

Fruit of the Holy Spirit

Galatians 5:16-26

Discipleship Essentials - Part Three: Becoming Like Christ

Rev. Eunice T. McGarrah

Sunday, May 13, 2007

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

We have just heard the scripture for today read from the Geneva Bible, which was the Bible of the first Jamestown settlers. Quite frankly, it stands the test of time. Now, please turn to Galatians 5:16-26 in your personal Bible or in the pew Bible and keep it open for reference.

Let us pray: Lord God, as we come together on this day which commemorates the great efforts, vision and spirit of pioneers and mothers, we ask that you would, by the power of your Holy Spirit speak to us the words that will enliven us for the days you have given us...days in which we can live for your glory or our own. We pray that we would live for you and not ourselves, so that your kingdom would be revealed. In the name of our risen Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

We've been talking about discipleship and what it means to be a follower of Jesus ever since January 7. So, I have a question? What makes a good Christian? It's not a bad question. After all, ever since human beings started talking, they talked about the virtues necessary for a good life...virtues that would lead to a life well-lived and a community that lived for the common good. One thing sort of leads to another in those kinds of discussions and lists of virtues started to appear. The Greek philosophers had their own. The Hebrews had their own list, but they were commandments, not suggested virtues.

Benjamin Franklin had his list of thirteen virtues and even had what looks like an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of his performance. Needless to say, he wasn't quite able to measure up, but he still carried the list around as a reminder of what he should be like.

Hu Jintao, the President of the People's Republic of China has produced a list of, as near as I can tell, of eight virtues for his fellow countrymen, including, "Be disciplined and law-abiding, not chaotic and lawless." While dissident groups in China look askance at his virtues, he has said that such a list is needed in order to give the Chinese people a sense of right and wrong, good and evil, beauty and ugliness.

Winning the list of virtues competition is the Virtues Project which lists over 60 different virtues which they find necessary for human life to flourish. Among their virtues are orderliness (I'm behind already), enthusiasm, and creativity.

Lists can be helpful, but when you're making lists in order to judge how good a human being or Christian someone is, lists end up being destructive. There's an internet joke going around that illustrates how keeping lists can be harmful to relationships in the church.

Frank was walking across a bridge one day when he saw a desperate man preparing to leap to his death. "Wait," Frank called after him, "Don't do it! You've too much to live for!"

The man turned and said, "Like what?"

Frank said, "Well, ah, what's your name?" "Stan," the man said.

Frank said, "Well, Stan, are you atheist or religious?" Stan said, "Religious."

Frank said, "Well, so am I. are you Buddhist or Christian?" Stan said, "Christian."

Frank said, "So am I. Are you Episcopalian or Evangelical?" Stan said, "Evangelical."

Frank said, "Well, so am I! Are you Evangelical Church of the Lord or Evangelical Church of God?"

Stan said, "Evangelical Church of God!" Frank said, "Wow! Me too! Are you Original Evangelical Church of God or Reformed Evangelical Church of God?" Stan said, "I'm Reformed Evangelical Church of God!"

Frank said, "Me too! Are you Reformed Evangelical Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Evangelical Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"

Stan said, "Reformed Evangelical Church of God, Reformation of 1915!" To which Frank replied, "Die, heretic scum," and pushed Stan off.

It's funny because it's all too familiar, unfortunately. We've seen those kinds of conversations in which someone's faith is questioned based on how well they measure up according to the checklist.

This is the problem the congregations in the region of Galatia were having. They had come to know Jesus Christ as pagan Gentiles.

They had not been among the Gentile God-fearers who were very familiar with and who even lived by Jewish law and ritual. The gospel was for them and under Paul's ministry they had decided to follow Jesus. But then, visitors came from the church in Jerusalem and told them that they would not be real Christians unless they followed all of the Jewish laws. And that was a pretty long and intense list of requirements. They were told that faith wasn't enough to save them.

It would be putting it mildly to say that Paul was upset. If you've got your Bibles open, you can turn to the first chapter of Galatians. Now remember, we've divided it into chapters, but it's really a letter. We are reading someone else's mail and you can read in between the lines to figure out what's going on at the other end. Paul's greeting gets right to the point. He tells them right off the bat that he's got the authority to tell them what's right, and then in the salutation reminds them of what Jesus did – he gave his life for their sins so that they might be saved from this present evil age.

Jesus didn't give them a list of rules or a set of eight or thirteen or sixty-plus virtues for them to live up to in order to have fulfilled lives. Christ fulfilled the law – that's the kind of fulfillment and satisfaction that matters. It's a matter of life and death. Their sin would have resulted in their spiritual death had not Christ given his life on their behalf. Only then can ethics matter or even be discerned or sustained.

Paul can't believe that they would set aside this message of grace and live as if they could contribute something more to their salvation. They had been told and had believed that Christ plus nothing saved them from the penalty and power of sin. Now, in essence, they were saying that they had to contribute something...that Christ wasn't enough. They thought that Jesus needed help with the salvation agenda and that help would come in the keeping of regulations and rituals.

One thing seems clear about the Galatian congregations – they were trying quite hard to be good Christians. They wanted to be the best Christians they could be, which is already setting them up for sin, isn't it? In the effort to become really good Christians and do the right thing, they had descended into fragmented congregations, they were at each other's throats...they were 'devouring each other.' There seems to have been a competition as to who was doing better at keeping the rules and a fairly high level of judgmentalism

I don't know if this has a familiar ring to you. Here is a group of people who wanted to do the right thing. They had an ethic, something that needed to be accomplished for the common good, some just cause and yet there were disagreements that were tearing them apart...disagreements over who was doing it better, who cared more, who was more righteous. That was going totally against the Christ whom they professed.

Lists of 'things to do' or more often, 'things NOT to do' are not the essence of the Christian life. Last Sunday, Dick and I were at our 40th class reunion at Wheaton College. If you know anything about Wheaton, you know it has a pledge, which prohibits drinking. Now, our party was off campus and there was an adequate level of the fruit of the vine present. They were teasing me about my pastoral vocation and I warned them that if they kept it up, I would change the wine into water. What followed surprised me – several folks regressed 40 years and started explaining why it was all right to have the wine there, but not someplace else. We fell back into the legal reactions about faith and behavior.

Well, Paul is clear that living that way is not the right way to go about the Christian life. Lists don't constitute the Christian life. In fact, in the 'doing' of them, the Christian life can fly apart as we live according to our self-centered impulses of competition that then lead to envy, jealousy, exclusion and all sorts of self-indulgence.

The problem with all of this is not that we have the wrong list...the point is not to substitute a list of the works of our sinful nature for a list of the fruit of the Spirit. The problem is the heart...our nature. One of the things that has to be clear is that we have a sinful nature that wants to go its own way. It wants to replace God as the one who sets the agenda, who sets the tone, who determines what will and will not be done, who determines what is and isn't right. So when the text says that we will not inherit the kingdom of God, in some sense it is because we've already rejected it. We don't want that kingdom. We don't want a place where someone else other than ourselves rules.

Those of you who were in my Jesus at the Movies class during this last Institute term know that one of my favorite lines from Franco Zeffirelli's Jesus of Nazareth happens when Herod realizes that a baby is to be born who will be a rival for his throne. He storms through his palace yelling, "This is my world. I will not share it with an infant."

When we occupy the throne of our lives, the deeds we accomplish are pretty obvious. Our rebellious nature wins out and we engage in behavior that hurts others and ourselves. Worse, it keeps us from the purposes that a loving God has for us. The kingdom we rule is chaotic and out of control.

What are we to do? Clearly the answer is not more of the same...not more of self and self-effort... not more self-talk. My Day Planner talks to me all the time. There are pithy sayings at the top of each page, reminding me of how, if I just try harder, the day will go well. Of course my favorite one occurred on the day when we were discussing the broken elevator in the main church building in staff meeting. I looked at the top of my page for the day. It said, "The elevator to success is out of order. You'll have to climb the stairs...one step at a time."

We are not climbing to God in this life. God has come to us and entered our lives in Jesus Christ and he didn't come to give us a different "To Do" list. He came so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, our lives might bear the fruit of the Spirit. Now, note that it doesn't say 'fruits.' It is not plural. It is one thing described in several ways. And the one thing that it is is Jesus. The fruit of the Spirit is really a description of Jesus Christ. What we want people to see in us is Christ, who has been formed in us. Not just a Christ imitation, but Christ himself growing ever more prominent in our lives.

In Discipleship Essentials, Greg Ogden tells this story: "A little girl and her mother were talking as they walked out of church. The

mother asked her daughter how she liked church that day. The daughter replied that she thought it was good, but she was a little confused. She said, "The pastor said that God was bigger than we are. Is that true?" Her mother responded that it was true. "He also said that God lives inside us. Is that true, Mommy?" "Yes." "Well then, said the girl, "if God is bigger than we are, shouldn't some of him show through?"

Believe it or not, there's a Mother's Day connection here. We Protestants don't think at length about Mary the mother of Jesus, but she is a prime example of discipleship for us. As she listened to the word of God from the angel, Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit was formed in her. Just so, Jesus is to take shape in us and shine through.

That's what the fruit is about...it is about the work of the Holy Spirit doing what God wants in us, rather than the works of our sinful nature which produce all sorts of fragmented and destructive lives. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ takes shape in us and begins to show through to those around us.

So, how do we live by the Spirit? Yesterday, in a group that was considering this text, a friend said that in her New English Bible, it says that we are 'to let the Spirit direct our course.' That caused her to think about running a race (a huge metaphor with Paul and one you will hear about next week). In order to run the race well, the runner must listen to and heed the words of her coach.

That indeed is one way in which we live by the Spirit. We listen to the Word of God. The Spirit always works with the Word. The Word without the Spirit is dead and can really become a huge 'do and don't list.' And, the Spirit without the word can become any feeling that moves us. Both are dangerous extremes. But the Word and Spirit give life. This is why we work hard to give you opportunities to be in classes where you can learn God's Word and by the power of the Spirit be transformed.

That's because, every time we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit," we mean that we believe that there is a living God able and willing to enter human personality and change it.

When you read all of this letter to the Galatian churches, you realize that there is conflict all over the place and it is fueled by jealousy, envy and the worst kind of self-righteous competition. It's in the souls of people; it's in the church and it's in the culture. Chaos abounds. Is there any hope?

Remember last week's sermon? In laying out a theology of the Holy Spirit, Jean started right at the beginning. The Spirit of God hovered over the chaos and brought order to the creation. Just so, the Spirit of God yearns to bring order to the chaos that just might be your life. That's what the Spirit does and we are told so right at the start so that we will never, ever forget it.

When the prophet Zechariah contemplated the future of God's people, he saw a time when all would be as God desired it to be and wondered how it might come to be. The word of the Lord came to him saying it will happen, not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit. (Zechariah 4:6)

We cannot get caught up in thinking that Paul is proposing a new list of virtues to replace the works of the sinful nature. To do so would be to make the mistake that the Galatians made when they thought that the point of salvation – getting and keeping it – was to do good things. I don't remember who said it, but I like it and I think it helps us understand what's at stake for us as disciples: Jesus did not die to make bad people good. He died to make dead people live. The Spirit has made you alive in Christ and as you are led by the Spirit, Christ will grow in you for your good and for God's glory. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.