

Sermon Draft for June 29, 2025

Text: Galatians 5:1, 13–25

Sermon: “Bearing Fruit”

The season of Pentecost is a time to focus on the gift of God’s Spirit. The liturgical color green reminds us of life and growth and fits well with the image of fruit that Paul employs in the Epistle. The Collect employs an agricultural metaphor as well, praying that God may “graft” love for his name into our hearts.

The book of Galatians begins more abruptly than most of Paul’s epistles. He does not pause to give thanks for the Galatians in chapter 1; instead, he launches immediately into a rebuke. Why? The issue at stake in Galatia is nothing less than the Gospel itself. Are we saved by grace or by works? Does salvation depend on our own efforts or the work of Jesus Christ? False teachers are enslaving God’s people under the Law, turning their faith to their own efforts instead of to Jesus, and Paul is writing so that in Christ they may be set free.

This message remains essential today. There is no more effective way for the devil to lead pious people astray than to turn their focus to their own efforts. In Galatia, the false teaching declared that one needs Jesus plus circumcision to be saved. Today, the message may be that we need Jesus plus a moderate level of good works, Jesus plus particular spiritual gifts, or Jesus plus a clean record when it comes to certain sins. Therefore, Paul definitively declares that Jesus plus any contribution from me equals the end of grace and an obligation to obey God's whole Law. That equation leads to fear and doubt, to death and certain damnation.

So, we take our stand on the work of Christ alone. Jesus' atoning death plus Jesus' victorious resurrection plus Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit equals life and salvation, equals freedom from fear and doubt, and equals not just justification but also sanctification.

You step out of the car and take a deep breath, drawing in the fresh, fragrant air. Rows of apple trees stretch before you, the budding fruit small and green.

Beyond them is a field covered with spreading vines that are supplying life to watermelons, little orbs growing slowly but surely larger. On the near side of the trees are bushes, bursting with color, beckoning you with their fruit. The strawberries are already in season, and it doesn't take long to fill your container with juicy, red pickings. You lift one to your lips and sink your teeth into its sweetness. It doesn't get much better than this!

God has filled this world with delightful fruits. He has given us apples and watermelons and strawberries. He has given us pineapples, blueberries, oranges, bananas, mangoes, kiwi, and grapes. As if that's not enough, there are peaches, pears, plums, tangerines, raspberries, and blackberries. All that, and we are still just scratching the surface. There are thousands of different varieties just of the apples, not to mention all the more exotic fruits we could find as we travel the world. God has created a world that is absolutely bursting with fruit of the tree and vine.

And then there is the fruit that God seeks in us. Paul mentions nine varieties. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Each one is delicious, and together they provide exactly the feast that we want to come home to at the end of a long day, or to find at the office as we go to work. We want our schools, our communities, and our nation to be marked with exactly these characteristics. God created us not just to enjoy fruit, but to bear fruit, to become an orchard that is continuously producing love and joy and peace and everything else that delights him and makes his world a wonderful place to live.

So, back to the orchard, there you stand, strawberries in hand, still delighting in the flavor that God provided on your tongue. And then a careless child runs past, knocking into your bucket and spilling the produce to the ground. You look around for the negligent parents and see that one of them is staring down at a phone while the other picks berries, and neither one recognizes the mess caused by their offspring.

Your blood pressure rises, and as you bend down to begin cleaning up the mess, the words that escape from your lips are not exactly patient, kind, gentle, and self-controlled.

And that is the problem, isn't it. God created us to bear fruit. But love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control do not exactly come naturally. Apple trees bear apples. Strawberry bushes bear strawberries. But what do we bear? What comes naturally to us?

In our text, Paul lists some crass sins: ***“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God”*** (vs 19–21). Lots of those were the kinds of things that just about everyone agrees are evil.

But did you notice that Paul's list of grievous sins also includes a few items that sound uncomfortably familiar? Words like jealousy, divisions, envy, and impurity hit close to home.

These come naturally. These grow effortlessly. And for that reason, Paul is quick to warn that those who make a practice of doing such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. If this is what the orchard produces, it has no place in God's kingdom. If this is what I produce, I have no place in God's kingdom. That is a scary thought!

And so, the solution seems obvious. Try harder not to sin. Try harder to be loving and joyful and to have peace and to be patient and to do everything else that Paul lists among the fruit of the Spirit. Try harder, and hope your effort is good enough.

It makes sense to us. In one form or another, this is what the religions of the world teach. This is what the Galatian Christians were trying to do. Paul wrote this entire letter because he heard that they were working hard to fulfill the Law of Moses, even to the point of embracing circumcision.

But for Paul, that the Christians in Galatia are trying so hard is a huge red flag, and it should be for you and for me too. They are trying hard to get something that God had already given them.

Imagine again stepping out of the car into that orchard. This time you walk past the strawberry bushes, through the rows of apple trees, until you come upon the farmer. And when you see him there, wearing a big straw hat and denim overalls, you're surprised to find him holding a baseball bat and standing in front of a gnarly old oak tree with bare branches and giant hollows visible in its trunk. You watch for a moment, and the farmer pulls back the bat over his shoulder and then lets it rip like he's swinging for a grand slam, right into the side of that oak tree.

"More apples!" he yells. "What's wrong with you? I told you last year I wanted more apples." And then the tree gets another blow.

It's a ridiculous picture. You don't have to be a farmer to recognize that the problem is not that the tree is not trying hard enough. The problem is that it's not an apple tree.

If the farmer wants apples to grow in that spot, the oak tree is going to have to go, and a new tree is going to have to be planted in its place.

The problem in Galatia is not that they're not trying hard enough. The problem is not that they need to add laws like circumcision to their list. The problem is that they've taken their eyes off of Jesus Christ and what he did for them at the cross. By running back to their own obedience, they are searching for fruit on a tree that can have nothing to offer.

Paul describes two trees growing in our lives. The first he identifies as the flesh, because you and I are born into slavery to sin. Until Christ comes to redeem our bodies, my flesh will continue to produce desires that are opposed to God and his will. It is worse than an unfruitful oak tree. The sinful flesh actively opposes fruit. It produces weeds and thorns and poison: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, and the whole rest of the list, including the sins that seem big to us and including the sins that seem small to us.

Make no mistake. Those who make a practice of doing such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

This tree cannot produce good fruit. We can yell at it, beat ourselves up, tell ourselves to do better, buy a book on self-improvement, hire a life coach, and maybe even make a little progress curtailing some bad behaviors. But the fruit of love? The sweetness of genuine joy? The delicious flavor of real peace? Nothing good grows from the sinful flesh. This tree has to go. A new tree has to grow.

And the good news, it is! As Baptism united you with Jesus, that first tree was sentenced to death. As Paul said, ***“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”*** (v 24). Those passions and desires exist. But they are dead and dying, pinned to the cross of Jesus.

And in Baptism, God planted his Spirit within us. His Spirit is already full of love, already has perfect joy, already lives in perfect peace. Patience is not something God’s Spirit is working on.

God does not come to his children with a baseball bat, yelling, “Try harder to be patient!” Instead, God came to dwell within us, and God is patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. All of that already exists in you, because God’s Spirit is in you. And so, says Paul, since **“we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit”** (v 25).

Amen.