

Sermon Series on the Fruit of the Spirit

Week #1: Kindness & Generosity

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Please be seated.

Historians tell us that the New Testament book of Galatians was probably written between the late 40's to early 50's of the first century of the Common Era. It was a 3-part letter written to the people of the newly emerging Christian Church of the region of Galatia which is known today as central Turkey. Galatia was named for the Celtic people, the Gauls, who settled there about 300 years before the birth of Christ. The name "Galatia" meant "land of the Gauls" and it was an area that was to become very important to the Roman Empire.

Paul focused much of his missionary work on converting the Gentiles, or non-Jewish people, to Christianity. One of the big questions of that time was if Gentiles needed first to convert to Judaism in the process of becoming Christians? Should these same converts to Christianity be required to keep the Law of Moses? Specifically, should they be required to adhere to the Jewish laws around circumcision and food preparation? As Paul continued his ministry in Galatia, he expressed the view that the Gospels should provide Christians with the guidance that they needed rather than being tied to the Law of Moses. In chapters 5 and 6 of Galatians, Paul is providing the people of Galatia with practical ideas on how to live out the Gospels. He also wants them to understand that freedom in terms of Christianity means obeying Christ's command, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." Paul also stressed that freedom in Christ meant turning away from things like self-indulgence, drunkenness, envy, jealousy, quarreling, anger, divisiveness, idolatry, lust, and impurity. He goes on to say that being led by the Holy Spirit is the key for Christians, not the Law of Moses.

In verses 22-25, Paul describes a Christian life that is led by the Spirit as being exemplified by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He describes these 9 qualities as "fruit of the Spirit". He contends that it is only by allowing the Spirit of God to work in us that we are able to be free from our own

selfishness and self-centredness; free to love others in the way that Christ commanded when he said, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” The fruit of the Spirit is evidence that God is at work in our lives.

The Law of Moses was originally intended to address the problem that humankind had become corrupted by sin. If we think of the 10 Commandments, they focus largely on what NOT to do; do not steal, do not lie, do not kill, do not worship idols, and so forth. But the message that Paul is bringing to the Galatians is to shift away from focusing on the realm of sin which is the theme of the 10 Commandments, to thinking about the realm of the Spirit which he views as a new creation. Paul is very focused on the Kingdom of God coming to earth and merging with the present. This makes sense because Paul believed that the second coming of Christ would happen in his own lifetime. He was also very dedicated to the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name. **Thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.**”

By listing the fruit of the Spirit for the Galatians, Paul is trying to give them some tangible signposts that the Spirit is at work in them and that the Spirit will continue to work in them. The people that are converting to Christianity are very eager to move forward with their faith journeys – so much so that some of the men are willing to be circumcised, while others are indicating that they will avoid certain foods or prepare their food in particular ways according to Jewish law if that is what it takes for them to make a tangible gesture that they are committed to a new life in Christ. Paul is telling them that this is not necessary, to not to worry about getting caught up in the Law of Moses; but rather to focus on the fruit of the Spirit which not only transforms their lives, but also provides evidence that God’s Spirit is at work transforming them: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Throughout the month of September, we are going to be exploring the fruit of the Spirit more closely: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This week we are focusing on kindness and generosity, and our readings and prayers chosen for today reflect those two ideas.

In our Old Testament passage from Proverbs, the author is sharing a kind of recipe for a happy life. There is encouragement to be loyal and faithful, to trust in the Lord, to really take hold of wisdom and insight. We are told that to live this way means that we will be safe, that we will have restful nights, and that God will save us from evil. But it is the last line that is so important: “Whenever you possibly can, do good to those who need it. Never tell your neighbours to wait until tomorrow if you can help them now.” Bishop Sandra always concludes her services by sharing a similar sentiment before the final blessing. She always encourages us to remember that time passes quickly and that we should take every opportunity to do what we can to brighten the lives of others today. It may be as simple as passing along a compliment or just saying, “Good morning!” to a stranger. For some people, that simple word or gesture may be the greatest kindness that they will experience that day.

Psalms 121 is a personal favourite of mine. The imagery is really very beautiful; it is all about God’s kindness and generosity towards us throughout our lives. When we consider that it was originally written for people living in a desert territory, it becomes all the more special. It is incredibly rare to find shade in the desert; and yet we have here the image of God providing that shade from both the sun and from the moon. We are reminded that God watches over us while we are awake, and while we are asleep. Throughout the busyness of our lives, He is always there.

And finally, in our Gospel reading from Matthew, we have the parable of the talents. In ancient times, “talents” was a measure of money. But I have often thought that there is real value in reading this parable with our contemporary use of the word “talents”; that is, that God has generously blessed us with particular gifts in terms of skills and abilities that we can use to build up the body of Christ. Like the characters in the story, God has entrusted us with skills and abilities that are to be used in his service and to better the world around us. If we never take the time or opportunity to nurture those talents and to find ways to use them for purposes other than selfish ones, then we are like that last slave in the story. If we depreciate those God-given talents by being complacent or by saying that we really have nothing to offer, then we actually put ourselves into the outer darkness. We

create our own unhappiness and that can also lead to jealousy. I know that I do not have a talent for athletic activities – but I have really learned to enjoy doing athletic activities badly. I could spend my time and energy dwelling on my deficits as an athlete and never actually get out there and engage in being active simply because it is good for me and simply because God, in His generosity, has gifted me a physical body that can walk and dance and ride a bike, and so forth. I will never be an Olympian, but there are other ways that I can contribute to the world and to helping to bring the Kingdom of God into the present by striving to be kind and generous to others in a way that reflects God's kindness and generosity to all creation, including human beings.

And so, as we consider the fruit of the Spirit and, in particular, kindness and generosity, how might we take action this week to make those two qualities more overt in our own lives? What opportunities might we take to show kindness to others or to be generous? It may be that you find that the two go hand in hand. It may be that giving another person the benefit of the doubt in a difficult situation will be both an act of generosity and kindness. Paul reminds us this morning, and will continue to remind us throughout September, that a Spirit-led life will be exemplified by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When others see these qualities in us, that is a sign that the Spirit is at work in our lives. And when we strive to nurture these qualities in ourselves, we are actually inviting the Spirit to do even more in our lives than we can ask or imagine. Amen.