

## ***Fruit of the Spirit: Gentleness and Self-Control***

Bill Chadwick Oak Grove Presbyterian Church April 7, 2019

*Ephesians 4:1-3*

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord,  
beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been  
called,  
with all humility and gentleness, with patience,  
bearing with one another in love,  
making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of  
peace.*

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness (sometimes translated “generosity”), faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. What a lovely description of the life I presume all of us would like to live. The shorthand version of this is: Try to be the person your dog thinks you are.

Today is our final sermon in this series. I’m going to offer you a number of brief “think-withs” for your pondering.

First, I want to add a couple brief pieces to our thinking about Faithfulness last week.

One. Some of you have heard this before, perhaps many times: In our life of discipleship, we are not called to be successful. We are called to be faithful. That gives us freedom—freedom to be creative, to be innovative, to ignore those “seven last words of the church” that imprison so many congregations: “We’ve never done it that way before.” You Oak Grovers are singularly free from that attitude and I can’t tell you how grateful I am for that. We are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful.

Two. I keep encouraging us to be faithful to the leading of the Spirit. How do we know what that is, what God wants us to be doing? That's a question worth a couple minutes of our time. First, let me say that I don't believe that God has a singular, specific, detailed "plan" for each of our lives—what job to do, where to live, what person to marry, what class to take, which particular house to buy out of all the houses in the world—a daily plan that we are supposed to somehow discover. I know that there are a lot of Christians that feel that way and maybe you are one of them. Which is fine. It just seems so stressful to me. Now I do feel *extraordinarily* fortunate to be married to Kris. And when we have our rather frequent conversations about use of commas and quotation marks and other points of grammar, we do acknowledge that it was lucky we found each other because 99.9% of people would find that to be fingernails-on-the-blackboard annoying.

That "detailed, specific plan" sort of thinking reminds me of a story. There was a fellow who was struggling with his physical conditioning, i.e., he was heavy. For a couple of weeks he had successfully avoided the bakery on his way to work. But one morning he said to himself, "Well, I'm just going to drive down the street past the bakery. IF there is a parking spot available right in front of the bakery, I will take that as a sign from God that today I should stop. And sure enough," he reported, "right there in front of the bakery, on my ninth time around the block, there was a parking space."

Back to my point. To exhibit these wonderful attributes that Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit, I have contended that our focus must be on faithfully following the will of God. Not one specific plan laid out before we were born, but as situations arise. Here's a process I have found to be helpful. I first read it in an article by a UCC pastor named Harrel Beck, but I've seen it elsewhere as well.

How do we discern the leading of God? Beck suggested a three-legged stool sort of model. First, of course, we have the Bible. Now, I bristle at

calling the Bible a rulebook, because it is SOOOO much more than that, but there are some rules in there. So, to use the example of vocational discernment, if I am choosing between being a businessperson and being a hit man, the Bible would be pretty clear about that. “Thou shalt not kill.” No hit man. But if I am choosing between being a businessperson or a teacher or a bricklayer or an IT person or any other job that is helpful for the world, the Bible doesn’t give clear guidance on that. So we turn to the second leg of the stool: what does our “gut” say? I have learned this lesson the hard way over the years—to listen to my gut (much of the time). When I was in seminary, I was going to be the youth leader at this little church in California as part of my internship. So I thought, “I want to buy a VW bus to haul those kids around in.” So I found this well-used, but very cute, robin’s egg blue VW bus for sale, right at the very top end of my budget. I loved that bus. My gut didn’t. My gut was not settled about it. At all. But I went ahead and bought that little van.

It was a disaster, a total money pit. I spent more on repairs the first six months than the entire purchase price of the car.

Here’s a more significant example from my own life. About a month before my first wedding, my gut told me, “This is a bad idea. You should call this off.” But the invitations had already gone out. Everything had been paid for. Postponing would have been very embarrassing. Not, of course, as embarrassing, painful and expensive as the divorce.

So: Bible and gut. But the Bible and my gut are not enough.

Reminds me of a story. A young woman had just graduated college with a teaching degree and was searching for a teaching position. She was offered one in a small district and she told the superintendent she would take it. Two weeks before school was to start, she was offered a different position, in a larger district, for more money. She took it. And she called the first superintendent to tell him of her decision. She said,

“I’m sorry if this leaves you in the lurch, but I prayed about it and I believe this is the right thing for me to do. I have peace about it.”

The superintendent’s response, “She has peace. I’m left with the pieces.”

Like that young woman, I can sometimes get my gut to get in alignment with what I really want to do, even if it’s maybe not the thing God wants me to do. So Bible and gut alone are not enough.

The third leg of the stool is the collective wisdom of our Christian friends. Another personal example. Back in 1995, I was out of work. I had quit a job without having another one. It was a good decision, but after some time none of those lottery tickets had come through and I needed a job. I was very fortunate in that I had three possibilities. One was an interesting position in a newly emerging environmental field, to own my own business. The other two were pastor openings. I was very interested in all three options. The Bible would have affirmed any of them. My gut was excited about all three. One of the congregations wasn’t very far along in the pastor search process when the other, St. Luke Pres in Minnetonka, offered me a call to become one of their co-pastors. What to do? I was quite excited about the business opportunity. It wasn’t obvious to Kris and me which choice to make. We really wanted to be right in the center of God’s will.

So we called about ten of our closest Christian friends to come over to our house and hold a “clearness meeting,” as the Quakers call it. I explained to them the options we had and that I was looking for their wisdom. We prayed together and then they shared what they felt we should do. They unanimously felt like we should take the call to St. Luke. So we did.

And it was mostly a really good experience there. In those times when it wasn’t so good, it was very helpful for us to look back to that clearness

meeting and say, “Yes, we are confident that this is where God wants us to be ministering right now.”

If I had assembled my friends for a clearness meeting before my first marriage, I wouldn't have gotten married. After we announced our separation, so many people whom I really respected came up to me and said, “I never thought that you two were a good match.” I was right on the fence that month before the wedding. If one of those people had said something, I would have called it off.

Discerning what it is to be faithful, three legs: Bible, gut, wisdom of the church. Obviously, this is just for big decisions. I don't do this before ordering lunch. Hmm, tacos or Caesar salad?

Moving on.

Gentleness and self-control. Now “gentleness” and “self-control” really go together, don't they? And they are both in such short supply these days in our culture.

Where's Mister Rogers when we need him?

Video games are so horrifically violent, as are so many TV shows and movies. What about so-called “Reality TV”? Certainly no self-control shown there.

Gentleness. I feel so lucky to have had a father who was a tender and gentle man. He tried to teach his children to follow that example. Frequently when we kids were arguing he would quote the Biblical proverb: “a soft answer turneth away wrath” Proverbs 15:1. In a more recent translation: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (New International Version).

On Saturday morning cowboy shows when I was a kid, they used to talk about “breaking” horses, training a wild stallion to come under the control of the cowboy. I'm told that many horse people today prefer the term “gentling,” that a horse being trained is being “gentled,” rather than

“broken.” And it’s being gentled so that it is under the control of the handler.

And as Paul is using the phrase “self-control,” he’s really meaning not under our own control, but to be under the control of the Spirit. Saying yes to God’s leadership.

And saying yes to God means saying no to many of the attractions and distractions of daily life. As Pastor Emily Hull McGee put it in a recent sermon, “When you choose self-control — actively resisting the seductive beckoning of your screen, your desk, your calendar, your fridge, even your old college flame who just messaged you on Facebook, ... (you) are saying yes to God. (And)... it is when you say yes to God that you are set free.” (*A sermon preached on Luke 18:18-22 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC, on July 9, 2017*)

There is freedom in self-control/God-control. As the old saying goes, “Freedom for a locomotive is staying on the tracks.” I love trains. A locomotive is a thing of beauty and power...when it stays on the track. If the locomotive decides to follow its own will and head off across the meadow it quickly bogs down and usually topples over.

A few months ago in an Adult Faith Formation session a number of us learned a great saying. I don’t remember the day’s topic, but I remember this statement from Amy Zsohar: “We are not responsible for our first thought, but we are responsible for our second thought and our first action.” Now, that’s self-control/God control. “We are not responsible for our first thought, but we are responsible for our second thought and our first action.” In times of a crisis, a difficult situation, our first thought might not be fully Christ-like. A situation arises that triggers the reptilian part of our brain, our fight or flight syndrome, and our first thought might not be one that we’ll be proud of later. But that’s okay, our *first* thought.

Emotions just are. What we do with them is what matters. “We are not responsible for our first thought, but we are responsible for our second thought and our first action.”

Three final think-withs from the apostle Paul. Romans 12:2: “And do not be conformed to this world”—this world of “reality TV,” of pornography, of gratuitous violence in media, of selfishness, greed, blatant dishonesty at the very highest levels of government, of disdain for creation, of laziness, of gluttony, of judgmentalism... Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern the will of God, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

And Philippians 4:8: And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.

Galatians 5:22-23: “Finally, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” May the Spirit live within us in its fullness. Amen? Amen!