

For Good Fruit to Grow!  
Galatian 5:13-26  
Farmville Baptist Church  
July 5, 2020

Today we are starting a new 9 week sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit, and what it might mean for us to risk allowing God to develop those qualities in our lives. What might it mean for us to risk: love, joy peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control? After an introduction to the series today, we'll spend a week exploring each of these character qualities and seek to risk allowing the Spirit to build them into our lives.

The fruit of the Spirit is familiar to many of us all the way back to Children's Sunday School and Vacation Bible School days for some. We know that they are important and that we are to live into them, but as always, let's set this passage in the larger context of Galatians. Last week as we finished up our series in Acts, we heard the story of Peter seeing the vision on the roof of the sheet full of unclean animals and then men appeared at his door to take him to Cornelius, a Gentile. Peter was resistant to this call from God, even after the vision - because it went against Hebrew purity laws. You remember the mantra last week was "We've never done it that way before." After Cornelius and his family became Christians, Peter was summoned before the council in Jerusalem to account for his witness to unclean Gentiles. After Peter's testimony, the council accepted the idea that Gentiles could indeed become Christians, but the question then became do Gentiles have to become Jews in order to become Christians? Must they be circumcised and follow the law of Moses in order to also follow Christ? It is this very issue that Paul is now dealing with in Galatians - must believers follow the law (related to circumcision and a host of other things) or are they free from the law as followers of Christ?

Paul argues for freedom ó and that's what the passage we heard earlier is really about. The opening verse of chapter 5 puts it this way, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." But in verse 13, Paul makes it abundantly clear that this freedom is not *carte blanche* to do as we wish. "You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love, become servants, of each other." For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The freedom that we are given is for love. In the Galatian community, the harsh debates and infighting among the young Christians were outward and visible signs of ongoing enslavement. They were allowing debates over circumcision to be given precedence over the law of loving one's neighbor as oneself.<sup>1</sup>

It sounds silly to us doesn't it? But almost every church I know has an issue like this that gets them tangled up and keeps them from living into the full freedom that Christ wants them to experience.

Now there are two things that Paul says here that we often miss. First, this passage talks about the **fruit** of the spirit ó not the **fruits** of the spirit. They are a package deal ó we don't get to pick and choose the ones we want and ignore the rest. And please know that this list is descriptive, not exhaustive. These are not the only things that the Spirit wants to grow in our lives

We should also note that Paul is **not** telling the Galatians to cultivate these qualities ó fruit cannot be humanly manufactured. Rather, Paul is painting a picture of the harvest that the **SPIRIT** produces. Now, before we get too comfortable, the Spirit produces the fruit, but that doesn't mean we don't have work to do. How many of you here today are gardeners? Did you

just walk out into your backyard one day to discover ripe, juicy produce hanging on lush green plants? If so, I want to come to your house after church. No, it takes hard work, and months of it, to get to the harvest doesn't it? First, we have to cultivate the soil.

This often begins by plowing up what is already growing there. I don't know about you, but at our house, the lawn is full of weeds. For us if it's green, it counts. Dandelions, clover, moss, we'll take it. The reality is though, it is those invasive plants that are keeping us from having the golf-course looking lawns that some of our neighbors work so hard to cultivate. We know the weeds are there, but after a while, we don't really see them anymore, we come to accept them as normal.

You know where I'm going with this analogy don't you? Our lives are the same way. We all have weeds growing in our hearts. And often, they've been there so long we don't even see them anymore. Paul names some of those weeds for the Galatians ó again a suggestive list not an exhaustive one ó spiritual weeds, mental, physical and emotional weeds, weeds that destroy humanity and community - Eugene Peterson's translation is worth hearing again: "repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on. Paul says."

And here is the problem with these weeds - The things we carry define us, just as much as we define them. The things we carry define us, just as much as we define them. Theologian

GK Beale puts it this way: We become what we worship. Here's how it works. If we believe something, it affects our behavior. And how we behave influences what we become.

My dad died when I was in my mid-twenties ó really when I was just starting to get to know him as an adult. He was a warm and loving person, as long as your skin was the same color his was. Fortunately, his views were slowly starting to change as he got to know people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, but when I was a child, he had really strong views. I don't know who taught him to believe that way or why, and I'd love to have that conversation with him now. I never agreed with my dad's view on race, but if I'm honest, I know I still carry a few weeds of his influence in my heart and soul. It has only been in the last 5-7 years that I have come to understand how much I have benefitted from white privilege and, as we talked about a few weeks ago, I still don't fully utilize what little power and influence I have to work for lasting change in the world around me.

For many years, I did not even know that the weeds were there, but friends, I know that I am responsible for pulling them out even if someone else planted them. We are all responsible for weeding them out to make room for the beautiful fruit that the Spirit wants to cultivate in our hearts and souls.

So here's my challenge, as we work our way through this series, pay attention when you experience resistance. If we are talking about gentleness or kindness and you get prickly, ask yourself if there is a weed or a thorn there that needs pulled to make room for better fruit. If we take responsibility for what is growing in our own hearts, we can experience the freedom that Christ desires for each of us ó the freedom to bring our best selves in service to the kingdom of God.

So where does risk come into all of this? Why pair risk with the fruit of the spirit? It seems important to pair risk with these qualities because opening ourselves up to this weeding and cultivating process will likely cost us something, we will likely be changed in the process. And as we have talked about before, for most of us the uncertainty of change is uncomfortable ó what we know provides us with security ó even if it isn't healthy.

There is a story of two former POWs who were talking many years after they had returned home. The first one asked, "Have you forgiven your captors?" "No," the other one answered.

The first replied, "Then it sounds like they still have you imprisoned." (PAUSE)

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Let us stand firm then, and not submit ourselves again to a yoke of slavery. Instead, may we allow the Spirit to cultivate Her fruit in us, that we may truly love our neighbors ó all of them ó as ourselves, and bear much fruit for the kingdom.

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<sup>i</sup> J William Harkins, Feasting on the Word, p. 186.