
FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

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COLOSSIANS 1:28-29

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the New Testament we find a marvelous and wondrous juxtaposition between our *once-for-all-time* forgiveness/acceptance by the Lord **and** our *little-here-little-there* growth in the Lord. Regardless of what progress we make or do not make in our journey with Jesus, we are (already) “sealed in Him” and given the pledge of our full inheritance by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13); yet we are encouraged to “walk in a manner worthy” of our calling (v. 4:1), and to “be strong in the Lord” (v. 6:10). Though we have already been granted the distinction of being “called children of God” (1 John 3:1), our spiritual life is supposed to progress from childhood to maturity (see 1 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 3:12-14; Hebrews 5:12-14).

Our “citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20), so we are “strangers and exiles on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13), and even though we are new creations in Christ—the old things having passed away, and new things having come (2 Corinthians 5:17)—we are (still) reminded to “put on the new self who is being renewed” (Colossians 3:10). Changed and changing, born again and growing. Peter says it best: “...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Peter 2:2), and “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

So what does it mean to “grow in the Lord,” to develop into a “strong, mature believer”? Are there benchmarks along the way, spiritual milestones we can use to mark our progress? In our own lives and in the lives of the people we’re discipling, what should we look for and aim at? After all, parents of very young children wait the day(s) when their youngster is potty-trained and able to tie his or her own shoes. Parents of teenagers look for a child’s sense of responsibility to outpace the inclination to foolishness; and, ultimately, we who parent look for evidence that our children have learned more than just what we have taught them.

In church circles it can too often be the case that people’s spiritual maturity/strength is thought of merely in terms of how many years they have “walked with Jesus,” how often they nod (or say, “Amen”) when a preacher says something they already learned years ago, or how regularly and frequently they attend church services. As people who want to move toward spiritual maturity, what direction should we head?

BACKDROP FOR SPIRITUAL MATURITY

All of us begin as sinners, having fallen way short of what we were meant to do/be as beings fashioned in the image of God, and we have been ransomed out of our guilty-and-condemned-to-die status by the free gift/grace of God (Romans 3:23-24; 6:23).

Because we have not done and could not do anything to bail ourselves out of that condemned condition, we do not have—nor will we ever have—reason to boast in our accomplishments (Ephesians 2:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31). Any celebration we might make about ourselves should only be in terms of what we’ve come to know about the Lord’s delight in exercising kindness, rendering faultless judgment and (re) making things as they should be (Jeremiah 9:23-25).

Once we are created beings (as opposed to evolved-by-happenstance), fashioned in God’s image, yet marvelously distinct from His other children, our ultimate calling is to become more like Him and more true to our (real) selves (Psalm 139:13-16; Ephesians 2:10). We are also ministry-gifts that Jesus has given to His church, so we’re told to “fulfill” our ministry (Ephesians 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 4:5), learning how to function better and better in our unique role in His Body.

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT (GALATIANS 5:22-23)

1. LOVING not self-centered (John 13:35; 15:13; Galatians 5:13-14; 1 Peter 4:8).

2. JOYFUL not moody (Romans 14:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:6).
3. PEACEFUL not agitated (John 16:33; Romans 15:13; Philippians 4:6-7).
4. PATIENT not anxious (2 Timothy 2:24; James 5:7-8).
5. KIND not cantankerous (Ephesians 4:31-32; 2 Timothy 2:23-26).
6. BENEFITING not disadvantaging OTHERS (Mark 3:4; Acts 10:38; Galatians 6:10).
7. STEADY in beliefs/convictions not double-minded (Ephesians 4:13-14; James 1:6-8).
8. GENTLE not harsh or brash (Galatians 6:1; Colossians 3:12; James 3:13).
9. SELF-CONTROLLED not lawless (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Timothy 3:1-4).

When we speak about “*growing* in the Lord” and “*maturing* in our walk with Jesus,” we are acknowledging the wonderful possibility of being so changed in our thought-patterns, behavior, attitudes and perspectives—that we become more and more like the Lord. His ways (of living, doing and thinking) differ markedly from ours (Isaiah 55:6-8), and that makes it difficult for us to fit very well—much like a square peg trying to fit snugly in a round hole, a *metric* bolt trying to connect with a *non-metric* nut, or a hose with a bent nozzle trying to screw into a new hose. God’s desire for our growth isn’t just to “straighten us out” in angry, exasperated disgust. Rather, He’s so interested in flowing life into and through us to others that He wants our connection with Him, like that of two joined hoses, to be without any leaks.

So what does it mean to “grow in the Lord,” to develop into a “strong, mature believer”? Is it just a function of time passing? Can we accelerate or retard our growth? Should we eat more of the spiritual counterpart to vegetables? Does God grow us, or do we grow ourselves? That is the focus of our Bible study.

This well-known passage, contrasts the “fruits of the Spirit” with the “deeds of the flesh.” We’re told to “serve one another” in love, and to resist the impulses of the flesh by electing to “walk by the Spirit.” The implication is that the fruits of the Spirit ripen in our lives largely as a result of intentional choices we make about how to behave and think when confronted by the inevitable opportunities to think

mostly about ourselves—what’s convenient, self-satisfying, securing or advantageous to us.

There are, of course, many supplemental activities that do help produce spiritual fruit—like reading our Bible, praying, receiving teaching and counsel from more mature believers—but spiritual maturity comes mostly as a result of conscious decisions to steer our reactions on a godly, rather than a fleshly, course. The steering wheel pulls and jerks in our hands like when driving a car on a well-worn dirt road: the ruts and potholes try to reverse the proper process, exerting their strength up through the tires and steering mechanism to turn the wheel!

But here’s the promise: if we do our best to align our thoughts and behavior with the fruits of the Spirit, letting them be conscious reminders like “*always veer to the left*” or “*slow down in rainy weather*,” then our driving habits will get better and better. And by the way, God’s point is far grander than just teaching us how to drive according to the rules; He’s most interested in where we get to go and what we’ll get to see on cool, long road tours throughout our lives.

KEEPING IN MIND...AND CHOOSING TO BE.....

Joyful, not moody or worked-up:

*“For you will go out with **joy** and be led forth with peace; the mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of **joy** before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands”— Isaiah 55:12*

*“... for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and **joy** in the Holy Spirit.”—Romans 14:17*

*“Now may the God of hope fill you with all **joy** and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”—Romans 15:13*

Peaceful, not agitated or self-protected:

*“The steadfast of mind You will keep in perfect **peace**, because he trusts in You.”— Isaiah 26:3*

*“Peace I leave with you; My **peace** I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.” —John 14:27*

*“The God of **peace** will soon crush Satan under your feet.”—Romans 16:20*

*“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the **peace** of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”—Philippians 4:6-7*

JOHN 15:12-13

Many people mistakenly imagine that the Bible is just a collection of stories *and* a rulebook detailing all the stuff we’re not supposed to do—or else! They sincerely wonder why anyone would want to read such a Book more than once, and they puzzle over what anyone could get out of studying it. Besides, once you’re out of school, who wants to study...anything?

But the Bible has so much to say to us about our life. It offers amazingly simple (to understand) points of counsel and life-direction, and its pages are filled with understandings that explain people’s behaviors, our own stumbling and fears, and why choices we make have such huge consequences in our life. In many ways, it’s like physical therapy; its verses exercise mental, emotional and spiritual muscles that have atrophied from disuse or misuse. The more we read, and reflect on what we read, the more those words change our *inner* condition.

SOME VERSES ON LOVE

“This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.”—John 15:12-13

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”—John 3:16

“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”—Romans 8:32

“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”—John 13:35

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”—Romans 5:8

“By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”—1 John 4:9-10

“Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”—1 John 3:18

“Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.”—1 Peter 4:8

“And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet Jesus has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before God holy and blameless and beyond reproach...”—Colossians 1:21-22

PATIENT NOT ANXIOUS OR INTOLERANT

Most of us acknowledge the huge gap that exists (in virtually every area of our lives) between the glorious and incredible state/condition of being completely forgiven AND the state/condition of on-going guiltiness. Everywhere I look in my life, I see evidence of continued culpability. I am a sinner, constantly coming up short in my efforts to live as God wants me to live; yet, I am living in a constant state of *having been forgiven*, once-for-all-time. For sincere believers, the chasm separating our daily (sinful) life and our eternal (sinless) life is embarrassing.

That's one reason why I get so amused, in a pathetic sort of way, when others think they have made a big discovery in spotting something so sinister as shortcomings, failures and brokenness in my life. A sinner saved by grace—that would be me! While it is always a good idea to echo David's prayer when he asked the Lord to convict him of hidden sins (Psalm 19:12), and we should keep reminding ourselves of Jesus' words to get the 4x4 out of our own eye before we go after the speck of sawdust in another's, most of the time and in most of the cases, we are very aware of our own sinfulness.

If you're like me, you wonder if you are making any progress at all in your spiritual life. How do we know that we're growing and truly maturing in the Lord? How do we come out from under the curse of our High School Yearbook—and really change for the better? “By bearing fruits of the Spirit.”

BENEVOLENT IN INTENTION AND ACTION

*“You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about **doing good** and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.”—Acts 10:38*

*“And He said to them, “Is it lawful to **do good** or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save a life or to kill?” But they kept silent.”—Mark 3:4*

“Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise making the most of your time, because the days are evil.”—Ephesians 5:15-16

KIND AND HELPFUL REGARDLESS OF RESPONSE

*“Do not let **kindness** and truth leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.”— Proverbs 3:3*

*“What is desirable in a man is his **kindness**...”—Proverbs 19:22*

*“But love your enemies, and **do good**, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is **kind** to ungrateful and evil men.”—Luke 6:35*

*“The Lord is righteous in all His ways and **kind** in all His deeds.”—Psalms 145:17*

*“**Be kind** to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you”. —Ephesians 4:32*

*“The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but **be kind** to all, able to teach, patient when wronged...”—2 Timothy 2:24*

*“He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the **kind** intention of His will...”—Ephesians 1:5*

GALATIANS 5:22-23

The plans God has for us—“to give us a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11-14)—relate primarily to the quality of life we end up enjoying. While the world tells us that we must have fame or fortune or specific circumstances/commodities if we want to be fulfilled, God says the secret to abundant life can be found only in Him and in His way for life to be lived. One of the primary metaphors used in the Bible to explain the human condition is that of an exiled/captive nation that has been carried far off from its homeland, and made to serve as slaves to its oppressive taskmasters. Israel, the people of God were held captive by the Egyptians (and others) and, in this case, the Babylonians.

God said He would restore the fortunes of His people and gather them back to their rightful places of inheritance. The process always takes longer than the promise, but God works steadily, in your life and in mine, to recover our lives and bring us back to what He meant for us from the beginning. In the New Testament, that restoration process begins with *salvation* (when we invite Jesus to forgive our sins) and proceeds forward through what theologians call *sanctification*. That’s a big word that simply means “set apart or designated for special purpose.”

You and I have incredible destiny and purpose in God’s plans. Not only have we been entrusted with the message of life and forgiveness in Jesus—a message we’re privileged to share with the world around us—but we also get to experience ongoing personal transformation. Instead of staying stuck in our crummy attitudes and bad heart-conditions, we get to exchange (convert) the ways of our flesh with the ways of God’s Spirit. Our conscious choices to behave/walk in the Spirit, when we are sorely tempted to let our flesh call the shots, produce spiritual produce (fruit).

That’s what we’ve been studying in Galatians: the fruit of the Spirit. Here we examine GENTLENESS, another compelling fruit of God’s way, another incredible and profoundly notable quality that can become part of our lives simply by choosing it (instead of its fleshly opposite) again and again.

GENTLE IN HOW WE TREAT AND APPROACH OTHERS

*“You have also given me the shield of Your salvation, and Your right hand upholds me; and Your **gentleness** makes me great.”—Psalms 18:35*

*“Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am **gentle** and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”—Matthew 11:29*

*“Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold your King is coming to you, **gentle**, and mounted on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”—
Matthew 21:5*

*“Blessed are the **gentle**, for they shall inherit the earth.”—Matthew 5:5*

*“But we proved to be **gentle** among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children.”— 1 Thessalonians 2:7*

*“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, **gentle**, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.”—
James 3:17*

*“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of **gentleness**; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.”— Galatians 6:1*

*“...but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a **gentle** and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God.”—1 Peter 3:4*

Maturing in our walk with Jesus essentially means changing our thought-patterns, behavior, attitudes and perspectives, so that our manner of living, doing and thinking become more like God’s (Isaiah 55:6-8). The most obvious contrasts between our respective ways of life can be found in this passage written to the Galatians—a group of believers who were a bit confused about the inadequacies of even well-intended “natural” works/deeds when it comes to true spiritual accomplishments. Flesh is flesh, and even when that flesh is sincerely trying to be “good,” it cannot do what grace and “faith working through love” can do (Galatians 5:5-6). As vigorously as we may wash and deodorize it (as I do before one of my long trips to Europe), flesh will always reassert its rancid and rank constitution.

Even “good flesh” comes up short in the Kingdom; hence, Jesus said we must be born again *of the Spirit*. Only what is born of the Spirit is *spiritual* (John 3:3-6), and that is why we speak of being *converted*: the fundamental composition of our being gets altered/transformed from flesh (only) to spirit, enabling us to inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:50-53). In similar fashion, the base and corrupt elements of our flesh undergo ongoing conversion as we *mature* in the Lord, and, “fruits of the Spirit” supplant “deeds of the flesh”

The fruits of the Spirit ripen in our lives largely as a result of intentional choices we make about how to behave and think when confronted by the inevitable opportunities to think mostly about ourselves—what’s convenient, self-satisfying, securing or advantageous to us. The conversion process is not easy or quick because we never completely get rid of our flesh until we die, and it acts like gravity, weighting and pulling us down even when we’re doing our best to rise above it.

Oftentimes we will feel like Paul when he cried out in frustration,

“... I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”—Romans 7:18-8:1

This is a critical concept to grasp, as we desire to *mature* in Jesus. Our spirit/soul has already been converted, and we are already accepted by God; we are already saved from judgment and hell; Jesus paid the complete price for our ransom, and God has already, once-for-all-time cast every one of our sins (past, present and future) behind His back. The reason for maturing in the Lord, for replacing deeds of the flesh with fruits of the Spirit is **NOT** to assure our place in Heaven or to become “good enough” to be acceptable to God.

Rather, the whole point of “walking by the Spirit” and not carrying out “the desire of the flesh” is to inherit *in this life* more kingdom dynamic and power for living the kind of life God wants us to enjoy—full of love, joy, peace, etc.—and for ministering that kind of life to others. Spiritual maturity is marked by tangible spiritual fruit that: 1) grows abundantly in our life, and 2) feeds those who do not yet have an abundant crop of their own.

EXERCISING SELF-CONTROL

“He who is slow [long-winged, patient, longsuffering] to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules [has dominion over, governs] his spirit, than he who captures [occupies, controls] a city.”—Proverbs 16:32

“Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over [ability to hold back, enclose, assemble] his spirit.”—Proverbs 25:28

“But realize this, in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control [power, vigor, strength or dominion over self], brutal, haters of good...”—2 Timothy 3:1-3

“For they disciplined [trained, taught] us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful [cheerful, calmly delightful], but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained [naked practice, vigorous workout] by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.

Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak [hanging limp] and the knees that are feeble [paralyzed, enfeebled], and make straight [direct, level] paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame [halting, limping, crippled] may not be put out of joint [turned away, set off course], but rather be healed [cured, made whole].”—Hebrews 12:10-13

“Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control [self-restraint, continence].”—1 Corinthians 7:5

“But if they do not have self-control [self-restraint, mastery of self] let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.”—1 Corinthians 7:9

“Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control [self-restraint, mastery of self] in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”—1 Corinthians 9:25