

**Essentials: Spirit (Fruit)**

Galatians 5.16-25

May 9, 2021

Happy Mother's Day! Today we're talking about what we heard in the passage a moment ago: *how does the produce of a life with God's Spirit turn up in us and through us?* As it's Mother's Day, maybe a parenting picture will help to begin. Anyone who's gone on a walk with a toddler knows the importance of guidance when crossing the street. The early lessons are familiar. *Hold my hand now as we cross the street. We always hold hands when we cross the street. Keep holding my hand until we're on the other side. Good job; thank you for holding my hand as we crossed the street. It's very important and you must always listen!* Day after day we repeat the lesson. There's usually a time (which can feel like a very long time) when a child will fight against or refuse the guidance. But then one day the little hand begins to slip into your hand more readily as you usher them across a busy road. They've learned to trust the importance of being *led* and it has become their *modus operandi* - well, most of the time!

Children follow in the steps of their parents and caregivers. That's not a bad picture to begin with when we open to the book of Galatians and imagine life under the direction of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians Paul often emphasizes our relation to God as *children* over against other "parenting" forces to which we might cling. That might take some getting used to, because when we talk about the results or the fruit of something, we often connect that first to human effort. A business *produces* a profit because of the work done by the owners. The *results* of a body getting healthy are from working hard on diet and exercise.

However, when Paul describes how Godly fruit is produced in human life, he doesn't begin with, "*well just put your back into it and you'll be more peaceful or patient or kind*". He doesn't assume "trying harder" will produce the kind of fruit we hope to see resulting from God's eternal influence. Paul's controlling metaphors of being "parented" by the Spirit (or sometimes being "rooted") always have to do with God's action, before human action. For Paul the "*fruit of the Holy Spirit*" begins with

*belonging to* and *letting* ourselves be led by God's Spirit, just as children *belong* and are *led*. If we don't start there we'd be putting the cart before the horse.

## **BELONGING**

The first word to notice when speaking about the fruit of the Spirit (and in Galatians in general) is Paul's emphasis on our "belonging" to Jesus. We're reminded throughout Galatians that Christians are "children of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal 5.26). Galatians is often referenced when speaking about belonging *with* Jesus and therefore with each other and what that means for equality and equity. No matter our sex, ethnic or socioeconomic background, we are all children at the table set by Jesus and made to belong. This is of course deeply important, especially as the problems of racism and sexism are being pointed out more freely and openly, and rightly so. In the family of Jesus there is no room for either racism or sexism. And though we shouldn't be surprised to find those things rearing their ugly heads around us, we should never be complacent about recognizing their reality and letting God heal what is broken between us.

That said, what makes belonging *with* one another possible is first belonging *to* Jesus. In our day and age many don't mind hearing about belonging *with* one another or even belonging *with* God. But we get a bit spiky when we hear the Christian distinctive that we only belong *with* because we *belong to* Jesus. Yet without this essential foundation our faith falls apart. A Christian community is one which believes it has *been made* and is not *self-made*; meaning we are the created beings, not the creator. And when we follow that through to Jesus we hear the gospel clearly: Jesus has resuscitated us from death to life, which is only possible through God's action and not our own. So we can't really be Christian without becoming comfortable with the fact that we don't own our lives and all of our action is first reliant God's action. That proves vital to Paul's argument when it comes to what we expect the Holy Spirit to produce in our lives. *Because you are God's children, because you belong to Jesus, therefore...*

The other thing we should notice about the word "belonging" is what we began with last week. It's essential to hear that when Paul or others in the New Testament speak about the Holy Spirit, they are speaking about Jesus' Spirit. So the command to "let the Holy Spirit guide your lives" (Gal 5.16) is none other than a command to remember our belonging to Jesus. So, we needn't be worried about a different kind of

character or God coming through in our experience of the Holy Spirit. We should expect everything of *Jesus* to flow from daily life with his Spirit. And that needs to be said when much has been made of the distinctions between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But the distinctions have nothing to do with three different temperaments or characteristics of God, and mostly to do with the ways in which we speak about God in the first place. Sometimes we're tempted to believe that God the Father is powerful, Jesus is kind, and the Spirit is mysteriously unpredictable – and that never the three shall meet! Not so. The same character that we see in YHWH (Israel's God) is in Jesus and also in the Spirit Jesus sends. So the point is just to say that the Holy Spirit *belongs* to Jesus. So when we ask for a filling or direction from the Holy Spirit, Jesus is behind that. In short, if you're into Jesus, then his Spirit with us is very good news and nothing to be afraid of, and there's more where Jesus came from!

So those are a couple of thoughts about belonging. For the fruit of the Holy Spirit to turn up in us we must first come to grips with the fact that we *belong to Jesus*, and affirm that *belonging* by giving way to the direction of his Spirit. But as we hear in Galatians it's not always that simple.

## **LETING**

Which leads us to the other word we should notice in Galatians when talking about "the fruit of the Holy Spirit". "Letting". Now's probably a good time to return to that picture of the toddler crossing the street with a parent or caregiver. In the passage we heard it's clear that there's something of a tug of war between God's Spirit in us and what Paul calls "our sinful nature". By this he means that even though we belong to Jesus, we are still given to being influenced by other forces, or even "parented", because of the sway that sin and evil still have in the world in which we live. So there's a choice we face consciously at least several times a day: to give way to God's Spirit to guide and produce fruit, or to give way to other forces which will in the end produce the same sin leading to death from which Jesus' has resuscitated us. That might sound like what we hear from Paul in Romans or Ephesians: don't conduct yourself like a dead person when Jesus has made you alive!

The trouble is we don't usually walk around thinking in those terms; that moment to moment we're either *giving way* to God's Spirit or *giving way to sin and death*. We often think that *we're in control when we do what we want* and call it freedom, and

Paul would disagree with that. Our society has taken to believe that if it feels good in the moment we should do it and therefore we are really being "us" when we simply follow impulses. Paul would ask: but what is *giving direction* to those impulses? And when we look at the list of what comes from following the influence of what Paul calls a "sinful nature", we hear a lot of things that look like a life gone off the rails. Fits of rage, envy, hatred, discord, drunkenness, sexual immorality - a pervading sense of what we see there is of a life that is dangerously out of control, out of the hands of the person living it. So for Paul there is as we said a kind of tug of war and we are always *giving way* to a parenting force one way or another.

His argument then is to remember who we truly belong to and to *let God's Spirit as parent do the guiding* because we're always being *guided or parented* by something; and the best *guidance or parenting* comes from the one who made us in the first place. Giving way to that guidance and parenting, we should say, doesn't mean we are any less ourselves, just as a child giving way to good parenting makes her any less herself. In the nature verses nurture language we could say that as maker God's knows best the being he has created and is working to nurture us into ourselves more fully through the close, daily guidance of his Spirit.

So *letting or giving way* is the right place to start, which, coupled with our action of *following* produces the kind of character or fruit we see in Jesus to whom we truly *belong*.

## **Holding Hands**

We could say a lot more about what the fruit of a life parented by the Spirit looks like. But when we're hoping to see the fruit of the Spirit turn up, maybe we can worry less about the results. When we emphasize the produce over the process we miss the point. We'll not get to one without the other. *Less trying, more letting*. And be encouraged by looking at the lives around us which have given way and are giving way to the Holy Spirit, and notice what turns up: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We'll close today with two simple questions before we hear from LaVerne, who as I said earlier really is a tree full of fruit:

Have we come to grips with who we really belong to? And when looking at the fruit of our lives: whose hand are we holding? Maybe today we can hear the voice of the Holy Spirit say something like this: *"Here child, give me your hand. Safely now across the street..."*

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What are our thoughts about belonging "with" Jesus verses "to" Jesus and how that shapes our faith?
2. What would you say are some "parenting" forces that can govern our lives?
3. What does it mean to take the hand of the Holy Spirit daily in practice? What does a life like that look like? Share examples how that's done.