

## **Fruit of the Spirit: Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-control**

I read a story this week about Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century reformer whose journey of faith has some amazing lessons for us, 500 years later. His father wanted him to be a lawyer and sent him to university, but young Martin was soon done with that idea, believing that law represented uncertainty. Luther wanted to know truth, to know God, to understand what it meant to love God and so he gravitated to tutors who trained him in philosophy and theology. On July 2, 1505, on his way back to the university from a trip home, he was nearly hit by a lightning strike and he cried out, "Help! Saint Anna, I will become a monk!" Despite the fury of his father, who saw his expensive education being wasted, Luther sold his books and entered a closed Augustinian Friary two weeks later.

As a monk, Luther struggled with intense feelings of guilt over so many things that he was frequently in confessional, asking for forgiveness for his thoughts, his desires, his deeds. His was a tortured soul and I can almost hear his confessors saying, "Alright, what is it now?" His obsession with finding certainty led him to a study of the Scripture and his study of the Scripture led him to denounce some of the practices of the Roman Catholic church, particularly the idea that people could gain spiritual favors from God by donating money to the rebuilding of St. Peter's in Rome. His writings on this topic got him in trouble with the pope and, eventually, got him excommunicated from the Roman church, which was the breakthrough event that started the Protestant Reformation.

Retelling the history of that time makes it sound like a boring series of events that had some theological outcome, but, in fact, his life was in frequent danger, he had to stand before powerful people and denounce their beliefs at risk of his life, and his denunciations of Rome set loose a series of rebellions, especially among the peasants, that cost many lives and which he had to vigorously oppose.

One day, feeling upset and depressed by his enemies, Luther noticed his infant son Martin nursing in his mother's arms and remarked, "Child, your enemies are the Pope, the Bishops, Duke George, Ferdinand and the devil. And there you are ... unconcerned." And as he spoke those words he realized that his own anxiety, his own deep fears of his enemies and what they might do to him, were unwarranted; God had promised to protect him.

Dale Carnegie wrote about an interview he had had with Henry Ford when the founder of the Ford Motor Company was 78 years old. He had expected to find a gaunt, nervous old man. When asked if he worried, Ford replied, "No. I believe God is managing affairs and He doesn't need any advice from me. With God in charge, I believe that everything will work out for the best in the end. So, what is there to worry about?"

That's faith, that's a confidence in God, a willingness to trust Him with all that's uncertain. The same Greek word, *pistis*, is translated by the word "faith" and by the

word “faithfulness”, depending on the context. So, what is the connection between faith and the faithfulness that is also one of the fruits of the Spirit?

First, faith is never seen in Scripture as some abstract mental activity, something a person thinks about but doesn't do anything about. Faith is something you put your trust in, something you willingly lean on for support, a belief that expresses itself in action. It's no good to say that I believe that this music stand would make a good stool for me to sit on unless I'm willing to sit on it -- and find out that my faith was not well-founded. It's no good to say that I believe a plague of locusts is arriving tomorrow unless I put some kind of covering over the plants in my garden. And it's no good to say I believe that Jesus saves me from my sin if I keep trying to save myself, to prove myself righteous before God.

Second, the Hebrew word that we translate “faith” doesn't actually have an equivalent word in English. The closest to its meaning are words like “strengthen”, “support” or “hold up”. In the physical world it is used to describe pillars that provide support for doors and in the spiritual world it is used to describe God's eternally firm support of His people.

Think about the front door of your house hanging from one bent hinge, never closing properly, swaying about in the breeze. Then think about the pillars to which the massive doors that led into the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem were firmly hinged. The former is a picture of the general reliability of people who are not anchored in truth, not submitted to God and His commands. The latter is a picture of those who are firmly fixed, in their minds and in their actions, to the promises of God, and to the trustworthiness of His character.

With that as the outline, let's look at what faithfulness means for us -- what can we do that demonstrates this fruit of the Spirit in our daily lives? Abraham is held up as an example of a man of faith in various parts of the New Testament, notably in Paul's letters to Rome and Galatia and in the letter to the Hebrews and the letter of James. He showed his faith by acting on whatever God told him to do. Get up, Abram, and go to a strange land that I will show you when you get there. And Abram got up, packed up, and moved to the land of Canaan. When God told him that his wife Sarah would have a son, he believed. When God told him to sacrifice that son, Abraham obeyed right up until the point where God interrupted him and spared Isaac. What these events show us is that faithfulness is faith in action, that it can be described with words like steadfastness and obedience, and constancy. It is a fruit produced by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and, like the pillars that support the doors of the temple, it makes our lives solid and secure, immovable, an anchor for others.

It means that we keep our promises, especially the vows we make in marriage. It has become too easy to say that marriage is hard and requires too much of us. I read enough of the “ball-and-chain” rhetoric on the internet to know that this is the way much of the world looks at marriage today. But God designed marriage and He designed it to kill the selfishness in us, as the primary training ground for learning

how to love as He first loved us, and if we resist His purposes we are resisting His Spirit's work in us.

Faithfulness means that we are loyal to our friends, that we work at protecting our families from the strategies of Satan, even if that work is simply consistent prayer. It means that we stand by people who make big mistakes and that we offer our strength to our friends, our family, our church body, when others are weak.

A modern-day Abraham would be respected as a person who kept his word, as a person who obeyed God, as a person who lived to a higher standard than the world around him. That's faithfulness, the fruit of the Spirit.

The next fruit that we look at today is "gentleness". Picture a judge sitting behind her bench, gavel in hand, ready to pronounce the verdict. There is guilt and responsibility in the case, and these things demand a penalty be paid. But there are also circumstances that indicate that mercy might be the more appropriate response and the thought that a merciful response will, in fact, produce a greater good. The judge decides in favor of mercy, believing that the strict application of the law would crush the guilty person and do nothing to save him. This is the verdict of Christ Jesus in our lives, and it is the appropriate picture for the word "gentleness" that Paul uses here. The model is the gentleness of Jesus who, though He could apply all the penalties of the law, chooses to treat us with mercy.

I have a question for you. How many of you believe that when someone who is working at the Post Office sees the label "Fragile" on a parcel, they immediately slow down their pace, gently pick up the parcel and carry it to the place it next needs to go? Why would we need bubble wrap and all the foam chips we endure these days if everyone who saw the word "fragile" would treat the package with the extra care that it requires? But, someone is making the assumption that the person has packaged the item very carefully and so it can be handled roughly .... or, they are assuming that whatever is wrapped up in that package is not nearly so important as their personal convenience or the speed at which they do their job.

Now, we don't wear labels on our foreheads, and it's pretty obvious it wouldn't do any good if we had "fragile" plastered on our faces, but that's how we're made. We are fragile physically, emotionally, spiritually, mentally ... in every way we can imagine we have vulnerabilities, weaknesses, that we try to hide from the world around us. We want to appear strong, want to seem invincible, but we're not. I'll bet every one, or almost everyone in this room can remember some mean thing that another kid said to us when we were in school, or that one of our parents said to us -- something that isn't particularly important on its own, but is important to us because it hurt us. Why else would we remember it?

So, don't ever call your child stupid or overreact to mistakes he might have made or panic on the inside because she isn't maturing as quickly as you would like. If your children embarrass you and you try to compensate for something they've said or done

in a public way, you'll hurt them. Even if your response is to make a joke about it and get people to laugh with you instead of at you, it could be hurtful to that child. There may be times when you need to confront some behaviors, but do it privately, not in anger, but in love, with a concern for his character, her future, their openness to you and to God. This gentleness of the parent, which forgives, which over-looks a child's errors when it just seems like laying down the law one more time is getting you nowhere -- this gentleness is also the way we are to relate to one another, with our brothers and sisters in the family of God.

When the Greeks developed a word they not only gave it a careful definition, but they usually illustrated it. The word "gentleness" was best illustrated by an animal that had been wild and now had been tamed by its owner. A tamed horse, for example, has yielded or submitted its strength to other purposes than running around in the wild. Therefore, gentleness is power under control, or submitted strength.

When it comes to the church, the strength could be the strength of the law, of doing the right thing, of making sure that everyone else is doing the right thing. But we must be careful not to abuse that power, not to hammer home our corrections of everyone else's mistakes. There are two reasons for this:

1. We don't want to listen to people tell us what they think we've been doing wrong or to constantly call us to their "correct" position on an issue, and
2. That's not the way Jesus related to us. He came to us with all the power of righteousness, the perfect life, on His side and all the rebellion and failure on our side and He showed mercy. We are imitators of Jesus; He's our example and we follow that example. So we deal with problems in a gentle way, in a way that prefers mercy to justice.

Timothy was a young man leading a very large church, maybe as many as 40 thousand people or more. Paul instructed him on how to deal with people who opposed him, who maybe looked down on him, who didn't think he had the maturity to lead this big church. And Paul wrote in his second letter to Timothy:

*The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him, he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth. (2:24,25)*

Gentleness doesn't mean weakness -- remember the idea of strength under control - but it does mean choosing the path that promotes peace, promotes spiritual growth, promotes loving community and exalts Jesus.

Finally, the wonderful fruit of self-control. This can be a bit tricky to understand because the Greeks had a concept of self-control which the New Testament rejects. Here is an excerpt from Paul's teaching to Timothy (1 Tim. 4:1-3):

*The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.*

*They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.*

Self-control is not, therefore, running away from anything that someone else says has the potential to lead us away from Christ. In Paul's day, people said such things about marriage and about eating certain foods and, even today, folks will promote a whole range of restrictions that they have found helpful in their own lives and which they then become evangelistic about -- this diet is for everybody!!

That's not the kind of self-control that Paul is writing about in his letter to the Galatians. Here there is a possible, even likely, parallel with the final two items on the list of vices from verse 21 -- drunkenness and orgies. The word self-control is often connected with the word for temperance and is used in contexts which oppose drunkenness, but it has broader meanings as well.

In 1 Timothy 3 it is used of our speech, and the contrast is made between malicious talk and both self-control and trustworthiness. At the beginning of Titus 2 older men are encouraged to be temperate (avoiding extremes, with particular reference to alcohol), worthy of respect, self-controlled and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. These passages indicate that the idea of self-control is a pretty wide one, pretty inclusive of areas where we might easily lose it.

Patti's reading a book right now called *Weird*. It's written by a pastor whose point is that "being normal" is just fitting in with the world. His book encourages us to get beyond normal, to be willing to be different, weird, and in the process he tells funny stories about himself. He starts chapter one with a story of trying to find a parking space at the mall just before Christmas, how God answered his selfish prayer that he would find a spot before someone else did and how, as he waited for a truck to pull out of the spot, a little red sports care dashed into it before he could. Has that ever happened to you? What was your immediate reaction? His wasn't good. He stepped on the gas and while his wife screamed at him to stop and his kids prayed in the back seat, he slammed on the brakes, screeched to a halt right behind the red sports car and yelled at the man for taking "his" spot. 20 minutes later he found a spot, the family went sullenly into the mall, the Christmas spirit totally ruined, and who should they meet in the J.C. Penney store but the driver of the red sports car. The man walked up to him and said, "I know you're in a big hurry, but it seems there's more going on in your life right now," and proceeded to tell him he could find help ... in Jesus.

There are situations which push us really hard, where it's really easy for us to lose self-control. Maybe it's with our children, maybe it's around the house, maybe it's on the golf course where that little round ball takes us way out of our way for no good reason. The point is that self-control is an absolutely necessary thing for us to get along in the world. If we can't hold back our anger, our impatience, or our frustration and refuse to let them spill all over the important people in our lives, we're going to be

in trouble.

What do we need to do about it? Do we need to get a grip and start acting with more restraint? Do we need to take an anger management class so we can manage our feelings better? Where do we go to learn this art form called self-control that seems so difficult for us?

First things first: it's not us that produces the fruit of love, joy and peace, not us that finds the key to living with patience, gentleness and self-control. The reason it's called the fruit of the Spirit is because it is the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of Dave King's latest self-improvement project or your New Year's resolution. We so often seem to start in the wrong place with these things. The place to start is with humility before God, with asking Him for a greater work of His Spirit within our lives and then let Him lead from there -- but that's next week's topic and we'll leave it until then.