

“A FRUITFUL LIFE”

1. Introduction

Galatians 5:16-26

We’re starting a new, fairly short, series this morning – well, short compared to the Matthew series!. Someone suggested we might look at this particular subject and I’m grateful for the opportunity to look at something that is well-known to many Christians, but then we tend very often to assume we therefore know all there is to know about it. I’m not claiming for one moment that this series will exhaust the subject, but it will give us an excuse to reflect on it and, if you are part of a housegroup, you can share your ideas with others. If you’re not part of a housegroup, this might be a good time to think about joining one.

Anyway, we’re going to have a look at what Paul, in the passage we’ve just heard, calls “*the fruit of the Spirit*”. How are we to live fruitful lives, fulfilled lives, exemplary lives as followers of Jesus? If you are a follower of Jesus, what should your life look like? How do we live out the values of God’s Kingdom in a world which seems in many ways to be totally at odds with them? I hope that the next few weeks will give us all cause to think and reflect on how well we live up to the kind of standards that Jesus really sets for those who claim to be his disciples.

But, as with anything else we take from the Bible, we need to look at this description of the “*fruit of the Spirit*” in the context in which Paul sets it here in this letter to the Christians in first-century Galatia. Paul is not writing about this in isolation – it’s not a little unattached aphorism that bears no relation to what’s written around it. Paul writes about the “*fruit of the Spirit*” for a reason and that reason is connected to the things he says immediately before it. He is expressing here something of the tension that we experience trying to live as Christians in a world that is still very much at odds with God’s values – living with the constant pull of our fallen humanity in one direction as we are trying to move in the opposite direction, the direction of God’s transforming activity. Paul expresses it as a tension between “*the sinful nature*” and “*the Spirit*”, which are, as he sees it “*contrary*” to and “*in conflict with*” each other.

The “*Spirit*” here is clearly the Holy Spirit, the essence, if you like, of God at work in our lives and in his world. And the “*sinful nature*” – or “*the flesh*” if you have an older version – is that aspect of our fallen humanity which has been affected by evil. It’s the result of “*the Fall*”, the coming of evil into God’s good creation. Our originally good nature has been perverted and distorted by the presence of evil. It pulls us in one direction when we should be going in the other. And that other direction is the way of the Holy Spirit, the way of God, the way in which we were originally created. This constant tension ends up with us not doing what we want to do (v17b). Paul writes that we should be trying to “*live by the Spirit*” – literally trying to “*walk with the Spirit*” (the Greek word is *peripateio*, from which we get our word

“peripatetic”). Put that thought into the part of your brain that stores such stuff because we’ll come back to that another week.

The hinge of this passage seems to me to be *v21b*. Those who live according to the sinful nature “*will not inherit the Kingdom of God*”. This is all about the Kingdom – God’s benevolent, sovereign rule – and about accepting and living out the values of that Kingdom. What Paul writes about before that phrase is all to do with things that are inimical to the Kingdom. And what he writes about after it is all to do with the way in which Jesus’ followers should reflect and live out the values of the Kingdom. This is a passage of fundamental contrasts.

The main contrast – the one which will lead us into our consideration of the “*fruit of the Spirit*”, is between those “*acts of the sinful nature*” in *vv19-21* and “*the fruit of the Spirit*” in *vv22,23*. And the vocabulary which Paul chooses serves to emphasise that. He writes about the “*acts of the sinful nature*” – the things we do which are what people actually **see you doing**: as Paul says, these are “*obvious*”. That is contrasted with “*the fruit of the Spirit*”, the qualities of your life – what people can **see you are**. This is, if you like, a contrast between behaviour and being, between actions and attitudes.

“*Acts*”, you see, are deeds, things you need – at least initially – to make a choice to do. They are things you can do or you can stop doing. Paul lists some of them here, as he does in several other places in his letters. The lists are all slightly different, but not in any way mutually incompatible. You may have noticed, if you were following the reading in your Bible, that the NIV (and, indeed, most other translations) puts these acts into four groups separated by semi-colons. (There wasn’t any punctuation in the original Greek, so this is a bit of a surmise, really.) Different commentators and scholars use different words to sum up each little group, but I’m going to refer to them this morning as – sexual sin; religious sin; social sin; and pagan sin.

Now many people who have written about these verses make the point that the “*acts of the sinful nature*” describe the world in which the Galatians lived. And they make a pretty compelling point about that world. This does describe what Paul and his readers would have seen around them all the time in the cosmopolitan, pagan, self-seeking culture of the day. But the temptation then is to assume that this is some kind of first century list and so divorce it completely from our contemporary situation. This is Paul writing to people who lived in a different place and time from us, so we can look on with a kind of bemused interest, but keep it all at arm’s length from our current context. Then we fail to see just how implicated we are in all this today, how much we are sucked into all this in our own culture in twenty-first century western Europe. Paul isn’t writing about the Galatian condition, or the first century condition, but about the human condition. Martin Luther wrote a great commentary on *Galatians* and he mentions

St Jerome who had lived some centuries before him and struggled with the tensions Paul describes. Then he goes on to say that this isn't something people like Jerome – the holy men of earlier times – had to cope with, but something for the here and now. (There's a little bit of anti-Catholic and anti-clerical propaganda here, as you'd expect with Luther, but the point remains.)

“If Jerome felt himself in such flames of fleshly lust, who lived in the barren wilderness with bread and water, what do our holy belly-gods the clergy men feel, think ye, who so stuff and stretch out themselves with all kinds of dainty fare, that it is a marvel their bellies burst not? Wherefore these things are written, not to hermits and monks (as the Papists dream) nor to sinners in the world only; but to the universal Church of Christ and to all the faithful: whom Paul exhorteth to walk in the Spirit that they fulfil not the lust of the flesh.”

This is for you and me, folks. These warnings are not for some group of people remote in time, space, class or holiness from us. What Paul goes on to describe here in vv19-21 is something that we all need to take careful note of, here in Lichfield in the second decade of the twenty-first century. And we need to take note of it, not just because it describes some possible pitfalls into which we might stumble, but because much of this is actually *encouraged* in our own society and we have become pretty much anaesthetised to it. Without spending an unnecessarily prurient amount of time looking at this, let's look at these four groups of “*acts of the sinful nature*”.

Sexual sin

Just think for a moment of the ready availability of pornography in our society – in cinema, on television, over the Internet. It's there for anyone to look at and drool over – in fact, it's almost unavoidable. Consider the use of sexualised imagery in advertising and marketing and the way in which it is so readily portrayed in our newspapers and magazines. Think of the ready acceptance of so many forms of non-biblical sexual partnerships – by which I mean contrary to the monogamous, life-long, committed partnerships that the Bible puts forward as God's ideal. Wherever you look, sex is commodified, another pay-as-you-go opportunity for self-gratification and transient pleasure at the expense of the de-humanising and objectification of other human beings made in God's image. “*Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery*” are part and parcel of the commercial and leisure life of our society in ways which even the Galatians might find hard to believe. And even if we do not participate ourselves – and it's difficult not to, as most of us allow ourselves to be entertained by it to some extent – we still allow it to wash over us and seep into our consciousness, affecting our attitudes and values.

Religious sin

Idolatry and witchcraft were considered to be very much a part of one's religious experience in the world of the first century. We may not think of it necessarily in religious terms but the same things still go on. Look at the cult of celebrity, the idol worship of those who appear to have succeeded in a particular field – even, sadly, within the Christian community. It's idolatry because it usurps the place of God in your

life. Your fanatical attachment to some reality star or football genius or musical diva is taking you away from your devotion to God and his ways. Idolising those who are rich or talented or intelligent or unorthodox or famous is just as much idolatry as bowing down in front of a statue of Artemis or Apollo.

And the same goes for witchcraft (or “*sorcery*” in some versions). [Interestingly, the word translated here as “*witchcraft*” is “*pharmakai*” from which we get our word “*pharmacy*”. (Just threw that in for the pharmacists and medics amongst you this morning!) It’s all to do with the link in the first-century mind between religion and healing.] Look around at the alternative spiritualities and false religions, the superstitions and weird belief systems that command attention today. Many people are so desperate not to believe in Jesus that they’ll believe in all kinds of other stuff – and make it seem trendy and cool. As G K Chesterton once said: “*When people stop believing in God they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in anything.*”

Social sin

This is where the rubber really hits the road for many of us. We huff and puff about sexual immorality and want to deal with it as severely as possible – but what about “*discord ... selfish ambition ... envy*”. When was the last time you heard of someone being made to feel unwelcome in church because they seemed to display one of those characteristics?

Of course, these things have always been part of the human condition. These are not new “*acts of the sinful nature*”. But today these are not simply tolerated in our culture: they are assimilated and even admired. In fact, I would go so far as to say that much of our contemporary western culture is based on some of these. We are already beginning to see quite clearly how **hatred** and **discord** are part of our political life – and I’m not just talking about the way in which minorities are discriminated against, but about the vehement and venomous abuse that is today heaped on those who happen to have different prejudices from yours. I am very much afraid that this election campaign will be characterised by this. And it rubs off on the rest of us.

An entire industry – advertising and marketing – is built on the assumption of **jealousy**, being made to think you need something you haven’t got and that need being translated into desire. We see **selfish ambition** pretty well anywhere we look. Our career structures and our economic system are now driven by this ludicrous idea that competition is a good and worthy motive in everything from job promotion to running the NHS. And whilst we’re thinking about our economic system, **envy** is what now keeps it all going. Our entire economic system is built on debt. Everyone uses credit cards, bank loans, instalment plans. Why? So they can get what they want when they want it. “*Take the waiting out of wanting*” – the slogan of the Access credit card all those years ago. That’s envy.

Think about **dissensions** and **factions**. Everything today is considered in opposition to something else, so our political and legal systems are totally adversarial. It's not about truth or justice, but about who is the better orator, who puts forth the cleverer argument, who can make their opponent look small and insignificant. People are not bothered about what you stand for, but who you're against. And if you really want to win people over, put a bit of emotion into it: shout and stamp to get your point across. That shows you're passionate about it – or, as Paul would put it, you're acting in a **fit of rage**.

Can you see how divisive and demeaning all this is? This is totally contrary to the values of the Kingdom. This is totally at odds with the fruit of the Spirit. This is what we are to recognise is “*in conflict with*” the fruit of the Spirit.

Pagan sin

This is really a bit of shorthand for these last two “*acts of the sinful nature*”. In Paul's day, “*drunkenness, orgies and the like*” were very much associated with the pagan rites at the gods' and goddesses' shrines. Narcotics would also have been used with alcohol as trance-like states were induced, libations were poured to the deities, and temple prostitution was rife. They were all really attempts to leave behind the humdrum existence of everyday life, the struggle of the here and now, and lose oneself in a “higher” reality. Nothing has really changed except the names of the gods – Diana, Zeus, Asclepius and the rest are now Wetherspoons, Kopparberg, Gordons and Spice. Drink, drugs and partying are integral to the culture of so many.

So, says Paul, this is not the way to go. This is not the kind of stuff you'll find in the Kingdom of God. And he terms it a “*warning*” (v21). Those who live and act like this, those who are drawn into such a way of life, those who have these priorities find that their deeds, their “*acts*” betray their loyalties and priorities. It's not what the followers of Jesus Christ should be part of.

And then in v22 there is one of Paul's big “*But*”s. (I've often considered a series on Paul's Big Buts, but I fear it might be misconstrued and I can't think of a different title!) “*But,*” he says at the beginning of this next paragraph – there is a different way. As always there is an alternative, another way of behaving and another way of being. It does not have to be like this. And the alternative is to walk in the Spirit's way, to follow the path God marks out by his Holy Spirit's influence in our lives. Walking with the Spirit means that we begin to cultivate the “*fruit of the Spirit*”. And Paul gives us a list of qualities that constitute the “*fruit of the Spirit*”.

Now, as we've remarked many times before when we've come across this passage, Paul does not talk about the "*fruits of the Spirit*" – plural. He talks about the "*fruit of the Spirit*" – singular. This is not a checklist of things you might want to try. This isn't a list of nine qualities and you can choose any five to show how holy you are. This is a cluster of qualities, all of which will naturally be displayed by those who decide to follow the way of Jesus and commit to walking the way of the Holy Spirit. You can't pick out the easiest or the most attractive or whatever. You don't do a Myers-Briggs test to see which of these qualities is most suited to your temperament. It's all or nothing, really. These are the things that will be seen in the lives of those people who are in practice what they have confessed to be in principle. "You say you're a Christian?" asks Paul. "OK. Get on and live like it. And this is how other people will know."

You'll be pleased to know we're not going to look at all nine of these this morning. Over the next few weeks, we're going to look at each of these qualities in turn and see just how they might affect the way we live our lives, how we live out our discipleship and model the values of the Kingdom of God. The important thing is, though, that we are called, as Paul puts it, to "*keep in step with the Spirit*", constantly to be asking for the help of the Holy Spirit. Living out these values is not something we can do under our own steam, so we need to keep praying for God's help.

This morning, for many of us, that help might mostly be needed to turn away from the "*acts of the sinful nature*". We need God's help to recognise where we have slipped into doing those things, to acknowledge that it is not what he wants and to turn away from them, to walk in a different direction. That's what the Bible refers to elsewhere as "repentance". This morning, seek God's forgiveness for where you have gone wrong and accept his grace – and his strength to move forward in the way he wants you to go.

"A FRUITFUL LIFE"

1. Introduction ***Galatians 5:16-26***

We are considering "*the fruit of the Spirit*". How are we to live fruitful lives, fulfilled lives, exemplary lives as followers of Jesus? If you are a follower of Jesus, what should your life look like? How do we live out the values of God's Kingdom in a world which seems in many ways to be totally at odds with them? Paul is not writing about this in isolation. He is expressing here something of the tension between "*the sinful nature*" and "*the Spirit*", which are, as he sees it "*contrary*" to each other.

The hinge of this passage is *v21b*. This is all about the Kingdom – God's benevolent, sovereign rule – and about accepting and living out the values of that Kingdom. What Paul writes about before that phrase is all to do with things that are inimical to the Kingdom. And what he writes about after it is all to do with the way in which Jesus' followers should reflect and live out the values of the Kingdom.

The main contrast – the one which will lead us into our consideration of the "*fruit of the Spirit*" – is between those "*acts of the sinful nature*" in *vv19-21* and "*the fruit of the Spirit*" in *vv22,23*. And the vocabulary which Paul chooses serves to emphasise that. He writes about the "**acts of the sinful nature**" – the things we do which are what people actually **see you doing**: as Paul says, these are "*obvious*". That is contrasted with "*the fruit of the Spirit*", the qualities of your life – what people can **see you are**. This is, if you like, a contrast between behaviour and being, between actions and attitudes. Paul isn't writing about the Galatian condition, or the first century condition, but about the human condition. What Paul goes on to describe here in *vv19-21* is something that we all need to take careful note of, here in Lichfield in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Sexual sin

"*Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery*" – seen all around us in the media, advertising and unbiblical relationships.

Religious sin

"*Idolatry and witchcraft*" – the cult of celebrity and false religion.

Social sin

"*Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy*" – all things we see in our society and some of which are actively encouraged in the pursuit of a particular economic and social system.

Pagan sin

"*Drunkenness, orgies and the like*" were very much associated with the pagan rites at the gods' and goddesses' shrines. Drink, drugs and partying are still integral to the culture of many people.

But there is an alternative, another way of behaving and another way of being. It does not have to be like this. And the alternative is to walk in the Spirit's way, cultivating the "*fruit of the Spirit*".

Questions for discussion

- 1) How do you experience the tension between the "*acts of the sinful nature*" and "*living by the Spirit*"?
- 2) Do you think our society is too much driven by the things Paul lists in *vv19,20*? Why/why not? What can we do about it?
- 3) What do we mean by "*living by the Spirit*"? How can we encourage that in each other?
- 4) What do you see as the difference between actions and attitudes? How does one affect the other?