

Sermon Series on the Fruit of the Spirit

Week #3: Humility & Self-Control

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

To this point in our sermon series, we have talked about kindness, generosity, patience, and faithfulness as elements of the fruit of the Spirit. This week we turn our focus to humility and self-control. Like last week, these two aspects of the fruit of the Spirit can seem to be pretty challenging to strive for; particularly in our contemporary culture. We are bombarded by messages from media and from people who do not subscribe to the Christian way of living that we should self-promote; that that is the only way to get ahead in this world. And we are certainly discouraged from self-control, instead being constantly encouraged to “just go for it” and “live for today”, to not think about the longer term consequences of being impulsive or of being self-indulgent. But humility and self-control are one of the key ways that we can make sure that we are living **in** the world while not being **of** the world.

It is not often that we get to hear readings from the Book of Sirach on Sunday mornings, so it is a bit refreshing to encounter this passage. Many theologians see this book as being characterized by wisdom and by teaching. The author, Sirach, reminds us that wisdom is a gift from God that is so profound that we will never truly understand it in this life. But he reminds us that holding a deep respect for God is our entry point into accessing the wisdom that will allow us to lead happy, peaceful, and fruitful lives. We are reminded to be slow to anger, to exercise patience, to be faithful and to be humble. In many respects, this passage from Sirach is reminiscent of what Paul was saying to the faith community in Galatia: turn away from things like self-indulgence, drunkenness, envy, jealousy, quarreling, anger, divisiveness, idolatry, lust, and impurity. Instead, live lives that will be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, humility, and self-control.

Psalms 18 is considered to be a song of thanksgiving. David, having been rescued by God from his enemies and from Saul, is believed to have sung these words. We need to

remember that this song and David's rescue predate the stories that we heard about earlier this summer when we delved into the book of Samuel. At this point in his life, David has yet to encounter Bethsheba and all of that business that followed. And so he sings this song to God, believing that it is his faithfulness and his righteousness that have prompted God to rescue him. But the key to this psalm is verse 27: *For you deliver a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down.* It is David's humility, his ability to humble himself before God, that has also moved God to save him from his enemies.

In our Gospel passage from Luke 14, Jesus is again using a parable, a story built around a metaphor, to help the Pharisees to understand an important message about humility. At this point in the story, Jesus has been invited to eat a meal on the sabbath at the home of a leader of the Pharisees. There are other guests there, important people in the Jewish community, and Jesus watches them work through that awkward dance that sometimes happens when dinner guests are trying to figure out where to sit. Clearly, this was at a time before we had place cards and seating charts. In that culture, where you sat in relation to the most important person at the table was a reflection of your own status. People wanted to sit in the places of honour and Jesus is telling them that this is the exact opposite of humility. He cautions them against choosing the best places for themselves because they might actually be asked to move lower down; a situation that would be far more humiliating than choosing a humbler place first and possibly being asked to move up. Jesus also cautions them against showing a false kind of generosity to their peers or to those whom they want to befriend for reasons of status. He tells them that inviting people to your home for dinner is not actually that generous if you know that they will very likely return the favour. And, in the case of inviting someone who is wealthier or more popular to your home for dinner in the hopes of actually getting more out of the deal with a return invitation is also not really an act of generosity. But, inviting those who are marginalized or poor to share in your abundance is a different story. Inviting someone to share in your abundance who has no possible way of returning the favour **is** the kind of activity and the kind of generosity that God notices and is also in keeping with the fruit of the Spirit.

Humility and self-control are not easily achieved; they are hard won qualities that we have to work at. Beyond being elements of the fruit of the Spirit, we are also reminded this morning that they are qualities that make up the unchangeable character of God. Paul directed the people of Galatia to follow the Gospels as the guide to the “good life” rather than worrying about following the law of Moses. He was not suggesting to the Galatians that the Gospels would provide them with a kind of recipe book on how to be a Christian anymore than the law of Moses was intended to be a kind of recipe book for the Jewish community. In fact, one of the biggest challenges that Jesus offered to the Jewish community was to STOP relying on the numerous rules and regulations that they had come to count on as a kind of recipe book for living. He believed that the Jewish people had become so caught up in sticking to the letter of the law that they had forgotten the spirit of the law. Likewise, in his commentary to the Galatians, Paul is telling the people to shift their focus from rules and regulations thinking about the meaning of the Gospels. And in doing so, he is also drawing them into thinking on the unchangeable character of God. Paul tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is evidence to ourselves and to others that God is at work in our lives. But the qualities that make up the fruit of the Spirit are also consistent with the character of God. We should not strive to be humble or self-controlled simply because we want to experience the fruit of the Spirit. We should strive to cultivate those qualities in ourselves and in our lives because doing so more closely aligns who and what we are with the character of God. If we consider what the book of Genesis tells us, we know that we are created in the image of God. Does it not make sense, then, for us to use our lives and our energies to be more like God, more like that unchangeable character of God? Amen.