

Good Fruit
April 15, 2007
Gal. 5:22-26
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I.

Is there anything better than a fresh peach in the summertime? It's so sweet and juicy, and the juice just dribbles down your chin and gets all over your face. Forget about Carl's Jr. Or what about blackberries that have ripened and are just perfect for your hot cereal in the morning?

Fruit is so simply delicious. And when you pick it ripe from the tree or the vine, there's just nothing better.

The apostle Paul says that life in the Spirit of God is like that. It doesn't produce something you can eat, of course, but it does produce attitudes and behaviors that are irresistibly wonderful for our lives. Let's pray together as we take a look at Paul's teachings on Spiritual fruit.

Prayer: Loving God, you came in the flesh as the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and by your grace your Spirit is available to all who ask in his name. Be with us today as we look at these early Christians who were learning what it meant to be faithful disciples, and teach *us* too how to be faithful disciples in our own time and circumstances. Amen.

II.

When someone like Paul talks about spirituality, he isn't talking about something vague or abstract. He has something very specific in mind, especially when he writes to the church in Galatia.

Since Paul had left that region on his last missionary journey, a group of false teachers had come in and distorted his original message. They said that true spirituality required something more than what Paul had taught them.

Instead of accepting Jesus Christ alone as God's perfect man and man's perfect God, the church in Galatia was getting confused by a message that was more than what Paul had preached. They had turned from the good news of God's grace in Jesus Christ by adding something to it, namely following Old Testament rituals which identified these Greek-speaking Christians with ancient Israel. The new

teachers, whom Paul called “agitators,” taught their Galatian pupils that they should observe Israel’s dietary restrictions, be circumcised, and observe certain religious holy days. But Christ-plus-something was not the gospel that Christ preached.

Christ plus circumcision is not the gospel. Christ plus eating certain things is not the gospel and observing certain holidays is not the gospel. Only trust in Christ—his work, his death, his resurrection on our behalf—is what matters to Paul when it comes to experiencing the fullness of life that God intended for humanity.

III.

It is so easy to add things to our understanding of God’s grace because Christian faith is about receiving what God does and responding to it with joy. We think that adding something to it will help, but sometimes it confuses the central fact that God sent his Son to die for us.

If you’re in a darkroom developing your award winning photographs that you’ve taken on vacation, it doesn’t help for someone to turn on a light. You have enough light to develop the photographs without adding more light, and besides, the type of light that you bring into the room will only ruin the pictures!

Or take the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, you don’t need to add a lot of paint to her. She’s already completed, she’s perfect, and she’s a masterpiece. The same thing can be said about the gospel.

So when we talk about spiritual fruit, we’re not talking about adding anything to the good news of God’s grace; we’re merely talking about what that good news adds to our lives. No wonder Paul got so riled up when he heard about false teachers. He said if they are teaching you about circumcision, then you might as well go all the way and emasculate yourselves (4:2)

You see, our role is not to add anything to what God has done. Faithfulness is becoming more aware of what God has done and by that awareness to train our eyes and ears to see what God is doing here and now.

IV.

It’s kind of like getting stuck in downtown L.A. on a Friday afternoon and wanting to get back to Orange County. You think to yourself, “I’m going to be here forever,” and then you realize that you can use the carpool lane because you have your friend in the car with you. You realize, “Oh, I don’t need to be stuck

here anymore, there's the carpool lane right up there. I'm going to take advantage of it and use it!" When you see the crucified Christ, you move into a truth that has been there all along and it shows you that you can live differently and move on.

Keeping Christ crucified before us strips away an attempt at self-justification, trying to position ourselves just right, from bargaining with God, and basically leaves us with one choice: to live by faith all the time.

And, if we live by faith all the time, then we're aware that there's grace abounding all the time. Because if we're going to live by faith, then we need to continually remind ourselves that it is a free gift from God.

V.

Now look at what happens when this realization takes place in your life. You no longer belong to yourself. You belong to God. Paul says in 4:6-7, "Because you are children belonging to God's household, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God." We are heirs to everything the Father has given to the Son including the Spirit that enables us to call out to God in the most intimate of ways.

Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). So when you enter into a relationship with the Father and now your spirit cries out as his did, "Abba Father."

It's no longer only you crying out, "What's in it for me?" or "What is the good life I can create for myself?" Jesus' Spirit cries out in you, "Let your will be done, not my will, Father."

Your hope is no longer constrained by your preferences and prejudices about the way life is *supposed* to be; your hope is now as a brother or sister of the crucified one. And therefore, because the Spirit of the Son lives in you, you call out, "Abba, Father," and it comes from your heart.

VI.

The Spirit of God's Son binds us to God in such a way that when we do something that is out of synch with God's Spirit we know we're off key. We become divided against ourselves and we experience all the things that Paul says are works of the flesh rather than a natural outpouring or fruit of his Spirit.

You remember what they were from Pastor Jeff's sermon a couple of weeks ago. Paul says in 5:19-21 "The works of the flesh are obvious: ¹⁹fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger," and so on and so forth. "²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control."

VII.

This is one of the many paradoxes we see in scripture. We think the works of the flesh are going to be more beneficial than those of the Spirit because we're the ones who get to decide what they are. We get to stay in control and we can feel good about ourselves about what we do and don't do. This may have been going on with the Galatians' willingness to observe practices of the Old Testament laws. Perhaps they saw it as way of monitoring how well they were doing.

But here's the paradox. When we're in conflict with the Spirit, it actually prevents us from getting what we want. Think about it, who says, "I want to be loveless, joyless, anxious, impatient, mean-spirited, stingy, skeptical, abrasive, and out of control?" I can't think of anyone who wants this, can you? We'd all much rather experience the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control?

But all those attitudes and characteristics are mere byproducts of the essential relationship that you build day-by-day and month-by-month with Jesus Christ through the power of his Spirit.

VIII.

If you are a golf fan, then you've looked up to some great golfers. In fact, I would guess that if you play golf today you mimic you're favorites. You learned to address the ball like them, stand like them, and even swing the club like them.

But I guarantee you if you were at Augusta National last Sunday on the 18th tee of the Masters with Tiger woods is on the hole behind you and only two strokes down, you couldn't hit the ball 300 yards down the middle of the fairway to save your life. Why?

Because you have not lived your life like a professional golfer. You have not spent the hours on the practice tee or in the weight room. You have not disciplined your mind and body the way they have. You have not focused your eating and sleeping habits like they have. You have not focused your professional life around golf. You haven't done it.

So it's unrealistic to expect that you could put yourselves in their shoes and do what they can do. In the same way, it is unrealistic to think that you'll exhibit the fruit of the Spirit in any significant way without living more and more in Christ's Spirit.

Paul talks about "crucifying the flesh," and in another place, he says, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me" (2:20).

For me, that means reflecting day by day on God's mercy toward me, what he did for me in Christ, and what he continues to do by his grace. It means looking at the crosses that I bear in my own life, the storms I face and see how they might become instruments of my own growth rather than of my bitterness. It means calling out "Abba Father, I want to be more like you, God." That's a prayer that God wants to answer.

If I haven't been living this way, I'm not going to respond to events in my life with love, joy, patience, kindness, and generosity, etc. If someone hurts me, I'm more apt to get angry than turn the other cheek. If I haven't been calling out to God, I might habitually choose what's best for me over what's best for others. If I have not been aware of God's work in my day, then when someone hurts me or offends me, I'm apt to speak badly about them whether what I have to say is the truth or not.

IX.

You know, the Fruit of the Spirit are good indicators of the Spirit's work in a person's life. I know when I see a loving person or a joyful person or a kind person that God is at work in them. Sometimes God is at work in spite of a person's knowledge of Christ and other times God is at work because of a conscious submission to greater intimacy with Jesus.

Paul is saying to the Christians in Galatia that you don't need to have God bear fruit in spite of your resistance and lack of knowledge. You can have God bear fruit *BECAUSE* of your acceptance and growing intimacy with Christ.

Will it be a battle? Absolutely. The Galatians were prime examples of that. Paul makes the case that their battles were only symptomatic of a much more fundamental issue. They were using their newfound freedom to indulge their flesh rather than to serve one another in love.

That's the fundamental choice that Paul is setting up. He says if you want to follow some law, then try this one on for size: "Serve on another in love." Because if you're moved by Christ's Spirit, that's what he will do for you. And what you'll naturally produce is fruit that is consistent with Christ's character and Christ's life and Christ's ministry.

X.

The fruit of the Spirit won't get all over your face like fresh fruit will, but it will get all over the place. A person who is loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, generous, kind, faithful and self controlled can't help but making a difference in the lives of the people they meet and live with.

You know people who have weathered tremendously difficult assignments in life with joy. You know people who are generous and spend more time thinking about what they can give away than what they can accumulate. You know people who are loving and kind and have taken care of you when you've gone through a bad stretch in your own life. The fruit of God's Spirit has an impact that goes far beyond what we can comprehend and imagine. It may not get on your face, but it does get all over the place.

It extends to the community around us as we work with children and families at the Aliso Viejo Community Center. It is born in Tijuana as we build houses through Amor ministries. And it goes across the ocean to Kenya when we fund new medical outpost and orphanages. The fruit of God's Spirit benefits everyone, not only the one through whom it's borne, but also to all those with whom it comes in contact. So Abba, Father, let your will be done in us. Come Holy Spirit, come. Amen.