

**Pastor:** Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

**Scripture:** Galatians 5:16-26

*“<sup>16</sup> Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. <sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>22</sup> By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. <sup>24</sup> And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.”*

Most of you know that Pastor Audrey and I have spent the past couple days with the Youth of the Mid-Atlantic District of the Church of the Brethren at their Winter Retreat over in Westminster. The theme we were given by the District Youth Cabinet, of which our own Katie Hardy is a member, was to explore the Fruit of the Spirit. They told us that they wanted to understand them and embody them more than just be able to memorize them. Several of them already had them memorized because of an old children’s song they probably learned at Vacation Bible School. Maybe you remember the little ditty, too. But they wanted to go deeper, so this morning Pastor Audrey is with the youth sharing the final session on the Fruit of the Spirit and I am here with you to preach on some of our thoughts on this familiar text from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians. So, let’s start with talking about reflexes.

The human body truly is amazing. In addition to basic reflexes that are built into our joints, muscles, and brain, one of the truly fascinating reflexes of the human body happens when we are under stress and our body can decide in an instant whether to flee or fight. We call this the fight-or-flight response to stress. Scientists like to say it goes back to the time when a primitive human had to decide in an instant whether to run from a wild animal or fight it. But in a moment of stress our bodies are prepared to help us make that difficult decision and make it fast. Thus, you ought to know quickly to spring into action as a child walks too close to a busy intersection—that’s fight or to get out of a building that is filling with smoke—that’s flight. It’s like a basic natural reflex.

But what I am more interested in is whether or not bearing the fruits of the spirit can be as simple as a reflex. Can we condition our mind, body, and spirit to respond to life’s dilemmas with fruit? And how are we naturally inclined to respond to dilemmas—with good or rotten fruit?

Well, as we seek to answer these questions, let’s look at the actual fruits we’re talking about here. The fruits of the spirit section of this scripture is just a list of good qualities a person ought to possess. Scholars call this list a virtue list. The virtues on this virtue list are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—a good list of virtues. Now virtue lists were quite a popular thing for teachers to put out there for their disciples to learn in ancient times. Even in the New Testament, other less popular virtue lists can

be found in 2 Corinthians; 1 & 2 Timothy; and 2 Peter. I think you get the idea; these were popular.

However, the opposite of a virtue list is also quite popular and present in the earlier verses of Galatians 5:19-21. Scholars call this opposing list a “vice list.” Vice lists and virtue lists. Paul calls this specific vice list the “works of the flesh” and this list includes “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.” Notice how much longer the vice list is. So, we read these competing qualities as the works of the flesh and the fruits of the Spirit.

So why are these lists so popular? I think it’s important to understand a little about the way the ancient Biblical folks understood ethics. We’ve had centuries of ethicists pondering what makes for a right or wrong decision. We’ve discovered that finding a truly right or moral choice depends on a myriad of factors which include the best outcome for the most people, the level of harm a choice inflicts, the agreement of a choice with the cultural moral norms of the time, or the agreement with a person’s religious morals.

Let’s take the ethical dilemma commonly known as the Trolley Problem. A train trolley is running on tracks that will run into a crowd of people surely to kill many, but you are near a lever that would alter its tracks making the trolley hit just one person certainly killing him. What do you do: allow the trolley to kill many or turn the lever so that it kills only one? It’s an ethicist’s no-win scenario that forces you to think more about what makes a decision right or wrong. Some would say, whichever choice hurts the fewest people, so you turn the lever and only one person dies. Some would say whichever keeps your hands clean, so you stay out of it and allow the many to die. Some would say if you have an opportunity to act morally and do nothing, you’re still guilty.

I hope this illustrates the complexities of how people decide what is good and moral. Now in New Testament times, the prevailing view on ethics was organized by Aristotle and it was called, virtue ethics. Aristotle asserted that if we base our living off the achievement of a few important virtues, that we would lead a moral, ethical life. If I aim to be generous, kind, and have self-control, I would have a virtuous moral life.

This virtue ethics lends itself to Christian and Jewish teaching because, as Paul believed, if people would just pursue the fruits or virtues of the Spirit, they could lead a good life. If someone could make those virtuous qualities second nature, then they would consistently make good choices. This was popular thought in those days and I do believe that many of us believe them, too. We want good, virtuous, fruity people making the tough decision when they need to because if they are grounded in virtue, they’ll be wise in the moment. Their ethical reflexes will be good. I think that logic is fair, but it is not so easy to be grounded in virtue.

I think the keys to being grounded in virtues and fruits are found in the rest of the Galatians text this morning that does not include virtue and vice lists.

It’s important to note that, in the end, these lists of virtues and vices are not all-encompassing lists. This is not some recreating of the law in the Torah; these are not some new set of Ten Commandments breathed upon tablets by God. No, this is just another list of virtues, to which we could add other very important characteristics for a true Christian. Paul just chooses these because they’re likely relevant to the Galatians people, helpful to them.

So, knowing that grounding ourselves in the fruits of the Spirit is not about following and spending time necessarily in these specific character traits, how do we become grounded? The answer is in the section title, “Fruits of the Spirit.” We become grounded in the Spirit. The Spirit is what is so important here because it is out of the Spirit that the virtues flow. So, we

don't spend time dwelling on being filled with self-control and expect that we'll be filled with the Spirit. We dwell with the Spirit and find ourselves filled with self-control. Do you get that twist? Nor can we fill ourselves and dwell in patience and expect the Spirit to come from that. No, these things flow out of the Spirit, not into it.

We can't virtue ourselves into Christian living. Christian virtue comes from dwelling with the Holy Spirit? So, how do we dwell with the Spirit? You already know the answer to this. These answers are simple: participate in worship, prayer, study, and Christian fellowship. Worship, prayer, study, and Christian fellowship: when you do these things you are communing with the Spirit, you are soaking up the Holy Spirit's transforming power and your fruits are ripening.

Do you remember the words of Jesus about the vine and branches? We are going to dwell on this text a little more during the season of Lent when we focus on the "I am" sayings of Jesus in the Gospels, but this saying is very appropriate today also. Jesus said in John 15: 5, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." Don't just try to be ethical; try to be spiritual and then you'll bear good fruit. Be a branch that's source of life is the true vine, the true source of sustenance—this is Jesus Christ and his very real Spirit.

Work on your spiritual self and you will find yourself making better choices, bearing better fruit. If the philosophy of virtue ethics is true and in order to become more ethical, we must practice and dwell in good virtue. Then as Christians we can't choose a single virtue to work on, but we can choose the Spirit out of which all virtues flow. So, I urge you, develop greater habits and disciplines that keep you connected to the vine; then and only then will we all see the good fruits come to bear.