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# THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

## The Fruitful Life

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SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ JANUARY 20, 2019

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So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. <sup>17</sup>The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. <sup>18</sup>But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.

<sup>19</sup>When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, <sup>20</sup>idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, <sup>21</sup>envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

<sup>22</sup>But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!

<sup>24</sup>Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. <sup>25</sup>Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives.

Galatians 5:16-25 (NLT)

## **The Biblical Imagery of Fruit-Bearing**

How does a luscious, ripe and tasty basket of fruit sound to you? That's what we have on the menu today, figuratively speaking. We are completing a three-week study of the biblical imagery of bearing fruit, or living a fruitful life. Two weeks ago we read Psalm 92 in the Old Testament, which proclaimed that God's purpose for His people is to be fruitful even into old age, staying fresh and alive by His life within us. Last Sunday we moved into the New Testament and received with the disciples the profound imagery presented by Jesus of the Vine and the Branches. This simple parable or metaphor reminded us that we are not able to bear the kind of lasting fruit that makes a true difference in the world without remaining closely connected to Christ our Vine. Today, completing the biblical concept of a fruit-bearing life, we come to Paul's letter to the Galatians.

## **Our Unrestrained Nature**

In chapter 5 we are given a stark contrast between the natural way of living that flows out of our "flesh" or our unspiritual self, and the way of living that is produced by God's Spirit within us. The "sinful nature," unrestrained by conscience and the power of Christ can do all kinds of damage—to us and to people around us.

Let's be candid: when we read the list of behaviors that Paul lists for us beginning in verse 19 in machine-gun fashion ("sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures ... jealousy, anger, selfish ambition, division," etc. ), these sound not only like they're taken straight from the headlines of politics, sports, business and the gossip columns; they also strike close to home! It's not just "those other people" who struggle with a "sinful nature"; we've all at times felt tempted in those directions. In fact, sometimes those things sound fun, or profitable, or what we would want to do if we let our feelings and emotions and desires guide us. The way maggots are drawn to raw meat, our natural selves are drawn to the things that feel good, and that help us fit in with everyone else. And a lot of these behaviors do, at least in the short term, seem to offer pleasurable rewards. But what

are the long term consequences? And, even if we prefer to be tolerant of the flaws and failures in our own selves, how many of us would want to see these behaviors in the people we depend on: our spouses, our parents, our doctor or our accountant, our closest friends? When the sinful nature gets control of a single life, it can cause big problems. When the sinful natures of lots of people get control of a family or community or company or nation, the problems are multiplied.

A national auto and casualty insurance company, which used to advertise itself as being “good hands” in order to comfort people, a few years ago hired a new ad agency to take their commercials in a different direction. They decided to focus not on the longing for security but on the fear of danger. A rumpled, scroungy-looking guy with bruises and bandages all over him proclaims himself repeatedly to be the embodiment of “Mayhem,” and all kinds of disastrous accidents follow in his wake wherever he goes.

The message from the insurance company: life can be filled with mayhem ... and therefore you should give us a bunch of your money so we’ll help you when the mayhem strikes.

Long before those commercials hit the airwaves, Paul was warning about the same thing: the dangers of our unrestrained natures. If we let our desires and passions and wishes rule us, lots of mayhem can follow—and it will hurt us and those we love. The mayhem may not be physical disasters (a car accident, a tree limb falling on a house, a lightning strike), but personal disasters (inner guilt and turmoil, broken relationships, addiction, unhappiness, conflict).

### **Yielding to God’s Control**

The opposite course is to yield ourselves to God’s guidance and control. And to the extent we do that, we will produce what Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit.” That’s what we are focusing on this morning. Paul’s words complete the biblical vision of living a fruitful life. For our final few minutes together we will analyze this passage carefully

and concentrate not on the “mayhem,” but on the positive qualities listed in verses 22 and 23. In the process I hope we will learn some things about the “fruit of the Spirit.” There are three principles for understanding this work of God in us.

### **1. Fruit has two dimensions or purposes.**

Consider the production of a plant (a tree, a vine, or whatever the parent organism might be). The fruit of an apple, pear or almond tree, of a strawberry vine or grapevine, has the dual purpose, as created by God, of serving both as food for humans and animals, and as seed for future plants. The apple’s body is juicy to bite into, but its inner core contains the seeds that, if planted in the right soil, can produce more trees.

In the same way, I want us to think of the fruit produced by the Spirit of God working in us as having two purposes or dimensions. We fulfill our created purpose not only when we have a **positive impact on other people** by our actions, but also when we develop the **inner attitudes and personal qualities** that make us more like Christ.

Our passage in Galatians puts the primary emphasis on the second of these dimensions, the inner qualities we need to develop. It is those qualities that cause us to act in ways that are pleasing to God and, as a consequence, we can influence others for good.

### **2. A plant produces one kind of fruit; God produces multiple kinds.**

A peach tree can only produce peaches, not bananas. A pumpkin vine is not able to make blackberries.—no matter how hard it tries! But Paul tells us in Galatians 5 that the fruit produced by God’s Spirit working within us is rich and varied. Out of that single source we have nine different qualities identified here: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And this is not a complete list. Other character traits and inner qualities are identified elsewhere in the New Testament. Just as a basket of fruit will have a pleasing variety of different flavors within it but not contain every single fruit in the world, so this and other passages

of the Bible contain just partial lists. Galatians 5 is meant to be a *sampling*, not a comprehensive and all-inclusive catalogue of every quality of a Christlike life.

### **3. The fruit of the Spirit is a cooperative effort.**

Do the personal qualities, attitudes and actions described in Paul's list of the Spirit's fruits come from God's work within us, or do they result from our initiative and efforts? The answer is simply "Yes." The Lord will not change me contrary to my will, as if I was a robot being reprogrammed to operate only according to my software's dictates. But I can't come close to becoming the person God wants me to be without the strength and motivation and inner resources He alone can provide.

As a living example of this process of God bringing forth His desired fruit through an imperfect person who is learning how to trust Him, I offer a man who will be with us as a special guest two months from now. Our Bonita Christian Forum speaker in March will be actor Stephen Baldwin. He comes from a well-known show business family (his older brother Alec and younger brother Daniel are also actors), and he has starred in a number of films and television shows. In his early years, all the way into his 40s, he lived the Hollywood lifestyle. From all accounts Stephen was a world-class party animal, chasing after women and chemical highs and pursuing money and fame at all costs. Then his life went through a dramatic change after September 11, 2001, triggered by a realization that his values to that point in his life had been meaningless.

Making a conscious commitment to Christ, Stephen began to experience major changes within—which led to major changes in his lifestyle and actions.

He will share with us his journey in life, and the new direction for everything he has done in the past 17 years. He is not perfect, and he will acknowledge that he is still filing off the rough edges. But he will speak to us as a sinner who has found a Savior. In his autobiog-

raphy, written after he turned to Christ, Stephen shares his experience of personal change. At one point, in describing the emergence of one of the “fruits of the spirit” that we have been talking about today (the quality of **peace**, number three in our list), here is what he says:

Now, when something happens that would have made me angry in the past, I find myself chuckling because I don’t flip out. The peace of the Holy Spirit comes over me. Instead of launching into a string of profanity, I ask the Lord what He is up to in this situation. I’ve got to be honest: as I stand back and look at this transformation in me, it seems really weird. Seeing myself NOT react with anger and profanity is so out of character with who I was before September 11 that I can hardly believe it myself.

When I see this change in my reactions, I realize how different I really am. But I didn’t change me. God did. Now I find it funny that my first response to some problem coming across my radar screen isn’t anger, or fear, or ‘I’ve got to drop everything and focus all my energy on this problem’, or ‘I better call my lawyer.’ I just don’t think that way anymore. Instead I can sense the peace of the Holy Spirit sweep over me.

What Stephen has discovered for himself is nothing less than the “fruit of the spirit” emerging and flourishing in his own character and inner self. It is the cooperation between Christ and an imperfect disciple that brings these changes about. The same process occurs with all the nine varieties of fruit mentioned here in Galatians, as well as the other qualities of Christian character and behavior that are described elsewhere in the Bible.

### **Studying the Fruit**

What should we say about each of these individual characteristics? It would be illuminating and inspiring to us to spend time examining each fruit in detail. Entire books have been written about this. Years ago Jeanne and I were part of a couples Bible study that worked through a study guide on the nine dimensions of the “fruit of the Spirit,” examining one per week and looking at lots of biblical definitions and examples. It was a great, eye-opening experience. I came to

understand what it meant to not just feel loving thoughts towards others but to act on them. I discovered what biblical joy meant, and why it is a part of our Christian life. I learned about inner peace and how to achieve it, and about how to be patient with both circumstances and people. I saw that kindness was not just being “nice” and “polite” but truly caring about the welfare of others; I saw that goodness meant I needed to focus my mind not on destructive and critical thoughts but on positive ones. I realized that faithfulness meant I must make commitments to God and others and then keep them consistently. I learned that gentleness required me to control my anger and get rid of it. And I came to see that self-discipline was the secret to growing more like Jesus Christ day by day.

I would enjoy exploring these nine qualities with you, and I believe you would benefit from it. But we don’t have the luxury of time to do that now. I simply commend to you the practice of thoughtful reflection on this passage and these nine qualities. To the extent that you and I begin to put these into practice, our lives and our relationships with others will be better.

### **Beautiful Things Happen**

Last Monday Dr. Jeremiah Johnston was with us. He spends a lot of his time in the arena of college campuses, explaining the Christian faith and answering the accusations of our critics. In our conversation last week, he pointed out the selective and distorted criticisms often leveled at Christians. Of course we’re not perfect, and the church has at times lost its way. But the profound good in this world that has been brought about by ordinary people like you and me—who have consciously chosen to yield our sinful natures to the control of God’s Spirit and live out these spiritual fruits—has far outweighed the bad.

Here are just a few issues Jeremiah has addressed in debates and how he has responded:

- ◆ Atheists have charged that the Crusades prove the Church is a source of evil and violence in the world. Jeremiah replies

that those miserable wars came about in a time when nobody but a few clergy in western Europe had any access to the Bible. Thus they were unable to read God’s Word for themselves, and were ripe to fall into the prevailing violent culture of their times. But what about the hospitals founded all across Europe in the years after the Crusades, all by Christians?

- ◆ Critics have attacked the church because of the misconduct of priests who have abused young boys—claiming those crimes as proof that all Christians are hypocrites. Jeremiah replies: “How then do you explain Mother Teresa, and millions of others through the centuries who have given their lives so sacrificially?”
- ◆ The critics will say that southern American slaveholders who tried to justify racism and slavery to preserve their own economic interests are proof that the church is racist. “How then do you explain the Christian abolitionists in America and in England, who worked so hard to ultimately end the slave trade and African slavery?” he asks.

It’s not my place today to carry on a debate. I simply want to proclaim what I believe is an undeniable reality. Whenever and wherever people allow God to produce the “fruit of the Spirit” in their own inner lives and their outward behaviors, beautiful things happen! ■