively.

Self-control means more than avoiding that last cookie on the kitchen counter, more than steeling yourself against temptation—it is about becoming the master of your flesh with its drives and desires.

Mastery of our appetites is an expression of power; giving in to every impulse is what it means to be a slave to sin. Life in the flesh is slavery to sin. Life in the Spirit is what enables Christians to feel and act above their fleshly nature.

This is why many Christians fast. Fasting is a reminder of the role our appetites and drives play in our lives, and an exercise in mastery over them.

Self-control is far easier for one whose life has been given away to Jesus Christ than to one whose hands are still on the steering wheel of every earthly concern. As we give ourselves away to Christ and to each other, self-mastery becomes more than easy; it becomes our true nature, pattern, habit, and joy.

THE FRUITS ARE VIRTUES

We do well to consider all these fruits of the Spirit even as we seek to become the trees that bear them. But here's the final trick: you and I cannot by our own effort produce a single fruit. We cannot will one into existence by intensely desiring to do so. We can imitate the actions of life in the Spirit, but without the actual Holy Spirit working through us, it is just hypocrisy, play-acting. Fruit is borne by the work of the Spirit in us and through us, not by our own accomplishment (that is the lesson we learned from the Law). So how do we become effective fruit-bearing Christians? Should we initiate new programming to channel our selfishness and bolster our fruit-like behaviors? I don't think so; I don't think this works with adults. What we need to do is much simpler. We need to become empty vessels that the Spirit can fill.

As our baptism is a dying to self—selfhood, self-absorption, self-centeredness—and rising to serve the Lord, we need to remember our baptism daily and the reality that we are not our own. Your life, my life, do not belong to you and me, for we have been bought with a price.

It is only in giving ourselves away daily to God that we can be channels of God's Spirit and thereby fruit-bearers. We don't have to do anything other than surrender to the Lord as often and as completely as possible. It is only by our utter surrender that we present the Lord with an empty vessel that can then contain his Spirit. This should not only be our daily prayer but our longing.

And it is, for when we live by the Spirit, we are not only bearing fruit, but we are being fed from the Tree of Life. When we are self-empty/Spirit-filled, we relish a feast of spiritual fruit that feeds us to the core of our souls: joy, peace, love, patience, kindness, mercy, warmth, music, praise, beauty, etc. And all these satisfy us, fulfill us, and become for us that new fuel—that new system—by which we live for others to the great and eternal glory of God. †