

## Love, Joy, Peace (Freedom Series)

Today we start to look at freedom in the way that Paul presents it in Galatians 5:22 and 23. We have talked about being slaves of sin, being in bondage to our old nature and to the selfishness that held us captive until we met Christ. We saw last week that the sinful nature was at war with the Spirit of Jesus, that they are in constant conflict with each other because they desire opposite things. If we break it down to make it as simple as possible, we could say that the old nature is focused on selfish desires and the life in the Spirit is focused on serving one another in love. We've seen those themes over and over again in our brief study of Galatians 5 and last week we looked in some detail at the fruit of the sinful nature. Today we want to start looking at the fruit of the Spirit and how that represents both serving one another in love and true Christian freedom.

So, imagine with me your wedding day -- whether you've been married or not, you can imagine it. If you're the groom and you're looking down the aisle at this woman walking arm in arm with her father down the aisle toward you, can I just interrupt your imagination and ask you what you're thinking? Are you thinking, "Thank you, Lord, for such a beautiful bride. She is going to make me so happy, is going to bring me so much joy. I'm so thrilled that You have brought her into my life and given her to be my wife. I'm so happy." Or, are you thinking, "Thank you, Lord, for trusting me with such a precious person. Thank you for allowing me to be the one who will lay down my life for her, who will cause her to shine, to excel in all she does, who will encourage her gifts and who will constantly bring blessing into her life, no matter the cost to me"? And ladies, as you are walking down the aisle, are you thinking about what this man will bring into your life or what you will contribute to his? Are you thinking of how you can help him to grow in Christ, to use the gifts God has given him, to become all that God wants him to be? Or are you thinking of how great he makes you feel when he looks out for your needs first? Are you dreaming of a marriage where you feel cherished, your opinions valued, your contributions appreciated, your person consistently validated and affirmed?

What's natural for us? To think of what this will mean for me! I'm thinking, "She's mine!" and she's thinking, "He's mine!" and both are thinking of how wonderful it will be to have this person in our lives. That's the way it works for us, but it doesn't seem to be the way it worked for Jesus. He engaged Himself to us so that He could create a work of great beauty in our lives, a work of transformation that would prepare us for an eternal life of great richness and blessing and meaning. When He looks down the aisle and sees His bride, the church, coming towards Him, He will know that He has invested Himself fully in making her -- in making us -- as beautiful and as prepared as we could possibly be.

I'm using this example to say, in another way, how hard it is for us to live the Spirit-directed life. It's not natural to think of others before we think of ourselves. It's not natural to sacrifice for the good of another person. And yet, you Christians do this unnatural thing every day of your lives. You do it because you are being changed by

the presence of the Holy Spirit within you. You do it because He is making you like Jesus and Jesus is always aware of, and responding to, the needs of others. The compassion that comes from within you is not the fruit of the old nature, but is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

So today we are turning to Galatians 5:22 and the first three out of nine fruits, or results, evidences, of the Spirit's work in our lives. Paul writes:

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace.*

Love is the starting place for all discussion of Christian life and practice, our worldview, our moral stance. We love, John tells us, because He first loved us. We are oriented towards love because Jesus forgave all our sin and offered us new life. We believe in His love for us because He sacrificed His life on the cross, making the payment, the restitution for our sin through His own blood. We love in response to His love and in obedience to His command, the command He gave His closest followers on the night before His death: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

These simple facts have changed our lives forever. But they must continue to change us if we are going to live in freedom. All of those facts were true of the Galatians as well, and they were mired in immorality, in angry disputes, in hateful conversations and divisive factions. They had begun their new life, and then had turned away from the source of that new life and gone back to their old ways, to the patterns of selfishness that caused all this relational havoc in their community.

How does this kind of thing happen? Once we're on the road to freedom and the Holy Spirit is living within us and we're experiencing His power at work, changing us from the inside out -- why doesn't that just keep going? How could we possibly find ourselves in a nasty situation like the Galatians were in if the Spirit continues to be present with us? Because, in true freedom, we never have to choose what is good. The good thing is never automatic, never compulsory, even though the Spirit will often show us the benefits of choosing the good. We can still decide to resist the Spirit and do something stupid, destructive, or unloving. We are free to choose badly or to choose well, to build up or tear down. That's why the New Testament contains specific instructions about how we are to relate to the Holy Spirit:

*Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God* Paul writes in Eph. 4:30, and in 1 Thess. 5:19 he says,

*Do not put out the Spirit's fire.*

Paul is telling us that we have the option of resisting and quenching the work of God's Spirit within us -- and he urges us not to do that. But this is the freedom that we now have in Christ. Before, we could not be led by the Spirit of God because He didn't live within us, but, through faith, the Spirit does live in us and we have the freedom to follow His leading or to tune Him out. The problem with tuning Him out is that we lose touch with the very source of our life, our joy and our freedom. We quickly and easily can fall back into the bondage we came out of.

But here's this opportunity, this new life that is ours through Jesus, and we can

nurture it or shut it down.

*The fruit of the Spirit is love*

How do you nurture love and how can you shut it down? One of the obvious ways to resist the call to love is by taking offense. We're a pretty primitive culture when it comes to how easily we take offense. We have laws and media pressure and political correctness, all working to keep the possibility of offense away from us, and, still, some will take offense at the smallest perceived slight.

Even more damaging is the unwillingness or the inability to forgive those who have harmed us in some way. The Master stressed to His disciples the importance of being quick to forgive, making it clear that unwillingness to forgive others would come back to bite us, as the Lord would refuse to forgive us.

Another aspect of the relational crisis within the Christian family is the things people will argue over, as if there was one right answer and it should be clear to everyone. People will argue about whether or not Jesus' return will occur before or after the time of tribulation, a time of great suffering on the earth. Why? Because, just as it was in Paul's day, some are more concerned with issues than they are with relationships, with people.

But the central calls of the Christian life are to love God and to love people. God's approach to the human race was to come to us in love and that's how He expects us to confront the world around us. We will have a greater and more lasting impact on our culture if we demonstrate sacrificial love than if we convince someone that Calvinism was somehow superior to Arminianism -- and if you don't know the difference, you can still be a child of God.

So, given that this has, historically, been a difficult area for the church to succeed in, and given that this is at the core of our calling as children of God, how do we experience this fruit of the Spirit? How should we expect to see the fruit of love coming out of our lives?

1. We will see it in a change of attitude towards people who aren't doing well. We live in a world of judges, where it seems that so many feel they have a right, a responsibility even, to judge others. But the Spirit's presence within us makes us humbler, more aware of our own weakness, more able to sympathize with the weaknesses of others and, therefore, more willing and more able to help them bear the burdens they carry. In other words, gifts like compassion and mercy will grow to replace the old habits of criticism and judgment. It's not that you don't care that they are bungling life big-time, but that you no longer feel superior, no longer feel above their situation, and you become willing to shoulder a bit of their load. This clear command to love people results in us being 'with' them, close enough to feel their pain and close enough to be of some help.
2. The second thing we'll see is that we'll be more careful in offering our opinions, whether it's our opinions about people, about issues, about decisions. We won't just talk so that we can hear our own voice, but we'll talk with the purpose of bringing

consensus, encouragement, unity, to the group of people who are in discussion with us. Immaturity is usually pretty much selfishness, whereas growing in love means growing in the ability to work for a greater purpose, for God's glory, for the good of every person involved. Immaturity grabs the microphone and tries to get everyone to line up behind them, while love means handing the mike to each person, listening well and looking for ways to build unity.

3. The third thing I'm going to mention here is that as love grows in us, we look for ways to serve, we volunteer our time, we use our training or our abilities to help people who have a need in an area where we can be helpful. This group, Silver Valley, you're good at this. When there is a move, there are volunteers to help. When there's a health need, there are people who make meals or who clean the house or who drive people to doctor's appointments. When someone needs a car repair and can't afford it right now, Wayne will find a way to get the car up and running without it costing too much. It just goes on and on and it doesn't happen because you signed an "obligation to serve" form when you started coming, but because the Spirit of Jesus is in you and He is teaching you to love one another, to serve one another in love.
4. Another way in which you will see this fruit of the Spirit is in your attitude to the people you worship with week by week. You will see them soaring and floundering, and you won't envy them or judge them. You will simply care more and more about them and when the phone call comes for the prayer chain, you'll give some serious minutes to seeking the Lord on behalf of that person's need. Your level of care increases as you draw closer to the people you fellowship with because the Spirit of Jesus is drawing your heart closer to them.

The second item on our list today is the word "joy".

*The fruit of the Spirit is joy.*

I don't think we understand this word "joy" very well. We are likely to see it as some kind of "intense pleasure", a burst of emotion that is richer and deeper than most ordinary experiences. But joy is actually quite closely related to love and we see it in Jesus' teaching in John 15:

*As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now, remain in My love. If you obey My commands, you will remain in My love, just as I have obeyed My Father's commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*

Jesus found joy from being obedient to His Father, from doing all that the Father asked of Him. In the context of receiving the Father's approval, of remaining in His love, He experienced joy. Jesus' hope for His disciples was that they would obey His command to love one another and that, in doing so, their joy would be complete. Joy seems to come from a sense of being in the right place, the place of God's choosing, of His calling in our lives. It is the fruit of God's goodness being made real in our awareness. As we appreciate Him, as we rest in His love and forgiveness, as we

submit our hearts to obeying His will by loving others, we are given this gift of great joy, the fullness of life, the great satisfaction of feeling like all is well, despite the troubles in the world around us.

Joy infects the person who has become aware of how great God's love is and how complete His offer of salvation is for all who believe. Listen to this quotation from the composer Joseph Haydn who wrote in the late 18th century:

*When I think upon God, my heart is so full of joy that the notes dance and leap, as it were, from my pen, and since God has given me a cheerful heart it will be pardoned me that I serve Him with a cheerful spirit."*

Joy can't be produced "on demand", by an act of the will or by some determined effort. Joy is the fruit of the Spirit and will be most commonly experienced when we are fully cooperating with the Spirit's ministry in our lives, when we sense His pleasure over us and when we see His love and grace at work in and through us.

Finally:

*The fruit of the Spirit is peace.*

You know what peace is when you don't have it, when you're stressed, when you're restless, when you're agitated or in an awkward situation. In those times you long for the sense that you don't have a thing to worry about, that, in the words of the philosopher Noel Escueta, "Everything's gonna be alright."

But the peace that is described here is deeper and more lasting than the kind of refuge that we often seek. This peace is a calmness in the face of tragedy, or death, of great loss, of the crumbling of all our sources of security. Peace is probably best illustrated rather than explained and I liked this story told by a former sportscaster named Red Barber about the passing of his own father. He's just described baptizing his father in the Anglican tradition (they call it Episcopalian in the States) and then writes this:

*The next day, to everyone's astonishment, the senior Barber raised his head and stuttered, "I want to see a preacher." Being in a Baptist home, they sent for a Baptist pastor who read Scripture and prayed. Afterwards the young minister took the old man's hand for a moment. William Lanier Barber looked him in the eye and with a steady voice said, "All my life I have loved God Almighty. That will have to be enough for me now."*

Red declared it was the most beautiful, complete confession of a man's faith he had ever witnessed.

Later that afternoon Mr. Barber said three things to his son. "Walter, I want you to have my watch; you are the only family member with any sense of time." Then he said, "Walter, I love you." His final admonition, "Walter, go on back to your job."

Peace is the assurance that all is well, that God is good and that He holds our lives, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health ... and that not even death will separate us from him. Peace is confidence in a God who loved us so much

that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. Peace is the end of striving to be a human doing and the sign that a real human being is present. Peace is a gift that comes to those who really and truly trust in their Lord.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy and peace. That means that when we cooperate with the Holy Spirit's agenda for our lives, we will see ever-greater measures of love and of joy and of peace. When we submit to His will for our lives, His greater purposes than the old ways of selfishness we once pursued, we find the freedom that produces great love, great joy and great peace.

Long ago the nations of Argentina and Chile were at constant war with each other, but eventually decided that there was nothing good coming of their conflict, so they made peace, not just between each other, but in submission to Christ. There is a statue in the Andes on the border between Chile and Argentina that's called *The Christ of the Andes* and the inscription below it reads:

*Sooner shall these mountains crumble into dust than the Argentines and Chileans break the peace sworn at the feet of Christ the Redeemer.*

At His feet, in His presence, by His Spirit, the fruit we experience is of otherworldly goodness: love, joy & peace.