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Title: Fruit of the Spirit Series – 1. The Key To Transformation

Text: Galatians 5:22-23

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” Today we seem to live in a culture that doesn’t have many filters. Blogs, Facebook posts and even songs invite our likes and dislikes. I’ve read some incredible posts and listened to some nice songs and I’m surprised to see the number of dislikes. People say what they want—when they want. It doesn’t seem to matter how hurtful or ugly they sometimes are. Sometimes even we in the church have a distorted idea of what spiritual maturity really looks like. We seem to think that if a person has enough knowledge, and uses the correct terminology and can quote the right people, then they must be spiritually mature—because they’re so informed, and they have the opinions to prove it. So it doesn’t matter if they’re mean and hateful; it only matters that they’re right. Right? Actually, WRONG! In the gospels, and in the letters of Paul—in fact, throughout all the New Testament—we encounter a different measure of true spirituality. It’s not based on the opinions you hold; it’s based on the life that you live, and the person you are. True spirituality—spiritual maturity—is marked by Christian character, and Christian character is defined, to a great extent, by how you treat others. This is why Paul said, *“We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God”* (Colossians 1:9-10). During the course of this series we will hold up these nine qualities (Gal. 5:22-23) as a model of spiritual maturity. These nine qualities define the person that God wants you to be. This does not diminish the importance of having an accurate understanding of theology and sound doctrine, knowing what you believe and being able to defend Biblical truth. But it does put all of our knowledge into a greater context: How does what we believe affect how we live? How does it affect the person we become? We often refer to these as the FRUITS of the Spirit, as if there are nine of them, but Paul actually refers to the FRUIT—SINGULAR—of the Spirit. All nine go together and build on one another. Why is that significant? Because they’re a unit. This is NOT a buffet. You can’t say, “I’ll take joy and peace, but self-control and patience aren’t my top priority.” They all come together. These qualities exist in your spiritual DNA, so to speak, because you are a new creation in Christ and the Holy Spirit is living within you. So, the potential is there, BUT it needs to be developed, nurtured, and cultivated. And so ... that’s the focus of this series. Today, we’ll talk about the first step of spiritual growth—the KEY TO TRANSFORMATION. This is where it begins for every Christian. If you want to grow in your spiritual life, if you want to bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your daily walk, this is where it begins. There are three things you should do on a daily basis in order to cultivate the Spirit’s fruit. The key word here is **DAILY**.

1. Prepare Your Heart. Whenever I hear this phrase, I can’t help but think of the Old Testament verse about King Rehoboam: *“And he did evil, because he prepared not his heart to seek the Lord”* (2 Chronicles 12:14). How do you prepare your heart? It begins with **PRAYER**—simply asking God to make these qualities come alive in your life. John Stott was a noted teacher and theologian of recent times. He went home to be with the Lord about 7 years ago at the age of 90. He spent most of his ministry serving one church, and he also served the global church. He wrote a number of books, preached all over the world, had a tremendous influence in the lives of many, and was even named one of the 100 most influential people in the world (Time Magazine, 2005). For many years he began every day with the same prayer (refer to bulletin insert). That shows how important these nine qualities were to him. It’s quite a challenging list. The fact is, we’ll never get there without God’s help. We cannot develop these qualities on our own. So cultivating the fruit of the Spirit begins with a prayer: “God, make these qualities real in my life.” You also prepare your heart by **SPENDING TIME IN THE WORD**. When you read the Bible, you give God the opportunity to speak to you about YOU. The Holy Spirit will draw to your attention—certain **ATTITUDES** you need to change, certain **ACTIONS** you need to avoid, certain **BEHAVIORS** you need

to put into practice. So each morning you can turn to the Scripture and say: “God, tell me what I need to hear in order to become more like Jesus.” Preparing your heart in this way is like preparing the soil of a garden. You’re breaking up the fallow ground. You’re getting beneath the hard surface and you’re getting into the area where the seeds of growth can take root. In order for the Spirit’s fruit to ripen in your life, you need to prepare your heart EACH DAY! Instead of being like Rehoboam, we need to be like Ezra, “*And Ezra prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord...*” (Ezra 7:10). As you spend time in fellowship with God each day, he will lead you into the next step.

2. Prune Away Every Obstacle. When you prune, you’re removing obstacles to growth. During my Summers when I was a kid, I learned about the process of thinning in the orchard. If there was a cluster of four or five apples on a branch, you would pull off the two or three smallest ones so that the others would have room to grow. It works the same way in our spiritual life. You constantly need to be pruning and thinning away anything that stands in the way of your growth. Some of these are obvious. **SIN**, needless to say. Other things are less obvious—because they’re not necessarily bad—but they’re just not the best use of your time. They’re like the smaller apples in the cluster. Former NFL coach George Allen had a sign on his office wall that said: “Is what I’m doing right now taking me closer to my ultimate goal of winning?” This is the kind of question we need to ask when we’re pruning our daily lives: “Is this way of doing things taking me closer to my ultimate goal of becoming a spiritually mature follower of Jesus Christ?” There are many things in our lives that stand in the way of our greater spiritual growth, and we need to be willing to prune them out. For some, that may be: “I won’t discuss politics anymore, because the topic tends to bring out the worst in me.” Or... “I will limit TV to an hour a day, because it gets in the way of better things.” OR... “I’m going to stop trying to be funny, because my jokes tend to hurt others.” And on and on. This is what the writer of Hebrews was talking about when he said, “...let us also lay aside EVERY weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...” (Hebrews 12:1). This is the kind of pruning that is necessary if we are to grow into the fullness of Jesus Christ.

3. Practice Each Quality. Do you know how you get better at loving others? Same way you get to Carnegie Hall: YOU PRACTICE! How do you become more patient? YOU PRACTICE! How do you develop self-control? YOU PRACTICE! And on and on. Here is a paradox of the Christian life. You can’t become spiritually mature by your own effort. Neither can you become spiritually mature WITHOUT your own effort. I’ve heard people say: “If God wants me to be patient, He’ll just have to make me patient, because I have no patience.” Now, if your heart’s desire is to become patient, God will make you patient. Part of the process for this transformation is that you practice as often as you can. Tim Hill, as accomplished as he is as a saxophone player, did not fall asleep one night and wake up the next morning a saxophonist. Practice made him a great musician. PRACTICE is the key word. Just like swinging a baseball bat and trying to play the right notes on a piano, sometimes you’ll get it right and sometimes you’ll get it wrong, but the more you practice this quality, the more God makes it grow. This is why Paul said, “*What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you*” (Philippians 4:9). You CAN’T do it by your OWN EFFORT; NEITHER can you do it WITHOUT ANY EFFORT at all. What you are willing to PRACTICE, God will bring to PERFECTION. This is why we need to keep these qualities in front of us every day of our lives, front and center, so that we will always remember the exact direction God wants us to go, character-wise. This is what spiritual maturity REALLY looks like. I’ve heard people say that when you have the Holy Spirit, these qualities will naturally come to you—as if it is effortless and inevitable. That’s not accurate. Your spiritual life MUST be cultivated on a daily basis. Do you know what you call this daily cultivation? WALKING IN THE SPIRIT. That’s how most Bible versions say it. I love the way this verse is phrased in the NIV... “*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit*” (Galatians 5:25). Preparing your heart, pruning away obstacles, practicing each quality—that’s what keeping in step with the Spirit is. It’s a DAILY PROCESS. For this reason, John Stott prayed this prayer every day. One writer I read this week said about him: “It hardly seems surprising, then, that many people who knew John Stott personally said that he was the most Christ-like person they ever met.” So, today, I’m challenging each one of you—for the duration of this series, at least, to pray your version of this prayer every day (refer to bulletin insert).