



May/June 2023

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

Fruit
OF THE
Spirit

ALSO: WALKING THROUGH THE BIBLE

Friends:

If someone asked you, “What should everyday Christian living look like?” how would you answer? One of the best summaries for picturing Christian living is the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance [patience], kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). During the month of May, Pastor George Koopmans explores the Bible’s teaching on these qualities and how we can more deeply grow into them.



For the month of June, I had the privilege of writing about many occurrences of “walking” that we find in Scripture. I was moved to write on the subject because last year I hiked for three weeks on the Appalachian Trail. Throughout those weeks of trekking through beautiful and sometimes dangerous settings in God’s creation, I reflected on many biblical scenes: God’s time with Adam and Eve in the garden, Abraham’s journey with God, Jesus’ walking among us, and more. I pray that these reflections will encourage you—wherever you are—in your walk with God.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God’s Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Kurt Selles

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"Fruit of the Spirit"
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**"Walking through
the Bible"**
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ReFrame
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may

Fruit of the Spirit

George Koopmans

Jesus calls his followers to bear spiritual fruit. In a way, he says, you can do this like a carefully tended vine will bear fruit for a gardener—and this will be for his Father's glory. Like the branches of a vine, we cannot bear fruit on our own, but if we stay connected to him, his life will remain in us, and we will continue to bear fruit (John 15:1-8).

This month we will focus on the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Through the Holy Spirit, who keeps us connected to the life-giving love of Christ, we are able to produce fruit that glorifies God in all kinds of ways—and in abundance that we could not imagine. And as our lives become more fruitful, we are drawn into sweeter communion with our amazing, triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

George Koopmans has served as an ecumenical chaplain at Medicine Hat College in Medicine Hat, Alberta, since November 2021. Prior to entering into chaplaincy, George served as a pastor to two congregations—one in Minnesota (Luverne), and the other in Medicine Hat. George and his wife, Emily, have four adult daughters and three grandchildren. Hiking, biking, and birdwatching are his favorite hobbies.

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.
—Galatians 5:22-23

Winter had not yet lost its icy grip on the Canadian prairies when our family flew to southern California for a vacation. Soon after arriving, we stumbled upon a grapefruit tree in a park. We often bought grapefruit at the grocery store, but the thought of picking a grapefruit straight from a tree and eating it right there was a temptation we could not resist!

But all of the low-hanging fruit had already been picked. So one of our daughters, sitting on my shoulders, took a long stick and was able to reach high enough to knock down a juicy, ripe fruit from the tree. Never had a grapefruit tasted so good to us!

Years later that same daughter, now an adult, sat on my shoulders again to reach bananas on a roadside tree in Hawaii. We had an apple tree and a pear

tree in our own backyard, but this fruit was different. From our perspective it was . . . well, exotic!

This month our daily devotions will focus on fruit—not fruit that grows on trees but fruit that is produced in us by the Holy Spirit. While traces of love, joy, peace, forbearance (patience), kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are present in most everyone's lives, these traits take on a new and vibrant dimension when we walk in step with the Spirit.

Lord, fill us with your Spirit so that we may produce fruit in keeping with your purpose for our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

FAITH LEADS TO ACTION

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.
—James 2:17

“Goldilocks and the Three Bears” is a fairy tale about a girl who got lost in the woods. She stumbled across the house of three bears. She entered their home, ate their porridge, sat in their chairs, and fell asleep on one of their beds. Not only is this a fun story for children and families, but it can help us resolve one of the tensions in the Christian faith.

For centuries Christians have been pondering the relationship between grace, faith, and works and how they relate to salvation. In Ephesians 2:8-9 Paul teaches that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works. However, James writes, “A person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone” (James 2:24). Critics of Christianity say these passages show that the Bible is full of contradictions and cannot be trusted.

But the point James is making is that the Bible and Christianity can be like a story that comes alive only in the mind but not in the heart. Like the story of Goldilocks, it has good lessons but lacks the power to truly change lives. Only when God moves from being known in our minds to being embraced in our hearts as Lord does faith become true, living, and saving. When the gift of true faith is present, God’s Spirit changes us, and our lives begin to produce the good works of the fruit of the Spirit!

Lord, fill our minds with your knowledge, but also fill our hearts with your presence and produce in us fruit that is pleasing to you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS LOVE

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. —1 John 4:10

One of the many joys of being a pastor is to officiate at weddings. Weddings come in all sizes and shapes, but most of them have one thing in common: love.

Before officiating at a wedding, I meet with the engaged couple for premarriage counseling. Part of our discussion centers on the reasons why they are getting married. Love always plays a significant role in these reasons. And yet that little word *love* can mean many different things. *Love* is a noun, and *love* is a verb. We fall in love, and we love being in love. We love people and animals, sports and ice cream, and certain types of weather! Love songs are one of the most popular types of music. So when we consider that love is the fruit of the Spirit, what exactly are we talking about?

John writes, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” True love is sacrificial action. It seeks to bless others. It seeks the best interests of others. The more we value God’s saving love for us, the more the Spirit moves us to share that love with others in both our words and our deeds.

Father God, even as you have shown your love to us through the death of your Son, help us by your Spirit to truly love you and our neighbors. In Jesus, Amen.

THE NATURE OF LOVE

Now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.
—1 Corinthians 13:13

First Corinthians 13 is often called “the love chapter.” It is commonly read at weddings. It contains a list of the many characteristics of love. Here we learn that love is patient and kind; it does not envy or boast; it is not proud, rude, self-seeking, or easily angered; nor does it keep a record of wrongs. “Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.” Further, it always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. “Love never fails”!

However, if I am honest, I have to admit that I often fail. I fail to do the things that Paul says love does—and the things that love never does, these are the things I find myself doing. Interestingly, in Romans 7:19, Paul confesses to having that same problem.

It is common to make excuses for our failures. We say things like “I’m only human.” Or “If Paul fails, what can I expect of

myself?” But it is far better to seek God’s forgiveness for our failures and to recognize, with thanks, that God “delivers [us] through Christ Jesus our Lord!” (Romans 7:25).

With our hearts and our Bibles open, we need to ask God to change us. And as we make this our regular practice, we will be amazed to see that through his Word and Spirit, God produces ever greater quantities of his love in our lives.

Lord, we thank you that you are patient and kind. Forgive us for our lack of love, and produce in us a rich harvest of true love, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . . ."

—Matthew 5:43-44

In our campus ministry at Medicine Hat (Alberta) College, we gather on campus to sing, to read and reflect on Scripture, and to pray. The students who form our little church were born in many different countries. The tone of our skin ranges from very pale to very dark. Though we come from diverse backgrounds, our love for God and for one another is amazing. When I read in Revelation 7:9 of the great multitude in heaven "from every nation, tribe, people and language," our little campus church comes to mind. Our fellowship is sweet, and we eagerly invite others to join us.

However, our world is very different from this fellowship. The world is deeply divided along political, economic, religious, ethnic, and racial lines. In fact, the divisions in our world are nearly endless. When Jesus calls us to love our enemies, he

certainly includes those who are different from me.

Our world is content to live with friend/enemy distinctions, loving friends and hating enemies, but Jesus calls us to love friend and enemy alike. We cannot do this on our own, but through the power of the Holy Spirit we can extend true love to everyone. As we love friend and enemy alike, we give this world a glimpse of what the world to come will be.

Lord Jesus, thank you for dying for us even though we were your enemies. Help us to love our enemies for your sake. Amen.

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS JOY

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! . . . The Lord is near.
—Philippians 4:4-5

The end of April is a happy time at the college where I serve as a chaplain. Classes are finished, and final exams are complete! Suddenly stress that has been building for weeks is released, and we see smiling faces all around.

In all kinds of situations, release from stress can lead to smiles and joy and even rejoicing and celebration.

Would you be surprised to know that some variation of “Be happy” is one of the most common instructions to us in God’s Word? While a search of the Bible may not always turn up the word “happy,” when we add the instructions to be glad, to rejoice, and to be joyful, we realize that this command does occur quite often in Scripture. Even the catchy title of a song from a past era, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy,” is a reflection of

this common theme in God’s Word.

What a remarkable blessing it is that God not only commands us to be joyful but also produces joy in us by his Spirit. The Spirit produces joy in the lives of his people not only when they are surrounded by “happy” circumstances. Even while chained in prison, Paul and Silas were able to sing with joy (see Acts 16:25-34). People who walk by the Spirit can find joy in all circumstances.

Holy Spirit, we thank you not only for calling us to rejoice in the Lord always, but also for producing that joy in our lives through your presence, in Jesus’ name! Amen.

JOY IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds. . . .
—James 1:2

Students sometimes receive lower grades on papers and exams than they have hoped for. Disappointment can lead to frustration and anger. Fear may enter the picture as well: “Because of this low mark, will I lose my place in my program or be suspended from my sports team?”

Students are not the only ones who face difficult and challenging situations. The loss of a job, strained relationships at home, and pressures at work can bring a great deal of stress into our lives. We also struggle when we get sick, or when a family member or friend becomes ill. There is also the heart-wrenching pain of persecution, which remains a reality in our world.

James urges us to “consider it pure joy” when we face trials and struggles in our lives. What? This is certainly one

of the most challenging commands in the Bible. But James explains that trials and sufferings in the lives of believers produce a stronger and more robust faith. And faith, as Peter puts it when he talks about suffering, is more valuable than gold (1 Peter 1:7).

When we see our struggles from this perspective, we can also begin to understand why Paul calls them light and temporary (2 Corinthians 4:17) and “not worth comparing with the glory” that awaits us (Romans 8:18).

Lord, thank you that through your Spirit we may experience joy in the midst of struggles, as our challenges in life bring us into a deeper relationship with you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE SOURCE OF JOY

Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.
—Psalm 37:4

The desire to have joy and be happy is universal. It is one of the deepest desires of the human heart. But happiness often seems elusive. Surprisingly our Bible passage today offers the hope of happiness, joy, and peace in all times, places, and situations. The psalmist says, “Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

The question, then, is “How do we ‘take delight in the LORD’?” First of all, we need a right relationship with God—and this is offered freely to us through faith in Jesus. And then we can focus on the full life we are called to in Christ (John 10:10; 15:10-17; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 6:27-36) and how we can begin living that way here and now.

Thinking highly of God the Father, who loves us and sent his Son to save us while we

were still his enemies is a start (Romans 5:8-11). Focusing on the Savior, who redeemed us and has prepared the way for us to spend eternity with him and each other in perfect joy, is also crucial. And walking with the Spirit, who guides and comforts us each day, will lead to lasting joy, happiness, and contentment.

Some things in this world bring fleeting joy. But all those things break down, wear out, get stolen, rust, burn up, or betray us and ultimately let us down. When we “take delight in the LORD,” however, the Spirit produces the lasting fruit of joy in our lives.

Giver of every good gift, we thank you for the promise of giving us the desires of our hearts when we delight in you! Amen.

SHALOM

He himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. . . .

—Ephesians 2:14

The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*. This rich word means much more than the absence of conflict, war, or strife and a lack of tension or animosity. It points to full flourishing for all people and creation, in which life is exactly as it should be. Prior to their fall into sin, our first parents enjoyed shalom in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2). They fully enjoyed their walks with God in the cool of the day, they enjoyed each other's company fully, and their work and world were beautiful.

As believers who have been restored to a right relationship with God through the sacrifice of Jesus, we now have a taste—at least to some degree—of what Adam and Eve enjoyed before sin entered their lives. Likewise, in the church and outside of it, we also have a glimpse of the peace that awaits us in God's presence.

Sometimes this taste of shalom is strong, and sometimes it is weak, but it is always there.

We have also been tasked with bringing others to a renewed sense of peace. One way of approaching this is to ask, "How can I make life on earth seem a little more like heaven (or God's kingdom) for someone else?" Can you think of a way to bring peace into the lives of others today?

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the peace that we have with you through Jesus, and for guiding us to grow in peace with others. Help us to be agents of peace in this broken world. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS PEACE

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
—Matthew 11:28

As our world entered into COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, sharp rises in mental health issues soon followed. Everyday life at college and university campuses, among many other settings, turned upside down. Some studies reported that as many as 75 percent of students experienced elevated levels of stress and anxiety. For many, sleep became elusive, and functioning well on a daily basis became a huge challenge.

Stress and anxiety can be described as a lack of inner peace. When we consider the mental health struggles of our world, there is reason for hope. Hope comes when we learn that "the fruit of the Spirit is . . . peace" (Galatians 5:22). The Spirit cares about our inner turmoil and seeks to calm it. And in many cases the Spirit works to bring peace through coun-

seling and medication. These can be helpful means toward healing, if needed. Thankfully we can trust that whatever we need, God cares about every aspect of our lives, and in Christ we have the promise of increased peace.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that your concern for us is all encompassing. We pray for inner peace in the midst of our anxious times, and may the Spirit in us provide a calming presence for others. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

CAST ALL YOUR ANXIETY ON GOD

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

—1 Peter 5:7

A student sat at a table in the corner of the library. The table was covered with books and papers. In just a few days, classes would be over for the semester, and deadlines for final papers and exams were looming. I asked the student how she was doing, and she told me she was “so stressed out!”

I replied, “Well, I cannot write your papers for you, and I wouldn’t be much of a help in studying—but, if you like, I would be happy to pray with you.”

She said she would appreciate that, so we prayed together. After a few moments, she said, “I don’t feel anxious anymore.” Her response was amazing. She simply said, “I no longer feel any stress.”

Another student in a similar situation said, “I don’t have any reason to feel anxious after bringing my cares to the Lord.”

The words of an old hymn come to mind: “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! Oh, what peace we often forfeit; oh, what needless pain we bear—all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.”

The good news for an increasingly anxious world is that the Spirit wants to produce peace in our minds, hearts, and lives, and often that can happen when we open ourselves to the Lord in prayer.

Lord God, we live in anxious times in an anxious world. As we cast our cares upon Jesus, grant us peace. We pray in the name of the Prince of Peace, our Lord Jesus. Amen.

CELEBRATING OUR PATIENT GOD

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. —2 Peter 3:9

When it comes to frozen pizza, I am not at all patient. I don't wait for the oven to preheat, and once the pizza is done, I don't wait for it to cool down. My impatience leads to a poorly cooked pizza that burns my mouth!

But if I changed and became more patient with frozen pizza, that would not necessarily be a sign of the Spirit working in me. When we think of patience as the fruit of the Spirit, it means more than just the opposite of hotheadedness. That is why "forbearance" or "longsuffering" is sometimes listed in place of "patience" in the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.

The Holy Spirit prompted the apostle Peter to remind his readers about the patience—longsuffering and forbearance—of God to all people.

God first showed his amazing patience with humanity in the Garden of Eden when he promised a Savior rather than eternal banishment from his presence (Genesis 3:15). And ever since then, God has patiently continued to call us to repentance. Though he will sometimes send punishment, God does not destroy the people he loves and has called. God continues to wait today for people from every tribe and nation to come to him in faith and repentance. And he calls us to return to him daily and to celebrate his patience with praise and thanksgiving.

Patient God, we thank you for calling us all to faith and repentance. Help us to respond to your gracious call. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PATIENCE TOWARD OTHERS

"I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."

—Matthew 5:39

Few teachings of Jesus are more difficult to follow than this instruction to turn the other cheek. When we are wronged, it is natural to want to get even. Yet God calls us to turn the other cheek. Is this a call for us to simply let ourselves be bullied? To never stand up for ourselves? No, it runs far deeper than that.

When we are wronged, it helps to remember that no wrong will go unpunished. Every sin that is committed will be paid for. "It is mine to avenge," says the Lord, "I will repay" (Deuteronomy 32:35; see Romans 12:17-21). This is a great comfort to believers who are being wronged! Every wrong against us will be punished.

The good news of Jesus is that if the wrong that was committed is repented of, and the wrongdoer asks for forgiveness, the

wrong is paid for by Christ on the cross. Jesus came into this world in order to take on the punishment for all human sin, so that all who look to him can be saved.

When a wrong is committed against us, we might think, "Well, I want the one who hurt me to be punished. I want *them* punished, not Christ." But we need to remember that we too have wronged many others and that Christ took on our punishment, paying for our guilt as well.

Forgiving God, guide us to be patient with others, especially when we are wronged, so that Christ may be made visible in us. Help us, Holy Spirit, to show your patience in all times and circumstances. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WORKING AND WAITING

You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.
—James 5:8

Have you heard the story about the father who took his children on a week-long fishing trip? The first day of the trip was rainy, so they stayed in their cabin. The second day was the same as the first. Soon the children began to fight. On the third day the father said, "We are going fishing."

"But, Dad," the children cried, "it's still raining."

"That's right," the father replied, "but if we don't go fishing, we will just spend our time fighting." The moral of this story is that when the church is not "fishing" (Matthew 4:19), it is prone to start fighting.

James calls us to wait patiently for the Lord's return. But this patient waiting is not without a purpose. As Peter teaches, God is not slow in returning but is being patient, "not wanting anyone to perish" (2 Peter

3:9). And we are called to participate in calling people to faith. Jesus calls his followers to take the good news of salvation to all peoples and nations (Matthew 28:18-20). As Paul put it, we are like ambassadors, imploring people to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Already in the days of James, Peter, and Paul, some believers were losing patience waiting for the return of Christ. The situation is certainly no better today. But when we are active participants in God's mission, each day of delaying his return is another day of opportunity.

Lord Jesus, we are eager for your return, but we also ask that in this time of delay many others will come to know and love you. Amen.

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS KINDNESS

"I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us. . . ."

—Isaiah 63:7

Kindness can be described as a friendly, generous, considerate disposition toward others. But, sadly, this trait can be elusive in our everyday world—especially where there is a lot of competition. When we look for kindness in our world, we can find it, but we also tend to find a lot of unkindness.

Isaiah tells about the kindnesses of God and all that the Lord has done for us. Already in the garden of Eden we see the kindness of God to our first parents. God had warned Adam and Eve of the dire consequences of disobeying his command. When they disobeyed anyway, they became aware of their guilt and were afraid. But God displayed at least two great acts of kindness. First, instead of bringing about the punishment of death right away, God promised to send his Son to take on the ultimate

punishment for sin. Second, God took care of Adam and Eve's immediate needs and gave them clothes to wear. From that time forward, God's kindness has been on display as he points to his Son, Jesus, the Savior, as the way of forgiveness, restoration, and full life forever.

Kind God, move us to see your kindness today, and guide us to find ways to reflect your kindness to others as we forgive those who wrong us and seek to lead them to your wholeness. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

KINDNESS TO EVERYONE

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"
—Luke 10:36

Jesus' parable about the good Samaritan has inspired many people throughout the centuries to act with kindness toward others—especially those who may be different from them or who are even their enemies. (In Jesus' day the Jews and Samaritans detested each other, and Jesus taught this parable partly as a lesson about caring for people whom we think of as enemies.) Ultimately this story teaches that everyone around us is a neighbor whom God calls us to love just as he loves them—without strings attached. We are reminded to show the kindness of God to everyone and to reach out to people who are hurting.

Though we might not encounter a situation like the one Jesus describes here, we all have opportunities to be kind. We may be rushing off to class, hurrying off to work, or going about

our busy day, and we can be so focused on the task at hand that we can miss seeing an opportunity to be kind and to care for someone.

But when we are in step with the Spirit, who lives within us, we find that the Spirit helps us notice such things. The Spirit sees and hears the brokenness and hurts around us. The Spirit helps us to discern . . . that person needs a kind word, or that person needs a random act of kindness.

The question I face today is simple. Will I listen, or will I be too busy doing my own things?

Spirit of God, move us to show kindness in every situation we find ourselves in. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING

"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? . . ."
—Matthew 18:21

Whenever I read Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant, my blood begins to boil. I think, "How ungrateful, mean, and greedy this man is. There isn't a kind bone in his body!" Here was a man who owed more money than he could ever repay. But after he was forgiven of his huge debt, he punished another man for owing him just a small amount. The forgiven man had received mercy, but he did not show mercy to the other man.

It is not wrong to be angry about this. In fact, this is the response Jesus is looking for. But we must not stop there. Jesus designed this story to help us think and act faithfully as children of God. How should we respond to the kindness God has shown us? God has forgiven our huge debt of sin; will we do the same for others who have sinned against us?

It is easy for us to ask for God's forgiveness and yet carry grudges and ill will toward others. It is easy to remember and resent what others have said and done against us. But if we accept God's forgiveness and yet fail to forgive others, we are no different from the ungrateful man in Jesus' parable.

Jesus teaches us to forgive and to keep forgiving so that we can't remember how many times we have forgiven. When we walk with the Spirit, we are changed. God's kindness begins to flow from us to others.

Father, thank you for forgiving my sin. Move me to forgive others, showing them the kindness you have shown to me. In Jesus, Amen.

GIFTS AND FRUIT

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.
—Romans 12:6

Years ago, my mother had a large jar for storing pennies. Over the years she accumulated thousands of these little coins but didn't do anything with them. It was a unique and fancy jar, but that never changed the fact that the pennies just lay there, never doing or accomplishing anything. The church, however, was never meant to be like that penny jar.

After Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven (Acts 1:4-11), he gave spiritual gifts to his people. These gifts are listed in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. Spiritual gifts are given to every believer in Christ so that each of us may do our part in building up the church, the body of Christ, and advancing God's kingdom. The spiritual gifts and the fruit of the Spirit are closely related in function and purpose.

As we discover which gifts we are given by the Spirit and we learn to bear the fruit of the Spirit, we may be amazed to see how God is using us to advance his kingdom and to be a blessing to others. This in turn blesses and encourages us in our Christian walk as well.

Lord God, thank you for the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit. Thank you for equipping us to carry out your will in our lives, in our homes and churches, and in the world. Amen.

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS GOODNESS

"Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone."
—Mark 10:17-18

Jesus' reply to the rich man here is full of surprises. First, in response to being called "Good teacher," Jesus says, "only God is good." Was Jesus saying that he is not God? No, Jesus answered this way because the rich man saw him as just a man—a good man, but still just a man. As the rich man stood before Jesus, he was also confronted with the fact that he himself was just a man and not as good as he had thought. Ultimately, only God is good. (And, of course, Jesus himself is good because he too is God, but he is not drawing attention to himself here.)

In our everyday lives, we use the word *good* to describe all kinds of things. We say, "Good morning." We appreciated a good breakfast. Seeing that the weather is good, we go out to meet with our good friends.

The Bible, however, mainly uses the word *good* to refer to what is pure and holy. The point Jesus is making is that only the perfect and holy God is truly good.

And yet, as we find forgiveness through Jesus and we are restored to a right relationship with God, we gain the ability to do good and to be good. All who are clothed in the righteousness of Christ and act for his glory will one day hear the words "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (see Matthew 25:21, 23).

Father, help us to follow Jesus. Forgive our sins, we pray, and, by the power of your Spirit in us, help us to do what is good. Amen.

THE LORD HAS SHOWN US WHAT IS GOOD

"In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."

—Matthew 7:12

In our reading today from Micah 6 and in the quotation from Jesus in Matthew 7, we find helpful guidelines that summarize the teachings of God's law. These help us to focus on the main things God calls us to live by.

Jesus' statement in Matthew 7 is often called the "golden rule." It reminds us to treat others as we would like to be treated. Here, as in many of his teachings, Jesus presents a principle of what should be rather than what is. In our world, doing to others as they have done to us (in terms of favors or payback) is far more common than treating others as we would like them to treat us.

The prophet Micah spoke to God's people in a time when the wealthy and powerful were just going through the motions of religious duty while their

hearts were far from the Lord. God's desire was that they would love to extend mercy to people who were poor and weak, and to act justly toward their neighbors always. Instead, the wealthy and powerful were crushing the poor and weak.

These are good reminders. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that there can be times when we, too, neglect to show justice and mercy in our day-to-day living.

How can we turn that around?

Lord and God, help me to show justice and mercy in the things I do today. Help me to build up people who need encouragement and to bless those who are downcast and disadvantaged. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

CONTINUE TO DO GOOD

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. —Galatians 6:9

Ephesians 2:1-9, especially verses 8-9, are among the best-known verses in the Bible, but verse 10 is often neglected. This verse teaches that we are saved by grace through faith not simply to spend eternity with God but so that we may do good works that God has planned for us to do.

And yet the reality is that, at times, we tire of doing good.

There are several reasons for this. Sometimes we feel that our good works aren't making a difference. At other times we become too busy looking after our own interests, and we neglect to look to the interests of others (Philippians 2:4).

But the good news is that if we remain open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, he will continue to produce good fruit in our lives. The Spirit will lead us to new areas of service and

will open new opportunities for us to bless others.

To me, one of the joys of serving as a chaplain is to watch busy students as they take time to do good to others even as they prepare for a lifetime of serving in God's kingdom.

Lord, we need you to help us do good. We can't do this on our own. By your Spirit, guide us to bear fruit that honors you in all we think, say, and do. And lead us to serve you faithfully as you open doors and opportunities for us to share your blessings with others. In Jesus, Amen.

OUR FAITHFUL GOD

... if we are faithless, [Christ] remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.
—2 Timothy 2:13

When our children were young, we visited an aquarium that had a glass tunnel through the middle. As we walked along, we saw sharks and other fish swimming all around us. I have often wondered if the Israelites' experience of walking through the Red Sea was similar. Did they see fish swimming in the walls of water alongside their path? We can't be sure. Besides, it was nighttime. Even so, the light of God was there to show the way (Exodus 14).

Sadly, the Israelites soon forgot their miraculous deliverance. After a few days in the desert without finding water, they started grumbling and complaining about their situation (Exodus 15:22-16:3). God provided them with plenty of water and food, and yet soon they were grumbling again. Throughout the Old Testament

we see repeated patterns of Israel's unfaithfulness to God. And yet God remained faithful.

When Jesus came, the Jews and other Israelite descendants were still God's people—not because of their faithfulness but because of God's—and so it remains today.

The words of the Holy Spirit are true. Though we are unfaithful, our Lord is always faithful. May we marvel today that even when we are unfaithful, God forgives us and remains faithful, keeping all of his promises to us.

"Great is your faithfulness, O God." Holy Spirit, continue your good work in us and help us to be faithful to you in our thoughts, our words, and our deeds. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

LET YOUR 'YES' BE 'YES'

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices. . . .
—Colossians 3:9

Each of the students took their turn. They raised their right hand and solemnly swore to carry out their duties with honesty and integrity. Another student association executive team was in place and set to serve the student body for another year.

But the question may be asked, "Was this swearing-in ceremony wrong?" Was it, and is every other oath of office, a violation of Jesus' teaching? No. The point Jesus makes is that we are to be people who keep our word. One of the most important examples of being a Christian witness is the matter of keeping promises.

As a chaplain, I speak to dozens of students, faculty, and staff each day. Often I am asked or invited to do things. The easy part is to say "Yes." Remembering what I promised and then following up on it is

the hard part! Unfortunately, I still have cringeworthy moments when someone begins a sentence with "Remember when you said you would . . ."

Regardless of our occupation and regardless of whom we are speaking to, being true to our word is a mark of faithfulness. Thankfully, our God is always faithful to his promises, and with the help of the Holy Spirit we too may grow in being faithful to the promises and commitments we make.

Holy God, help us truly to be people of our word. Help us to do what we promise so that our "yes" is "yes" and our "no" is "no." In Jesus' name, Amen.

SEXUAL IMMORALITY

Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality. . . .
—Ephesians 5:3

Years ago I attended a conference where a well-known Christian speaker asserted that the largest problem faced by Western Christianity was the use of pornography. The statistics on pornography use within the Christian community are shocking. The harm done to individuals, families, congregations, and the wider church community is incalculable. It drives a wedge between married couples, it gives unrealistic expectations to youth, and, riddled by guilt, many users hide from God rather than approaching him for forgiveness.

Throughout the Bible God teaches the importance of faithfulness and warns that sexual immorality is harmful and destructive. It ruins relationships and destroys trust. It treats people like objects when they should be valued as imagebearers of God. God

uses the imagery of marriage to display the rich relationship of faithfulness that he wants with his people. God describes himself as a husband to Israel and compares idolatry to spiritual adultery.

Rather than hiding and ignoring pornography and other forms of sexual immorality among us, followers of Christ will do well to name these destructive influences, bring them into the light, and encourage healing to take place. May we seek to live in faithfulness, for Jesus' sake.

Holy God, we acknowledge our sin, especially in areas of sexual immorality. We ask for forgiveness and deliverance. Guide us to be faithful. In Jesus, Amen.

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS GENTLENESS

"See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."
—Matthew 21:5

In Jesus' statements of blessing (often called the Beatitudes) in Matthew 5:3-11, we read, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Today we equate meekness with being shy and timid. But the biblical concept of meekness is closer to gentleness. When a powerful person sets aside their power and acts humbly and gently for a better good, they are displaying meekness.

Long ago Zechariah prophesied about a king who would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. This was quite unusual because a deliverer king would normally ride a horse as a symbol of power and victory. Jesus, however, came in gentleness, freeing his people from the grip of sin and death by humbling himself and dying on a cross. And then in amazing and surprising power he rose in victory over death and the

grave. He did all of this for our sake, promising new, full life forever for all who believe in him.

There is a time to use power for righteous reasons, and there is a time when it's better to serve with gentleness. Let's ask the Spirit to guide us in showing gentleness for Jesus' sake.

Holy Spirit, teach us when to be strong and bold and when to be humble and gentle so that your kingdom and people may be built up. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THE ALMIGHTY, GENTLE GOD

He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

—Isaiah 40:11

Isaiah 40 speaks of the power and might of God with amazing clarity. Estimates hold that the observable universe is 45 billion light years across, and yet, according to Isaiah, that is only like the breadth of God's hand. Ultimately, though, comparing the infinite God to the finiteness of this universe—as expansive as it is—would be futile.

Even so, when we consider that the almighty God scoops up his people in his arms and carries them like lambs, close to his heart, we are moved to marvel at his gentle love. Knowing that God has written our names on the palms of his hands (Isaiah 49:16) and that he sings over us (Zephaniah 3:17) as he carries us along is comforting beyond words.

Today some of us need to experience the comfort of our

gentle God. Reading of his gentle loving care is a good start. However, God's gentleness is experienced in an incarnational way (in the flesh) when we treat others with the gentleness that God has shown us.

In what ways can you show gentleness to everyone around you today?

Father, you are infinite and almighty. We are small and weak. You pick us up in your arms, and you love us and bless us. May we find shelter in your love today, and may we be shelter for people who are hurting. In Jesus, Amen.

THE GENTLENESS OF JESUS

"Neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."
—John 8:11

Jesus' gentleness to the woman who was caught in adultery is heartwarming. According to the law of Moses, this woman could have been stoned to death (Leviticus 20:10). But Jesus knew the religious leaders were more interested in trapping him than in following God's law. The fact that the woman was caught in adultery means that the man involved was also known. But where was he? He is not even mentioned in the story. The religious leaders simply assumed that if Jesus did not demand the death penalty, he would be guilty of breaking the law, and that would give them a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus turned the tables on the religious leaders and put them into an impossible situation. He said, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." So

throwing a stone would mean declaring yourself sinless. None of the leaders were prepared to do that. One by one, her accusers went away, and then Jesus told the woman, "Neither do I condemn you. . . . Go now and leave your life of sin."

Similarly, the Lord tells us, "I came into this world not to condemn you but to forgive you; repent and sin no more" (see John 3:17-21). "And with the gentleness that I treat you, treat everyone around you" (see Matthew 7:12).

Jesus, we marvel at your gentleness with all of us sinners. Thank you for being such a gentle Savior, and help us to be gentle with others. Amen.

PENTECOST

"In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams." —Acts 2:17

There is an old saying that "Actions speak louder than words." One of the students in the chaplaincy ministry at our college "oozes" the fruit of the Spirit. His kindness, gentleness, joy, and patience are clearly evident. As people see this, they are attracted to him, and opportunities to share his faith are multiplied. Another student frequently pours out her heart to the Lord in prayer as she pleads for the advancement of God's kingdom.

The Spirit of God gave Jesus' apostles the ability to speak in many languages on that day of Pentecost written about in Acts 2, and the same Spirit enables us to speak and to act in win-some ways today. Through the power of the Spirit, God's kingdom is advancing, and he has called and equipped each of us to be his witnesses in whatever

circumstances we may find ourselves.

Today we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. But our celebration of Pentecost is not so much meant to be talked about as it is to be lived—in word and deed. By the power of the Spirit working through us, our words and fruit-filled actions are the tools God uses to build his kingdom.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of the Spirit poured out on Jesus' followers on that Pentecost day so long ago. Help us to live by the power of the Spirit today and every day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TAMING THE TONGUE

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire. . . .
—James 3:5-6

Over the years our family has had many brushes with forest fires. At one point a forest fire came to within a kilometer of our house before being brought under control. We have had vacation plans altered because of wildfires, and on other occasions we seldom left our home because of the poor air quality. Each of these fires began with a spark and a tiny flame before becoming a raging inferno.

James writes that poorly chosen words are like sparks that cause a great fire. Both bring immeasurable damage. A little gossip runs its course, and who knows how much damage it causes! A careless word is spoken, and a person is left wounded and scarred for a lifetime. Sadly, I may be the one who uttered those words.

The good news is that the fruit of the Spirit is self-control.

Though “no human being can tame the tongue,” the Spirit of God can. When we walk in step with the Spirit, we will notice that the Spirit helps us to control our tongues. And, says James, “with the wisdom that comes from heaven,” self-control in other areas of life follows. Godly wisdom brings peace, love, humility, mercy, and good fruit for life the way God intends it to be.

Heavenly Father, help us to control our tongues. May our words bring honor and glory to you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

SPEAK THE TRUTH IN LOVE

Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

—Ephesians 4:15

A student who graces the college campus where I work always has a smile on his face and speaks with words that are kind and gentle. Proverbs 16:24 could have been inspired with him in mind! While a few well-chosen words are sweeter than honey, rash and poorly chosen words can damage and even destroy relationships.

The Holy Spirit calls us to speak the truth in love. Not everything that is true needs to be said, and when love is not the motive for what we are prepared to say, we would do well simply to remain silent. There is a right way and a wrong way to say things, and there is a time to speak and a time to be silent.

It is easy for us to make excuses for our poorly chosen words. We often think and say

things like “I’m just a blunt person,” or, “That’s my nature,” or, “I just say it the way I see it.”

However, there is hope for all of God’s children. In Ephesians 4, Paul gives helpful advice about putting off falsehood and speaking truthfully, avoiding unwholesome talk, and building others up. When we walk with the Holy Spirit, we are changed. With the Spirit’s help we can change the way we speak in our homes and workplaces, in our churches, and in the world.

Father, help us to choose our words well, building others up in faith rather than hurting and tearing down. May our words be attractive to all who don’t yet know you as well. In Jesus, Amen.

SELF-CONTROL

They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you. —1 Peter 4:4

Every person's story is different and unique. Some people were born into religious homes where strict morals and ethics were taught, and they followed these closely from their earliest days. Some people raised in such homes have a "prodigal child" story (see Luke 15:11-24). Still others were brought up apart from religion and yet followed cultural morals, while others grew up more or less wild through and through.

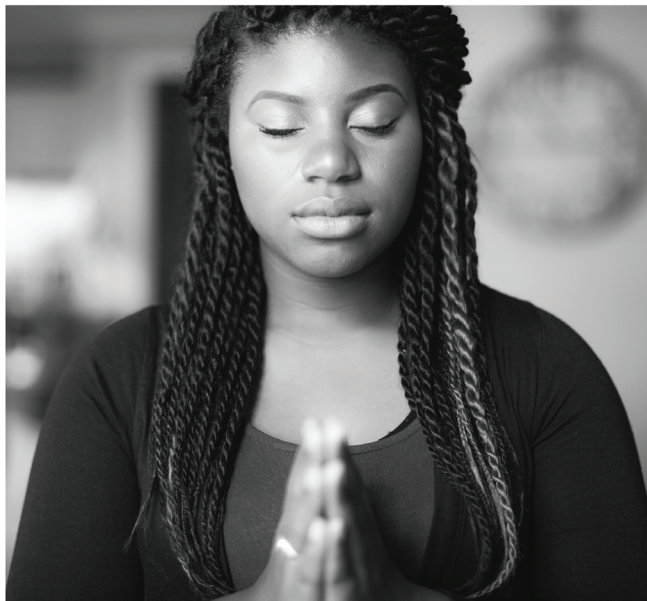
Regardless of our backgrounds, we are called now as believers to live according to the pattern that God sets out for us in his Word. We find this pattern in many places in the Bible such as Ephesians 4-5, Colossians 3, and 1 Peter 4:1-11. A close reading of these passages shows great similarity to the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5.

The great news for us is that as we keep in step with the Holy Spirit, we will find that our old sinful nature slowly loses its grip on us. Our "taste" for sinful desires and behaviors gradually fades. Living God's way takes on a sweeter and sweeter flavor as we live our lives in step with the Spirit.

While most fruit is sweet, none is as sweet as the fruit of the Spirit.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for weaning us from our sinful desires and old ways, showing us that living in step with the Spirit is the best way to live. In Jesus, Amen.

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