

“Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Character of Christ”

Introduction: Thanks to your GPS, or a similar app on your cell phone, when traveling in your car you can easily see the miles you have to go, the next turn you have to take, and your expected time of arrival, down to the last minute. Thanks to the screen on the seat-back in front of you on the airplane, you can know how far you’ve flown, what part of the country or world you are currently flying over, and what the weather will be when and where the plane lands. Thanks to the miracle of a fitbit on your wrist, you can keep track of the number of steps you take in a day, the number of calories you’ve burned, your current heart rate, and even how well you slept last night!

Would that we had such a tracking device to measure the progress we are making, or not, in our spiritual life. How on earth did Jesus ever expect us to follow him, and grow to become more and more like him, without one?! However, we already have one. It’s a list known as the fruit of the Spirit, arguably the simplest and most all-encompassing description of Christian character there is, a list that really speaks of the character of Jesus. The tricky part is that Paul not only makes the case that a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is the ultimate goal of the Christian life, but also that such a life is only fully possible through the inner work of the Spirit. At the same time, our role is *not* simply to be a passive one.

How do we cultivate this basket of fruit, this character of Christ? What does it look like, to live our life on the vine? That will be our task for our summer Sundays, both during our sermon time and also during Children’s Church. This morning, as we celebrate the arrival of the Holy Spirit, I want to make some preparatory remarks about our relationship with the Spirit, both the conflict we can have, and the cooperation to which we’re called.

I. Conflict with the Spirit

A. We begin with Paul. As he writes to the church in Galatia, he observes for them the conflict between what he calls walking by, or keeping in step with, the Spirit, and the “flesh,” by which he means our sinful nature. The root of the conflict is that the Spirit desires one kind of life for us, a beautiful and healthy and productive life characterized by various fruit, but our sinful nature desires a different kind of life for us, one that is characterized by “acts of the flesh” that are entirely immoral and self-centered.

B. As Paul is writing to Christians, it is worth noting that one of the points he is seeking to make is that just because we have put our confidence in Christ, turning to him in repentance and faith, our internal systems don’t just suddenly shift over and we’ll discover that we’re living like Jesus, every day and all the time. Sinful practices become habits; they become part of our character which needs to be re-formed in Christ, which is a process. Fruit doesn’t appear overnight.

C. A second point he’s inferring here, and really throughout the letter, is that turning to Jesus in repentance and faith is not just about getting our sin forgiven so that we can get into heaven when we die. Jesus’ call, “Follow me,” is a call to become a disciple, a learner or apprentice. It’s a call into a new kind of life, a progressive inner transformation, for our sake and for the sake of others. To that end, Paul does not see himself as an undertaker, preparing us to die, but as a mid-wife, being “in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you” (4:19).

D. The goal of this formation is that we find ourselves taking on more and more of the character of Christ, not preparing to die, but to really beginning to live. And as we begin to live into the character of Christ, we begin to reveal what life in the kingdom of God looks like because we're living out the character of our creator (cf. Col. 3:1-17). As Jesus observed for his followers relatively early in his ministry, we will be known by our fruit: "a good tree bears good fruit" (Ma. 7:17). Then, toward the end of his time in earth, he comments, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit" (Jn. 15:5). Through our being "in the vine," the world will come to know what the love of God is all about, he prays (Jn. 17:20-23). In other words, we don't seek to cultivate a more plentiful harvest of the fruit of the Spirit because our salvation is at stake, or somehow God will love us more, but because such fruit is tied to God's mission in the world.

II. Cooperation with the Spirit

A. Into this conversation of character transformation steps the Holy Spirit. It's worth considering that whenever we see the formative work of God in the world, the Holy Spirit is always somewhere in the mix! So, for instance, at creation we read that the Spirit of God was hovering (like an eagle; cf. Dt. 32:11), over the waters and then the breath (Spirit) of God breathed life into mankind (Ge. 1:2; 2:7). Or at the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit descended like a dove (a visual link to Genesis), anointing, guiding, and empowering Jesus as he began his ministry of re-creation (Mk. 1:9-11). And then at Pentecost, the Spirit is described as a great wind and as flames of fire as he filled the followers of Jesus, forming them into a community and empowering them to bear witness to his goodness and grace. The Spirit who, in the OT, had come upon particular people, at particular times, for particular purposes, now takes up residence in all who put their confidence in Jesus. The character transformation that he seeks to create in us is the character, or fruit, of the life of Christ.

B. But, as we said last week, this doesn't mean that we're to be passive, waiting for our character to change like we might wait for lightening to strike. Paul instructs us to cooperate, or "keep in step" with, the Spirit, interacting with him in some way. Keeping with the horticultural images we have here, while we can't produce fruit, we certainly need to be involved in its cultivation. Let's think of this in terms of being planted, being nourished, and being weeded.

1. Planted: Are we properly planted? Do we desire to be a follower of Jesus? Have we responded to his invitation to be our Lord and Savior? Have we sought his forgiveness and asked him to lead our life? If not, then we might not be properly planted, and if we're not properly planted we won't be connected to the vine, and if we're not connected to the vine we will have no hope of bearing Christ-like fruit.

2. Nourished: If we are properly planted, are we being properly nourished? Such nourishing takes place as we engage in spiritual practices or disciplines through which we open our lives to the work the Spirit wants to do in us, practices such as worship and prayer, solitude and silence, fellowship and fasting, study and service, meditation and memorization, just to name a few. The disciplines are practices that enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort.

Illustration: I think of the story of an anthropologist who was exploring the South Sea islands. At one point in his journey he came across a cannibal, sitting by his pot, reading a Bible. "What are you doing?" the anthropologist asked. "I'm reading the Bible," the native responded. The anthropologist scoffed and said, "Don't you know that modern, civilized man has rejected that book? You shouldn't be wasting your

time.” The cannibal slowly looked at the man from head to toe and then answered, “Sir, if it weren’t for this book, you’d be in that pot!”

The point is that had the converted cannibal seen this anthropologist walking his way before engaging in the disciplines of study, and probably solitude and silence, and maybe even fasting, he wouldn’t have been able to say “no.” But through the nourishment drawn from these habits as he cooperated with the Spirit, he had come to know himself, to learn what God desires, and to practice what it meant to say “no” to his fleshly desires and still be cared for by God. His transformed inner character had enabled a fruitful, life-giving, change in his outward behavior.

3. Weeded: Did you know that government reports reveal 205 varieties of weeds, half of which seem to be in our backyards?! It is a gardening fact that things like green beans and corn have a far harder time growing than weeds, which seem to grow without much effort. But they do take effort to pull out. Such a practice begins with recognizing what is a weed and what is not. Sometimes it’s hard to tell, but Paul here, and in Colossians 3, gives us a pretty good start of what he says needs to be removed from our lives and put to death so that the good stuff can grow. Jesus makes the further point in his parable of the soils that the rocks and thorns which represent the trials and worries, the lure of riches, and the pleasures of life can choke out the seeds of new life that God desires to grow within us. We need to be vigilant, to be on constant alert for these weeds and, through confession and repentance, root them out by giving them to Jesus to take away.

C. Experts tell me that it takes at least three years for a vine to be cultivated before it really begins to produce. Further, fruit can be growing even when even might not be able to see anything just yet. So as we think of our life on the vine, with cultivating the character of Christ, with cooperating with the Holy Spirit, let’s be intentional and not passive, but let’s also be patient. It takes just two days to make a mushroom but sixty years to make an oak tree. Which do you want to be?!

The prophet Isaiah promises that when God gets done with us, through the work of the Spirit, an oak of righteousness is what we’ll be.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

What a great image! The Spirit not only wants to produce fruit in you, he wants to make you, individually, and us together as a great forest, into a solid and glorious image of his character, one that is engaged in rebuilding and renewing what has become broken in the world (Isa. 61:1-6). So, don’t get discouraged, and don’t give up as you think about how far away you still might be from the character of Jesus. We will never fully arrive this side of his return, and he simply loves that you are on the journey, so continue to seek ways to cooperate with his Spirit so that he can continue making something beautiful and glorious, in you and through you.