

Matt. 4:1-11

October 1, 2017

Galatians 5:16-25

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

“Refreshing Fruit In All Seasons”

One of my most memorable experiences, since coming to Bakersfield, has been picking luscious, ripe, navel oranges and eating them right there in the orange grove, with juice running down my hands and face. My wife grew up with fresh fruit ripening on the tree and vine all around her, and to this day she loves to pick fruit and eat fresh fruit. There’s nothing quite as tasty and nutritious as vine or tree-ripened fruit.

Now most of us know that fruit also plays a role, metaphorically speaking, in the tragedy of the human condition. In God’s original creation (in the Garden of Eden, which you can read about in Genesis 1-3) the first man and woman were surrounded by fresh fruit in abundance, theirs for the taking; though God warned them not to eat one fruit – the forbidden fruit that would make them as gods. But they did, and so they lost their innocence and sin entered the world. Ever since, humanity has been caught in the web of sin – striving to control the world, with all the pride and arrogance, ambition and greed, lust for power, and the myriad evils that trail after those characteristics. That fall from grace was a huge disconnect from God, who is Spirit, and an alienation from the spiritual life.

Better Neighbors

Would you like to have better neighbors? Start with yourself. For the past six weeks we’ve been focusing on loving our neighborhoods by getting to know our neighbors, listening to them, building relationships, even friendships. We want to love our neighbors in this changing culture not because our first aim is to convert them, but because we’ve been converted. This is not just another church program – done in six weeks. This is a life-long quest and I am hoping that a year from now your neighborhood will have grown more friendly and connected because of you, a disciple of Jesus.

Our aim here is to foster genuine Christian character among ourselves at church, so that when we go into our neighborhoods we are good examples of our faith in Christ. Remember what it says? *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!...”* 2 Cor. 5:17. Redeemed by Christ we become new creations, His disciples, commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is a spiritual conversion. It is the work of the Holy Spirit transforming our character from the fallen, sinful nature into the redeemed and restored (and spiritual) nature that God desires in us. It’s really the only nature that truly brings joy to our lives.

For the next several weeks we’ll be concentrating on how we can be better neighbors by being better followers of Christ. It’s about the good fruit of a life in Christ becoming a reality in our living. In contrast to the “forbidden fruit” that brought sin into the world, we’re going to focus on the fruit of the Spirit that brings grace into the world.

Spirit Life

Disciples of Jesus want to emulate him, in word and deed ... but When we commit our lives to Christ a spiritual battle begins in earnest. Our sinful desires wage war against our souls. It's a battle that Jesus himself entered, when he was tempted to use worldly means for his heavenly purpose. Like Him to win the spiritual battle in our souls, to bring grace into our lives and into our neighborhoods, we must turn to the spiritual life we have in Christ. Too many people don't realize it, or they forget, or ignore, the spiritual foundations of our material world. The fact is, God, who is Spirit, created the heavens and the earth, and we are really spiritual creatures living in a material world.

Jesus lived by the Spirit – that is what made him so attractive to some, and so repellant to others. Jesus embodied the Spirit-filled humanity that had lost its original goodness when sin entered the world. His Spirit-led living enabled him to fulfill his Father's purpose, and same can be true for you and me. He invited all people to receive Him, receive the Holy Spirit, and to join in the Spirit-filled life.

What do we mean by "living in the Spirit; or Spirit-filled living?" We do not mean being a "spiritual person" as is often understood these days; that is, someone who meditates, or reads books on world religions, or mysticism. We do not mean someone who is vaguely in search of spiritual truth, or prays to a distant God or universal spirit. Nor do we mean someone who seeks for non-offensive, reflective ways to pretty much continue to follow their own desires. No, the spiritual life we Christians mean is this: living by the power of God's Holy Spirit to specifically transform our fallen human nature into one more Christ-like, illustrated in the way Jesus lived, attested to in Scripture.

It says that Jesus was led by the Spirit out into the wilderness, there to be tempted by the devil. He went from a spiritual high – "this is my beloved Son" - to great temptation. Isn't that the way? Have you ever noticed that almost every mountaintop experience in life is followed by a valley experience?

Our Savior knew he was divinely called, but the temptation He faced was to fulfill this heavenly calling through earthly means. That's our temptation also. His temptation was to follow the fallen, sinful nature (the worldly realm under the Evil One's influence) to attain his heavenly goals. The devil knew this and that is why he came to Jesus. "Give up, don't use your power for anything new. Make bread for yourself out of stones, get rich quick as all the others did and do! "Indulge in glory and fame and the praise of others just like everyone else!" And the devil continued to tempt him, "Rule over the whole world the way I do and all others wish to. Forget about a new start, forget about an alternative. Be realistic and tough and leave things as they are, always have been, and always will be."

We know what it is to want to leave things be. We do it all the time, rather than risk the change Christ invites. A lot of us are like that old hound dog, sitting on a nail . . . We're always tempted to just leave things the way they are. Jesus, like us, was tempted in every way to leave things be. But leaving things as they are produces the kind of fruit we can hardly stomach. It's the fruit that comes naturally to humans and Paul lists it's traits in his letter to the Galatians: things like sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies. We know of these things. They are the subject of soap operas, tabloids, and scandals. They lead to

broken lives, broken families, and a broken society and they're in more of our neighborhoods than we'd care to know. Those things naturally arise if we just leave things be and rely on the ways of this world for our living.

Fortunately for us Jesus didn't do that. He turned to His heavenly Father and the Source of the spiritual power He needed to resist the devil. We can too, thanks to Him.

Spirit Fruit

Jesus chose to live in close connection with His Heavenly Father, and thereby He planted the seeds for the Fruit of the Spirit, right there in the wilderness, in the place where the devil met him. Jesus planted the fruit that would be in season all year round. If you earnestly follow the path our Messiah has opened for us, your life will begin to exhibit the Fruit of the Spirit. What is that fruit? *"...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law,"* Galatians 5:22-23. Now that's the kind of fruit that gives nourishment to a whole and healthy life. And it's in season all year round and in all places..

So if Jesus planted this fruit and we're saved by Jesus, why don't we exhibit this fruit all the time? Well, let's be honest. There are several obstacles:

1. **The world** (1 John 2:15-17). Just look at TV, the news, movies, drive down the road and see billboards – they all carry advertisements and invitations that appeal to our selfishness, greed, lust, and gluttony. The world is not going to help us live by the Spirit.

2. **The devil** (1 Peter 5:8). If Jesus faced the devil, what makes you think we won't also? His influence goes out daily, especially bringing temptations to those who have turned to God. There is a battle for your soul. These two obstacles are somewhat beyond our control, but that does not relieve us of responsibility.

3. **Our sin nature** (Galatians 5:19), with which we must all deal. Because of the Fall of humans (Adam) we all have a human nature that will betray us, if allowed to. So many popular songs say "follow your heart." Jeremiah 17:9 admonishes us: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" God knows, if we follow our heart, unredeemed by Christ, we'll do what pleases ourselves at the moment. But it most likely will not give us love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control. As the Scripture reminds us: *"... the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other"* Gal. 5:17. Many of us fail in our daily struggles for God because we try to balance the Spirit and the flesh and make them function as co-workers. But they can't work together, because they are opposites. We know how that is: we've got God in our minds, and then the devil comes through our tongues (or other parts of the anatomy).

Priest and author Henri Nouwen, writing in his journal, says it for all of us: "I love Jesus but want to hold on to my own independence even when that independence brings no real freedom. I love Jesus but do not want to lose the respect of my professional colleagues, even though their respect does not make me grow spiritually."¹

¹Quoted in Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor*, 297.

Living by the Spirit will make us attractive to some, and repellant to others. Yet God desires and intends for us to live by the Spirit.

Spirit Power

For that reason God has given us Holy Spirit power. God has willed for you to live a life of righteousness, to follow a plan and purpose he has designed for you, and He expects to see you in heaven. His Son has extended His Word to give you direction, and the Holy Spirit teaches you his Word and empowers you to obey and follow it. The Holy Spirit provides a way for human beings to perform godly tasks. Without the Holy Spirit we would live in constant frustration, knowing the right to do, but never having the energy to do it. Hesitate not to ask God for Holy Spirit power to live in a manner pleasing to Him.

We can't just leave things as they are. The question is whether we will allow the Spirit to produce among us the Fruit of the Spirit or if we'll be left by the wayside another piece of our culture's rotting fruit – past its season. *"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness,"* 2 Peter 1:3-4. Not instantly, but step by step, choosing each day to be with Him. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – fruit of a Spirit-led life, fresh in all seasons. In the next few weeks that will be our focus. *"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit,"* Galatians 5:25.

Keep your eyes on the One who refuses to turn stones into bread, jump from great heights, or rule with great temporal power. He is the source of all hope, the strength for our future. He is the giver of the Fruit of the Spirit.

***"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life..."* 2 Peter 1:3.**