

**Opportunities to Bear Fruit
Galatians 5:22-26**

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If you have ever been on a Youth Mission Trip or Youth Retreat with Polly Pinke, you will know that she has the gift of joy. Polly is always smiling. She always brings joy to those around her and it's contagious. I admire that about her. I admire Handy Avery's kindness. His kindness towards me as a young minister. His kindness and thoughtfulness towards each of you as he serves as your minister. Who do you know who's love for others is overflowing? Who comes to mind as one of the most patient or generous person that you admire? Who demonstrates self-control in the most trying of situations? We all have people in our lives that we look up to and admire who exhibit these traits. Maybe in self-reflection there are some traits that we feel are our strengths. But I am sure we can name our weaknesses too.

Our text this morning is no stranger to us. We have heard this text before. Maybe like me, you learned a song when you were younger at camp or VBS to memorize the fruit of the Spirit. I will spare you the singing this morning. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Earlier in Chapter 5, Paul says that love is how genuine faith expresses itself. Some biblical scholars believe that love is the only item on the list. All the others are named characteristics in how love expresses itself. The love that Paul talks about is an agape love. Love that is unconditional, unselfish and sacrificial. Have you thought about the fruits from that lens? How we demonstrate love is found through our joy, our peace, our patience with others, our kindness to others, our gentleness towards others, and our self-control. Notice that the second fruit is joy. Let's talk about joy. Sometimes we can intermingle the words joy and happiness, but I believe there is a distinction we must understand. We seek to be happy and often our decisions are based upon the thought of will this make someone happy or will it bring us happiness. Joy is different. It's deeper. Joy is not something we seek, but an experience of gladness that comes to us through

God himself. Joy is deeper and can be found in the midst of deep circumstances where happiness cannot.

I could continue through the rest of the fruit of the Spirit, but I believe there are two important questions we must ask ourselves this morning. How do we live life through the fruit of the Spirit and how do we serve others through the fruit of the Spirit? How are you living life through the fruit of the Spirit? We must recognize our strengths and realize that those gifts can be used to serve others. We must also recognize our weaknesses. Have you ever asked for peace? How many times have you prayed for peace that passes all understanding during a difficult situation? Have you ever prayed for patience? Parents of children probably have. We pray for fruit like patience and to receive joy and to show self-control. That's not a bad thing to do. And often in our darkest times, the peace of Christ surrounds us when we need it the most. But I believe that God also speaks through us indirectly. Sometimes we may ask for patience, but instead of patience, God gives us opportunities to be patient. God gives us opportunities to be kind to others or gentle towards others or show more self-control. Be careful what you ask for. This is not God's sense of humor or a test to give us to see if we really can continue to be patient or kind to someone who has hurt it. It is God's way of bringing out what is already inside of us. You see, I believe that we have all been gifted with love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That is the way that we were created as beings created in the image of God. But through our personalities, circumstances and experiences, some of those fruit are more fruitful than others at time. So, when we struggle, God gives us opportunities to practice and bring out what is already within us. If we want peace and love, look inward and what we have already been gifted with. The Holy Spirit works to bring inner peace, which can exist in the midst of outward conflict. What we need is to be faithful to the call of God that is already found within us.

We have all had this experience before. We are standing in the check-out line at the grocery store. It's a long line and right behind us a parent and their children take their place. The parent's shopping basket is full to the brim and the children are running wild. The parent is trying to get items out of the basket while yelling at the kids to settle down. The toddler is crying, the younger kids aren't listening, and some are starting to be defiant. The parent looks tired and overwhelmed. What we see in that snapshot of a few moments

of our day is the outward experience, but we don't get a glimpse of the inward conflict. We don't know their story. We just see their actions and we react. We think, if those were my children, they wouldn't behave that way. That parents needs to get control. I don't understand why those kids don't listen and act that way. That was some foul language that came out of the teens mouth. Why can't they be more helpful? We've all had those thoughts.

But we miss the whole other side of the conflict. We don't know what's going on in that home. Maybe that parent is a foster parent who just received new placements a few hours ago. Or maybe that is a single parent, trying to do their best and make ends meet. Maybe that parent has just gone through a nasty divorce or experienced the loss of their spouse. Maybe the children in that home have never experienced love or have been hurt and broken in ways that are unthinkable. Maybe there is so much brokenness in their home that the pieces seem too shattered to fix. Or maybe the parent made the mistake and took them to Sonic for milkshakes before they went shopping and they are still on their sugar fix. The point is, we don't know the story, but we are too often quick to judge based upon our short, limited interaction.

I share this brief monologue because it leads us to our second question for today, how do we serve others through the fruit of the Spirit? How do we seek out opportunities to bear fruit? It starts with reaching within us to the fruit and gifts that we have already been given. It requires us to look up and look out to the opportunities before us. This past week over 66 children walked through our doors for Vacation Bible School and over 40 children and youth volunteers gathered together to plant seeds of hope and love. I wonder how many of those children might become prospects for our church. That thought has crossed my mind and I know it's crossed yours too. We have had those conversations. But I don't want us to focus too much on our turnover rate or seeking to get more families to grow our program. Our focus should be that we had the opportunity to share the love of Jesus Christ with 66 children this past week. We don't know their story or their inward conflict. We only know what we saw and experienced in our interactions with them at VBS. But the love of Christ compels us to share his love, mercy, and grace with each child.

How do we bear fruit with others? It starts with us seeking and listening for opportunities to do so. Lord, give me patience, give me some more self-control. Well, be ready to embrace the opportunity to engage in self-control and patience when it's given to you. Let's take one step back from this personally and think broader. Church what are we being called to do? What are we being called to do that will take us beyond these walls? What are we being called to do that will require us to go and not to stay here where we are? I don't have the answer to that but it's a conversation we should be having. If we want to meet people where there are. If we want to experience and get to know the inward conflict and not just see the outward expressions, we must go. Our Kentucky Mission Team just returned from building a home. They don't just send supplies to a family; they go and build a home for them. But they don't just build a home for them. They meet the family and learn their story. That personal interaction and experience can only be experienced by going and doing. So where are we being called to go and do? Where are we being called to with opportunities to bear fruit. Let's us go and do with the realization that it is only possible through the power of God's love, mercy, and grace. May that be enough. Amen.