

“Choosing Life”  
Galatians 5:16-18, 22-26  
Luke 6:31-38

Pastor Norman Fowler  
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow  
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Just wondering, do you like gentleness? How about self-control? These are the final two fruits of the Spirit that we are talking about today.

I like gentleness. I like a gentle breeze. It's certainly a lot better than a gale-force wind. And self-control – I certainly like it when somebody else is showing it with me.

That's probably not what Jesus is suggesting, that I ask everybody else do these things, but rather, that I might consider how I might allow gentleness and self-control to grow in my life as well. He's really talking to us, isn't he, not just to everyone else. He calls each of us to allow these character traits to work their way into our lives.

Now, the problem I sometimes have, particularly with gentleness, is it seems a little wimpy, like I shouldn't really respond strongly to anything. I don't think that's really what this gentleness is all about. We can start where Eugene Peterson does with gentleness and say it's simply not forcing our way in life. Not forcing *our* way.

As I was reading through the definition in a much longer list, one of the things that stood out to me was a short description that was noted. This definition is “using our strength to accommodate another's weakness.” Isn't that an interesting way to think about gentleness? It's to recognize that gentleness happens when we are able to have the strength to help another, to support another, to see the other's weakness and not take advantage of it, but to help them in that place of need. There's a certain amount of strength that is needed, not to try to force our way in life, but to actually care about the other. We will talk a little more about that.

What about self-control? Well, again, Eugene Peterson has an interesting way of putting it. He suggests it's a way of marshalling and directing our energies wisely. That makes it sound pretty nice. Another definition was to refrain from hampering or hurting another. Notice that all these seem to have something to do with relationships, don't they? As we've looked through the whole list of fruits and as we look at these two today—gentleness and self-control—it's all about relationships and how we live it out and how we let God work in us to live it out.

The only struggle I have is that if I'm in the middle of something with someone, I'm working on something or just trying to figure out how to relate or I'm perhaps having a little difference of agreement, it's hard for me to go through the list – is this loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, generous, faithful, gentle, self-controlled – I'm probably just not going to do it in the middle of an activity, am I?

It's interesting that in today's scripture, Jesus is, at least the way Eugene Peterson translates it, giving us a rule of thumb because we need something that helps us

understand quickly. Oh, well maybe if I think how I would like to be treated in this circumstance... It's interesting, we've all heard that before, sometimes called the Golden Rule: Do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

What's interesting to me about this is that it's a wonderful rule of thumb, but what I find in my own life is that I tend to find myself trying to work on this but struggling with being a garden-variety sinner. I love the way Eugene Peterson put that, because it made me think about how, in my life, oftentimes I feel more like a garden-variety person that's full of weeds rather than lots of fruit. It seems that what I've done is slightly misunderstood Jesus. Instead of trying to figure out what I would like others to do to me, I react differently. I react as if I think, "I will do to others as they do to me." Slightly different, isn't it?

I think what Jesus is encouraging is not to live out of reaction, but out of right action. Thinking about what the right action is first, in spite of my reactions. To think about what I want done first, to think about how I would like to be treated. I can tell you that one of the things I recognize is that I would like to be treated the way the fruits of the Spirit are described. I like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. I like those things. I like people to be that way around me. Interesting.

Jesus gives us a rule of thumb to think about – how we want to be treated is a good way to treat others. It feels to me like Jesus is giving us a rule of thumb that we might have a green thumb in allowing the Spirit to work in our lives to produce the very fruit of the Spirit. I like that. A rule of thumb to give us a green thumb, so that the Spirit might work in our lives to change us.

I still run up against one issue. All of this is really nice. And that's exactly what it is, it's nice. But does it work? Everybody tells me that if I really do that Christian stuff my life is going to be constricted, it's all about moralizing and judgment. These gifts of the Spirit don't seem to me to be like that at all. In fact, what I think Paul is suggesting is that it's just the opposite. When we align our lives with the Spirit, when we follow Jesus, it's not that our lives become constricted and bound in ways that we don't like. I think it's just the opposite, and I think that's what Paul is saying in Galatians. When we align ourselves with the Spirit, we live freely, animated, motivated. Those are wonderful words. I think that's exactly what it is to live into our relationship with Jesus, is to live in a way that we experience freely, that we're animated. I don't know about you, but this world feels more like a force driving me down. I need some animation. I think the Spirit is in our lives to help us feel animated and motivated. What's one of the struggles we have when we feel depression at work in our lives? It's a lack of motivation. It's a feeling that there's nothing to do. When we align ourselves with the Spirit, there's lots to do.

It's not about comparing ourselves with one another. We are each unique. There's a wonderful way that Eugene Peterson translates this at the end of this passage: it's not about comparing ourselves with one another, we have more interesting things to do.

That's being motivated by the Holy Spirit. We have more interesting things to do. We can figure out how we can love one another, where we can find the joy, where we can find the peace and the patience, where we can do all those different things. I would argue that finding how we might live out the fruit of the Spirit is a challenge. It can be exciting, it can be an adventure. We're invited to follow Jesus and to find our way down that adventure.

The one thing I recognize is that as I try to live this out, it's much easier to live this out with the people I don't know, with folks I might meet once in a while. It's always astounded me how easy it is not to exhibit the fruit of the Spirit with the people I know best.

I used to live in a very small community, and they would say that every spring they would have a big fight. There was some truth to that. What was amazing about it was the level of vehemence that occurred, how hard they could be on each other. I would argue that the reason they could do that is because they felt like family. It's amazing to me how easy it is to be hardest on the very people we know best, perhaps starting with ourselves. Jesus is inviting us to live out the fruits of the Spirit, not just with the people we meet occasionally, but with the people we live with every day. To be those who can show the gentleness with the people whose weaknesses we know the best. To show self-control in those places where we want so much *not* to let our self-control govern us. I would argue that when we do that, the moments of joy are better, as well. It's much harder to get to joy with someone when we've worked on each others' weaknesses or we've called each other names, or we've struggled with all kinds of issues. But Jesus calls us to let ourselves think about how we want to be treated, how we want the fruits of the Spirit in our lives with each of the people in our lives. Perhaps starting with ourselves. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness... Think about giving yourself those things sometimes. Gentleness, self-control...

As we celebrate Scout Sunday today, in many ways what all this is about is being prepared for life. That's the Scout Motto: Be Prepared. It's Jesus, and Paul, helping us to be prepared to follow him for life. As we do these things, we will be following another of the things scouts say. We will be doing at least one good turn daily. The good thing about thinking about doing a good turn daily is that it gets to be a habit. That's what we're invited to do, to make these part of our character, who we are, to follow and align ourselves with the Spirit, to recognize that as we do that, God will be at work in our lives. The fruit will be produced.

So we're invited to allow the fruit of the Spirit to become part of who we are as individuals, who we are as a community. Indeed, in many ways as we gather around the table we're celebrating the way God has called us through Christ to be that family in which the fruit are produced. To follow the rule of thumb that gives us the green thumb that allows our lives to begin to produce the fruit of the Spirit. And when we live in a community where there are fruit of the Spirit, I think the tastes are wonderful. Amen.