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Galatians 5:22-26; I John 3:18; James 2:14

Fruit of the Spirit: Antidote for the Modern World



The Apostle Paul had a deep concern. After proclaiming the good news to the Galatians, Corinthians, Ephesians, and more, he saw they were trapped in old patterns, attitudes, and actions.

They were filled with scorn for those unlike themselves.

They hoarded what they had.

They were at war with each other over minor details of faith.

Anger reared its head in a moment.

Snap judgements were the order of the day, and people divided into factions to control the narrative.

These are precisely the ills that plague us all. And if our modern world is beset by the same plague as Paul's, then our solution is also the same. The world is fractured, and as Christians we have the audacity to suggest a solution. It won't do any good until we can live it ourselves, but we will not move forward as a society, as a church, or as individuals until we find it in our hearts to be open. To be open to the very core of God - God's Spirit. And its gifts are powerful, known as the Fruit of the Spirit.

Patience...where there is intolerance,

Peace...where there is anxiety,

Joy...where there is despair,

Kindness...where there is indifference,

Gentleness...amid cruelty,

Generosity...in miserliness,

Faithfulness...when we are fickle.

These transform us, they will change us from within until finally, where there was hatred, anger, and fear in your heart, there is only one thing left: Love.

When you are open, the Spirit will pour these into your heart, and you will offer it to others. This is God's calling for Brick Church. The Fruit of the Spirit. It is our charge and commission from Christ. Too many churches have been made over in the image of the world, believing they can bring hope and change using the same methods the world uses. But this is a trap, for the world's patterns do not serve God.

And so, Paul gives us instructions to be "guided" by the Spirit, a rather vague term but the original Greek offers clarity. "Guided" is the translation of *Peripateo*. A contraction of *pateo* which means walk and *peri* which means around, as in *all* around. Thus, we are to walk all around, completely by the Spirit.

One of the joys of Central Park is the vast array of dog walkers. If you have ever seen the original *101 Dalmatians* you will remember the scene where dogs and their humans walk, dress, and act the same. The dogs reflect the

personality of the snooty, playful, or proper owners. It is sheer delight to watch and it's true!

The nervous, calm, or playful dog reflects the one who holds the leash. Some chase down every squirrel, others shrink timidly at any passerby, and still more wag their tails, roll over, and look for a good belly rub from any who would indulge them.

There are dogs who incessantly pull with all their might against their owners, desperately trying to go anywhere but the intended direction.

In some ways, we are all pulling in the wrong direction against our Lord's direction and guidance. Some of us more than others.

Who is holding your leash? What pulls and tugs on you making you go this way and that? Is it generating what Paul calls the "works of the flesh?" Anger, factions, envy, and more.

Or is what pulls you out of bed and out the door generating the Fruit of the Spirit? That is our ultimate goal. To be like the dog who is in such perfect sync with the one holding the leash that no pressure ever need be applied. Simply being close by is enough.

Paul believes there are two choices - Spirit led or flesh led. Being led by the light and will of God, or being led by forces that pull us away.

Like any, we need to be trained and it means learning in our heart and soul when God is trying to pull us in new directions. The more we can do this, and learn to go where God leads us, the more belly rubs, frisbee catches, and games of chase we will enjoy.

Being led by the Spirit is not the same as being religious. That is the trap Jesus railed against. Those who turned the law into a leash, restraining our Spirit and dousing the fire of hope and love in others. Paul wrote to the Galatians because some were insisting upon circumcision, and perhaps the 400 other laws as well, as a path to life.

But rather than a set of rules drilled into our heads, Jesus sought to embed God's Spirit in our hearts.

The Bible gives us glimpses of this Spirit. When others would be in utter despair in prison, Paul flowed over with joy as he sang hymns of praise. When Peter's instinct was to exclude, God's Spirit opened his heart to welcome Cornelius the Roman soldier. At Pentecost when the difference of language and culture might have pulled the people apart, the Spirit united them in collective understanding. Rather than a barrier, diverse cultures offered a moment of ecstatic power.

The Spirit is the one that brought you here to be one with people who share much in common with you; but who also have different political opinions and thoughts about society. We share this Spirit, the Spirit of Love.

This is the summation and summit of the Fruit of the Spirit; the love that is generated by our life together and the frightening evidence that God loves us. Ultimately, the Fruit of the Spirit is nothing less than receiving, into the depths of our being, God's love.

The word agape in Greek mostly refers to the active love of God in choosing to bless people with divine favor and presence. Agape

describes God's motivation for sending the Son into the World - a passionate active love to redeem this creation so close to the divine heart.

But God has also chosen to love Brick Church. Yes, love us. Bless us beyond our deserving. And how do I know this? How can we tell the Spirit of God is with us and for us? Children.

We know not why, but when so many other churches cannot find a child or a youth, God showers us with this extreme joy.

I am absolutely struck by this fact. When other nursery schools cannot fill their classrooms, and are closing their doors, we are enrolled past capacity. When churches are dying to have baptisms, we are blessed with dozens each year. When there are no youth to be found in their hallways, we have them preaching from the pulpit!

And showing us, telling us, what this Spirit of God looks like. Mr. Auth, Ms. Anderson, and Ms. Thorpe at Youth Sunday last year (go watch it again!) - honestly, creatively, passionately, and lovingly poured their hearts out to us all.

And so, the Spirit of God has showered love upon us granting us great privilege to be a church of generations for generations and generations.

And be joyful and be glad and know you are blessed because the Fruit of God's love is with us! For you have taken this sign of God's love and been faithful to it. Not complacent, stagnant, or self-satisfied.

And beyond the Day School, you have helped create an Academy to fulfill dreams of parents and children you have never met and will never meet in Liberia. The Spirit of God led you, blessed us, and blessed them. But this is not all. There is the Summer Steps program that seeks to prepare children from different economic backgrounds to be able to compete and excel in the best schools in the world.

But there is even more the Spirit of God is pulling us to do out of love. With COVID restrictions passing, we are recommitting and doubling down on the children's choir program, hoping to bring in children from the church, school, and beyond. In a few weeks, we will begin an entirely new worship service on Wednesday nights meant to foster the faith of our children, help them grow in their love for God, each other, and across generations!

The Spirit is showering us with love through this sacred gift of our children, teaching us how to love through them. God is sending us a message. As Jesus told us, when we welcome these children, we welcome him. And when we become like them, we open the gates to the Kingdom of God.

Many of you know beloved author and pastor Frederick Buechner recently passed away. David Brooks had an excellent article in the New York Times that tapped into our topic.

*(Buechner) He modeled how a person can experience life more fully, which is a process of scraping off some of the ways adulthood teaches us to see. As Philip Yancey wrote, Buechner "tries to reawaken the child in people: the one who naively trusts, who will at least go*

*and look for the magic place, who is not ashamed of not knowing the answers because he is not expected to know the answers.”*

In these next weeks, we will explore even more implications of the Fruit of the Spirit. We are on a journey. As the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for a time of self-discovery and reflection, so are we. Over time, we will see how the Spirit takes this love and grows it into peace, patience, joy, and more. The aim is nothing less than to be filled with the most beautiful thing in all creation, the character and core of God’s very being.

Amen.