



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# **The Fruit of the Spirit**

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22).*

Today is Pentecost, the day we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jesus' disciples, which also marks the birthday of the church.

Pentecost involved all sorts of striking phenomena, according to the book of Acts, including a kind of simultaneous translation, in which people from different backgrounds heard the good news in their own native language. That sort of spectacular event doesn't happen very often, of course, but it doesn't need to. Once was enough. Pentecost came by way of announcing that a whole new order of things was about to begin. The world would be turned upside down. Old pagan gods would be cast down, and even some of the Jewish understanding of God would take on a new interpretation, as Christians came to recognize the one true God in three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This outpouring of the Holy Spirit is what makes the church the church. It's the Spirit that convinces us of the gospel's truth, and assures us of God's love, and fills us with confidence in God's power to save us and make us a new creation.

Even today, just as at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit speaks to each of us in our own language, and especially in the language of our individual hearts. The Spirit knows what we need and offers it to us: courage when we're afraid, comfort when we're afflicted, strength when we're weak, grace when we have to forgive or be forgiven. Every time

someone awakens to the presence of God stirring in the soul, a new little Pentecost breaks out among us.

Luke says it took a while for some Christians to catch on to the reality of the Holy Spirit. When Paul comes to Ephesus he asks the members of the young church there, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They answer, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Clearly, they were an early prototype of some Presbyterians. “Into what were you baptized then?” Paul asks, and they answer, “Into John’s baptism.”

Ah, Paul says. John the Baptist was all about repentance, and getting ready for the Messiah. But Christian baptism means receiving the Holy Spirit. If you’re a little child it means the Spirit marks you as one of God’s own; and if you’re older it means you’re inviting God’s Spirit to transform your own spirit, to guide and direct your whole life. The Holy Spirit is just God working in you and through you, making you all that you were meant to be.

What turned the world upside down two thousand years ago was the Holy Spirit on the move, the one true God turning over all the idols and the pseudo gods people are prone to worship. That work is still going on, now as much as ever, because the modern world has its own pantheon of lesser gods, and the lure of idolatry is as strong today as it ever was.

At our retreat in March someone mentioned a book she was reading by a Christian psychiatrist named David Allen. That caught my attention because I knew a psychiatrist by that name forty years ago at Yale Divinity School. Sure enough, it was the same man. The book was published in 1994, and it’s called *Shattering the Gods Within*:

*Victory Over the Powers that Control Us.* I found a copy online and I think it's so helpful that we'll use it in some of our small group settings here.

The powers that control us, Dr. Allen says, are all the things that serve as false gods in our lives—the people and pursuits and pleasures that we pour our devotion into, hoping they will satisfy us. Many of those things are not bad in themselves. Some of them are quite good, in fact. But they set us up for disappointment, and ultimately for despair, when they become little gods, when we make them the focus of our ultimate concern, as if they could fill the place in our soul that only God is big enough to fill.

As a psychiatrist, Dr. Allen meets all these pseudo gods when their devotees turn up in his office, looking for help after the things they thought would make them happy finally let them down. False gods can become a kind of addiction when we depend on them for the promise of pleasure or release from pain, until at last we come to be controlled by whatever we place at the center of our lives.

Some addictions are obvious enough: drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, food, shopping, clamoring for status and whatever counts as success in our lives. But some pseudo gods are more subtle. They include things like a preoccupation with conformity and a compulsion to fit in; the need to be needed; a sense of entitlement to comfort or anything else; a clinging to anger or fear or guilt. Even being religious can become a kind of pseudo god.

The point is that many people's lives revolve around something they think will make them happy, when ultimately it will only let them down if they expect too much from it. False gods demand more and more in the way of devotion

while delivering less and less satisfaction, as with any other addiction. The one true God alone is big enough to satisfy the soul, because we were made in the image of God, to be completely fulfilled only when we learn to love as God loves us.

St. Paul had no knowledge of modern psychiatry, of course, but he knew how to read the health or sickness of a soul. He writes to the Galatians:

Now the works of the flesh are obvious [and by flesh he means, metaphorically, anything that's driven solely by the natural desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain]: sexual immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, quarreling, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like.

It's a long list, and not at all exhaustive. Notice how some of the things he mentions have to do with physical habits, but many of them are spiritual or psychological dispositions.

Paul says those habits of the heart could ultimately keep a soul out of heaven—not only because God might bar the door to them, but because the kingdom of heaven would not be heaven if it were made up of souls with habits like that. These are the kinds of qualities that false gods and idols cultivate in their followers, until they corrupt our souls and make us and everyone around us miserable.

By contrast, Paul says, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the kinds of qualities we admire in other people and aspire to ourselves.

And see how Paul describes these qualities as *fruit* of the Spirit. Fruit is something that grows on a vine or at the end of a branch. It doesn't appear all by itself; it's produced by the thing that feeds it, which is to say that this fruit of the Spirit is not something we can produce all by ourselves, just by trying harder. These are habits of the heart that grow naturally within us if our spirits are fed and nurtured by the Holy Spirit.

Too often people think that being a Christian is a mostly just a matter of trying harder to be good, or struggling do the right thing, as if it was all up to us. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul knows, because he spent the first part of his life trying to do just that—trying to follow the moral and spiritual law by the sheer force of his own will. But when he met Jesus, Paul learned two things. First, he learned that he was not very good at being good, all by himself. And second, he discovered that he didn't have to be. All he had to do was let the Holy Spirit go to work inside of him, convincing him of God's grace, calming his restless soul, giving him courage and strength, and producing the Spirit's fruit within him. Paul learned that he could no more grow love, joy, peace, patience, and all those other virtues by himself than an olive or an apple could grow without a tree to produce and nurture and feed it.

So there's good news at Pentecost, especially for those who are worn out by religion, and for anyone who thinks that Christianity is just a matter of trying hard to be good or to do the right thing. Of course we want to do what's right in God's eyes, but righteousness is a fruit, not a vine or a tree trunk. Jesus says "I am the vine and you are the branches; apart from me you can do nothing." That's another



way of saying that love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and all the rest are fruits of the Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and the Spirit of God.

Pentecost is not just something that happened once upon a time, long ago and far away. It happens every time the Holy Spirit is let loose within our human spirits, to guide and comfort and strengthen us, and make us the people we were meant to be.

We have to cooperate with the Spirit, of course, because God will not override our free will. But we don't have to do it all by ourselves. We can let go and let God, as they say. And the promise of Pentecost is that God will do great things in and through us if we allow the Spirit to work within us. Then we'll find that the more the Holy Spirit moves us, the more we'll develop the peace and joy and satisfaction we've always wanted—because those are gifts of the Spirit after all, and only the one true God has the power to give such great gifts.



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