

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE IMPRINT OF GOD'S SPIRIT

Galatians 5:16-25

Pastor Chris is a terrific storyteller, isn't he? Whether you're a kid, or a kid at heart, I imagine you look forward to his storytelling each Sunday. He has a gift for it. And I'm glad he uses that gift to bless us and to glorify God.

I want to begin with a story today. It comes from my favorite book of children's fables by Arnold Lobel. Some of you have heard this story before. It is a story about a hen and an apple tree. The story goes like this: One fall day, a hen looked out the window of her little house and saw an apple tree growing in her backyard. "That's strange," the hen said. "I'm sure there was no tree standing in that spot yesterday."

"There are some of us that grow fast," said the tree.

The hen looked at the bottom of the tree and said: "I've never seen a tree that has ten furry toes."

"There are some of us that do," said the tree. "Hen, come outside and enjoy the cool shade of my leafy branches."

The hen looked up at the top of the tree and said: "I've never seen a tree that has two long, pointed ears."

"There are some of us that do," said the tree. "Hen, come outside and eat one of my delicious apples."

"Come to think of it," said the hen, "I've never heard a tree speak from a mouth that is full of sharp teeth."

"There are some of us that can," said the tree. "Hen, come outside and rest your back against the bark of my trunk."

"I've heard," said the hen, "that some of you trees lose all your leaves at this time of the year." (As I said, it was in the fall.)

"Oh yes," said the tree. "There are some of us that will." Then the tree began to shake, and all of its leaves quickly dropped off.

The hen was not surprised to see a large wolf where an apple tree had been standing just a moment before. She locked her shutters and slammed her windows closed. The wolf, knowing he had been outsmarted, stormed away in a hungry rage.

The moral of the story, says Arnold Lobel, is that it is difficult to pretend to be something you are not. (Arnold Lobel, *Fables*, 10-11.)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says we should be on the lookout for pretenders who come to us in sheep's clothing but on the inside, beneath their clothes and masks, are as dangerous and ferocious as wolves. He laid down this principle in Matthew 7:16 and 20: "By their fruit you will know them." You will recognize their true character, their true colors, their true identity by the fruit they produce in their lives.

There is another story, not from the book of *Fables*, about a boy who, after being sent to his room for bad behavior, would sneak out of the house by climbing down an old fruit tree located right outside his bedroom window.

One day his father announced that he was going to cut down the tree, since it hadn't produced any fruit in years. In a last-ditch effort to save the tree (and his means of escape from the house), this boy and his brothers went out and bought a basket of apples. After dark they climbed up into the tree and tied the apples to its branches. Then they waited.

When he saw the tree the next morning, the father called to his wife: "Mary," he said, "I can't believe my eyes! You've got to see this! That old tree that has been barren for years is covered with apples! It's a miracle ... especially since it's a pear tree!"

A pear tree doesn't grow apples. It is difficult to pretend to be something you are not. A tree cannot hide its true identity for long. Nor can a wolf. And neither can we.

What we appear to be on the outside doesn't always reflect what we are on the inside. It is possible to disguise ourselves, to pretend to be something we're not, and fool some people in the process. But sooner or later the real fruit of our lives, of your life and mine, will be seen for what it is. Sooner or later the real substance of your character will be revealed. As Jesus said, by the fruit of your life you will be known. And *we* will be known by the fruit of our life together as a church, as a family and fellowship of Christ's followers.

Paul uses the word *karpos*, the word for "fruit," in a metaphorical way here in Galatians 5. He is not talking about apples or oranges or pears or peaches. He is talking about evidences or qualities of grace to be exhibited in our lives. Healthy, abundant spiritual fruit is a vital sign of a healthy and vibrant Christian life. It is a sign that the grace of God, which teaches us to say "No" to anything that would dishonor the name of Jesus and grieve His heart, and to say "Yes" to what pleases Him, has taken hold in our hearts.

In this passage we see the stark contrast between what Paul calls "the works of the flesh" (meaning actions and attitudes that flow from our fallen, sinful nature) and "the fruit of the Spirit" (these evidences of God's grace in our lives).

The acts of the flesh, which Paul says are obvious (verse 19), include such things as:

- Sexual immorality: The word here is *porneia*, which refers specifically to sexual intimacy outside of marriage, but is used more broadly to cover all forms of sexual

immorality. *Porneia* is the root from which we get the word “pornography,” which is a rampant, virulent form of sexual immorality in our culture.

- Impurity and debauchery (or sensuality), two more words that relate to sin in the realm of sex.
- Idolatry: The word is *eidololatria*, which sounds like our English word and means “the worship of idols (or false gods).” Like sexual immorality, it was not just a 1st century problem. It is a perennial problem. Our idols in the 21st century may be more sophisticated, but they are just as real. Paul uses this same word in 1 Corinthians 10:14, where he says: “Therefore, my friends, flee from idolatry.” And again, in Colossians 3:5, where he says: “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality (*porneia*), impurity (same as above), lust, evil desires, and greed, which is idolatry (*eidololatria*).” Greed – the desire for more – is a form of idolatry, if it is a (or *the*) controlling passion of your life.
- Witchcraft: The word is *pharmakeia*, but is not to be confused with the modern-day field of pharmacy. In the ancient world, *pharmakeia* had to do with dabbling in the occult, which is something you should never do as a follower of the Lord Jesus.
- Hatred, discord, and envy.
- Fits of rage: Paul uses the same word (*thumoi*) in Ephesians 4:31, where he says: “Get rid of all bitterness, *rage*, and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.” Again, in Colossians 3:8: “You must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, *rage*, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.” None of these is consistent with life in fellowship with the Holy Spirit.
- Selfish ambition: The word Paul uses is *eritheiai*, which is similar to the word for discord or contentiousness (*eris*) used earlier, suggesting an ungodly motive for creating or fueling strife.
- Which leads to dissensions (divisiveness) and factions (the word is actually *haireseis*, from which comes the word “heresies.”) Heresies, of course, are false teachings that cause and promote divisiveness and factions in the body of Christ.
- Envy, drunkenness, revelries (or riotous behavior), and the like.

When Paul says: “(A)nd the like,” he makes it clear that the list he has just given us is not meant to be complete and exhaustive. There are other behaviors and qualities we could add that, like these, are unalterably opposed to life in the kingdom of God. And when he says: “(T)hose who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God,” he does not mean there is no hope for you if you have ever committed one of these sins. He is referring to people who persist in a self-centered lifestyle of rebellion against God and His gracious rule, not to people who sincerely trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, but who fall short of His glory in the conduct of our daily life. As long as you insist on living life your

own way and persist in these “acts of the flesh,” you disqualify yourself from life in the kingdom of God. But if you repent of your sins, if you renounce and repudiate the acts of our sinful nature, if you trust in the Lord Jesus and His grace for salvation and life, and seek to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in your life, you can be sure that there is – and will always be – a place for you in the kingdom of God.

In verses 22 and 23, Paul turns to the fruit of the Spirit, where he says: “But the fruit (*karpos* – singular) of the Spirit is (again, singular) love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” This list, like Paul’s list of the acts of the flesh, is not meant to be complete. Representative, yes; exhaustive, no. We could add other “graces,” like compassion, contentment, humility, forgiveness, and submission to one another out of reverence for Christ. But the list in Galatians 5 is a good place to start. Let me encourage you to memorize this list and bring it to mind often.

A young girl who was learning about the fruit of the Spirit recited this list to her mother. She said: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and remote control.” She almost got it. Remote control is a pretty neat thing. Some of us remember when remote control meant having someone else get up and go to the TV to change the channel. As much as the TV remote has changed our lives, though, it is not a fruit of the Spirit. 😊

What Paul is saying is this: When the Holy Spirit lives in us – which is our birthright as believers; when we are in Christ, walking with Him by faith and growing in His grace; then these character traits should increasingly be the distinguishing marks of our lives:

- Love for God and others
- Joy (MSG: “exuberance about life”)
- Peace with God, with others, with our circumstances and ourselves
- Patience or forbearance (MSG: “A willingness to stick with things and people”)
- Kindness (MSG: “A sense of compassion in the heart”)
- Goodness that is expressed in generosity
- Faithfulness to God and to our commitments in life
- Gentleness (MSG: “Not needing to force our way in life”)
- Self-control (MSG: “The ability to marshal and direct our energies wisely”)

(MSG: Taken from Galatians 5:22-23, *The Message*.)

These are not, in every instance, the virtues or qualities people aspire to cultivate today, though we may give lip-service to at least some of them. If you want to get ahead in the world, if you’re out to make a name for yourself, if the pursuit of pleasure or power or the accumulation of possessions is the primary passion of your life, you won’t give the fruit of the Spirit more than a momentary glance. If that.

But ... if you want to please God – as I hope you do; if it is your desire to keep in step with the Spirit (verse 25) and not the latest rhythm of the world; if you want to be a winsome, effective witness to the Lord Jesus in the world (including the world of COVID); if you want

to contribute to a healthy, vibrant, growing, grace-filled church family, then you will want to allow the Lord Jesus to cultivate His character in you.

Which is what the fruit of the Spirit really is: It is a description of the character of Jesus Himself, a character reproduced in us by the Holy Spirit as we live under the gracious and sovereign rule of God. It is the character of Jesus revealed in the relationships and responsibilities of life.

Someone (Robert Roberts) has said that to bear the fruit of the Spirit is to bear in our own persons (and, I would add, in our life together as a church) “the imprint of the Spirit of God.”

When a football team hires a new coach or brings in a star quarterback, they expect the new coach or QB (or both) to put their imprint on the team and lead the team to new heights of success. For better or worse, every President, every Cabinet head, every Governor, every political office holder, whether local, state, or national, puts their imprint on the office they hold.

To exhibit the fruit of the Spirit is to make manifest the imprint of God’s Spirit in our lives. The fruit of the Spirit gives evidence that we belong to Jesus. It reflects the character of Jesus in our attitudes and actions, in our conduct and conversation. To bear the fruit of the Spirit is to be like Jesus.

What matters most to God is not what you do or don’t do. Don’t misunderstand: What you do *is* important. But there is much, much more to the Christian life than a list of do’s and don’ts. And there is more to it than just believing the right things. Yes, God is deeply concerned about what we believe. He cares passionately about the truth. His Word *is* truth. He wants us to hold firmly to the doctrinal essentials of the faith and to make no room, no allowances, for heresies that would dilute the truth of the gospel or lead us astray.

Dead orthodoxy, though – right belief without a living relationship with God – will never get anyone to heaven. Just “believing in God” doesn’t make you a Christian. The Bible reminds us that even demons believe in God (James 2:19), but what good does it do?

What matters most to God is not how you look or how much you have or how well you speak or perform. Our culture tends to elevate style over substance. That is intuitively obvious, isn’t it? We judge people based on their appearance (including the color of their skin) or how smoothly they talk, on their gifts and abilities, rather than by looking at the content of their character.

We focus on image, not integrity. Charisma, not character. Trendiness, not truth. This is just one of a multitude of problems we face today.

But more than all these things, God cares about what you are – what *we* are – on the inside. What matters to God is His signature on your heart and His fruit in your life. The fruit of a Christlike character authenticates your claim to be a follower of Jesus. It is the kind of fruit God loves.

What is your favorite kind of fruit? I love, among other things, honey crisp apples. Most of the time I can't afford them, but they are my favorite. Cara cara oranges are another favorite of mine. So are green grapes. You may have more exotic favorites. God's favorite kind of fruit is the fruit of godly living that comes from a changed heart. It is the fruit of God's grace in a person's life, the fruit that comes from being in a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus. It is the fruit of a Christlike character woven into the fabric of our lives and relationships.

When our lives and relationships show forth the character of Jesus; when our sisters and brothers in Christ, our family members, friends, neighbors, classmates, teammates, and co-workers can see the imprint of God's Spirit in our lives; it brings joy to the heart of God and a smile to His face.

How does the fruit of the Spirit grow in the garden of your life and mine?

The first thing to recognize is that it takes time. Unlike the apples that appeared suddenly and miraculously on that pear tree, the fruit of the Spirit doesn't grow overnight. Or automatically. It takes time. By God's grace, the fruit of the Spirit will grow bit by bit as the Holy Spirit works gradually in your life.

It takes obedience, too. It takes obedience to God and a heart yielded to the Holy Spirit. Someone (Terry Fullam) put it this way: "The fruit of the Spirit grows only in the garden of obedience." If you want to bear the imprint of God's Spirit, you must learn and practice obedience in both the big things and the little things of life.

It takes being connected to Jesus, like branches connected to a vine. Listen to Jesus in John 15: "In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me" (John 15:4, MSG). Apart from Jesus, we can't produce anything good. But if we are connected to Him, if we remain in Him and He in us, we will bear much spiritual fruit and bring glory to God the Father (John 15:5,8).

It also takes being connected and staying connected, whenever possible, to the fellowship of believers, to one another, in loving relationships where the fruit of a Christlike character can be modeled, encouraged, and developed. Do not minimize the importance of being connected to one another in the body of Christ.

It takes devotion to God's Word. It takes being tuned in to the voice of God. The writer of Psalm 1 compares those who delight in God's Word and meditate on it continually, who not only hear God's Word but live by it, to a tree planted by a riverbank that bears fruit season after season without fail. It takes devotion to the Word of God. And there is no substitute for it.

It takes the power of God's Spirit at work in us, because you and I cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit by ourselves. It is the Holy Spirit who puts His imprint on us and makes us more like Jesus as we yield to His rule in our lives. It takes the power of the Holy Spirit, which is

always available to you and me. And it takes our resolve to keep in step with the Spirit and to follow where He leads.

Starting next Sunday, we'll look together at the kinds of fruit God wants us to produce as He puts the imprint of His Spirit on us. We'll do it in reverse order, beginning with self-control and working our way back to love, which is the supreme fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and remote control (I mean, *self-control*) – is a sign of a healthy Christian life. And a healthy church, too. We can always use more of the fruit of the Spirit in our church.

May it abound in us, to the glory and praise and pleasure of God. Lord, let it be so. Amen.