

The Fruit of the Spirit Faithfulness, Gentleness & Self-control

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law” (Galatians 5:22 – 23).

In this talk we will conclude our series of looking at the fruit of the Spirit, but before we do this let me start by asking you a tricky question: “Who are you at heart?” My socks tell me that I am the world’s best grandpa – which I somehow doubt but I do appreciate the sentiment. My office manager tells me that I am a dream to work for, but then she is married to me so maybe her assessment is a bit biased. We had a Christmas card thanking us for being good neighbours and wanting us to carry on “just being you.” I didn’t realise that grumpy old men were so in vogue! But none of these opinions would really answer the question I asked if I asked it of myself. No, to get the question answered I would have to ask myself to give an honest description of who I really am, in the inner core of my being. We will come back to see why this is so important later in this talk.

Just to tie the talks in this series together it is worth making three general points regarding these verses. First, it is the **fruit** of the Spirit. All these qualities together form a single whole. The works of the flesh, in vv.19-21, are many and varied and make for a sorry list. However, the various characteristics that we have considered in this series, those features of Christ that shine most gloriously in His life, are also to be reproduced in the lives of those who form His body. Second, they are the fruit **of the Spirit**. If I planted an apple tree in my garden because I like apples, I could go to the local supermarket and buy a bag of apples and then attach them to the said apple tree. I would have my apples, but they would not be the fruit of that apple tree. We must not go away from this series of talks, having given ourselves a stern mental talking to, with the intention of making ourselves more loving, more joyful, or kinder. If we did that, then it would be the fruit of the flesh, which is perfectly able to mimic niceness, but is fleshly all the same, and of no use to God.

These qualities are the inevitable result of the Holy Spirit being at work in our lives. We do not have to do anything for these qualities to be produced. However, if these qualities are not present, and with increasing measure, in our lives, then we should rightly wonder why not. Do I tolerate sin or wilful disobedience in my life that prevents the Holy Spirit from working? Perhaps I spend so little time in reading God’s word that the soil of my life is so thin that the Spirit-produced character tree can barely take root. On the other hand, if I spend each day in living relationship with Him, by spending time in prayer, Bible study, and obedience, then I can be sure that this fruit will result from fertile spiritual ground.

Thirdly, we can split the fruit of the Spirit into three groups of three. Love, joy, and peace are qualities that affect my relationship with God. Long-suffering, kindness, and goodness affect my relationship with others. Finally, the three qualities we will consider today (faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control) affect my relationship with myself. So let us begin by looking at faithfulness.

Depending on which translation you use, this fruit is described as faith, faithfulness, or fidelity. Primarily it refers to the quality of trustworthiness or reliability. It is worth just noticing that here, in Galatians 5:23, the Spirit wants to reproduce the very essence of God in us. 1 Corinthians 1:9 tells us,

“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Revelation 1:5 says:

“Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth.”

What a great thing it is that, in a very unreliable world, we have a totally reliable God! I think that it is worth considering this in two ways – outward and inward.

As we consider our attitude towards God are we marked by a readiness to accept what He says and to believe what we are told? This attitude should also mark our behaviour to one another. Hogg and Vine write of this characteristic:

“Trustfulness, the habit of mind which does not doubt that God is working all things together for good with those who love Him that seeks to realise the heart of the Apostle’s word concerning love, that it “believeth all things.” Suspicion of God is a work of the flesh, and so is suspicion of those around us; it darkens and embitters the soul, hinders efficiency in service and makes fellowship impossible.”

It is illogical and inconsistent to trust God for the most difficult of things – the forgiveness of my sins and adoption into His family - but then to doubt Him for the trivialities of life. Faithfulness will quietly rest on Him, allowing Him to work in His way and in His time. It also should tend to this position with our fellow man. Until such time as is proved otherwise, we should always believe the best about others. Too often our church life may become marked by suspicion – so and so isn’t doing what I think they should or at least not in the way I think they should. This is not the attitude of faithfulness that comes from the fruit of the Spirit. As soon as we recognise this wrong attitude, we need to judge it and seek God’s help to get rid of it.

But faithfulness also has an inward aspect. By this I mean am I reliable? Can others know with certainty that they can depend upon me? If someone speaks to me in confidence, can they do so knowing that nobody else will find out? If I am given a job to do, can I be left to complete the task without there being any concerns that it may not get done? If a register of church attendance were to be taken each week, could it be guaranteed that my name would always be on it? This is faithfulness in action.

We have a wonderful example of a man who lived out this quality of faithfulness in 2 Samuel 23:11, where we read,

“And after him was Shammah the son of Agee the Hararite. A troop of Philistines had gathered together into where there was a piece of ground full of lentils. So the [Israelites] fled from the Philistines. But he stationed himself in the middle of the field, defended it, and killed the Philistines. So the LORD brought about a great victory.”

Who has ever heard about taking a defensive stand in the middle of a bean field? And yet this is what Shammah did. He had seen his fellow Israelites run away. He had felt the discouragement of

being left alone and yet his reliability meant that he would not join them. God needed just one person to make a stand so that He could honour His promise to give the Israelites the land, wherever their foot trod. This was the land that God had promised to Israel and Shammah was going to hold God to that promise.

If I had been Shammah, I would have been terrified – alone against a troop of Philistine warriors. And yet he stood, and through him God won a great victory. His faithfulness must have been such an encouragement to so many – I know it is to me! It must have made such a difference to so many nameless others also. What would have happened to those who could not run away and hide – the old and infirm, the pregnant, and the little children? What would have happened to those in the next field? Selfishness would say that it is none of my concern, except that what I do does impact upon so many others. How much better the church would be today if every believer of previous generations had shown Shammah's kind of faithfulness! How much better future generations will be if I do!

Let us now move on to our second characteristic – that of gentleness or meekness. This is where we come back to what we were thinking about at the beginning. If you were talking to a colleague about the Lord Jesus, how would you describe Him? The Son of God? A great teacher? A miracle worker? The Saviour of the world? All true, but perhaps we should allow Jesus to describe Himself, which He does specifically in only one place in the New Testament – Matthew 11:29. His answer may surprise you.

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Not righteous and austere. Not joyful and glad. Not almighty and all-powerful. Just gentle and lowly in heart. When the Bible speaks about the heart it is not talking about red hearts and flowers. It is talking about what gets you up in the morning, about what motivates you to act the way you do. What are you at the very core of your being. Yes, at times Jesus clothed Himself in power and raised the dead. For sure, He displayed His righteousness as he told the woman in John 8 to “go, and sin no more.” But He also described Himself as gentle and lowly. That is who He is! [No wonder that the Spirit wants to make us gentle or meek – He is making us to be just like the Lord Jesus. If ever we glibly pray that we want to be more like Him, then be ready to be made gentle.](#) We read of the same characteristic in Matthew 5:5, where we read that,

“The meek...shall inherit the earth.”

Quite right too! Those who are most like Christ become the inheritors of the earth. We also read the same word in Matthew 21:5,

“Behold your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey.”

Outwardly that was a scene of triumph as the crowds shouted their Hosannahs. However, here was a Man who was meekly submitting His will to the eternal counsels and plans of His God in total obedience.

We read the same idea in 1 Peter 3:4,

“Rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.”

This world says that women need to exert themselves, dominate, and shout loud. That is not surprising really, as the devil has never had a very high opinion of women. On the other hand,

Peter tells us that the path to the very highest position, that of being like Christ, is to display a gentle spirit. It may sound counter-intuitive, but it is the path to lasting contentment. The characteristic is also linked with wisdom in James 3:13,

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.”

Perhaps it is just me, but it does frequently appear that those who know the most tend to be overbearing with us mere mortals who find learning difficult. How glad I am that the Lord Jesus is not like that, ranting from heaven about my lack of understanding of His word. No, He is gentle, wisely working it into my life over my lifetime – here a little, there a little, brick upon brick. Sometimes we may even give ourselves a hard time over how little we are learning and growing. Let us remember that He is gentle, He stands with open arms rather than a pointing finger and let us seek to emulate this as the fruit of the Spirit grows in our lives.

In Matthew 12:20 we read,

“A bruised reed He will not break; and smoking flax He will not quench.”

This is gentleness in action. Here are two things that have so little life left within them, almost, but not quite, broken. He who is at core gentle, is ready, willing, eager to deal with just such a one. He is able to make the reed strong again, to reignite the flax to flame so that it can light the room. In becoming more gentle we are becoming more like the Lord Jesus.

[But perhaps, like me, you just feel a bit uncomfortable about this. After all, we want to make our mark in this world and to make our lives count. All this talk of gentleness and of meekness sounds a bit wishy washy.](#) We confuse meekness with weakness, and Jesus was never weak. Meekness is restrained strength. It is the parent patiently allowing the child to win at chess to encourage them to play again and thus to learn the game. Yes, they could have won in 5 moves but then the child would give up and the bigger gain missed. Meekness is the pride lion sheathing his claws as he teaches the young cub to fight.

It is telling that in Numbers 12:3 Moses is described as the meekest man in all the earth! The man who took on the might of Pharaoh and won. The leader of a mighty nation for 40 years was also the meekest man at the time. That certainly raises the appeal of being meek! Within the context of those words being written, Moses could have insisted on his rights and have exerted his authority over those who were complaining against him. However, he chose to let God speak on his behalf. If he was doing wrong, then God would judge. If not, then what were the people complaining about? Sometimes we are too quick to insist on our rights, to vindicate ourselves. This comes from a position of our own insecurities and weaknesses. Instead, let us learn to be gentle like Jesus, and to allow God to speak on our behalf when we are judged by others. We have God for us, we come from a position of strength, so let us learn to be gentle in our dealing with one another and with the lost.

Incidentally, wasn't Moses the one who killed an Egyptian taskmaster? Wasn't Moses the man who struck the rock in anger? That doesn't sound all that meek to me. There are always times when we act out of character and trip up. It is so encouraging to see that God does not discard us after our first, or even second mistake. That is real gentleness – the bruised reed not being broken but lovingly, gently, restored.

Let us now move on to consider the final aspect of the fruit of the Spirit – that of self-control. This may be translated as temperance, the self-restraint of one's own behaviour. Due to the temperance movement, that took temperance as its name, it has become linked with the total abstinence from drinking alcohol. However, the thought is much wider here. It can be expressed in

relation to alcohol, but it could equally relate to our consumption of all food. It certainly does relate to the expression of our emotions and the regulation of our thought life. It also includes when we deny ourselves what may be a legitimate pleasure for a greater good.

We read the same word in Acts 24:25,

“Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgement to come, Felix was afraid and answered, “Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you.””

In presenting the gospel to the governor Felix, Paul demonstrated that self-control is an inevitable part of our response to salvation. No wonder Felix was concerned. Fancy those in authority having to exercise self-control and lose so many of the benefits of exercising high office. God does not have one rule for the elite and another for the rest of us. We all have to deny ourselves those things that do not enhance the cause of Christ by exercising self-control.

In his list of Christian virtues, Peter says that we are ,

“[add]...to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness.” 2 Peter 1:5-6.

The emphasis here is on our thought life – what we know and how that affects our lives and is expressed by self-control. So, for example, because I know that my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, I should want to keep it in reasonably good shape. I do this by exercising self-control about what I eat, about not using and abusing drugs, about not slouching on the sofa instead of taking some exercise, etc.

In 1 Corinthians 7:9 Paul relates self-control to our sexual appetites, and in chapter 9:25 he says that athletes forgo certain things because of their desire for the greater glory of becoming a prize winner. I would hope that it would be true of every child of God that they view the eternal glory of reward from their Saviour as worth all of the exercising of self-control in the here and now. There may be things, sometimes even good things, that we may have to miss out on in order to be the best we can for Christ. I may have to set my alarm clock a little earlier to allow myself time to pray before I start the day. Perhaps I may have to miss a favourite programme on TV so that I can exercise hospitality to another. Self-control must be one of the harder things to do in life. The flesh is so alive and well in so many of us that it is a constant battle to say “no” to myself over and over again. Just because I have a new life in Christ does not mean that the desire to please self has gone. Perhaps of all the battles we face in life, this one is the hardest to overcome. Perhaps, that is why it is last in the list!

The story of Elijah in 1 Kings 17 – 19 is a great example of a man, whose passions were like ours (James 5:17) and who learnt the cost and the benefits of self-control. Imagine for a moment being told to live in the desert to be fed by the ravens. We might view this in some kind of miraculous sepia-filled romance. I think the reality was that he lived for months on road-kill and carrion, and drinking from the ever-dwindling brook. And yet we read nothing of Elijah complaining to God. Here was a man who was doing exactly what God told him to do. Surely such a one should enjoy the blessings of God in this life. Apparently not! Imagine then being told to become dependent on a woman, a widow and a foreigner at that. Everything that went against all manner of polite societal norms. Again, Elijah obeyed without a murmur of complaint. Over that period of three years of drought, Elijah learnt that God was able to take care of a person of so little importance. Elijah obeyed. In doing so, he also learnt that God was well able to take care of something as important as His own Name. That is why Elijah could confidently stand on Mt. Carmel and know that God would act. Those years of self-control and ignominy culminated in the glory of Carmel and of the God who answered by fire.

Secretly, I think many of us would like the Carmel like experience of God, to be at the very epicentre of His working in this world. Perhaps what we are less ready for is the learning experience that precedes this kind of experience.

Interestingly, chapter 19 gives us a glimpse of what happened when Elijah's self-control slipped. Self-pity, doubts, and defeat soon followed. Thankfully God is the God of the second chance, who still had a work for Elijah to do. However, his story really does highlight to us the importance of this vital characteristic. May it be that in our lives we display in increasing measure faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, that are evidences of the work of the Holy-Spirit in our lives.

No wonder that Paul concludes this section with the words "against such there is no law." There is nothing wrong in being like Christ. There can be no just charge brought against any individual who acts in such a Christ-like manner. Too often the charge of hypocrisy, or failure, can be brought against us and quite justly. But for the one whose life is completely under the control of the Holy Spirit, where there is no spiritual inattention to grieve Him, nor any wilful sin to quench Him, then these lovely characteristics will be increasingly seen. They must have been evident in those early disciples who were given the name "Christian" – like Christ. How good a thing it would be if they were also abundantly clear in our own lives, for the glory of our wonderful Saviour, Jesus Christ.

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