

FILLING UP

→ Somewhere in our homes, most of us will have a bowl of fruit – in the kitchen, in the dining room or in the lounge. The extent to which we dip into it each day will vary from home to home I'm sure, but most of us are very aware of just how good for us fruit really is, so we know that we need to make it a regular part of our diet. What's actually in the bowl will vary from home to home too – apples, oranges, bananas, plums, pears, nectarines, satsumas, peaches – according to our taste and of course, to some extent it will vary depending on the time of year. But it doesn't really matter what the mix is – they are all fruit!

.....And, of course, so are things like tomatoes and cucumbers and squash and marrow even though we may not think of them as such. Basically a fruit is a tool for carrying seed so if it has seeds, it's a fruit. If it hasn't, it isn't. So that means that rhubarb must be a vegetable! What a strange world we live in!

.....Fruit is, of course, nature's way of making sure that seeds are widely distributed. We eat the fruit and then the seeds are generally deposited somewhere else to grow, a long way from their original plant. Over many generations we have seen how far those seeds have been distributed as fruit, in many cases, is now grown a very long way from its original home.

→ In the passage of scripture we've heard this morning, Paul also talks about a crop of fruit. But, of course, he isn't talking about apples and oranges and plums. He's talking about the qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And he calls these the fruit of the Spirit – the fruit that's meant to grow in our lives as we follow Jesus Christ.

.....Now, I'm guessing that many of you here this morning will have heard plenty of sermons over the years about the fruit of the Spirit and perhaps some of you have been greatly encouraged as you've recognised that fruit growing in you. But there may be others of us who actually go away from such sermons feeling quite guilty that we aren't more loving, or more patient, or more kind or have more self-control. Ever felt like that? Thought you must be getting this following Jesus all wrong?

.....Well, I don't think Paul's intention was to make those he was writing to, or us, feel guilty. I'm sure he meant something quite different. You see this list of qualities didn't just come out of the blue. Paul wrote about the fruit of the Spirit as part of a letter to the Christians in Galatia. They were experiencing some difficulties because they wanted to follow Jesus, but some of their teachers thought that in order to do that, they must also keep the Jewish law. They were telling them that they must become Jews first and then Christians after that!

.....Of course, Paul was a Jew himself, so he knew that this wasn't the case at all. He knew that you could be a Christian without first needing to be a Jew. He was slowly abandoning many of the Jewish rituals that he had grown up with because he found they got in the way of him sharing the good news about Jesus with people. He said that the Jewish law was fine as long as it lasted, but now that Jesus had come, everything had changed. You don't need to keep the Jewish law any more he told them. "For freedom, Christ has set us free!" he said in verse 13 of this fifth chapter.

.....But, then it's as if Paul realised that people might just misunderstand him, so he goes on to offer a "but!" And his "but" is that you we do have to let the Holy Spirit fill us and live the way that God encourages us to live. You see, if we choose to live our own way, then we may well see some of the less savoury characteristics and activities that Paul lists in this passage appearing in our lives and people who live like that don't fit into God's kingdom Paul says.

.....But if we allow ourselves to be filled with the Holy Spirit, we will produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. If we belong to Jesus, then our old life and our old ways have been put to death, Paul says. Notice that he doesn't say that it will be put to death or must be put to death, but that it has been put to death. We can produce this fruit when we belong to Jesus and we trust the Spirit to grow that fruit in us.

.....The trouble is though, that some of us don't believe it and we let obstacles get in the way of it happening. We know all too well that we're prone to behave in some of the ways that are mentioned in the more unsavoury list of characteristics and so living in the way that Paul describes with the fruit of the Spirit becoming increasingly evident in us feels like an impossible dream. And as we acknowledged last week, if we're trying to make those changes and force that fruit to grow in our own strength then we will fail.

→ So, what are these obstacles that get in the way of us seeing the fruit grow in our lives? Paul wanted the Galatians to be able to say, "Oh, I see! Now we get it! And he'd want the same for us. But sometimes we're simply ignorant about what the Holy Spirit wants to do in our lives. For example, you may have thought or at least hoped that the Holy Spirit would help to manage your circumstances so that you don't have to put up with other people's inconsistencies which irritate you. But in fact quite the opposite is true. The Holy Spirit isn't going to remove you from those difficult situations but give you the capacity to cope with them. If patience is going to grow in you and me then we have to be in situations where we can exercise that patience. And if love is going to grow in us then we need to be in situations where that love can be displayed, and so on.

.....Then a second thing that keeps us from trusting the Holy Spirit to produce fruit in us is quite simply the fact that we don't believe he can. How many of us have ever admitted that we don't think we could ever have more patience or be a person of peace or exude joy in every circumstance. Oh, we'll have every excuse or reason under the sun why it might be so and why it's impossible for us to change. But, if we're trapped in that kind of cycle, perhaps we actually need to admit to God that we're struggling to believe that he can really change anything in us. Remember that story in Mark's gospel where Jesus tells a sick child's father that "anything is possible to those who believe." The father's response was to say, "I believe, help my unbelief!" Maybe some of us need to make that kind of statement to God too!

.....Why? Because if we're truly God's people, then we're told that we will gradually develop these qualities in us. We're told that we're being made more and more like Jesus as we follow him and these qualities that we call the fruit of the Spirit, are qualities that shone out of Jesus and so should increasingly shine out of us!

→ But, of course, we ourselves, don't always notice these things very much. It's far more obvious to us when we've lost our patience and blown our top than when we haven't. In fact, it reminds me of a silly story of a man with a piece of string tied around his wrist and when he was asked why he wore it, he said, "It's to keep the elephants away!" Of course, the response came back, "But there are no elephants!" "Exactly," said the man. "It works!"

.....It's really hard to prove a negative isn't it! And in some cases it's hard to prove a positive – we know for ourselves when we've been unloving or unkind or impatient. But do we know when we've been loving or kind or patient, because if that's become the normal way we behave we wouldn't necessarily be aware of doing anything extraordinary. And should we be aware of it because wouldn't that make us proud of our behaviour as if it were all down to us, when actually it isn't really – it's down to the Holy Spirit at work in us to change us and grow this fruit.

.....You see you can't make fruit can you? You can't go to a banana factory and watch bananas being made or see the peel being put on an orange. Fruit grows! It's the farmers and gardeners who produce fruit, not factories or mills. The farmer or the gardener does a great deal to protect the fruit trees and see that they aren't eaten by pests or get too dry, but basically they then have to be patient and wait for the fruit to grow and ripen – we can help produce the right conditions but God, gives the growth.

.....And so with us! We can't manufacture love, or joy, or gentleness or any of the other qualities that Paul mentions, but we can help them grow by really being God's people, not just when we're here in church on Sunday but by allowing what we hear and experience and learn here and what we gain from our own prayer time and reading of the Bible to really have an impact on the rest of our week. Coming to church, reading our Bible and saying our prayers in themselves won't change us, but as we make those intentional moves towards God, the Holy Spirit will work in us.

.....You see, the Holy Spirit is a bit like the wind! We can't see Him or always know which direction he may come from next, but when he's passed our way we can usually see where He has been. The Holy Spirit works in unseen, quiet and often unexpected ways to change us and as he does that we'll see the fruit growing or certainly other people will notice the changes in us. Remember what Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing!" And in another of his letters, Paul reminds us to go on being filled with the Holy Spirit because it's not a once and for all thing, but a daily need; a continuous process.

→ So, will you actively trust the Holy Spirit to produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in your life? That isn't about having confidence in your abilities, but confidence in the Holy Spirit's commitment and ability to produce fruit in your life. Some will undoubtedly come more naturally to you than others and there will be occasions where we know we haven't displayed the qualities that we believe we should. But that's because we are all a work in progress.

.....However, the fruit of the Spirit growing in us is not the icing on the cake for just a few followers of Jesus – it is the cake itself. The fruit of the Spirit growing in us is an essential part of being a Christian. The fruit grows as we follow and as we trust that these qualities will become more and more apparent in us. The wind blows where it wills, but will you allow it to blow through your life, enable the fruit to grow and the seeds of your words and your actions to be carried elsewhere and make a difference in other people's lives too?

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