

“An Abundance of Blessings”

Psalm 9:1-12; Galatians 5:16-24

September 10, 2023

It was during a challenging season in my pastorate of the First Presbyterian Church of Mount Holly. Things were going well, really, it was just crazy busy. And there were, at the time, lots of pastoral care concerns going on in the congregation. Two were, at the moment, quite acute. The first was a ninety-six-year-old grandmother who was nearing the final days of her life. The other situation was a member, struggling with an addiction use disorder. During the course of the day, I had the opportunity to visit with both. At the home of the benevolent grandmother, the space was meticulous, kept clean by the woman's daughters and a legion of helpers. You see this particular woman was, for lack of better words, a saint. The type that always helped out cheerfully, she had been a fixture at the church, always one to give a helping hand or an encouraging word. Although her life was ebbing away, she was still able to speak, choosing to share words about her love for God and her family. Even though she was near to death, there was a holy peacefulness about the entire home. Later in that day though, I was called to visit a man who'd been mightily struggling with an opioid addiction. His house was unkempt, to say the least. There were even dog messes in the house as he wasn't allowing his pet to go out. It was a mess of wrappers and cans and dirty dishes and newspapers. It was deplorable, really. Now, thankfully, I do want to report that that young man, he got better and is doing quite well. I run into his parents at the Sports Page from time to time and they're always glad to share with me the positive things their son is doing these days. There really are happy endings, thanks be to God. But what stood out to me that day most clearly was the contrast. The stark difference between the two homes. One, a spectacle of dirt and mess and sadness, the other a pinnacle of cleanliness and joy, even in the face of loss.

I recalled that contrast while reading our verses from Galatians this morning. There, Paul gives us a pretty good run down of things both good and bad. And the difference between the two lists is just as shocking as the difference between those two homes on that day long ago. It shouldn't surprise us that Paul places these two very divergent lists beside each other. Throughout Galatians we are given a contrast between a lot of things. Resurrection and death, good and evil, light and dark, freedom and slavery are all talked about in turn in this letter to the Galatian Churches. It helps to remember that these churches are Paul's babies. He planted them. Was there as they were birthed; it was his effort that saw them out of their infancy into an era of growth. But, in his absence, people have come along and confused the church with some terrible theology. Choosing to reject the totality of grace, these people wanted Christians to maintain the Jewish law, even after their baptism. But Paul was convinced, that it was either entirely by grace that we're saved or that we're not saved at all, not really. And so, Paul writes furiously and, at times, pointedly, in order to help the Galatian churches right their wrong beliefs. And what Paul is always desirous of doing is building stable communities that are equipped to share the gospel with everyone. Just as Paul himself was an evangelist, so too did he arrange churches to spread the good news. And Paul was convinced, works-based righteousness was no way to reach the promised land of faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul wants us to take in this contrast between goodness and wickedness so that we will always hew to the Godly side of things. Yes, Paul believes, he's lived the truth of a resurrected life and he wants others to experience the joyous fruit of the Holy Spirit.

And to that end, Paul wants us to experience the fruit of the Holy Spirit. One thing should be pointed out before we get into the actual list of things Paul enumerates as God's blessings. While the list of debauched items are each individual things, we should note that the fruit of the Holy Spirit encompasses them all. By that I mean that the list of the things the world gives becomes kind of like a "pick your poison." In contrast, the fruit of the Holy Spirit while distinguishable, comes to you in one heaping portion. That is to say that when the Spirit is present, all of these wonderful things are there with you. It is the case that the good far outweighs the bad.

So, what is the fruit of the Holy Spirit? Well, to begin with, it's **love**. Makes sense, right. After all, of the three theological virtues recorded in First Corinthians 13, love is listed as the ultimate one. And for good reason. But the fact of the matter is that we've got a whole lot wrong about love these days. Unsurprisingly, in this era of obsession with self, love is all about a feeling, an experience that you get

to receive. I mean, it shouldn't go without being said that one of the most successful Marvel television adaptations deals with a bad-guy character named Loki. Thanks to the madness of the multiverse, Loki exists in several different forms one of whom is a woman. Guess what? He falls in love with her. It's a great example of narcissism played out in front of our eyes. And love should be about as far removed from narcissism as black is from white.

Love in the modern context is about elevating us and giving us access to the feelings and experiences we want to have. But, biblically speaking, love is something else entirely. To begin with, we remember from first John that, "God is love" which helps us make sense of why this word is listed first in our fruit of the Holy Spirit. Love, biblically speaking, isn't so much a feeling or an experience, those come along with it but they aren't love directly. No, in the Bible, love is an action. A verb. As in to love something is to see you in action for that thing. Love isn't a self-seeking experience; it is instead one where we shed that which is precious to us in order to please someone else. It's why the Bible points at Jesus Christ laying His life down on the cross as the ultimate act of love. There, an innocent man accepted a guilty verdict and hung, crucified for six long hours in the hot desert sun, dying. But He laid down His life for us and for our salvation so that we could escape the penalty for our sins. That's a kind of love that John's Gospel talks about, saying, (John 15:13) – *"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."*

So what does that mean for us? Well, it means that when we are living our lives by the Spirit's power, we are going to find ourselves loving others more easily and with greater cost to ourselves. Make no mistake about it, I've gotten to walk alongside a great number of people doing the job that I love. And one of the things that I can't help but notice is a correlation. It's a simple one, really. The more people that you actively love, the happier your life is going to be. By that I mean that as you increase the number of people within the circle of your life, you will experience an increasing amount of happiness. Some of the happiest people I know, care deeply for scores of people.

I'll personally never forget my Uncle Charles. A World War II veteran, after the war Uncle Charles settled down in Lenoir, North Carolina marrying my dad's older sister. There, he set about what to many would strike as a very unremarkable life. He worked from the day he returned to the day he retired at the Broyhill furniture factory. He and his wife raised two daughters. There wasn't much about him that made him seem very special. But, when he passed at 92 years old, I was shocked to find an overflowing church at his funeral. It turned out that there was a lot about my uncle I didn't know. Turned out he was an active deacon at his church where he sung in the choir, taught Sunday School and, for years before they got central heating, Uncle Charles would trundle across highway 321 to fire up the furnace on Sunday mornings. But one of the things I always noticed about my Uncle Charles was just how many people would come to visit him. There was always someone over, sipping tea and chatting. Yes, Charles circle of friends was large and varied. As a result, my Uncle Charles was one of the happiest people I ever knew.

Yes, love is an amazing fruit of the Holy Spirit. But also listed is **joy**. Sometimes we Christians tend to downplay the meaning of joy. But the Greek word translated as "joy" in Galatians 5 means "gladness and delight" – basically the same thing the world means when it talks about joy. It is a feeling of gladness based on our circumstances. Sadly, the world's joy cannot last because it is based on fleeting, physical circumstances. But the joy of the Lord is established in our spiritual, eternal circumstances. As we cling tight to Jesus abiding daily in our saving relationship with Him, we will experience the fullness of joy He promised.

Here, we read about that joy in the Gospel of John, the 15th chapter verses 4 through 11, *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples. As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love."*

These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

Yes, joy is what we receive by the Spirit's power. And, lest we think of joy in a one-dimensional manner, the Greek word contains within it the meaning of the excitement one feels at the beginning of a journey. Joy isn't just a giddy feeling, it's the sense of being on the threshold of Godly change for the better.

Of course, the older I get, the more I appreciate **peace**. No kidding, I can look back in my life and remember times where I received such elation from going to a loud nightclub or concert. I look back on those days and honestly think, "what was I thinking." Now, however, I prefer the quiet of home and the peacefulness of a night spent indoors.

And there's an axiom I've come to believe. I ran into it for the first time at St. John's Episcopal Church painted on a stairway once when I'd gotten lost. There it said, "No (N-O) Jesus, No (N-O) Peace. Know Jesus (K-N-O-W) Jesus, Know (K-N-O-W) Peace." Truer words have never been painted, I'm sure. Because to know Jesus is to know not only of our own salvation but the redemption of the entire world, it is also to live with the sure knowledge of resurrection following this life. In that knowledge, there is an abiding peace that can never be taken from you. It's why Jesus says not even to fear those who can take your life. For your life doesn't end upon death. Instead, for believers, it is the pathway into eternal life.

Ephesians 4:2 - *"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."* We don't see much patience in the world today, not even in the church. Maybe part of the reason is our fast-paced, want-it-now culture. But Christians have everything we need to be patient because we have the Holy Spirit living in us longing to display His character to those around us. Patient people put up with circumstances and other people, even when severely tried. Patient people display endurance, longsuffering, and perseverance.

The New Testament also specifically connects patience with sharing the Gospel. God is patient as He waits for the lost to come to Him and He calls His people to be patient as we extend the offer of salvation in Christ to others. **2 Peter 3:9** – *"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."*

Kindness conveys the meaning of moral goodness, integrity, usefulness, and benignity. In the King James Version, this word is translated as "gentleness," which links it to the meaning of a gentleman or a gentlewoman who behaved properly, with moral integrity and kindness. **Romans 2:4** reminds us that God's mercy and grace should lead us to repentance, not judgment. There, we read, *"Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"* The Holy Spirit enables us to have moral integrity with kindness and not get trapped in self-righteous judgment.

What do you think of when you think of the word, GENTLE? Personally, I think back to my first stuffed animal, a cat that was with me through several hospitalizations for asthma, her name was GENTLY. Gentleness actually has about three meanings included in the word in Greek. The first element is submission to the will of God. There's a word that we don't very much like in our lexicon – submission. But we are called to submit our will to the Lord our God and follow His ways. The second meaning conveyed by gentleness is teachableness. When you're gentle, you're open to learning from a superior. To be gentle is to find oneself listening instead of speaking, seeking to follow rather than lead. This is all held within the meaning of the word gentle. Finally, the last dimension of meaning is probably the most obvious – being considerate. It's one of the reasons why we're encouraged to be gentle, even when we're evangelizing. Kindness and Goodness, thankfully, are both pretty self-explanatory.

But what about self-control? Self-control (egkrateia) is the ability to control one's body and its sensual appetites and desires – physically and mentally – through the power of the Holy Spirit. Self-control relates to both chastity and sobriety, particularly moderation in eating and drinking. Self-control is the opposite of the works of the flesh that indulge sensual desires. As Galatians 5:16 says, *"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires*

what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.”

God wants for us what's best. And the best thing in life is the fruit of the Holy Spirit which comes as God's own Holy Spirit works within you, laboring for the Gospel, showering you with gifts from the Almighty!

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture and Quotes

John 15:13 – “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

John 15:4-11 – “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

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