

Pastor Walker has told me that you will be beginning a sermon series on the gifts of the Holy Spirit next week. I assume you're going to spend a lot of time looking at Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. There you'll be finding gifts like: prophesy, teaching, speaking in tongues, exhortation, etc. He said I could create a sermon on the subject but I thought I do something different and speak about the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is different than the gifts.

When I was in seminary the professor who taught the epistles, or letters of the New Testament, was a stickler for details. His homework and exam questions were very hard to answer, and he'd often write the questions in Greek. We were all taught to translate Greek because the New Testament was originally written in Greek.

So I'll never forget the one homework assignment where the question was, written in Greek, "List five of the gifts of the Holy Spirit." Okay, not too hard. Just find Romans 12 or 1

Corinthians 12 and start listing: Healing, miracles, prophesy, speaking in tongues, etc.

The next question, again written in Greek, "List the nine fruits of the Spirit." Okay, not too hard. Just turn to Galatians 5:22 and write, "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

I got the homework back and discovered that I had gotten the gifts of the Spirit right, but a check mark at the fruits of the Spirit. I was confused. The person sitting beside me got it wrong too. In fact, every person in the class - except one - got it wrong. With our cry of confusing the professor asked the one person who got it right to give the answer. He said, "There is no such thing as the fruits of the Holy Spirit."

There was an immediate cry of protest. Of course there are fruits of the Spirit! There's nine of them. It says so in Galatians 5:22-23. The professor gave a smirky smile and said read the question again. "The question asked for the fruits of the Spirit and you gave me the fruit of the Spirit." He went on

to say that the gifts of the Spirit are plural. But the fruit of the Spirit is singular. It is all one.

He made his point well, and obviously I remembered it. The gifts of the Spirit vary from person to person. One person may be able to teach, but another can't teach to save his life. One person can manage the finances of a major corporation, but another can't figure out how to balance a check book.

But everyone is expected to present the fullness of the fruit of the Spirit. You can't say, "I'm loving because the Spirit inspires that in me, but it's okay that I'm not patient because the Spirit hasn't given me that ability." No, simply being a Christian means that you would expect to have the qualities of: being loving, being joyful, being peaceful, being patient. Being kind and generous and faithful and gentle and having self-control. These are the qualities that the presence of the Holy Spirit brings to life in you.

At least that's the way it's supposed to work. But of course being humans, we have flaws.

I don't know about you, but I'm somewhat afraid of flying. No, it's nothing to do with being afraid of flying up high in the sky, or crashing or anything like that. It's the thought of being sealed in this flying tin can and having no way out, and you never know who's going to be seated beside you. Perhaps it will be a pleasant likeable person. That's nice. Perhaps it will be a person who just can't get comfortable and fidgets and jerks and moves around constantly. Maybe you have the aisle seat and the person at the window has to come and go every five minutes. Perhaps it will be person with a loud mouth who wants to talk the whole way and you just want to sleep. Perhaps it will be someone with horrible B.O., or bad breath. Horror of horrors, it might be a person with bad breath and who talks a lot.

The point is, you can't get away! You have an assigned seat! You have to sit there. All you can do is pray that you don't have to circle the airport a lot and you can land quickly. You think it would be unchristian to pray for the airplane to lose cabin pressure so those little masks would pop out of the ceiling; so that at least then the person beside you would stop talking!

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; O God, why is it so hard
sometimes?

Most of us can endure anything for a plane flight that lasts a couple hours. Our ability to manifest the fruit of the Spirit for the long term gets really tough. There's the employee in the cubicle next to you who is forever kissing up to the boss and undermining your own work. There's the family member you just can't get along with. Or there's abuse or addictions at work in your life. Manifesting love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control gets to be a really really big and almost impossible burden.

You'll remember that only a couple verses after describing the fruit of the Spirit Paul writes, "Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another." In the burdens and drudgery that often comes with daily life, these qualities which rot the fruit of the Spirit can come on all too strong.

I wish I could give you a solution or a formula to follow that would guarantee that you'll always have the fruit of the Spirit visible in your life, but I can't. No matter how much you pray, or read the Bible, or work in small groups, or do spiritual disciplines, you can't guarantee it, and you'll never have the fruit of the Spirit perfectly manifested in your life no matter how hard you try.

We have to remember that the fruit *of God's Spirit*. Not the fruit of our own spirit. It is God's work, not ours. And that's a good thing. If by our own work we could accomplish such a thing we'd have good reason brag and boast. But the Bible reminds us that if we are going to boast about anything it is to boast about God's power and goodness.

No, the fruit of the Spirit cannot be had by our own strength or willpower. Maybe we can keep it up for a while but sooner or later we'll mess up.

But this fruit of the Spirit is rooted in something deeper. In fact it is only the expression of something deeper, and if by the grace of God you connect with that deeper thing you'll unexpectedly discover the fruit of the Spirit coming out of you all over the place.

Let's come at the deeper level through the back door. Have you ever been to Frontier Field to watch a Redwings game? And when you were there were they people by the ticket booths with a bullhorn preaching about Christ? Or maybe there were people passing out pamphlets and flyers?

I hope I'm not offending anyone with this example, but how effective do you think they are at spreading the good news of God's love? Not very, in my opinion. In fact I think it's counterproductive. I think doing that is turning people off more than opening them to Christ. Personally I cringe and I almost want to cry to hear the grace of God presented in such a way. I wish they'd take a lesson from Jesus himself.

Do you remember in the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Luke Jesus sends 70 of his followers out to visit the towns he

himself intended to visit later? They go out as sort of a warm-up act. What were Jesus' instructions to them? "Carry no purse, no bag, not sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid."

This last bit always makes me think of the advice my parents gave to me when I was about to visit a friend's house. They'd say to make sure I ate whatever they put in front of me, whether I liked it or not. You don't say, "Yuck, this is disgusting! How do you cook such filth?" No, I think we teach our kids to be polite, even if it means telling a little lie.

How many supplies does Jesus say his followers should take on their evangelism tours? Nothing. No purse, not bag, no sandals. Eat and drink whatever they offer. Did he say to take a bullhorn, or tracts, or flyers, or invitations? No. None of that stuff.

Did you ever wonder why? Why did Jesus send his new converts who barely know anything about Jesus and they haven't seen the crucifixion yet so they don't even begin to understand what is going on; why did Jesus send them out so obviously ill equipped to do the work? He doesn't even give them a prepared speech to deliver. He only gives them an opening line, "Peace to this house!"

I can't pretend to fully know what was in Jesus' mind when he did this, but I do know one effect it had. It made this band of evangelists needy. It made them have to listen and be open to the people they were visiting.

Whenever I hear someone shouting gospel messages through a bullhorn to a passing crowd, in the midst of my cringing at what is happening I'm also thinking, "You're telling me that you have the solutions to my problems, but you don't even know what my problems are. You're not listening."

If you won't listen to people, you can't begin to get to know them. Those ill-equipped followers of Jesus that went out that day long ago really had the power to do only one thing -

listen to people. That is the first step in loving someone, and that is the first step in evangelism.

Love people and the fruit of the Spirit will naturally grow in your life. If you'd like to bear the fruit of the Spirit, don't start there. Start by recognizing that every person you meet is created in the image of God, and this is someone whom God loves so much that God was willing to die to have him or her. Yes, they may be annoying. Yes they may bore your to tears, or maybe even exploit and abuse you. They may be the loud-mouthed bad-breathed annoying guy crammed beside you in an airplane. But God was willing to die to save such a person. Love him or her. Listen to that person and stay open to the nudging of the Spirit... and then take it from there.

Now, you know well that not everyone is receptive. And Jesus gave advice for that too. Did he say that his followers should stay and keep at it on and on and on? No. He said if they don't receive you then go; leave. Don't curse them. Don't condemn them. Don't get back at them. That is God's business. Just go.

Just as an aside... I cringe when people don't take that advice, especially if they're in abusive relationships. They say they think they should just keep taking it, because by their love God will turn the other person.

Maybe; anything's possible. But Jesus' most direct advice is to go. If treating another person as being made in the image of God and loving them doesn't change destructive behavior in a relatively short time, it's not going to happen in the long run either. And your ability to manifest the fruit of the Spirit will get ever harder.

Because that's the other piece of this. You don't do it alone. You are Willowbrook Christian Church. You aren't Willowbrook Association of Individuals Who Go Through Life Apart.

The fruit of the Spirit in us nourishes others, and they are nourishment to us. The Victor clergy celebrate this pulpit exchange most years because it is a way to remind us all that even though our beliefs and worship practices differ, we are all

united in Christ, and the Spirit's work is carried out through us all.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control - not nine distinct qualities but one fruit of God's Spirit.

May God's Spirit be present among you, empower these qualities to dominate your life, and bless you to be a blessing to others. Amen.