

The Fruits of the Spirit - Introduction

Today we begin a new series for the Summer, an exploration of a beautiful passage in Galatians where St.Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit.

In the bible I use at home, the whole passage comes under the title Life by the Spirit. It's clear that St.Paul believes that the evidence of Life by the Spirit will be these qualities.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

As we examine these fruit of God's Spirit we shall no doubt explore the variance from different translations...if we go old school to the KJV or newer translations.

(SLIDE)

NRSV	NIV	KJV
Love	Love	Love
Joy	Joy	Joy
Peace	Peace	Peace
Patience	Forbearance	Longsuffering
Kindness	Kindness	Gentleness
Generosity	Goodness	Goodness
Faithfulness	Faithfulness	Faith
Gentleness	Gentleness	Meekness
Self-control	Self-control	Temperance

And we shall discover that these qualities are written about in other places, St.Paul was nothing if not consistent in his preaching and teaching. We shall examine the part we have to play in the development of the fruit in our character as well as exploring what they are and how we might experience more fruitfulness in spiritual character.

However we cannot launch in and ignore the context in which the fruit of the Spirit is set.

St.Paul has been speaking about freedom. The work of Jesus on the cross has been to set us free. And he did it so that we could remain living in freedom. No guilt from the past, no burden on our lives, real, joyful, expansive freedom – as one Psalm puts it – you have brought me out into a broad space.

St.Paul was writing to a group of Christians who were being heavily influenced to adopt all the Jewish rituals. He gets quite angry about that. The freedom we experience through our faith in Jesus doesn't need to be overlaid with strict rituals and restrictions.

As an aside, this is why I celebrate communion simply. I'm an Anglican priest and abide by the understanding that the priest is responsible for the authenticity and orthodoxy of communion – but I haven't adopted the high church rituals surrounding Eucharist.

Concerning freedom and rituals...think back over your church experience. I've been to churches where the expression of faith was very very restrictive, both in the theological expectation and the culture of the church. I want us to know freedom. My Mother was the first woman in the church we attended to pray aloud in the prayer meeting and she was not wearing a hat! So – I come from a tradition that seeks freedom in worship and faith!

Having got freedom on his mind, St.Paul then turns his attention away from the people wanting to bring back in all the Jewish rituals, and towards the personal battle everyone faces between the sinful nature and the life the Spirit would have us lead.

His first point is that freedom doesn't mean we can behave anyway we like towards others. *15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*

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The author Philip Yancey wrote this

I joke that I've been "in recovery" from a toxic church ever since childhood, and I sometimes threaten my publisher that I'll write a book called *Lies My Church Told Me*. I grew up in a fundamentalist, racist, legalistic church in the American South. Lots of heavy breathing and yelling, and lots of talk about Hell. In various books I recount the process I went through in realizing that the Gospel presented in that church was bad news, whereas the real Gospel is good news. Jesus said the truth shall set us free; well, if it doesn't set you free, then it's not the truth.

His books include
What is so Amazing about Grace
The Jesus I never knew
Where is God when it hurts
Disappointment with God

His journey to freedom has been tremendously helpful to others through his books.

St.Paul's second point is that we are not free to indulge in every sinful activity we can invent.

Whichever translation you might regularly use, St. Paul's list can be a familiar sounding litany. The danger is we glaze over and don't really pay attention. A fresh translation can arrest our attention.

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: 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.

Eugene Peterson modern take on verses 19 to 21 describe accurately the desperate search for personal satisfaction; but is ultimately very destructive. And it's not the life of anyone hoping to inherit God's Kingdom.

It's against this background – Freedom, but not ritual, or destructive behaviour, or acts of the flesh (to use his phrase) that St.Paul reveals the development of Christian character against which there is no law – and no limits.

Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control.

There is no limit to how much and how many of these qualities we have and the life of freedom we seek is characterised by these qualities. Frankly – the more of this we can get the better.

But there is a problem. St.Paul puts it this way.

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.

In the book of Romans he says more about this and I'll just quote a part of chapter 7

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

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I'm not sure which of the acts of the flesh St.Paul was particularly troubled by. As a child, whenever I read about orgies the pictures that came to mind were from the Asterix and Obelisk cartoon stories. The decadent Romans were always having orgies.

Whichever translation one looks at, works of the flesh, or sins of the flesh are plural. Works. Sins. But every translation simply says fruit, singular, for the work of the Spirit.

And I think there's a simple explanation. All of us are likely to sin and the variety and complexity of sinful behaviour is as numerous as there are human beings.

But there is one Spirit, and although the work of the Spirit is seen in many ways, (nine fruit are listed) they all have a single source.

The answer to our dilemma is the Holy Spirit. Much as we would love lives that only exhibited the fruit of the Spirit, the dark side keeps intruding. St.Paul advises

walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

No doubt as we explore the theme over the weeks we shall gain a greater insight into how. How do I walk by the Spirit?

Next week Terry is exploring the part we play in cooperating with the growth of these qualities, but for now an encouragement.

I quoted Philip Yancey earlier. Jesus said the truth shall set us free; well, if it doesn't set you free, then it's not the truth.

If we acknowledge the dark side of our lives, that truth is the key to being set free. The work of Jesus can be completed as we open ourselves to his forgiving grace.

Let us pray.

Hymn 127

Father, who in Jesus found us
God whose love is all around us
Who to freedom new unbound us
Keep our hearts with joy aflame.