

Over the past few weeks we have been reading through the letter that Paul wrote to the churches in the region of Galatia. We call this letter Galatians. We discovered that Paul started these churches on one of his missionary journeys. The Christians that became part of these churches came from Gentile or non-Jewish backgrounds.

But then after Paul left the Galatians to start other churches some evangelists who were Jewish Christian came to Galatia. These Jewish Christian evangelists told the Galatians that they needed to follow the strict Jewish rules before they could become Christian. Paul became very upset with the Galatians for accepting what he felt was a legalistic understanding of the Christian faith.

We now come to the 5th chapter of Galatians and a text of Scripture which is one of the most famous parts of the letter to the Galatians. The section that we call the fruits of the spirit. As I read this scripture I invite you to think about these words as words being written to the entire church and not necessarily to individuals in the church. In other words, these are words which contrast how churches behave.

Read Galatians 5:13-26

Between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, the average American gains 7 pounds. 7 pounds. Then comes a New Year, along with New Year's resolutions. Health clubs love this time of year. For it is during this time of year that we are willing to strap on the new running shoes or exercise gear and head off to the gym.

But we know what happens in late January and early February. The weather is still cold, it's dark early in the morning, and the newness of our fitness routine is long gone. By February, our New Year's resolutions for many become ancient history.

But there are some who persevere and continue to improve their health. And who are they? The ones who persevere and continue exercising are the ones who are part of a group focused on the mission of improved health. Those who partner with others around fitness goals are much more likely to continue to make progress.

The support found through relational connections provides energy for persevering. The ones that keep exercising have a group to celebrate with when fitness goals are achieved.

So if you are truly connected with authentic relationships to a group which is focused on continuing to stay in shape then you are much more likely to stay in shape than if you are not part of a group. And the opposite of this is also true. How motivated are you to stay in shape if you hang around people that are lazy and have no desire to stay in shape?

If you are close friends and spend your time with people that prefer to spend their time drinking a lot of soft drinks or beer and laying around and watching TV or gossiping about other people then I bet that makes it very hard to leave them and go to the gym and work out. If you are in an environment at work or at school or at home where there is a lot of negativity and back biting then it is very difficult not to become that as well.

My heart goes out to people who find themselves in these types of destructive environments at work or school and feel trapped in these environments by circumstances outside of their control.

In the scripture we read from Galatians, Paul compares these two types of churches. In the one type of church people are acting in these ways: There is sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like. Paul says that people that live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. Pretty strong words.

Many times people focus on the words about sexuality here. We do tend to focus on sex as a culture. But the majority of this list are words which focus on how we treat one another in a group. And I will argue that even the words about sex in this list are words which are directed to how people operate in a group. Sexual immortality is really about putting your own physical desires over against the pain that sexual immorality causes others.

Have you ever found yourself part of a group that could be defined by the words that Paul uses in this list? Have you ever been part of a group where there was hatred, discord, jealousy, selfish ambition, envy, and drunkenness? Do you find yourself dealing with these behaviors at work or in school? Maybe in your family? Have you ever experienced this in the church? Unfortunately these words describe way too many churches today.

But choosing to be a part of a church means that we should be choosing to be something different than the culture around us. And what are the ways that people in the church should act toward one another? Paul describes these as fruits of the Spirit. People in the church should instead model the following behaviors: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Can we show love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control without a support group? Sure we can. But being part of a church should mean that we help support and encourage one another to act that way toward one another and toward the people we encounter outside of the church.

So the challenge for all of us in this church today is to ask ourselves what are ways that we can help one another bear good fruit in our culture? It is very hard to show love and joy and peace and patience when you are in a culture of hate and anger and violence. It is very hard to be kind and good and faithful when you are surrounded by people who are cruel and unfaithful.

So how do we live out the fruits of the Spirit? That is where this community of faith comes into play. We need to help one another to be the people who show love and joy and peace and patience and goodness and faithfulness.

So I am going to challenge you to begin to think about ways to help one another live out these types of fruits. What can we be doing together as adults and youth so that we encourage one another to be this way? What can we be doing so that our children learn to live the fruits of the Spirit in their world?

The world where we live in has lots of rotten fruit. How can we help to encourage and support one another so that we are that good fruit?

I am going to close with a letter which came to the church on Friday. I think it gives a great witness to the impact that this community of faith is having on the people around us. It is a witness to what bearing good fruit is all about and how it impacts others.

(Dear Sir/Madam, Enclosed please find a check for \$100 to cover the cost of sponsoring a bench with an inscribed plaque. We live on Allison Creek and are so thrilled with the upgrades to the playing field area as well as the prayer chapel and the walking trails. We would love to sponsor a bench in memory of our son Gavin, who died in 2012 after battling a brain tumor. Gavin grew up on Allison Creek and played soccer on the field across from the church. If at all possible I would like for his plaque to go on a bench that faces the soccer field. We are so proud to call Allison Creek home and appreciate all of the hard work, time and effort that those involved have put into making it a better place for everyone.).

That is why it is important to bear good fruit. AMEN.

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-Illustration about gaining weight from Tidsworth, Mark, *Shift: Three Big Moves for the 21st Century Church*, Pinnacle Leadership Press, 2015, p. 64

-Given: June 26, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)