

Fruit of the Spirit – Kindness, gentleness, self-control

Last week, I said we had three fruits left – kindness, gentleness, and self-control. I half-jokingly said self-control is no fun and that we wouldn't spend a lot of time on it. We tend to think of self-control as denying ourselves something we really want – a piece of cake or another beer. Those sorts of things seem like buzz-kills, although complete lack of self-control with either of those things has consequences that are even bigger downers.

But it turns out self-control is more significant in this list than I might have thought, and it sort of helps bracket the whole list between love and self-control.

In the more elite intellectual world Paul swam in, philosophy was what the cool kids did. Greek philosophers like Socrates and Aristotle gave way to Roman philosophical schools like Stoicism and Epicureanism. There were also Jewish philosophers.

Much of Roman philosophy was influenced by the Greek philosophers and certainly the scholarly philosophical debates were very Greek in origin. They likely were very influential in Paul's education, especially probably Stoicism.

One of the hallmarks of Stoicism was self-control, or self-mastery. This is a very useful thing to make a high virtue in a society, like Rome, that was very centered on law and order and control of the people. In Philosophical schools, self-control was something you worked on to improve yourself.

Paul closes out his list with self-control, in line with the Stoics. Except he does something different – remember this is a list of fruit of the Spirit. He likely wouldn't say it's bad to work on self-control. But what he's really saying here is that when the Holy Spirit has hold of us, we don't have to work at it.

And what self-control is at its root is the ability to work against our own shadowy and often selfish nature. Paul essentially says we are not by nature able to consistently be kind, gentle, loving, peaceful, generous, joyful, or faithful. Our natural desire is all too often to be self-centered, which is the opposite of all the fruits. It's the spirit's work in us that enables us to control that self-centered nature.

So, self-control becomes the primary ingredient of all the other fruits. And the primary aim of all the fruits is love. The fruits all build a community of love.

Another thing about the fruit of the spirit is that it doesn't seem to me to be limited to Christians. I know people who are pretty skeptical of the whole Jesus thing – and even the whole God thing – who do bear these fruits. It makes me wonder if the work of the Spirit is not much broader than we Christians can possibly imagine.

Kindness and gentleness are the other two fruits left. If you want to get a pretty clear glimpse of the opposite of kindness and gentleness, follow a long thread on virtually any public Facebook page. Nebraska Through the Lens is a page for people to post interesting or beautiful photos of Nebraska. You'd think it would be a page not too vulnerable to meanness and nastiness. But you'd be wrong.

I know a lot of you aren't on social media and so it might not be relevant to you. The phenomenon of social media has many really great things. But it does two really bad things that are important for us to know about – first it lays bear the anger, bitterness, the desire to dominate, and even hatred of some people. Second, it amplifies that – it makes it seem like that nastiness is the norm in our society.

But, I don't think that's completely true in our ordinary real lives. Most places I go in real life, people are generally kind, and if not exactly kind, at least respectful. I honestly don't remember any time in the last year that someone was truly unkind to me in real life.

The political divisiveness is real. Political leaders and policies have a profound impact on the people God loves, so ignoring politics isn't probably our best choice. But, although I've been in political arguments in the past that have gotten pretty shrill, I have learned a little of the art of self-control. I've gotten much better at having respectful and enlightening disagreements rather than the shrill ones. And I've learned that beer and politics are an even worse combination than politics and social media.

All right, so we'll see what kind of stories you got. It can be any kindness, gentleness, and self-control – or it can be any of the other fruits we've talked about. As a first one, Linda shared one with me since she wasn't going to be here today.

She woke up to a crash on her front step and went outside to discover a neighbor had destroyed her favorite flower pot. She was angry and said her initial response was not kind. But as it turned out, the woman had a mental health issue and ended up hospitalized. She apologized when she was better. Linda's response moved from anger to kindness and compassion and when the police asked if Linda wanted to file charges, she said no.

One of the good Facebook memes I've seen says something like this – everyone is fighting a battle you don't know about. So when in doubt, be kind. Linda's story is a good example.

OK, so what else have you got? How as the Holy Spirit worked kindness through you – or maybe towards you?

....

As we finish up our exploration of the Fruit of the Spirit, know this. The Holy Spirit does wish to use us to bear fruit that builds strong communities of love.