

ST. PAUL: FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

By Jimmy Seghers

When we faithfully follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit these graces trigger acts of goodness that reflect this dynamic action of the Holy Spirit. Therefore these behaviors are aptly called the fruits of the Spirit. “These fruits differ from the virtues and the gifts in the same way as acts differ from the faculty which produces them.”¹ Because the fruits reflect the goodness within, they provide a valuable measure of our commitment to our Lord and Savior. During the Sermon on the Mountain Jesus warned of the deception from false prophets (Mt 7:15-20). Twice he gave this tool for discernment: “You will know them by their *fruit*” (Mt 7:16, 20).

Examining the presence of the fruits or the lack there of in our every day behavior is a valuable tool for self-examination. St. Paul enumerates the fruits in his Letter to the Galatians 5:22-23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” What follows is a reflection on this passage.

Love

The word love may be the most misunderstood common word in the English language because in the popular understanding it is defined by feelings and hormones. Authentic love is an act of the will. Genuine love has two essential elements: self-sacrifice and commitment. Perfect love embraces total self-sacrifice and complete commitment.

The Holy Spirit teaches us to live with self-sacrificing love because he is the divine Person of Love. This virtue is so important that St. Paul called it greater than faith and hope (1 Cor 13:13). Jesus proclaimed its importance: “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 15:34-35).

St. Paul also gave his practical insight into the virtue of love: “Love is *patient and kind*; love is *not jealous or boastful*; it is *not arrogant or rude*. Love does *not insist on its own way*; it is *not irritable or resentful*; it does *not rejoice at wrong*, but *rejoices in the right*. Love *bears* all things, *believes* all things, *hopes* all things, *endures* all things” (1 Cor 13:4-7).

Love or loving is also the principal fruit of the theological virtue of love. It is observed in the habitual behavior of those who readily sacrifice themselves for others, even in difficult circumstances.

Joy

The prophet Nehemiah declared: “the *joy* of the Lord is your strength” (Neh 8:10). The author of Hebrews wrote: “Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who

¹ Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life*, # 1360.

for the *joy* that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). The fruit of joy is the awareness that God is our strength and protector because we safely abide in his love.

This inner joy is undisturbed by the negative conditions that may surround us. We know Christ has redeemed us, loves us, protects us, and he will never abandon us. The fruit of joy is a foretaste of the perfect bliss and eternal delight of paradise that God wants us to experience now.

Peace

St. Paul addressed the subject of peace twice in his letter to the Romans. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have *peace* with God through the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1). “May the God of hope fill you with all *joy* and *peace* in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom 15:13). The peace of the Holy Spirit is the inner tranquility, even amid great hardships, that comes from our reliance on God who is all-powerful and always faithful.

Genuine peace comes from living confidently in the present moment with God rather than vainly trying to wrestle anxiously with tomorrow’s problems. The grace to cope with tomorrow’s trials does not come to us today. This is a reminder of the proverb: Sufficient today the evil thereof!

Patience

Patience is the virtue that helps us calmly bear our troubles and preserve serenity amid the difficulties of life. Patience mitigates sorrow and staves off excessive anger and complaining. St. Paul prayed: “May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and *patience* with *joy*, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light” (Gal 1:11). In his letter to the Ephesians he wrote: “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all *lowliness* and *meekness*, with *patience*, forbearing one another in *love*, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of *peace*” (Eph 5:1-3).

It is easier to bear with others when we live in the comfort of God’s mercy and forgiveness. When we have taken responsibility for our sinfulness and imperfections, we are less likely to be impatient with others.

Kindness

Genuine kindness stems from authentic love because it inclines a person to give to others without counting the cost. The kind person is other-directed. Some expressions that describe kindness are: benevolence, compassion, goodwill, generosity, and altruism. St. Paul describes kindness as a characteristic of authentic Christians: “but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, watching, hunger; by purity, knowledge, forbearance, *kindness*, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech,

and the power of God; with weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left” (2 Cor 6:4-7).

Kindness combats the evil of envy. Henry James once wrote: “Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind.” Blessed Mother Teresa said: “Kind words can be short and easy to speak but their echoes are truly endless.”

Goodness

Goodness is one of God’s attributes (Ps 107:1; 31:19; Hos 3:5). Human actions are said to be good when they conform to the proper moral order according to the natural and divine law. A person is said to have the characteristic of goodness when their actions pursue all that is good and avoid all that is evil. This is the first principle of sound practical reasoning. In St. Paul’s prayer for the Thessalonians he wrote: “To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his call, and may fill every *good resolve* and work of faith by his power” (2 Thess 2:11).

In a world polluted by evil, it can be difficult to grasp the concept and value of goodness, much less to pursue it as a goal. Yet, our eternal destiny is determined by our goodness (Jn 5:28-29; Rom 3:1-26; Tit 3:3-9).

Faithfulness

Faithfulness is the ability to remain true to our Christian vocation to the end of our life. This fidelity is extremely important, because if we abandon Jesus at the end of our life it negates all that went before. This is consistent with the adage: “It is not he who begins the race well who is commended, but he who ends it well.” Jesus declared: “But he who *endures to the end* will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

The faithful person is reliable. He is responsible. As a fruit of the spirit it means faithfully living an authentic Christian life. In his letter to Timothy St. Paul warned about those who are not faithful. “But understand this, that in the last days there will come time of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, un holy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it” (2 Tim 3:1-5).

Gentleness

Gentleness and meekness are synonyms. The gentle person shuns actions based on the principle, “might is right.” He does not insist on his own way. Jesus set the standard with the words, “learn from me; for I am *gentle* and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29). Then he lived this instruction during the terrible ordeal of his passion and death. St. Peter, who was not naturally gentle, learned and preached this lesson: “Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of robes, but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a *gentle* and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious” (1 Pet 3:3-4).

Gentleness reflects a person character, because the person who is meek is not excessively focused on himself. Tragically, the world often honors harshness under the banner of productivity. So attitudes like “brutally honest” are applauded. In the process people are stomped beneath our words and actions.

Self-control

Self-control is achieved through the virtue of temperance. This is a very important virtue because it reflects the power of the Holy Spirit to control all our appetites, particularly chastity, which is a major challenge today. St. Peter wrote in his second letter: “For this very reason [Christians are ‘partakers of the divine nature.’] make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with *self-control*, and *self-control* with steadfastness [*faithfulness*], and steadfastness with goodliness [*goodness*], and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with *love*. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful (See: Jn 15:2) in knowledge [intimate union] of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins [Baptism]. Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election [*faithfulness*], for if you do this you will never fall [because the grace of the Holy Spirit will protect you]; so there will be richly provided by you [by the Holy Spirit] an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Pet 1:5-11).

The person who lacks self-control is a slave to his unruly passions.