

*For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.*

Dear friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed;

Most people are familiar with the exploits of Johnny Appleseed, the itinerant missionary who travelled across the U.S. planting apple seeds in barren areas. A faithful, Christian man, he wanted to share his faith with as many people as possible. He also wanted to leave a lasting legacy to the future generations. Many of the great apple orchards in North America owe their beginning to the work of Johnny Appleseed; and those who enjoy apples should thank this selfless, tireless man, who went about sharing God's love with others, and planting apple seeds along the way.

When we look at the life and the accomplishments of Johnny Appleseed, we would have to say that he was a man who lived a very fruitful life. But all puns aside, our text today urges us to have fruit-full lives, that is, lives which are full of the wonderful fruit that comes as we live by the guidance and help of the Holy Spirit. Many times Jesus talked to His disciples about bearing good fruit, of leading fruit-full lives. And today, we want to remember, that as the Spirit works faith in our hearts, He helps us to be filled with the good fruit that is a joy to our own lives, a blessing to others and something glorious in the sight of God.

We are blessed to be able to enjoy such wonderful fruits as apples, oranges, bananas and grapefruit, strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, cherries, peaches, and many more. Our text today also speaks of different kinds of fruit. But not all of it is pleasant. Jesus said: *"For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.* (Luke 6:43-45 - ESV) When Paul talks in our text about the works of the flesh, he doesn't call them fruits—but they are the things that come, as Jesus says, out of the sinful heart. In that sense, Paul mentions some pretty rotten fruit: fruit that, in spiritual terms, is poisonous to our eternal life. We might say that Paul speaks of our lives as an orchard, filled with fruit. His concern is for the kind of fruit growing in the orchard of our hearts.

There is a fruit which seems to describe exactly what Paul wants us to know about the wrong kind of fruit in our lives. It is called the strangler fig, which grows in Mexico and the tropical zones of South America. The Spanish-speaking people refer to it as the "mata palo" which means "the tree killer". It is really a vine that grows around another tree—and into the tree, choking it. The fruit of the strangler fig is not palatable except to cattle and some birds. After the birds eat it, they must clean their beaks of the sticky residue. They do this by rubbing them on nearby trees. The seeds of the small fig have a natural glue which makes them adhere to the branches. When the rainy season arrives, germination takes place. Soon tiny roots make their way down into the heart of the wood and begin to grow. Within a few years the once lovely palms have become entirely covered with the entangling vines of the parasitic growth. Unless the tree is set free through the removal of these "strangler" figs, it finally begins to wither, dropping one frond after another until it is completely lifeless.

In our text, Paul warns us that we can be covered with fruit that is worse than strangler figs. He warns us against being caught up in the acts of the sinful nature, and then proceeds to remind us what some of those things are: *Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.* Left unchecked, these things take over our lives,

choking out any good fruit. They make us selfish and self-centred. As this fruit grows in our lives, we don't care about any one or anything except our own sinful desires. This horrible fruit poisons our lives so that there is no room in our hearts for forgiveness; no concern for the needs of others; no thought to the rightness or wrongness of anything we do. We even begin to think that we don't need God, because we are gods unto ourselves—and if people don't like it, well, that's just their problem.

Sooner or later, these works of the flesh—this rotten fruit—leaves a bad taste in your mouth. It also makes life seem so fruitless. But worst of all, Paul reminds us that these kinds of fruit are hazardous to our spiritual health. In fact, he says: *I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

But in His grace and goodness, God has removed the strangler figs from our lives. Through Jesus Christ, sin and its lust, which can so easily choke out our very lives, has been taken away. Jesus gave His life on the cross as a kind of herbicide against the sins that would make our lives fruitless, killing their power over us. And in His resurrection to life, He fertilizes our hearts, making them new again, cleansing them for the Spirit He sends us, who will make our lives truly fruit-full.

It is the life we have in the Spirit that makes this existence so sweet and savoury. The fruit He plants in our hearts and lives fills us and satisfies us. It adds beauty to our lives. It is also good for those around us. There is the fruit of *love*: true, caring love for one another that flows from the love we have in the Saviour, who loved us enough to die for us on the cross. There is the fruit of *joy*: joy that is ours in the living Christ, whose resurrection to life assures us of final victory, even in the darkest moments of our lives. There is the fruit of *peace*, sometimes called the fruit of contentment. It is the peace that comes from knowing that God is in charge of all things, and that everything will work out according to His gracious plans. Then there is *patience*, which enables us to deal with life's little irritations, and to be understanding of the weaknesses in others. Patience is the fruit that, together with love, makes us open to those around us, and helps us reach out to them with forgiveness and understanding.

The fruit of *kindness* leads us to do loving, caring acts for those around us who need our help. Coupled with *goodness*, this fruit takes away our selfishness and fills us with compassion. The fruit of *faithfulness* helps us to be people who can be trusted, people who can be counted on to keep our word, to do our best: at work, at school, at home. *Gentleness* is a fruit which helps us put aside our pride and selfish ambition, and allows us to deal with those around us. *Self control* is the fruit that teaches us to deal with our temper, our desires, our bad habits. Put them all together, and we have a fruit-full life that adds sweetness to each day. We have a life which gives thanks and glory to the God who made us and who only wants the best for us. We have a fruit-full life which, just like the work of Johnny Appleseed, brings blessings to those who can see and share in our fruitfulness.

Jesus once told His disciples: *You will recognize them by their fruits.* (Matthew 7:15-16 - ESV) In that instance He was speaking of the false prophets, whose daily lives would show just how false their teaching was. But the same is true for us as God's people. Those around us can see the faith in our hearts by the fruit that comes out in our lives. If the only thing that people can see in us are the acts of the sinful nature—the strangler figs which are choking us to spiritual death, then they—and God—would have every right to ask: where is your faith? But when they see the fruit of the Spirit, the wonderful *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*, then they are seeing how the Spirit works faith in us, making our lives fruit-full.

So, what kind of fruit is in the middle of your heart? Is it the kind that is tasteless, useless and even poisonous? If it is, God can plough it under and clean it out through His loving forgiveness and grace, given to us for the sake of the dying and rising Christ. But then listen to Paul, who says to us: *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.* As we live in the Spirit, we will find that wonderful fruit in the middle of our hearts and lives: the fruit that doesn't rot or spoil, and which is always ripe. This fruit makes life truly wonderful, tasty and sweet. As Paul says: *those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.* Amen.