

A Matter of Character

John 15:1-17 and Galatians 5:22-26

Good Morning Church Family,

It's wonderful to see you all this morning.

As a novice gardener, I'll confess that I am prone to impatience and anxiety about my plants. When I plant my seeds directly in the soil (versus transplanting say a tomato plant from the greenhouse), I think this is never going to work. This miniscule, dried out seed is going to be able to push out of the soil; it just feels hard to believe. I understand that this is how it works, but it's maddening and miraculous at the same time. And then, every single day after I put the seeds in, I go check to see if anything has sprouted. And I huff, and I fret, and I wonder, was my seed too old? Maybe it needs more water? What if I planted it too deep!? I come back into the house and I say Taylor, nothing is groooooowing. It's been two days. But what if it doesn't woook? It will be patient. I caaaaan't. I'm walking away. Nooooo. It's ridiculous isn't it? To be planted in the ground and expect instant results. To imagine that a sprout, and even more a harvest takes too long? As I see lived in out in every single one of your gardens, growing good fruit takes time, there aren't really any short cuts (Though I do feel like Ed's greenhouse is cheating a little bit) But with time, effort, and a lot of merciful sun and rain from God, the harvest will come. The plants will bear good fruit.

Scripture uses a lot of gardening and harvesting metaphors to explain the story of the Christian Life. The most famous of which is the passage that Roger read for us this morning from the book of Galatians. Paul, in his letter to the church at Galatia, compares the “fruits” of those who are walking and living in the ways of Jesus to the fruits of the world. I’m going to read the passage again, but I’m going to start a few verses earlier, just so we can get a better sense of the contrast that Paul is setting up. “So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not able to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.”

Paul is essentially saying, look, this is how you and others will know that you are followers of Jesus because you will bear this kind of a fruit. And the list that Paul offers: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are essential character traits. They’re character traits. They’re qualities that over time,

with effort, and a lot of mercy from God become baked into who we are as people. So when we operate in the world, when we interact with our neighbors, when we make choices (even when nobody's watching) we are acting in the ways of the Spirit.

In one of the earlier sermons from this series, we talked about how in the Jewish tradition, a student who wanted to become a rabbi, would choose to follow a specific rabbi, to learn from them, to emulate their character, to become like that Rabbi. The character traits that Paul is talking about when he lists the fruit of the Spirit are what we can strive to grow into in order to become like Jesus.

I'm sure in some ways that sounds like an obvious statement, but what I think our culture, and even the culture of churches, has misunderstood is JUST how much character matters, how important the role of Godly Character really is.

Some of you may have heard of Tim Keller. Keller was a theologian and the Pastor of Redeemer Church, a Presbyterian Church in New York City. He passed away a few weeks ago after a lengthy battle against pancreatic cancer. Last fall, I heard an interview with Tim Keller on the Christianity Today podcast, The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. In this particular episode of the podcast, Keller and the host are talking about the culture of personal celebrity in churches. In the interview, Keller talked about the distinction between Gifts and Graces. Here's what he said, "The other thing that I notice, and nobody talks about it anymore the way they used to, is the mistaking of gifts for grace. And that is that there's a tendency to look at... The spiritual gifts, let's say, are

things like your preaching and your teaching and your administration and your leadership, and that's your talents. It's really what you do. But spiritual graces, the fruit of the spirit, is who you are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness. It is absolutely natural, in our culture especially, especially in a therapeutic culture, especially in a consumer culture, especially in a technological culture, to not look at being, but look at doing. And so what's going on in a lot of these megachurches, frankly - in fact, everywhere - is what everybody's concentrating on is really not the character of the leaders, but the talent.

I'll tell you a quick, frightening story. A minister had an affair with a woman in his congregation, and it eventually came out and of course it blew up everything. And I remember at one point I had breakfast with him and we were talking, and for whatever reason he was willing to talk a little bit about how he maintained the ability to lead a big congregation while he was having an affair for a pretty good amount of time. He never told me how long it was, but it wasn't brief. And he said, Here's what happened. On Friday and Saturday as he was working on his sermon, his conscience would just start killing him: How can you get up there and preach when you're doing this? And then on Monday he would say, On Monday, I'm gonna call her and it will be over. And that would give his conscience just enough room so that he could actually write the sermon, and do the sermon without feeling like a hypocrite. And then his gifts would kick in, and even though his heart was far from God and he was feeling guilt and his prayer life was terrible and all that, the situation brought out his gifts. He was a great speaker. And he saw people crying, and he saw people afterwards saying, I came to faith in Christ. And

on Monday he said, God's really still with me. That's mistaking the operation of gifts for the work of spiritual fruit and grace in your life.

And this is happening all over the place. And here's the frightening thing. The people closest to the person, they see the lack of fruit. The people out here, they can only see the gifts. So they see the lack of fruit, they see the grumpiness or the abusiveness or the anger or the pride or the self-centeredness and all that, and they start to lose their respect for the leader. But as soon as they start to criticize - the people out here who don't see that, they only see the gifts - they just attack anybody who criticizes. You saw that. And it's all because of the gifts of grace thing, the people in close see the lack of grace, the people out here can only see the gifts. And unfortunately, very often the people up here who are trying to keep the operation going, they see the lack of grace, but they also know that they can't financially afford anything other than just keeping this person in power. So as I was listening to your stuff on Mars Hill, that was the other thing I wanted to say besides... I've mentioned a number of things here, but I thought that's something I needed to add."

In nearly all the ministry job postings I've ever seen, for pastors and other leadership type roles, the listings say this is what the Pastor will do, these are the targets we want to hit, the goals we want to see accomplished. Almost NEVER do those job listings say, this is who the pastor should be, these are the character traits that they will exhibit in their personal and professional lives. Gifts are what you do, graces (Character) is who you are. And that matters. It matters more than perhaps I think the Christian Church realizes.

Secondly, as was alluded to at the beginning of the sermon, character takes time to build. The fruit, Godly Character, won't grow without time and care. There is no shortcut, as much as I would sometimes like there to be one.

Eugene Peterson, in the book that inspired this sermon series, "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction," He says, "One aspect of the world that I have been able to identify as harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. We assume that if something can be done at all, it can be done quickly and efficiently. Our attention spans have been conditioned by 30 second commercials (or I would add, by 10 seconds instagram reels and tiktok videos). Our sense of reality has been flattened by 30 page abridgments. It is not difficult in such a world to get a person interested in the message of the Gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain that interest. Millions of people in our culture make decisions for Christ, but there is a dreadful attrition rate. Many claim to have been born again, but the evidence for mature Christian discipleship is slim. In our kind of culture anything; even news about God, can be sold if it is packaged freshly; but when it loses its novelty, it goes on the garbage heap. There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians would have called holiness." Discipleship takes time - Character take time.

In the Christian Life, Character Matters. Character takes time. Further still, character requires a connection with God.

In John chapter 15, we find this beautiful metaphor about what it means to be connected to God and what that connection produces in our own lives. Jesus says “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”, this good fruit, this character of Godliness requires that we remain connected to our loving saviour. Because it is the work of the Holy Spirit that brings change within us.

What are some ways that we can help to strengthen that connection and make space for growth?

We can pray. Throughout Jesus' ministry, we see him stepping away from the crowds, stepping away from “his gifts” in order to pray, so that he could grow further in the “graces” of God. Prayer makes space for us to hear God’s voice, to calm the noises and pressures of the life around us, and to rest in our identity as a beloved child of God. We can also invite the work of the Holy Spirit in prayer. There’s the joke, “Don’t ask God for patience because he’ll send a whole bunch of people that test your patience!” While there is certainly some truth to that joke, we also know that the Holy Spirit will meet us in the desire to follow Jesus well and help us grow fruits of good character.

We can also strengthen our character by being a part of a Christian community. When I think back on my own childhood, and now my kids here in this church, I am so thankful for the many people of Godly character who set such examples for me to follow. I want to be just like all of you when I grow up. Christian Community can and should offer us accountability. More and more, I realize that people in town know that I'm a Pastor. And that often gives me pause, knowing that in every interaction, I am representing something much grander than my own self. Christian community asks us to submit our own self-focused wants and desires to the life and health of the body. It says in John 15, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." Life in Christian Community invites in so many big and small ways to lay down our lives for one another.

So Friends, let us not be mistaken, character matters. Who we are informs what we do. Who we are shows us to be disciples of Jesus. Forming Godly Character requires time and a close connection with Jesus. Let us now grow weary of walking that journey, until the end of our days, together.