





***Theme: Freedom to Flourish – Discovering Who You
Were Meant to Be
“Finding Love, Joy and Peace”***

Weekly Memory Verse:

²² *But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace... –*
Galatians 5:22a

Monday, May 2 – Read Galatians 5:16-23. The apostle Paul lived in the Roman Empire, where many believed a good life meant “do whatever you want.” This way of living was called “hedonism,” a general term for conduct which is simply about pleasure of one kind or another. As we look around today, we see this way of living is still popular. Paul told the Galatian Christians a truly good life results as we allow God’s Spirit, rather than our own selfish wishes (literally “flesh” in Greek), to direct and control us. He listed nine vital qualities, “fruits,” the Spirit will produce in our lives.


 Paul was sad about the many ways we humans miss the mark. Review his examples in verses 19-21, noting how he mixed socially “respectable” actions with things almost everyone rejected. He didn’t prefer self-righteous “goodness.” Paul wrote in Galatians 3:6-11 that all who “rely on the works of the law are under a curse.” How did his choice of the term “fruit” in 5:22 focus attention on the spiritual roots of the nine key Christian traits he listed as growing in our lives?


 During this sermon series, we hope you will memorize the fruits of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” These nine qualities Paul lists are not things which, if we try hard enough, we could simply do without help, without the spirit. Which of these traits do you find are most present in you? Which of them do you most want the Spirit’s power to grow in you? How can you nurture an inner “climate” in which that fruit can grow?

Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit, and by your gentle, powerful presence grow your beautiful fruit to fill and guide my living every day. Amen.*

Tuesday, May 3 – Read Philippians 2:1-4. We read this text last week, but it is helpful to return to it this week. It was no accident that the first quality mentioned in the “fruit of the


Spirit” list was “love.” Paul’s words in today’s reading, calling us to live in mutual love rooted in God’s eternal love, can sound so poetic and idealistic—and, maybe, unrealistic. But Paul wasn’t writing poetry. Philippians 4:1-3 showed that two influential women in Philippi were strongly at odds. Paul was inviting them (and their supporters) to live out God’s love, humbling watching out for each other and not themselves.


 “With humility think of others as better than yourselves.” Scholar H. C. Hewlett said “humility...is the recognition of our true littleness as those dependent utterly on God.” That is quite different from yielding outwardly while being furious inside about someone else “winning.” How can that kind of humility open your heart to God’s love, and clear away inner barriers that get in the way of us loving one another?

 Christ’s love and the Spirit’s presence grow the love Paul urged the Philippians to live out. The New Testament word for love is agape, which means unconquerable benevolence and loving kindness. It is an attitude of the mind as much as of the heart. Agape concerns the will as much as the emotions. How can this God-given love replace “win/lose” thinking with “win/win” attitudes? What must happen in you so that you see stronger relationships as a bigger “win” than always getting your way?

Prayer: *O God, who is love, establish your reign in my heart and mind. As I internalize your persistent love for me, let that more and more shape how I relate to other people. Amen.*

Wednesday, May 4 – Read John 13:30-35. God’s love for us was not a distant abstraction. It took human form in Jesus. With the Roman cross waiting for him the next day, after Judas slunk into the night to betray him, Jesus called his followers to love one another. He says it is a “new commandment.” Being “new” isn’t so much a matter of never having heard words like this before. It’s a matter of the mode of this love, the depth and type of this love. Jesus goes on to articulate this by saying, “love one another in the same way that I have loved you.”


 Imagine you were one of Jesus’ first followers. After three years of daily contact, he said he wouldn’t physically be with you anymore. But he would send the Holy Spirit, and “you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples.” Could you accept the sincere (but at times faulty) love of other disciples as an expression of Jesus’ love to you? Can you today?


 You invite a non-religious friend to church or to your small group. Your friend says, “I don’t know. I’ve heard so many stories about churches that claim to follow Jesus but end up hurting people or cheating them. How do I know your church isn’t just one more of them?” What do you say? How likely would you be to offer Jesus’ answer to that question: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another”?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, I don’t want a window sticker or a fish emblem on my car’s trunk to be the best sign that I follow you. Through your Spirit, let my love for others bear witness that I’m your disciple. Amen.*

Thursday, May 5 – Read Nehemiah 8:1, 5-12 and John 15:9-15. The Persians who conquered Babylon let the Israelites go home to Jerusalem after decades of exile. Their return brought dizzying joy, as we read about in Psalm 126:1-3. But as Ezra read them


God's law, the people began to weep. The text does not specify why. Nehemiah used the occasion to teach a deep principle that runs throughout the Bible: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." And Jesus wove "love" and "joy" together as key elements of the life his followers could accept as his gift to them.


 The word joy comes from the Greek word, "charis," which Paul uses in Romans 14:17, 15:13 and Philippians 1:4 and 25. We also find in the Hebrew word for joy in Psalm 30:11. It is not the joy that comes from earthly things, still less from triumphing over someone else in competition. It is a joy whose foundation is God. How close or far is the way you define joy from the way Jesus used the word? In what ways does your openness to Jesus' offer of joy (made, again, in the shadow of the cross) make you an instrument who can share joy with others?

 The Bible talks about joy amid persecution in Luke 6:22-23, extreme poverty in 2 Corinthians 8:2, in the various tests we encounter in James 1:2, or unjust imprisonment in Acts 16:22-25. How do examples like that distinguish "joy" from happiness that depends on circumstances? How can the Holy Spirit's presence make joy possible under the conditions such as Bible writers mentioned? When have you felt the strength of God-given joy?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, how I want your joy to fill me up completely, fill me to overflowing, and then keep spilling out from me to uplift and encourage other people I meet. Amen.*

Friday, May 6 – Read 1 John 3:14-21 and Matthew 5:9. The fruit the Spirit bears in our lives is interconnected. Each area in which we grow helps us grow in other areas. John shared how receiving God's love in turn shows itself more and more in our ability to love others. Then, he said, this love becomes a source of peace, a way we can quiet our fears "even if our hearts condemn us." And we can share that peace with others, becoming among those Jesus said are the fortunate people who live, even now, in the reality of God's kingdom.

 In *The Message* version of the Bible, 1 John 3:18-20 reads, "Let's live in real love. This is...the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves." In what ways can perfectionism spoil peace? What has helped/is helping you learn to trust God's grace more than your self-criticism?

 Typically, in the New Testament, the Greek word *eirene* stands for the Hebrew shalom and means not just freedom from trouble but everything that makes for a person's highest good. Here it means that tranquility of heart which comes from the pervading awareness that our all our moments in life are in the hands of God. Making peace doesn't just apply to warring armies. It can refer to quiet healing between two people feeling alienated or afraid. How can you become a more effective peacemaker?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, as my world feels torn by distrust, fear and acid criticism, make me an instrument of your peace, someone you can use to heal divisions and create loving relationships. Amen.*

Saturday, May 7 – Read Philippians 4:6-7. Can't you picture the apostle Paul in a sunny meadow filled with flowers, pausing to listen to bird songs and pen these beautiful words about the peace God gives? That is far from the truth! As in several of his letters, Paul writes in Philippians 1:12-14 that he was a prisoner in a dank Roman dungeon when he

wrote this. In fact, given the capricious ways Roman justice could work, he writes in Philippians 1:20-21 that he couldn't be sure whether he would be released or executed! Under those conditions, Paul could authentically talk about God's gift of peace that "transcends all understanding." It went with him, not only through times our human nature calls peaceful, but even into prison and ultimately beyond the executioner's blade.



In the first century Roman world, most people anxiously eyed the pagan gods. Jesus saw God differently. With the God who had now revealed himself in Jesus, there was no guarantee against suffering. But there was the certainty that God was ultimately in control. God would always hear and answer prayers on anything and everything and in every moment. Our specific prayers might most often focus on serious and major matters, but we note that Paul says we should ask God about every area of life. If it matters to us, it matters to God. Prayer like that will mean God's peace—a deep peace in the middle of life's storms and problems—will guard your heart and mind. Jesus said in Matthew 11:28-30, "Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest...My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light." We don't get the Spirit's fruit by trying stressfully to be loving, joyful and at peace. How can you "try" less, trustingly opening your life to the Holy Spirit's presence so God can grow these fruits in your life?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, the old chorus said, "I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river in my soul." O come, Lord, and grow that kind of deep-seated peace in me. Amen.*