

Sermon: 1-4-21 - The Fruits of the Spirit: Love
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Love Divine, All Loves Excelling, CH #648
The Gift of Love, MH #408

As we move into the new year, I am pondering how we can make good use of the time God has given us. I am convinced that the only way to live the lives Christ would have us live is with the help of the Holy Spirit. There are simply things that we cannot do on our own, much as we might want to. Which is why I have chosen to open the new year by looking at Paul's letter to the Galatians and what it has to say about living lives that exhibit the fruit of the Spirit. Let's begin by reading from the 5th chapter.

13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 15 If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

19 The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 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.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to

**Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.
26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each
other. — Galatians 5:13-26**

The book of Galatians is an interesting book. It was written as a letter to the church in that region by the Apostle Paul. Paul travelled through the region of Galatia (**the central highlands of present day Turkey**) on all three of his missionary journeys, and while there, he established churches.

Most of the early converts to join the church in Galatia were Jews. Though Christianity was rooted in the Jewish faith of their upbringing, the new converts soon discovered that following Christ involved a huge shift culturally. As Christians, they were no longer required to live under the law. They could now live freely in Christ. Or maybe I should say that that freedom became available to them. Many of the new converts struggled with giving up the old ways. They found it especially hard to let go of the Jewish laws which had defined their lives for so long. Many of them argued that the law could not be set aside. Those church members were called Judaizers. They taught that before anyone could experience the “full blessings” of God, they had to first become Jews (including undergoing circumcision) and live under the law. Christianity, for them, was a form of Judaism practiced by those who had achieved a fuller understanding of God. Which meant that no one could claim to be a Christian unless they first became a Jew.

That was what many of the Jewish converts believed. But others disagreed, especially the Gentiles who had not been raised as Jews. The Gentile converts saw no point in adhering to the Jewish law, especially if it meant they had to be circumcised. They considered themselves to be Christians not Jews. Undergoing circumcision and living under the law simply made no sense to them.

This difference in understanding, between those who championed traditional Judaism and those who argued for the inclusion of the Gentiles, grew until it eventually split the church. Paul’s letter was written to a deeply divided church. Surprisingly, Paul sided with the Gentiles. Paul may have been a Jew, who had lived most of his life under the law, but, as

he reminded them, he had traded the yoke of the law for the freedom that was offered in Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Paul went on to tell them that they must let go of the law, too, pointing out that by returning to the law, they were denying the gospel. Paul minced no words when it came to those who insisted on living under the law. He chided them, saying:

If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! — Gal. 1:9

This was a church Paul had founded. He loved its members like children. It was hard for him to watch as their divisions grew deeper and deeper. So, he plead with them to return to the freedom of Christ's gospel. In case they had forgotten, he devoted two chapters to explaining why the gospel message was authentic, pointing out that it was the gospel, not the law, that brought salvation and freedom from sin. Which meant that salvation was available to all who called on the name of the Lord, not just Jews who lived under the law.

Then in chapters 3 and 4, Paul carried his arguments a step further, explaining why the gospel was superior to the law; explaining that those who lived freely in Christ were no longer required to adhere to legalistic religious rituals and rules that killed the spirit. However, lest they think that this freedom gave them license to do whatever they wanted, Paul went on to explain, in his last two chapters, that freedom in Christ was not an excuse for doing anything they wanted. Christ freed them to do what was right, not what they desired.

Which naturally led to the question of how they would know what was right, if right was not defined by the law? Paul's answer was that the Holy Spirit would show them what was right. Not only would the Holy Spirit show them what was right, the Spirit would instruct, guide, lead and empower them to do what was right. Thus, Paul said:

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. — Galatians 5:16

I don't want you to misunderstand. The Galatians, who were seeking to live under the law, were not bad people. The reason so many were drawn back to the Law was because they were struggling to live the lives they knew they should live. They were doing things that they knew were wrong, but were unable to stop. They hoped that, through obedience to the Law, they could gain control of their lives and be better people.

We have all struggled with the power of sin. I know that I have. I mess up. I sin. I know I really shouldn't have done what I did. I know I should do better. So, I decide that I will do better. Before I know it, I am saying, "I am not going to behave that way again." Over and over. The problem is that trying not to sin, by telling myself not to sin, only focuses me on the sin.

Trying to escape sin by telling yourself no to is a bit like trying to stay on a diet by telling yourself not to eat a piece of the German chocolate cake that you know is in the refrigerator. It is not helpful to walk around saying, "I am not going to eat the cake in the fridge. I am not going to take a bite of that creamy, delicious, German chocolate cake. I am not going to do it." Trying to avoid eating the cake by telling ourselves not to eat the cake only focuses our minds on the cake, ensuring that we will eventually give in to the temptation. The solution to avoiding the temptation posed by the cake is to fill our stomachs with something healthy and focus our minds on something else.

It is the same with sin. Trying to escape the power of sin by thinking about sin only focuses us on the sin we are trying to escape. It is far better to allow the Holy Spirit to fill us with the good things of God, driving out the evil desires and allowing us to live in Christ's freedom. It is wiser to focus our minds on the good things of God, inviting the Spirit to lead us into them. As Paul wrote the Philippians: **"Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."** — **Philippians 4:8-9**

When we allow the Spirit, rather than our desires, to fill us, it begins to spill out into what Paul called the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. It is the help of the Spirit, not willful adherence to the law, that transforms us over time into the new creation the Gospel speaks of.

This week, I would like to look at the first of those fruits, the fruit of love. The first challenge for us is that English is not overly helpful when it comes to talking about love. The English word, "love" encompasses a whole host of meanings from the sweetly sentimental to tough and concrete. The Greeks had four words for love: Eros for passionate love; Philia for familial love; Storge the awe, gee-whiz kind of love; and Agape, which is the love Paul is writing about here. Agape is not so much a feeling as a choice, a choice to seek the best for others.

The love Paul is talking about is the kind that enables us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Oh, some neighbors are easy to love. They are kind, caring people that we just naturally have warm feelings for. But others are a bit harder to care about. You know the neighbors I am talking about — the ones who never mow their lawn and let the dandelions grow out of control; the ones whose dog barks all night long; the grouch who is constantly complaining about our kids or our sprinklers or... Some of the neighbors who drop by our church can be hard to love, too. Some of them are dirty, smelly, confused transients, the misfits who struggle to find a place in society. Others are troubled, youth swearing and cursing and trying to prove how tough they are. Don't get me wrong. They are God's children, too, but they don't elicit the same warm feelings as a puppy or a kitten. Still, God asks us to love them, and sometimes the only way we can do that is with the help of the Spirit.

The truth is that loving our neighbors can be hard. It goes against what many of us have been taught. We have been taught that we live in a dog-eat-dog world in which only the strong survive. That charity begins at home. That we should set our sights high and shoot for the stars and not let anyone, even our neighbors, get in our way.

Many of us have been taught that, but it is the antithesis of the love Paul calls us to exhibit, and the fruit the Spirit offers to provide. The Christian

ethic has little to do with competition and winning. We are called to live out an ethic of familial love. The Bible teaches that we are all in this together, that we are to leave no one behind. After all, God could have abandoned us, but he did not. Indeed, God so loved us that he sent his son. We are called to extend that same love to others. Nowhere are we instructed to win by beating our sisters and brothers to the finish line. We are called to bring them with us, so that we can all finish the race together.

Which reminds me of a story I read awhile back. I tried to look the story up, but could not find it. So, I will try to tell the story from memory, knowing that I may not have the details right. It was a story about a man who volunteered to help with his community's Special Olympics. He was excited to help kids learn what it meant to train and compete. He wanted them to experience the thrill of competition and the joy of winning. He knew that for some on them, it might be the first win of their lives.

He worked with a young man who was training to run the 100 meter dash. He spent time helping him with his start and his stride. He helped him condition for the race. The boy blossomed under his attention and improved rapidly. To the man's great joy, his athlete won the early heats and soon found himself in the championship race. This race was to determine the best of the best. The excitement built, the gun went off, and the runners came out of their blocks with all of the speed they could muster. This was the moment they had been training for. His runner ran well, but another athlete took an early lead and it soon became apparent that he could not be caught. But then, just short of the finish line, the leader tripped and fell to the cinders. The other three runners shot by their fallen competitor. This was their chance to win. Then something unexpected happened. All three stopped. As one, they turned and went back to help their fallen competitor. They lifted him to his feet, wrapped his bleeding knee with a scarf, and supported him, as together they crossed the finish line, arm in arm, to a standing ovation from the crowd.

This is not the world's ethic of winner-takes-all competition. It is the kind of love Paul writes of. It is the kind of love that the Holy Spirit equips us to offer. And it is a powerful witness to a world that longs for, but rarely, sees self-giving love.

It is the kind of love I hope we are learning to show to our neighbors. Know that we cannot give such love on your own, at least not for long. But when we are walking with the Spirit, the Spirit equips us to love like those young racers loved. At times it may mean losing. It may mean dropping out of the race in order to step back and give a hand to a struggling brother or sister. Indeed, this kind of love has nothing to do with winning or even whether the recipient deserves our love. We do this because God loved us even when we didn't deserve his love and weren't very lovable ourselves. We do it because as we grow in the Spirit, something changes inside. We begin to care about others, to put their welfare first. And as we do, we discover that we are no longer alone. There are brothers and sisters walking with us, ready to bandage our knees when we stumble, and help us across the finish line. Why? Because they, like us, are being led by the Spirit who produces fruit in our lives. And one of those fruits is LOVE.