

Luke 18:9-14

Galatians 5:16-26

October 9, 2022

Kirkwood Sunday, The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

Preached by Philip Gladden at Camp Kirkwood, Watha, NC

THE CROSS-SHAPED LIFE

Living a Fruitful Life

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Did you hear about the minister who asked members of the congregation, "What would you like people to say about you when you're in your casket?" A man stood up and said, "I'd like them to say he was a fine family man." A woman stood up and said, "I'd like them to say she helped people in our community." A third member stood up and said, "I'd like them to say he was a faithful member of this church." One of the elders stood up and said, "I'd like them to say that he lived a long and fruitful life." Then the oldest member of the congregation stood up and said, "I'd like them to say, 'Look! I think he's moving!'"

Doris M. Robinson, having lived a long and fruitful life, passed away. Dolores Becker, known to her friends as Dee, passed away having lived a long and fruitful life. Barbara R. Whittier passed away while under in-home hospice care. Barbara was blessed in many ways with a long and fruitful life. After a long and fruitful life, Virginia Harless passed away peacefully. She was a mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, a teacher, a friend, and a very noble lady. Velma Kuhlman had a long and fruitful life. She passed away peacefully with her two daughters at her side.

These are snippets from online obituaries. Doris was 105, Dolores 92, Barbara had just celebrated her 100th birthday, Virginia was 93, and Velma lived to be 101. It's not uncommon to read "a long and fruitful life" in an obituary, especially when the person has reached the 90's or the century mark. We almost equate a fruitful life with a long life. But today's epistle lesson is all about living a fruitful life every day, no matter how young or how old you are!

When Paul contrasts the "works of the flesh" and the "fruit of the Spirit," he is not talking about mortal bodies and immortal spirits. No, he is talking about two ways of living. Living "according to the flesh" means living a self-centered life and being concerned about justifying yourself by who you are and what you do. Living "according to the Spirit" means living a God-centered life and being concerned about God's ways and your neighbors.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned the people, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits." (Matthew 7:15-20)

Paul describes living the cross-shaped life in similar language, but from a positive perspective: “By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” (Galatians 5:22-25)

The fruit of the Spirit has been described as “the concrete ways in which love is expressed.” In Monday night’s Bible Study, my college friend said, “You can’t make fruit happen. It comes to us as a gift.” That’s Paul’s point when he lists the fruit of the Spirit in contrast to the works of the flesh. “The fruit of the Spirit” is not our works, what we do and who we are, but God’s gift through the Spirit. Let’s hope that long before somebody writes our obituary or comments at our casket, you and I can and will be known by our fruits.

Here's how Frederick Buechner describes what it means to follow Jesus, to live the cross-shaped life, and to bear the fruit of the Spirit: “Jesus says, ‘Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire,’ and Saint Paul is only echoing him when he writes to the Galatians, ‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.’ This then is the gospel that Jesus seems both to have proclaimed with his lips and lived with his life, not just preaching to the dispossessed of his day from a high pulpit, but coming down and acting it out by giving himself to them body and soul as if he actually enjoyed it, horrifying all Jericho by spending the night there not with the local rabbi, say, or some prominent Pharisee but with Zaccheus of all people, the crooked tax collector. When Simon the Pharisee laid into him for letting a streetwalker dry his feet with her hair, Jesus said, ‘I tell you her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.’ It is no wonder that from the very start of his ministry the forces of Jewish morality and of Roman law were both out to get him because to him the only morality that mattered was one that sprang from the forgiven heart like fruit from the well-watered tree, and the only law he acknowledged as ultimate was the law of love.”¹

Several people asked, “What does Paul mean when he writes, ‘There is no law against such things as [the fruit of the Spirit]?’” He means love has no limits, and there is no law that restricts or prescribes exactly how much love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control we are to show when we live a fruitful life. Throughout his letter to the Galatians, Paul has again and again proclaimed that in Christ we are freed from the constraints of the do’s and don’ts of rules and regulations. Just to be very clear – Paul never once says that God’s law is no longer useful and applicable to our lives. Of course, it is! Because God gave us his law to show us how to live as God’s people and how to bear fruit in the Spirit. But God never intended for the law to save us, and whenever we add rules and regulations, do’s and don’ts to faith in Jesus Christ and trust in God, we are far from living a fruitful life.

Of course, the challenge of living a fruitful life is that it’s a life characterized by God’s love in Jesus Christ rather than a life that is determined by following a list of rules and regulations. My friend and colleague, Frances Taylor Gench, professor at Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, puts it this way, “Paul indicates the contours of the Christian life with broad sweeping strokes: ‘Stand fast in freedom’ . . .

‘through love become slaves to one another’ . . . ‘walk by the Spirit.’ But the demands of freedom are not detailed there. The limits of love are not prescribed. Why? Because as free and trusted sons and daughters of God, we are to fill in the gaps. Because we are free in Christ, we are to discern the concrete shape that freedom and love are to take in the midst of our ever-changing cultural contexts and in the midst of the varied circumstances of our individual lives.”²

As I thought about which scripture passage to use as a companion to Paul’s words about the fruit of the Spirit, several came to mind. I selected the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple. Remember what the Pharisee prayed to God? “God, I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of my income.” But the tax collector hung his head, beat his breast, and cried out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:9-14) Nothing at all wrong with fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of your income according to the law – until you brag about those accomplishments and use your following the law to judge other people as less worthy.

Or think about Peter, who asked Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” After all, seven times is a gracious plenty and exceeds the letter of the law. But Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you seventy-seven times (or seventy times seven times).” (Matthew 18:21-22) There is no law against forgiveness. If you’re keeping track of how many times, just so you can finally take revenge at #8, #78, or #491, you’re not living a fruitful life.

Or how about the lawyer who tested Jesus by asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” and then agreed when Jesus said, “Love God with everything you are and your neighbor as yourself.” But then, wanting to justify himself (should we say, wanting to rationalize his existing behavior or to be given a list of do’s and don’ts so he wouldn’t have to worry about all the rest of those people), he asked, “And who is my neighbor?” That’s when Jesus told him the story about the Jewish man who was robbed and then cared for by the Samaritan. At the end of the story, Jesus asked the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” In other words, which of these three – the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan – was living a fruitful life? When the lawyer said, “The one who showed him mercy,” Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.” He might have added, “By your fruits you will be known.” (Luke 15:25-37)

And the list goes on and on . . . because that’s at the heart of the biblical story and the story of our human lives. We’d like to have lists of rules and regulations, do’s and don’ts for our lives of faith, because we think those demands would make life easier. But, inevitably, we use the rules and regulations to justify ourselves and to judge others.

Instead, we hear a gospel of freedom in Christ with the demands of freedom to become slaves to one another in love, to live by the Spirit, to walk by the Spirit, to be guided by the Spirit, to love God, and to love our neighbor.

In his Introduction to the Letter to the Galatians in *The Message*, Eugene Peterson beautifully describes the reason Paul wrote his letter and the continuing importance of Paul’s words to us as twenty-first Christians who are called to live

fruitful lives. Peterson writes, “When men and women get their hands on religion, one of the first things they often do is turn it into an instrument for controlling others, either putting or keeping them ‘in their place.’ The history of such religious manipulation and coercion is long and tedious. It is little wonder that people who have only known religion on such terms experience release or escape from it as freedom. The problem is that the freedom turns out to be short-lived. . . Paul of Tarsus was doing his diligent best to add yet another chapter to this dreary history when he was converted by Jesus to something radically and entirely different – a free life in God. Through Jesus, Paul learned that God was not an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways, but a personal Savior who set us free to live a free life. God did not coerce us from without, but set us free from within.”³

You gotta have love, joy, peace, patience, kindness
For this is the fruit of the Spirit.
You gotta have goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control
For this is the fruit of the Spirit.

Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, grower of spiritual fruit, let the fruit of the Spirit blossom, mature, and ripen in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these. Let us possess them! Since we belong to Christ, we have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Let us live by the Spirit. Let us walk by the Spirit. Let us live in, through, and for Christ Jesus, as he lives in, through, and for us and his whole church. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

NOTES

¹Frederick Buechner, from *The Faces of Jesus*, “Weekly Sermon Illustration: The Fruit of the Spirit: June 20, 2016,” at www.frederickbuechner.com.

²Frances Taylor Gench, “Galatians 5:1, 13-25,” in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, July 1992, 46/3, p. 295.

³Eugene Peterson, “Introduction to Galatians,” *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), p. 1825.