

Character that Counts

Studies on the Fruit of the Spirit

Few pieces of literature have been quoted as much as Galatians 5:22-23: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” We love the sound of these words because they include the most beautiful of human virtues--virtues we want to give and receive.

These verses also describe God’s character as revealed in Scripture and fully demonstrated in the life of His Son Jesus Christ, “the exact representation of His being” (Hebrews 1:3). Furthermore, Scripture tells us that God created us in His own image to reflect His character (Genesis 1:26). Therefore, our fulfillment in life comes as we succeed or fail at being like Him and reflecting His character in the world around us.

While we see people practicing many good deeds, the sad truth is that most people struggle to consistently exude the love, joy, peace and patience which they would like to exhibit in their lives. In our own strength, most of us are pulled toward selfish ways and often fail at being who we want to be and who God wants us to be.

But the good news is that God promises to produce these qualities in us as we continually choose to yield our lives to Him. As fruit is the natural output of the fruit tree, the fruit of God’s Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23 is the natural outcome of walking with God and choosing to make Him Lord of our daily lives.

The purpose of this study is to help us experience more fully the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control God wants to produce in us as we trust Him with the details of our lives. Each lesson will cover the biblical definition of one of these virtues, how God develops it in our lives, and its rewards.

Note: Because these topics elicit so much group discussion, you may opt to spend more than one week on each lesson.

The fruit of the Spirit is . . .

Lesson 1

Love

No one would question the song lyrics that state “what the world needs now is love.” Countless human problems would be solved by following the biblical mandate to love your neighbor as yourself. But this unselfish type of love is easier said than done.

The word for love used to describe this fruit of the Spirit in a believer’s life was not a common Greek word for love in Paul’s day. At that time, two Greek words described love. They were *eros*, a passionate, usually sexual love, and *phileo*, tender affection, or friendship love.

But the New Testament used a different Greek word to describe the love of God for us and the love God’s Spirit produces in the Christian. The word for this love is *agape*. It is a love that selflessly acts on behalf of the highest interest of the one loved. Agape love does not depend on feelings, natural human affinity, or worthiness of the one loved. In fact, the agape love which the Holy Spirit produces in us often works with or without natural motivations for love. Agape love often acts contrary to our feelings and has nothing to do with the worthiness of the loved one.

Because such love is the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit, it is to be the identifying characteristic of the Christian. As one song declares, “They will know we are Christians by our love.”

The fruit of the Spirit is . . .

Lesson 2

Joy

We all long to experience joy in our lives. This delightful human emotion can come from families, our vocations, an abundance of food, good health, financial security, a victory.

But the lasting joy the Holy Spirit gives us goes beyond human feelings of delight and pleasure. This joy abides deep in our hearts and is not necessarily related to our circumstances. It is an inner well of strength as seen in the early Christians as they endured suffering and persecution. Their joy was rooted in knowing the love and faithfulness of God, who promises to work everything in the believer's life for good (Romans 8:28) and to give eternal life with Him in a new heaven and earth (1 Corinthians 2:9; 1 John 5:11; Revelation 21:1-4). It is a joy found in loving God and others.

But more than this, it is a joy based on a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. As the angel announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, he declared, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ, the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

We now know the angel spoke of the great freedom from the penalty and power of sin that the believer would find through faith in Christ. Simple faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ brings a joyful release from guilt and a new ability to walk in obedience to God. This is the joy described by the songwriter Isaac Watts when he penned:

*At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light
And the burden of my heart rolled away--
It was there by faith I received my sight,
And now I am happy all the day.*

The fruit of the Spirit is . . .

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Lesson

Peace

The word “peace” in the Bible refers to *wholeness and a sense of well-being in all areas of life*. Certainly we all yearn for this kind of peace. Not just because it feels better, but because a lack of peace drains our energy and adds stress to the already challenging circumstances we face.

People seek peace of mind in different ways. Some look for a sense of wholeness and well-being by trying to “get to the top” professionally, acquire financial security, obtain certain possessions, or go on exotic vacations. Others seek peace by striving to somehow get in control of things or by trying to change themselves or others. Still others seek peace through being religious or promoting certain philosophies.

But sooner or later, there comes a realization that these avenues do not lead to lasting peace. Life is constantly changing and giving us a renewed sense that we are not in control. Power and possessions cannot provide the security we need. Relationships are imperfect, and, no matter how hard we may try, we can never be perfect ourselves. The peace we need—a lasting sense of wholeness and well-being in all areas of life—at last may seem unattainable.

But God, who created us to experience peace, can also give us peace. What’s more, the sense of wholeness and well-being in all areas of life that He gives is not diminished by change, life’s uncertainties, or the imperfections we face in ourselves and others. It is a supernatural peace that comes from trusting God and His Word and letting His Spirit control our lives.

The fruit of the Spirit is . . .

Lesson 4

Patience

Impatience is among the greatest of our human struggles. All along the way, life demands patience from us. The child can't wait to be "big," the adolescent can't wait to be independent and self-sufficient, the adult can't wait for their personal or career dreams to materialize. Middle age brings the desire for freedom from the pressures of work, and later years require patience with physical limitations and future unknowns. All the seasons of life call for patience.

Life also requires patience on a daily basis. We all need self-restraint when provoked by others. Both child and adult need the ability not to retaliate with hostility or prompt punishment toward those who hurt, inconvenience or otherwise cross us. Emotional and relational success require the patience to respond in mercy instead of anger when people frustrate us.

And we need the patience, or longsuffering, to remain faithful in life's difficulties, trusting God even when we don't understand the way He is taking with us. Moreover, we need the patience to persevere when we are rejected or persecuted for our faith. We need the ability to keep on going when it would be easier to quit, and to maintain hope when we are being pulled toward despondency.

Patience may come easier for some than others, but the patience we all need must come from God's power in our lives. Patience grows as we trust God and find Him faithful through one challenge and then another. And growth in patience leads to perfected character, because patience requires growth in love, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control.

In this lesson on *Character that Counts*, we will look at how to draw on God's power for the patience and perseverance we need. We will also discover how patience is a fundamental building block of wholeness in our lives.

Kindness

Kindness is God's goodness in action. When the Spirit produces kindness in our lives, we become the hands and feet and mouthpiece of God as we love needy people.

And everyone is needy. We all need people in our lives who are hospitable and friendly, accepting, considerate and helpful. We need people that we can count on for support when our burdens are too heavy to carry alone.

Historically, the world's manmade religions have had harsh and cruel gods that were temperamental and demanding and sometimes even required human sacrifice for appeasement. But the one true God, who has revealed Himself through the Bible, through the history of Israel, and in the person of Jesus Christ, is infinitely kind. He sustains our lives, gives us many things that we do not deserve, including salvation, and helps us in the crises that we face in life.

The Scriptures declare, "The Lord is loving toward all He has made" (Psalm 145:17). "The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. . . ." (Nahum 1:7). "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). "The Lord is gracious; our God is full of compassion" (Psalm 116:5).

As God's children, we are to reflect our heavenly Father's kindness. This means being gracious in the way we treat our family members and friends and in the way we relate to our neighbors and those we meet each day. And it means being a part of what God is doing in our world to bring relief to the sick and needy, the frightened, and victims of injustice.

When the Holy Spirit produces God's kindness in us, we become humble servants who actively reflect His impartial love and compassion for

people. Our disposition toward others becomes like that of Jesus Christ--gentle, understanding and supportive. Through us, He is able to extend His mercy and hope to a hurting world.

As we continue our study of *Character that Counts*, we will look at what the Bible has to say about this wonderful fruit of the Spirit...kindness.

The fruit of the Spirit is . . .

Lesson 6

Goodness

While kindness is goodness expressing itself in deeds, goodness signifies a heart attitude that is morally upright. While kindness involves action, goodness is having a heart to be good, do good, and promote good. This inner goodness motivates right, noble and honorable words and deeds.

The Christian is to test and approve good (Romans 12:2), to cling to good (Romans 12:9), to do good (Romans 13:3), to follow after good (1 Thessalonians 5:15), to be enthusiastic for good (1 Peter 3:13), and to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). The Spirit-filled believer has an inner motivating desire to fulfill these mandates, and this is the fruit of goodness.

While kindness involves grace, gentleness and compassion, goodness does not always bring good to others by gentle means. Trench, a theologian following Jerome, believes that Jesus demonstrated the moral quality of goodness when he cleansed the temple in Matthew 21:12-13 and when He denounced the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:13-29). Kindness, on the other hand, is seen in His gracious dealings with the penitent woman in Luke 7:37-50. In this sense, goodness is sometimes the sterner element in the ideal character.

Because God's creation thrives on good and is contaminated by evil, the spiritual Christian's goodness brings a preservative factor to his environment. Jesus called it being "salt and light" (Matthew 5:13-14).

In this lesson, we will look at the importance of being men and women of goodness in our world. We will observe how we can develop and maintain this important fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

Lesson 7

The fruit of the Spirit is . . . Faithfulness

One of the greatest evidences of the Holy Spirit's control in our lives is extraordinary faithfulness. This faithfulness is characterized by absolute trust in God and personal trustworthiness. This virtue grows as the Holy Spirit uses God's Word to continually assure us of God's faithfulness and to help us trust God with the details of life. Then He works in our character to make us trustworthy and reliable servants of God and others.

Jesus discussed the need for faith more than any other subject. "I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Matt. 17:20). All through the Scriptures we are encouraged to practice bold faith to discover the treasures of God's love and faithfulness.

Jesus also stressed the importance of integrity in our service to God (Matthew 25:21) and in our promises to others. "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37).

Like the love and kindness aspects of the fruit of the Spirit, faithfulness makes us a shelter and source of hope to other people. The person who is full of genuine faith in God and trustworthiness of character draws people to him/her as the Lord Jesus did when He walked the earth. Faithfulness is the fruit of the Spirit that allows us to walk with God no matter what happens in life as well as be a beacon of light for others.

As we continue our study of *Character that Counts*, we will observe what the Bible has to say about the development and rewards of the fruit of the Spirit...faithfulness.

The fruit of the Spirit is . . .

Lesson 8

Gentleness

This fruit of the Spirit is perhaps the most difficult to translate into English. The Greek word *praotes* is best translated *meekness*, *gentleness* or *humility*, but the New Testament use of it has a fuller, deeper significance than the non-scriptural Greek writings. Vine's New Testament dictionary defines meekness (KJV), or gentleness (NIV) as an inner grace primarily exercised toward God. To have gentleness is to believe God's dealings with us are good, and therefore accept them without dispute or resistance. Gentleness requires humility and is often linked with it in the New Testament. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

Biblical humility and gentleness has at its foundation a trusting and yielded spirit toward God. While Jesus wished God's plan were different as He faced the cross, His prayer was "Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (Matthew 26:42). In Christ, we see that gentleness does not fight, struggle or contend with God's plan.

In English, humility, meekness, mildness, and gentleness suggest weakness. These words are often associated with an inability to help oneself. Yet Christ was gentle and meek in that He had the infinite resources of God at His command to destroy His enemies, but chose not to

use them in order to do His Father's good and perfect will (cf. Matthew 26:50-54).

This attitude of submission toward God brings gentleness into our relationships with others, even enemies, as we view them as the means by which God is carrying out His perfect will for our lives and producing Christ's perfect character in us. This perspective helps us respond to others with gentleness rather than animosity. Jesus demonstrated this gentleness toward others in His mock trial and crucifixion.

In the example of Jesus, we see that biblical meekness or gentleness is the opposite of self-assertiveness and self-interest. It is not occupied with self at all, but, like Jesus, is committed to doing God's will at whatever the cost. The gentleness or meekness developed in the believer by the Holy Spirit, therefore, requires supernatural inner strength and self-control.

In the power of the Spirit, we are called to show "true humility (gentleness or meekness) toward all men" (Titus 3:2). We are to exhibit gentleness in all the various ways we serve God (1 Timothy 6:11), and especially in correcting the weak and erring (Galatians 6:1; 2 Timothy 2:25). We are to receive God's Word with humility (James 1:21) and to share our faith with unbelievers with gentleness (1 Peter 3:15).

The fruit of the Spirit is . . .

Lesson 9

Self-Control

The word for self-control comes from the Greek word for strength, relating self-control to the strength it takes to control the body, emotions and will. *Vine's Expository Dictionary* defines self-control as the power not to abuse the powers God has given us. Examples of these powers would be everything from eating, sex and the use of words to physical, material or political power over those weaker.

Throughout the Bible, God gives guidelines for how He has created us to enjoy and use the powers He has bestowed upon us--guidelines that are healthy, constructive, and always in our best interest. Overall, they call us to practice mercy and moderation and above all to let our wills be under the direction of God's Spirit.

As you have probably observed by now, every aspect of the fruit of the Spirit is dependent on the rest. We need self-control to have biblical love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and gentleness. As the Spirit is allowed to develop these virtues in our lives, they motivate self-control--the good use, rather than abuse--of our God-given powers and freedoms.

Along with its cousin, patience, self-control may be the most difficult aspect of the fruit of the Spirit to discuss. Almost everyone has at least one area in which there is a daily battle with temptation and discouragement. In this final study, we will observe different areas in which God's Spirit promises to win the battle for self-control as we persevere in faith.

Keys to . . .

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Lesson

Character that Counts

Simply stated, what we have studied in Galatians 5:22-23 is what we look like when we allow Jesus Christ to live His life through us. Most would agree that the fruit of the Spirit--unconditional love, even toward enemies; joy, peace, patience and faithfulness even in hardship; kindness and goodness even in the face of ill-treatment; and self-control over body, emotions, and tongue--are virtues impossible to attain by human efforts. The Bible affirms this (Romans 7:21-23; John 15:5). But when Jesus Christ is allowed to produce His life in us through the power of the

indwelling Holy Spirit, this holistic lifestyle is produced as naturally as grapes on a vine.

In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul speaks of ‘the fruit of the Spirit’ as one and not of ‘fruits’ as separate because Christ is always all of these in us. If we are letting the Holy Spirit control our lives, when we need patience, He produces patience. When we need love that exceeds normal human love, the Spirit of Christ gives us love. When we need self-control over our natural impulses, the Holy Spirit gives self-control.

Charles Trumbell wrote, “Jesus Christ does not want to be our helper; He wants to be our life. He does not want us to work for Him. He wants us to let Him do His work through us....When our life is not only Christ’s but *Christ*, our life will be a winning life; for He cannot fail. And a winning life is a fruit-bearing life, a serving life.”

The Christ-controlled life does not mean our individual personality is abolished. Rather, Jesus Christ expresses Himself through the unique personalities and gifts He has given us. Paul was a logical thinker before his conversion, and God used this element so that he could write logical treatises like the letter to the Romans. John thought more mystically, and God used this element of his personality to write the Gospel of John. The reproduction of Christ’s life in us is through the power of the Holy Spirit. Theologically, this new life within us is sometimes called the abiding life (John 15), or the exchanged life (Galatians 2:20), or the Spirit-filled life (Ephesians 5:18; Galatians 5:22-23). But all picture the wondrous truth that God does not set the standard high, then leave us to struggle and fail. He promises to produce godly character in us as we let Jesus Christ be Lord of our lives.

The Christ-controlled life begins when we receive Christ into our lives (John 1:12). At that time, God’s Spirit takes up residence within us and we are given a new heart that yearns to please God (Ezekiel 36:26-27; John 14:16-20; Romans 8:9) The Holy Spirit empowers the Christian to resist temptation and steadily grow in godly character (Ephesians 3:16,20; 2 Corinthians 9:8; Philippians 4:13). Consequently, through the weeks and months and years of total commitment, our lives become a clearer and clearer reflection of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

Only as we understand these principles can a study of the fruit of the Spirit be experiential and not just academic. In our final lesson on *Character that*

Counts, we will review these keys to living a life that reflects the very nature of God.