

Abundant Fruit

A Journey toward Wholeness

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Transformational Thought: *Are you entirely ready to ask God to remove all your defects of character so that habitual sin in your life can be defeated?*

Read: Matthew 3:1-12

Introduction

From time to time it is good to take a serious look at ourselves, a time to be repentant and forgiven, a time to move toward that wholeness that God wants for each of us. That's what we will be doing together over the 40 days of this study.

In a sense we will be focusing on the other “other side” of penitence. For most of us, penitence isn't something we look forward to: having to take an honest look at ourselves and admit our sins. But there is the “other side” of penitence, the joy that comes from being forgiven. Few things can compare with the release we experience when we know we have been forgiven and can start with a clean slate in our relationship with God and one another.

But where do we go from there? Do we just begin to sin again? The answer to that question is the other “other side” of penitence. It is the realization that, left to our own devices, we will sin again—often the same sins we have confessed before. But there is a better way. Rather than trying to grit our teeth and steel ourselves against those sins so that we won't commit them again, we turn them over to God. Step 7 in Twelve Step programs is asking God to remove our shortcomings. Only He can bring us to the wholeness that He wants for us.

Over these 40 days we will look at how to ask God to remove our shortcomings and how He does that by developing the fruit of the Spirit within us; we'll be looking at producing fruit in keeping with repentance (v.8). We'll consider how we evaluate the quality of the fruit growing in our lives. We will conclude by looking at the Ten Commandments from a very positive point of view—the opportunity they provide us to bring forth abundant fruit.

Prayer: Father God, grant me Your wisdom and discernment to recognize my character defects and the willingness to ask You to remove them.

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on: “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature”*

Read: Galatians 5:16-21

Live by the Spirit

Our reading for today tells us how we are *not* to live; it is a listing of the sins that can be overcome by the fruit of the Spirit (which follow in vv.22,23). This passage sets the stage for our facing up to our sins and seeking forgiveness and wholeness.

The particular sins set forth by Paul are not intended to be all-inclusive. He ends the list with “and the like,” meaning “fill in the blanks with your own sins.”

When we become Christians, when we give our lives to Christ, a whole new world opens to us. We no longer need to be controlled by our sensual appetites and our selfish desires. We receive the Holy Spirit, and we can be led by the Spirit in all we think and do. A way we can find out if the Spirit is working in us is to see which of the lists truly appeals to us: that contained in today’s reading or the fruit of the Spirit which follow. Two forces compete for our attention, our sinful nature and the Holy Spirit; and, although the Holy Spirit is the stronger of the two, our old habits die hard. Even Paul had to deal with this problem within himself (Romans 7:14-25).

The Christian solution is to admit the problem, be repentant and confess our sins, and seek to move forward in the Holy Spirit. Being led by the Spirit moves us toward God and away from ourselves. We have an increasing hunger to know about God through Scripture and to spend time with Him in worship and prayer. Rather than serving ourselves, we want to serve Christ by serving others (Matthew 25:31-40). This is the journey toward wholeness that will be our pilgrimage in the coming days..

Prayer: Father, grant me a heart that desires to belong to You completely.

Transformational Thought: *What does “walking in the light” truly mean to you?*

Read: 1 John 1:5-10

Walking in the Light

In John’s letter, light represents what is pure and holy, and darkness what is sinful and evil. “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (v.5b). In us, there is some of both. To the extent that we “walk in the light” (i.e., live a life that is pure and holy), we walk with God, love our neighbor as ourselves, and are purified from our sins. However, if we begin to think we are holy and not sinful, “we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (v.8).

With that background, we then reach verse 9: “If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins *and purify us from all unrighteousness.*” There are two parts to this process. The first is confession, which will lead to forgiveness concerning those sinful things we have done. The second is the italicized portion. It is the scriptural basis for Step 7 in the so-called “Twelve Step” programs: “Humbly asked [God] to remove our shortcomings.” God doesn’t stop at forgiving us; He is willing to purify us if we will ask His help.

The book *Twelve Steps for Christians* reminds the reader that Step 6 in the program has involved being ready for God to remove our defects of character, and then says, “Asking God to remove our defects is a true measure of our willingness to surrender control. For those of us who have spent our lives thinking we were self-sufficient, it can be an extremely difficult task, but not an impossible one. If we are sincerely ready to abandon these deceptions, we can then ask God to be instrumental in letting go of our past and in the creation of our new life.”

If we want God to remove our shortcomings, if we truly want to “walk in the light,” we must be willing to accept what God sends to help us. God will use a great variety of means to correct our defects. He gives us grace to resist those things that would tempt us to sin, He sends people to help us along the way (although some may “help” us by testing us), He makes available gifts of the Spirit to those who will sustain us, and He provides practical things like biblically-based teachings. God will do His part if we do ours!

Prayer: Father, help me to recognize the help You send me to help in removing my shortcomings.

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on: “The Lord confides in those who fear him” (Psalm 25:14a).*

Read: Psalm 25:4-15

He Guides the Humble

“He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way” (v.9).

Humility is at the heart of our willingness to admit and confess our sinfulness and then ask God to remove our shortcomings. This psalm attributed to King David expresses his desire for guidance; and despite an instance or two of notorious sin, David was called a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22). Despite his success and his fame, David was humble before God.

Humility is a recurring theme in any journey toward wholeness. It is in practicing humility that we can gain the strength necessary to achieve the results we seek. From *Twelve Steps for Christians*: “We recognize now, more than ever before, that a major portion of our lives has been devoted to fulfilling our self-centered desires. We must set aside these prideful, selfish behavior patterns, come to terms with our inadequacies and realize that humility alone will free our spirit.” Pride tells us that we can do it on our own; humility, instead, has its hand out to God.

“Who, then, is the man who fears [i.e., stands in awe of] the Lord? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him” (v.12). To “fear” the Lord is to realize who God really is: holy, pure, righteous, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise, and all-loving. When we understand who God is, we understand ourselves better. We see our own inadequacies in relation to His goodness. Yet He loves us and wants His best for us (John 10:10). “The Lord confides in those who fear him” (v.14a). These are humbling thoughts; and it is as we fall in obeisance before the Lord that He will have our attention sufficiently to show us the way He wants us to go.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for loving me even when I had no room in my heart to love you or anyone else.

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on “turning your troubles into prayers.”*

Read: Philippians 4:4-9

Present Your Requests

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (v.6).

Paul, in prison, is telling the Philippians to rejoice! It is an important lesson for us all. Our outer circumstances do not need to dictate our inner peace. If serving God is the object of our lives, Jesus Christ is our guide and the Holy Spirit is working in us, there is reason to rejoice even in the most trying circumstances. Rather than letting our shortcomings discourage and defeat us, we have the choice of seeing them as challenges that, by the grace of God, we can conquer.

Paul tells us that, instead of being anxious, we are to “present our requests to God.” God, of course, knows the desire of our hearts; but, He wants us to ask Him for help. It is in the asking that we acknowledge our dependence upon Him and deal with the question of how greatly we really want our shortcomings removed. Our prayer, presenting our request to God, is more for our benefit than His.

The Apostle then tells us to “think about such things” as are noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy. We need not want only to get rid of that which is sinful in our lives but to take on what is good. That is what the journey toward wholeness is all about. As we grow in our relationship with the Lord and our desire to put our bad habits behind us, the focus should not be on our failings but on those good things to which God calls us. God wants us looking ahead to see what He is going to do in our lives rather than looking behind in fear that our past will catch up with us.

Finally, if you find these principles difficult, if anxiety continues and temptation to sin remains at the threshold of your mind, Paul’s advice would be to turn your troubles into prayers. If you worry more, pray more! No matter how difficult the challenge, with God on your side, you are on the road to victory.

Prayer: God, help me to see how my control issues cause me to lack faith which results in fear and anxiety.

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on “in God’s hands....”*

Read: 1 Peter 5:5-11

God Lifts the Humble

“For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12).

Living the life our Lord has for us will cause us to reverse patterns formed earlier in our lives. If we want God to remove our shortcomings, that’s part of the process. Growing up, seeking a mate, getting into the work world, “making a name for ourselves,” etc. all have an effect upon, or are affected by, our self-image. While building up our self-image, we may well have fallen into a prideful mode of life.

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (v.6). This does not mean that we need to destroy our self-image. The result of humbling ourselves before the Lord’s hand means that we will be lifted up to a higher level, not of pride in our own abilities but in gratitude about what God can do with us. This, then, is the attitude that allows us sincerely to look to God to remove our shortcomings. The results are at least two-fold. First, in God’s hands, something quite wonderful that could not happen otherwise can now happen: putting our sinful patterns behind us. Second, in God’s hands, self-image takes on a whole new meaning. Before, we found our self-worth by judging ourselves against others; after, we see ourselves as children of God loved by our Heavenly Father, with no need to judge anybody.

There are two other verses in Peter’s letter that need comment because they are so often quoted. “Cast all your anxiety on [God] because he cares for you” (v.7) speaks volumes to the points discussed above. If we try to deal with our problems ourselves, it shows that we are not trusting in God. God is willing and able to help us, but we need to come to Him with our needs.

“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (v.8) reminds us that there is someone who does not want us to turn our shortcomings over to the Lord and be led toward wholeness. We should, first, be conscious of this reality; second, be alert to recognize when the devil is tempting us away from God; and, third, follow Peter’s advice: “Resist him!”

Prayer: Father, help me to see myself as You see me. Help me to see my worth as Your child and not as I think the world needs to see me.

Transformational Thought: *How do you “come near to God”?*

Read: James 4:4-10

Resist Evil; Come Near to God

“Submit yourselves, then, to God” (v.7a).

This passage brings us abruptly—almost harshly—back to the reality of sin in our lives. While enumerating some remedies for dealing with our sins, James wants us to be honest about the battle continually going on in our lives between the ways of the world and the ways of God. Letting go of negative habits, no matter how destructive they may be, is not always easy.

As *Twelve Steps for Christians* points out, “It is normal to grieve for the loss of something we no longer have.” We may be ashamed of our sinful habits, but they wouldn’t have become habits if we hadn’t, in some way, wanted to do them. Releasing them will not be easy. It will be difficult not to fall back into our errant ways. “Rather than using our own ineffective strategies to avoid or deny the existence of fear of giving up, we can turn to our Lord for courage and trust the outcome. . . . Our love and trust in God can heal our memories, repair the damage and restore us to wholeness.” The answer is to come near to God (v.8) that He may lift us out of our bondage to sin and set us on the journey toward wholeness.

James gives us five ways to come near to God. (1) Be submissive to God, yielding to His authority and will. (2) Resist the devil rather than allowing him to lead you astray. (3) Purify your heart by turning your back on sin and looking forward toward the good things God has for you. (4) “Grieve, mourn and wail” about your sins, confessing your heartfelt repentance and your desire to turn your shortcomings over to the Lord. (5) Humble yourself before the Lord so that He may be able to do His good work in you.

Humbling ourselves before God is a way of showing that we know the source of our strength to resist sin and move toward wholeness. It is a way of honoring the God who, by His great love for us and mercy to us, will take what we give Him and use it to produce abundant fruit in us.

Prayer: Thank you, Holy Spirit, for your indwelling power. Thank you that, through you, I can have victory over my character defects and the temptations arising from those defects.

Transformational Thought: *Is there sin in your life that you believe cannot be forgiven by God? Confess it now, knowing that Jesus died for ALL sin and you have newness of life because of Calvary.*

Read: Psalm 51:1-12

Have a Clean Heart

“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin”

For those of us who think our sins are too great to be forgiven, this psalm is our assurance to the contrary. This is the psalm King David composed after his adultery with Bathsheba and having arranged for her husband Uriah to be killed in battle so that David could have her for his own. Few of us could equal David in sinning; yet, as pointed out earlier, he was referred to as a man after God’s own heart. Why? Because he was truly repentant and wanted to live in a new and obedient relationship with God.

The important thing is that David saw that his sins were sins against God (v.4). Even though particular people were also sinned against in the process, the overriding offense was against God. Sin is rebellion against the ways in which God has commanded us to live.

In this psalm, David not only wants his sins forgiven, but he wants to turn his shortcomings over to God for God to remove them. He knows that God “desires truth in [David’s] inner parts” and wants to teach him “wisdom in his inmost place.” David’s fondest hope is stated in verse 10: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit in me.” This is what we want and need, that God will lead us away from our sinfulness and into a new place wherein the fruit of the Spirit can grow.

God can, among other things, transform our inclinations toward sin into inclinations toward wholeness. What has been destructive in us can be transformed to be constructive. Those of us who are leaders are ones who tend to seek power, but power can be used for good instead of for selfish purposes. Those of us who have been controlled by our sensuality can let the love of God flow through us for the good of others instead of satisfying our lustful desires. Those of us who are materially wealthy can come to the aid of those in need instead of building our own financial empire. We can’t; God can.

Prayer: Jesus, thank you for giving yourself for All my sins. I am sorry that I have felt that your sacrifice wasn’t enough for every sin. Your sacrifice was and is perfect and you washed my heart clean.

Transformational Thought: *Are the desires of your heart now growing into Godly desires? What areas of your life changed the most in the last year?*

Read: Acts 3:11-20

Times of Refreshment

Surveys of the American public indicate that some 90+% of people believe in God. Yet honoring and serving God is not obvious in even a majority of Americans. The main character in a fiction book said, “I suppose people respect God, but do they really *like* him?” That probably expresses where a great many people are in their attitude about God: they have some recognition of His existence, but they would just as soon avoid Him. They believe He is, but they have no loyalty to Him or love for Him. When He came to live among people that we might know how much He loves us and what He was willing to do for us, we crucified Him.

That is the bad news that Peter is sharing with those whose attention he has gained by the healing of the crippled beggar (Acts 3:1-10). But, just as Jesus from the cross asked forgiveness for those who were killing him (Luke 23:34), Peter assures them of God’s willingness to forgive their ignorance in so acting. All he asks is that they repent and turn to God.

When we repent, God not only wipes away our sins but brings “times of refreshment” (v.19). Repentance itself is not easy; it’s not only painful to admit that we have done wrong, but it means we are going to have to give up some things that we think we have enjoyed. The “other side” of repentance, however, is release and freedom. Knowing we are forgiven, and that God will remove our shortcomings if we give Him a chance, is reason to rejoice. These are definitely “times of refreshment.” This is Good News indeed.

Is this not a great God? Is this not One whom we should not only respect and like, but love with all our being? There’s a lot of ignorance out there in the world concerning God. We have some Good News, and we need to pass it on.

Prayer: Create in me a clean, new heart that desires to love You and only You, my Lord, Savior, and God.

Transformational Thought: *Do you think through your choices before you make a decision to act or to speak? How would your relationships and life change if you asked yourself, “What would Jesus do?” before you acted?*

Read: Luke 10:38-42

Making Choices

Our passage of Scripture is about making choices. Martha, the compulsive one, was busy serving. It was a good and proper thing to do, and she no doubt did it well. That was her choice. Mary, the contemplative one, chose instead to sit at Jesus’ feet to hear what he had to say. As the story points out, Mary’s way was the better one. God calls us to service, but our service needs to be based on our love for Him rather than trying to earn points with Him by our actions. Jesus was not going to be long with them, and they both needed to give him their full attention rather than being distracted by “things to do.”

There is a threefold message for us in this story. First, our journey toward wholeness can succeed only if we are willing to spend time with God. We need to look at ourselves and consider the state of our relationship with God. This can lead to a time for repentance and asking God to remove our shortcomings.

Second, we need to make the right choices. If we want the wholeness God wants for us, we must choose not to do those things that separate us from God and choose, instead, those things that please Him. We have the power to choose which way we will go.

Third, we need to see our dependence on God and also our responsibility to take the first step. We can’t remove our own shortcomings, but we can take the first step in that direction by sincerely asking God for help. As A. Philip Parham says in *Letting God*, “God calls us; he never compels us. However, once we answer his call and choose his way, he gives us the power and courage we lack.”

Prayer: Father, grant me Godly wisdom and discernment today.

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on your perception of the indwelling Holy Spirit.*

Read: Romans 6:8-14

It's All Gift

In the passage for today, Paul is telling us that, because Jesus died for us and rose from the dead, those who accept him as their Lord and Savior never need to fear death. Traumatic though the event of physical death may be, it is passage into a glorious forever. Having this assurance frees us to enjoy this life in a new and better way. Knowing we do not have to fear death gives new vitality and meaning to life.

Paul then goes on to tell us that we can “count ourselves dead to sin” (v.11). That means that we should regard our old sinful nature as something of the past. Because of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, we no longer have to carry the burden of guilt nor do we have to be responsive to those old motives and goals that were shaped by our selfish desires. In our new life in Christ, we need simply to accept who we are as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16).

And the wonderful thing is that this is all a gift from God! This story might illustrate the point. The king had the grandest garden in the land, so the widow with no income and starving children came to the king's steward to buy food with the few coins she had. He refused her. She begged some additional money and came back and offered it to the king's steward, but he once again refused. The king's son, however, overheard the request and came to the woman. “Your mistake, dear lady, is that you think my father the king is in business. He is not. He does not sell, he gives.” And, with that, he helped the woman gather the food she needed for her children.

We who are blessed to be Christians live not under the law (i.e., earning our way, out of duty) but by grace (v.14b). Philip Parham writes, “We can't buy our health and salvation. Our king does not sell, he gives. . . . We live in ‘grace,’ which is just another word for ‘gift.’” The Lord has fruit abundant—the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23)—for us, simply waiting for our asking.

Prayer: Jesus, help me to understand that I rose with you in newness of life and that all you wish to do is live your resurrected life through me.

Transformational Thought: *Which of the Fruit of the Spirit seem to be growing in your life (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control)?*

Read: Galatians 5:22,23

Fruit of the Spirit

How does God remove our shortcomings? By growing the fruit of the Spirit within us. As we saw from our study of Galatians 5:16-21 some days ago, Paul lists those sins we have a propensity to commit if we live by the world's standards rather than by the indwelling Holy Spirit. On the other hand, if we live by the Spirit, we manifest the fruit listed in today's reading: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

If we want to see the extent to which our shortcomings are being removed, one of the best methods is to examine the fruit of the Spirit working in our lives. God replaces bad habits with good fruit. In subsequent studies, we'll look at ways we can test the fruit.

According to the *Life Application Bible*, "The fruit of the Spirit is the spontaneous work of the Holy Spirit in us. The Spirit produces these character traits that are found in the nature of Christ. They are the by-products of Christ's control—we can't obtain them by *trying* to get them without his help. If we want the fruit of the Spirit to grow in us, we must join our lives to his (see John 15:4, 5). We must know him, love him, remember him, and imitate him. As a result, we will fulfill the intended purpose of the law—to love God and our neighbors. . . . Because the God who sent the law also sent the Spirit, the by-products of the Spirit-filled life are in perfect harmony with the intent of God's law. A person who exhibits the fruit of the Spirit fulfills the law better than a person who observes the rituals but has little love in his or her heart."

The best defense against falling back into our old destructive patterns is to live a life that manifests the fruit of the Spirit. Where the fruit is growing in a healthy manner, there is less room for the weeds of our past sinful ways.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, help me to be free of self and let Jesus live through me.

Transformational Thought: *Do your outward appearance and actions reflect what is going on in your heart?*

Read: 1 Samuel 16:1-7

Outward Appearance

If God will remove our shortcomings, and a primary way He will do that is by growing fruit of the Spirit within us, how can we measure the extent to which the fruit is being manifested within us? How can we tell the extent to which we have put aside our old sinful habits (such as those in Galatians 5:19-21) and come to be led by the Spirit as evidenced in the fruit of the Spirit (listed in Galatians 5:22, 23)? The solution seemed to be to ask an expert on the growing and marketing of fruit (in this case, citrus); and, over the next eight studies, we will be taking a biblical look at his comments.

The outside color is not important. Although citrus to be sold in a market must be attractive to the eye, the outward appearance of the fruit is not indicative of its quality. If the fruit is to be used for juice, the outside color is immaterial.

When Samuel was told to anoint a son of Jesse to succeed Saul as king of Israel, he immediately thought that Eliab should be his choice. Saul was tall and handsome, so Samuel was perhaps expecting someone who looked like Saul to be the next king. Eliab must have been such a man. But the Lord told Samuel, “The Lord does not look at the things a man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (v.7b). Samuel would ultimately be led to choose young David, who was out tending the sheep (1 Samuel 16:8-13).

So it is with the fruit of the Spirit. “Looking good” isn’t what God has in mind when it comes to manifesting the fruit of the Spirit. He wants true love, joy, peace, etc. deeply rooted in our lives. Ceramic fruit, no matter how beautifully and skillfully made, is cold, hard, and unable to substitute for the real thing. The fruit of the Spirit may be very delicate, but it is genuine if it comes from the Holy Spirit within us rather than from our trying to fake it in order to look good.

Prayer: Father, help me to be honest with myself and others and put aside any masks I may be using to protect my ego.

Transformational Thought: *Consider the extent to which your words to others reflect the sweetness of the fruit of the Spirit and God's wisdom being manifested in your actions?*

Read: Psalm 119:97-104

Sweeter than Honey

High sugar content is what the citrus grower wants. Concerning the fruit of the Spirit, what God wants is the attitude expressed in the psalm: "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth" (v.103). The psalmist understands the sweetness of God's word; we need not only to have such an understanding ourselves but also to realize that that sweetness is to be reflected through us to those around us.

For the fruit of the Spirit to be manifested in our lives instead of our old errant ways, this psalm gives us some helpful guidelines. We need to be growing in our relationship with the Lord. One of the main ways in which we can do that is meditating on His law (v.97), that is, immersing ourselves in Scripture. If we truly want to live the way God wants us to live, we need to be learning about His ways in His book!

In the meantime, we need to be directing our steps away from "every evil path" (v.101). The life in Christ always involves a two-fold approach: moving toward Christ by worship, prayer, Bible study, fellowship and service; moving away from evil by resisting temptation, not letting ourselves get into situations that compromise our faith, and consciously avoiding those tendencies toward sin that dominated our past.

The combination of these approaches leads to wisdom. This isn't worldly wisdom but an ability to see things from God's point of view more clearly day by day. True wisdom is more than attaining knowledge; it is applying knowledge in a life-changing way. It comes from allowing God to teach us, and then putting into practice those things we are learning from God. When we do, the fruit of the Spirit grow in their "sugar content."

Prayer: Holy Spirit, grant me Your wisdom to do the things necessary to get closer to Jesus so the fruit of Your Spirit may be reflected in my daily actions and words.

Transitional Thought: *Be honest with yourself. What actions in your life are bitter to your spirit and the development of the fruit of the Spirit? What are you willing to do about them?*

Read: Exodus 15:22-27

Bitter Times

Low acidity is another key toward having good fruit. As the story of Moses and the Israelites coming to Marah shows us, that which is bitter is not fit for consumption, and produces grumbling and complaining.

It is no wonder the Israelites were unhappy with water so bitter they could not drink it. The situation became an important object lesson for them, however. First of all, God could solve the problem in a miraculous way. But, more than that, He wanted to teach them about obedience. He wanted to be sure that they understood that they were to: (1) listen to His voice, (2) do what was right in His eyes, (3) pay attention to His decrees, and (4) keep all His decrees. In exchange for this obedience, God promised to protect them from disease and heal them. This is, of course, good advice for us as well. God's laws exist to lead us to wholeness, not to destroy our fun. They give us guidelines within which we have freedom to live in joy, love, peace, and the other fruit of the Spirit.

There is another matter we need to consider here. Obedience for obedience's sake is not what God wants. God wants us to obey Him because we love Him. One of the problems with the Pharisees of Jesus' time is that they focused too much on the letter of the law and not enough on the spirit of the law. As a result, they misinterpreted the law as well as designing a multitude of regulations to enforce it. That is not what God wanted then, and it is not what He wants now.

There are Christians whose religious practice is so rule-dominated that there is little room for real faith. They fit the description of the person who was said to have looked like he was sanctified by vinegar. God wants an obedience that is centered in love; and that is what will produce abundant fruit of the Spirit.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, help me to worship my God in truth, with joy and thanksgiving.

Transformational Thought: *Review the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life. To what extent do you exhibit all the fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, meekness and self-control?*

Read: Job 31:1-8

Maintaining Balance

The fruit is ripe when the balance between sweetness and acidity has been attained. The right balance between sugar and acidity indicates that the fruit is ready. As we think about the fruit of the Spirit in our journey toward wholeness, balance is something we need to consider.

Job was a righteous man who was being tested. In our passage for today, he proclaims his innocence from some specific deeds, and then asks God to weigh him on honest scales. In the King James Version, verse 6 is: “Let me be weighed in an even balance that God may know mine integrity.” Job wants to be judged fairly. He believes his life to be in balance because he had revered God, and he wants his actions measured on precision scales.

As we seek to test how God is removing our shortcomings and growing fruit within us, there are at least two ways in which we will want to maintain balance. As with citrus, balance indicates maturity. If we’re trying too hard to show love, we may come across as syrupy and be ineffective. If, on the other hand, we try to show love even though we don’t want to, we’ll seem bitter and be equally ineffective. Letting the fruit grow within us naturally will produce balance. We’ll be sincere and not phony, and others will be blessed by our love. The other kind of balance that will show we are maturing in the fruit of the Spirit will be in the variety of fruits found in us. When we think about the *gifts* of the Holy Spirit (see Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4), we know that God parcels out different gifts to different people. But, concerning the fruit of the Spirit, we should all manifest all of them. If we show only one or more but not all of them, we are not maturing in a balanced way. Once we sincerely ask God to remove our shortcomings and begin to work with Him in accomplishing that goal, we should be able to see all nine of the fruit developing in us.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, thank You for the fruit of Your Spirit exhibited in my life. Keep me balanced with all the fruit and do what is necessary to keep me in balance, to the glory of Jesus.

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on whether people are attracted to you because of the fruit of the Spirit in your life?*

Read: 2 Corinthians 2:14—3:6

The Aroma of Christ

Taste, smell, and appearance are the things that count with the purchaser of fruit. For the person who is going to eat the fruit, this is how it is judged. The appearance will attract the person, the smell will either support the appearance or run contrary to it, but the proof will be in the taste, because that is the reason the fruit is bought.

In our Scripture reading, Paul is defending his ministry and begins by talking about being ministers of the New Covenant God made with humankind through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. “For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing” (2:15). The fruit of the Spirit manifested in Paul and the Corinthian Christians would have a certain “appearance, smell, and taste” to others. For those who accepted Christ through them, the choice meant life; for those who did not, death. They, and we, are the “aroma of Christ” to the world around us. No role could be more crucial, no ministry more important.

People should be able to tell that we Christians are different, and, of course, it should be a good difference! The love, joy, peace, etc. that we display by our lives should be enticing to those around us. They should see that we have something that they want. If our fruit of the Spirit is genuine—if it has the right appearance, smell, and taste—we will be able favorably to influence others to give their lives to Christ.

In our Bible passage, Paul asks, “Who is equal to such a task?” Our adequacy always comes from God (1 Corinthians 15:10; 2 Corinthians 3:5). We are His ministers, commissioned to go into all the world (including our own neighborhood and among our own family and friends) that the world might be brought to Christ (Matthew 28:18-20). Wherein we feel inadequate, we have the adequacy of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, within us. We are to use our fruit to bear fruit for Christ.

Prayer: Holy Spirit, help me to reflect Jesus today in all my thoughts, words, actions, reactions, and attitudes.

Transformational Thought: *Think about how long you have been maturing in Christ and reflect on the results.*

Read: John 15:1-8

Remaining in the Vine

Mature fruit is better than young fruit, based on the age of the root system. The fruit of the young citrus tree may seem to meet all of the other characteristics that would make it of the highest quality, but the fruit of a mature tree will nonetheless be better. The stronger the root system, the better the fruit.

Jesus grew up in a rural setting. He knew about fruit. In our passage for today he draws upon that knowledge to tell his followers how important it is for the branches to remain in the vine. “I am the vine, you are the branches; apart from me you can do nothing” (v.5). As we take a look at our shortcomings and then ask God to remove them, we need constantly to remind ourselves that this is not something we can do ourselves; apart from Christ, we can accomplish nothing. Furthermore, if we realize that the best way to be rid of our shortcomings is for the fruit of the Spirit to flourish within us, we know that we must remain in the vine that is Christ for that to happen.

New Christians often have a freshness and enthusiasm that can be very effective in initially reaching others for Christ; but it is those who have lived in the faith for a period of time who are deeply rooted in Christ and can be used more effectively in the work of discipleship. Over a period of time, the mature Christian has learned about God’s pruning work (v.2) as God shapes us so as to eliminate that in us that is not productive (i.e., our sinful tendencies), thereby enhancing the effectiveness of those portions of us that are in the image of Christ (i.e., the fruit of the Spirit). It is a lifelong process.

But what a process! “As the Father has loved me, so I love you. Now remain in my love” (v.9). “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (v.11). What more could we ask?

Prayer: Holy Spirit, help me to rest in the assurance that Jesus is in me and working through me on a moment by moment basis.

Transformational Thought: *To what extent are you consciously aware of God working to remove your shortcomings and growing the fruit of the Spirit within you?*

Read: James 5:7-11

Perseverance

The longer on the tree, the sweeter the fruit. There is a tendency on the part of the novice citrus grower to want to harvest all of the fruit on the tree as soon as samples from it have proved to be ripe. That early harvest is not necessary, and often not advisable. Although the fruit should not be left too long (see the next study), the fruit does grow sweeter as it remains on the tree. The tree itself is the best “storage facility” for the fruit.

Our reading for today has to do with being patient for the Lord’s return, but it begins by being couched in the language of agriculture. The farmer has to wait patiently for the crops to grow. The farmer has no control over the weather—that depends on God—but he understands that producing a good crop is a cooperative effort. There is work for him to do between the spring and autumn rains! So it is with us in the maturing of the fruit of the Spirit.

The removal of our shortcomings and the growth of the fruit of the Spirit within us will constitute neither a short-term project nor one that is solely in the hands of God. Both the farmer and the Christian live by faith, looking in hope toward the future that God has for us. In the meantime, both must deal with the trials that come their way, do the work the Lord has given them to do, and wait patiently for the outcome.

The journey toward wholeness is a lifelong process. If we want abundant fruit, we must persevere. Our fruit of the Spirit will become sweeter and benefit others more greatly the longer we remain faithful to God and grow in our relationship with Christ.

Prayer: Father, help me to remember that the trials and tribulations that I go through are all designed to make me a more fruitful Christian.

Transformational Thought: *How effectively is God using you? How effectively does He want to use you?*

Read: Matthew 20:20-28

Self-serving Makes for Rotten Fruit

Fruit that is over-ripe is not fit to eat. There is a problem if the fruit stays on the tree too long! It becomes rotten and is no good for anything.

Our reading for today is a lesson in servanthood, one of many on the subject in Scripture. The mother of James and John, and the two sons as well, failed to understand Jesus' teachings in 19:16-30 (Jesus' encounter with the rich young man) and 20:1-16 (the Parable of the Workers in the Field). They didn't realize that they would have to suffer before entering the glory of God's kingdom. The "cup" Jesus refers to in verse 23 was the crucifixion which he faced. James and John had similar fates lying before them; James would be martyred and John exiled. Christians aren't called to a life of status and rewards, but sacrifice and servanthood.

"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (v.26b), a reality that Jesus enacted on behalf of his disciples when he washed their feet (John 13:1-20). Neither the gifts of the Spirit nor the fruit are given to us simply for our own enjoyment. They become the means of reaching others with God's love. Just as the citrus becomes rotten if it is left on the tree, the fruit of the Spirit cannot be used to the glory of God if we keep "hanging around" the source of empowerment for ministry (doing only the "churchy" things) rather than going out into a lost world where God can reach others through us. Even those of us who are elderly and housebound can reach out for God through our prayers.

As we take a serious look at ourselves on this journey toward wholeness, if we find that we are not being used by God to affect our world, there are at least two questions we might ask ourselves. Are we simply seeking our own satisfaction in trying to put aside our sinful tendencies and develop the fruit of the Spirit, or do we want to be more effective for Christ? Are we fearful about being God's person out in the world; and, if so, what are we going to ask God to do to help us overcome that? We don't want our fruit to rot because of selfishness or fear.

Prayer: Father, let me sow love wherever I go each day. Give me the joy of a servant's heart.

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on an instance of unconditional love being shown to you by another and of you showing unconditional love to another.*

Read: 1 Corinthians 13

The Fruit of Love

Having had an opportunity over the last several days to look at how we might judge the quality of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, let us now spend a day on each of these fruit that we might better understand them and how they are to work in our lives. The first fruit listed in Galatians 5 is love.

Our reading for today is Paul's classic treatise on the nature of love. It is the standard by which we measure selfless love (*agape*). Its words are just as pertinent today as when they were written, and this passage is often read as a part of the wedding ceremony. Here are some ways we manifest love as a fruit of the Spirit:

Affirmation. One of the greatest gifts we can give in this life is affirming others by caring enough to love them. God doesn't care what other people think of us, but He cares very much what we think of other people.

Sensitivity. Part of our growth as Christians is our growing love and concern for others. Our sensitivity to the needs of those around us should become more finely tuned. We should have an intercessory prayer list of people who are on our heart and need to be in our prayers.

Thanksgiving. One way to grow the fruit of love in our lives is to become more conscious of the love being shown to us. Find a container into which you can drop a coin representing each special kindness shown to you; and, when the container is full, give the money to a worthy cause.

Spontaneity. Acting lovingly because we want something in return or out of a feeling of obligation or guilt is not selfless love. It occurs when, spontaneously, we do the loving thing that the fruit of love is being shown (see Matthew 25:31-40).

Prayer: Jesus, I am not capable of loving anyone but myself. But you love everyone unconditionally. Live your resurrected life through me. Love through me.

Transformational Thought: *Why do you have, or not have, joy in your life?*

Read: Matthew 18:10-14

The Fruit of Joy

Joy is an inner quality in the life of the Christian. Our inner attitudes do not have to reflect the outer circumstances surrounding us. Joy is centered in our relationship with God. That relationship is the anchor that holds us in place regardless of the situation we are in. If we truly know that our life is in Christ, and that what really matters at any given time is our relationship with him, we can have joy in the midst of the worst kind of trouble.

The parable of the lost sheep is a wonderful word picture of joy. The teaching contained in the parable is that the Lord rejoices over the one lost sheep who is found. The picture many of us have in our minds as we think of this parable is Jesus as the shepherd, carrying the lamb on his shoulders, rejoicing as he brings it back to the fold. Here are some ways to grow in the fruit of joy:

Serve others. Few things give as much joy as unselfish acts for the benefit of others (Acts 20:24).

Worship God. True worship is one of life's most exhilarating experiences (Psalms 30:5, 89:15).

Read and study Scripture. The Bible both enlightens and inspires when read devotionally (1 Thessalonians 1:4-6).

Be in relationship with God. It changes your whole perspective concerning the things that happen in your daily life. Knowing and trusting God is the source of great joy (1 Peter 1:8).

Share your faith. Leading people into a relationship with Jesus is not easy, but the end result is cause for joyous celebration (John 4:6).

Remember that you are a child of God. You'll spend eternity with Him (Romans 15:13).

Prayer: Grant me Your joy by letting me glorify Jesus by serving others.

Transformational Thought: *To what extent is God giving you wisdom and discernment about daily events? Does it give you peace when you are able to let go and let God?*

Read: Romans 5:1-11

The Fruit of Peace

Peace, as a fruit of the Spirit, is much more than simple absence of fear or anxiety. Peace comes from being better able to see things from God's point of view. Anxiety can paralyze us, draining our energy and preventing us from making the right decisions and doing the right things. Peace allows us to back off and gain perspective on the situation, seeking God's guidance and inspiration, and creatively dealing with whatever problems we face. Peace comes from deep within, where God dwells in us through His Holy Spirit.

Our reading for today contains a teaching from Paul that true peace comes from faith in God. "Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us." Despite what we face in life, our relationship with God through Christ is there to sustain us and point us to a better way. "So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God—all because of what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us in making us friends of God." Here are some steps we can take toward attaining peace:

First, we must relinquish control of our lives to God. The Lord can run our lives much better than we can on our own (Matthew 11:28-30).

Second, peace grows as we grow in our relationship with God. We come to see that, regardless of the problems that confront us in life, the Lord is with us (John 16:31-33).

Third, peace increases as we allow the Holy Spirit to guide us. When we quit allowing our old, sinful nature to control us, we can experience genuine peace (Romans 8:5-8).

Fourth, God's peace rules in our hearts. As long as God is our first priority, the situations we face can always be kept in perspective (Colossians 3:15).

Prayer: Holy Spirit, help me to let go today and live as a child lives, trusting and joyful.

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on whether you are you able to live in the moment and enjoy life daily, or do you spend your time projecting into the future or regretting the past?*

Read: Genesis 29:15-28

The Fruit of Patience

Our passage for today tells the story of Jacob who had to work 14 years to earn the right to marry Rachel. Laban, the father of Rachel and Leah, tricked Jacob because Jacob did not know the custom of the land that the older daughter must be married first. So, after working seven years for Laban, Jacob was given Leah as a wife and then had to promise to work another seven years in order to marry Rachel, the one he truly loved.

In our day of “instant everything,” our first reaction is that Jacob’s plight seems harsh in the extreme. Yet, in real life, our patience is constantly being tested. It can be as small a thing as being trapped in a traffic jam when we are late for work or for an appointment. It can be as great as a crippling injury or illness that seems to put our entire life on hold. We can either accept patience as a friend who is telling us to slow down, or we can rail against it as an enemy and suffer the consequences of ill temper and ill health.

Two primary qualities are needed in order that patience as a fruit of the Spirit can be manifested in us. They are inner peace and living one day at a time. Inner peace, as we have seen, comes from a stable relationship with God through prayer, Bible reading, and worship. It helps us keep things in perspective, and focuses our attention on others and their needs rather than on our selfish desires. Living one day at a time allows us to experience life at it fullest rather than fretting over things of the past or future.

Prayer: Father God, I know that You live with me in the now, not the past, or the future. Help me to really live with You this day and get the most out of each hour today.

Transformational Thought: *What can you do today to show God's kindness to someone, or everyone?*

Read: Exodus 2:15-21

The Fruit of Kindness

Kindness, like the other fruit of the Spirit, is a characteristic of Jesus. Jesus was the epitome of kindness, showing compassion to all with whom he came into contact. His divine compassion reached out to illness (Matthew 14:14), sorrow (Luke 7:13), hunger (Matthew 15:32), loneliness (Mark 1:41), and bewilderment (Matthew 9:36). Likewise, the opportunity to show kindness to others surrounds us every day.

Moses was a good example of kindness in not allowing the shepherds to drive the daughters of Reuel (also called Jethro, Exodus 3:1) from the well. Moses was a stranger, just having escaped with his life from Egypt. Yet seeing the injustice done to the women, he immediately came to their aid. That kindness led to his becoming a member of Reuel's household and the husband of Reuel's daughter Zipporah.

Kindness often leads to kindness. Simply smiling at someone at the supermarket leads to that person smiling at someone else; the one smile can create a virtual epidemic of kindness.

As a guideline to kindness, here is what John Wesley said: "Do all the good that you can, by all the means that you can, in all the ways that you can, in all the places that you can, at all the times that you can, for all the people that you can, for as long as ever you can."

Prayer: Holy Spirit, help me to let the love of Jesus pour through me to everyone today.

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on an act of sheer goodness recently shown to you. Rejoice in it.*

Read: Hebrews 13:1-8

The Fruit of Goodness

Goodness as a fruit of the Spirit manifests itself in many ways, as illustrated by this passage from Hebrews. We will show kindness to strangers (v.2) and empathy towards those in prison and those who have been mistreated (v.3), we will respect our marriage vows (v.4), and be content with what we have (v.5). The inner quality of goodness shows respect, sensitivity and kindness in a great variety of ways.

In the Old Testament, three people “entertained angels without knowing it”: Abraham, in Genesis 18:1ff; Gideon, in Judges 6:11ff; and Manoah, in Judges 13:2ff. All of us have had opportunities to be good to people who were strangers to us whether they were “angels” or not.

Prisons have always been intended to be places of rehabilitation as well as punishment; the name *penitentiary* indicates a place of reformatory discipline. However, drug-related crimes have so overcrowded the prison system in this country that good intentions have had to take a back seat. As a result, Christian ministries such as *Kairos* and Chuck Colson’s work have been a special blessing to prisoners in our day. In the days of the early church, many prisoners were persecuted Christians; and, from a world standpoint, there are many Christian prisoners of conscience today. Thus, there continue to be many opportunities for us to work and pray for prisoners through the fruit of goodness.

Goodness toward our Christian leaders should also be foremost in our minds (v.7). Often they lead lonely lives because others think they are “so spiritual, so close to God” that they do not need human friendship and care. Nothing could be further from the truth. And when we can’t show goodness through our actions, we can through our prayers.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, if you want me to take Matthew 25:37-40 to heart, I am open for you to show me what you want me to do.

Transformational Thought: *Are you faithfully committed to an individual or a small group of Christians you are accountable to? Do you pray for them daily and are you there for them when needed?*

Read: Genesis 9:20-29

The Fruit of Faithfulness

Faithfulness as a fruit of the Spirit is, according to William Barclay, in the nature of trustworthiness or loyalty. Our reading for today tells the story of Shem and Japeth covering their father Noah's nakedness. Following the flood, Noah and his family had settled down. Noah became a farmer, grew grapes, made wine, became drunk, and lay naked in his tent. It was Noah's other son, Ham, who came upon the scene. Instead of covering his father's nakedness, Ham went and told his two brothers, apparently with a mocking attitude. Shem and Japeth, however, proved trustworthy in the modest way in which they handled Noah's dishonor. They were models of faithfulness.

When our spouse, children, leaders, co-workers, friends, loved ones, brothers and sisters in Christ, and others with whom we have a relationship are attacked in any way, we have the opportunity to exhibit the fruit of faithfulness. The closer the relationship, the more likely we are to be faithful; the more remote the relationship, the more we may be tempted to do the thing or take the action that serves us best rather than being faithful. This is true in our relationship with God as well as with people. We especially demonstrate the gift of faithfulness when we stand up for someone who is in the right even though we could easily avoid the situation altogether.

While Saul was still king of Israel and David had secretly been anointed as his successor, Saul's son Jonathan and David were nonetheless very faithful to one another and remained so. These foundation stones of their relationship can be guidelines for us in showing faithfulness: (1) they based their relationship on commitment to God, not just each other; (2) they let nothing come between them, not even career or family problems; (3) they grew closer together when their friendship was tested; and (4) they remained faithful to one another to the end.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be a "Barnabas" to other Christians. Help me to encourage them and help them along their spiritual journeys.

Transformational Thought: *Are you a gentle person? What have you done lately to show that you are a gentle person? What are you going to do today to show your gentleness?*

Read: 2 Timothy 2:22-26

The Fruit of Gentleness

We live in an age that has been said to evidence the death of civility in our dealings with our fellow human beings. People's focus seems to be on their own rights without regard to the effect that exercising those rights might have on others. It is not a "gentler" world.

There was a time when it was a high compliment to be called a gentleman or a gentlewoman. This writer's grandfather was such a gentleman that he was still opening doors for women when he was well into his 90s. Men always stood up when a woman entered the room, and younger people likewise stood up when their elders entered. Men would give their seats on a bus, tram or train to any woman who was standing. Foul language was never used in mixed company. That was a gentler world. It reflected an attitude of serving and otherwise being considerate of others and was in line with the teachings of Jesus.

In our passage for today, Paul is giving Timothy guidelines for gentility. He tells him to get out of the way of evil and, instead, to pursue the good. Don't get into foolish arguments and quarreling. Be kind to everyone. Take advantage of opportunities to teach others rather than resenting them. With those who honestly disagree with you, gently instruct them so that they may be led to truth. Be patient and courteous in helping others understand.

Paul's guidelines could apply to us as well. We may not be able to bring back an age of gentleness in human affairs, but we Christians are certainly called to be salt and light to a tasteless and dark world (Matthew 5:13-16), just as we are expected to manifest the fruit of gentleness to those around us.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were always kind and gentle. Help me to reflect your gentle character today.

Transformational Thought: *Are you able to resolve conflict without losing your temper? When was the last time you lost your temper? When was the last time you had victory over your temper and remained in self-control?*

Read: 2 Samuel 16:5-13

The Fruit of Self-control

William Barclay said that self-control as a fruit of the Spirit “is the spirit which has mastered its desires and its love of pleasure. It is used in the athlete’s discipline of his body (1 Corinthians 9:25) and in the Christian’s mastery of sex (1 Corinthians 7:9). It is the virtue which makes a man able so to be master of himself that he is fit to be the servant of others.”

In our Scripture reading David gives us an example of self-control in facing the insults of Shimei. Following the rebellion of David’s son, Absalom, David is fleeing Jerusalem. On the way, he is continually cursed by Shimei, a relative of Saul. The curses are unjustified because David had no part in Saul’s death. Nonetheless, David and his entourage quietly tolerate Shimei’s abuse. If we cannot squelch unjustified criticism, it is best to ignore it. This is not easy because it is a strain on our emotions to face accusations of which we are innocent. At such time, it is important to remind ourselves that we live for God only; He knows we are in the right, and that is all that counts in the long run.

In the face of a confrontation that he knew would lead to his death, Jesus remained in control of himself (Mark 15:1-5). He didn’t argue with Pilate. In response to the second question, he didn’t even answer. It would have been human nature to defend oneself, to lie if necessary to save one’s life, even to grovel for mercy. Jesus will have none of that; he is our example of self-control. Jesus’ self-control was rooted in his relationship with the Father. He didn’t have to react; he could look within for the Father’s will in the situation and act accordingly. The fruit of the Spirit we know as self-control comes from resolving conflicts within ourselves by the grace of God so that we don’t have to react, but can act according to God’s will.

Prayer: Father God, help me not to take control when I am in disagreement with another. Help me to let Jesus live his resurrected life through me in those stressful times. Thank You for the power of the Holy Spirit that is always available to me.

Transformational Thought: *What is your view of the importance of the Ten Commandments in your life?*

Read: Matthew 22:34-40

Testing the Fruit

Having taken a look at each of the fruit of the Spirit in some detail, we will now apply them in connection with the Ten Commandments. Although worldly people always want to look at the negative side of the Ten Commandments (“Thou shalt not”), the commandments are simply a prescription for godly living. They are not ruts to bog us down from getting the best out of life, but a roadway to abundant living (John 10:10) designed to protect us and keep us on the right track.

In our reading for today, the Pharisees and Sadducees are trying to gang up on Jesus. The Sadducees had been silenced (vv.23-33), and now the Pharisees have a go at him. The Pharisees had classified over 600 laws and often tried to distinguish between those that were more important and those that were less important. Thus, an “expert in the law” asks Jesus to identify the most important law. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 in reply. In fulfilling these two laws, a person was fulfilling the Ten Commandments. In effect, these two commands summarize the Ten Commandments and the other Old Testament moral laws.

Love is the key. Jesus is saying that if we truly love God and our neighbor, we will also keep the Ten Commandments. Our focus, then, won’t be upon what we should *not* do but upon all the things we *can* do to demonstrate our love of God and others. If we can show love in this way, by the grace of God (i.e., the fruit of the Spirit), it is evidence that God is handling those shortcomings we handed over to Him.

As we continue our Lenten journey toward wholeness, let us take a positive look at the Ten Commandments through the lens of the fruit of the Spirit.

Prayer: Father, You gave the Commandments as a gift to me. They are a road map to a happy, joyful, peaceful life. Thank You for this gift.

Transformational Thought: *Are you learning to love God with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind, and all of your strength? Or are there things in this life that you cannot let go of?*

Read: Exodus 20:1-3; Acts 2:22-24, 29-41

Love as Commanded

“You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). The First Commandment is that we show our love of God by putting Him first in our lives.

Peter is our example of how *love* as a fruit of the Spirit can demonstrate what happens when we ask God to remove our shortcomings and become filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter, the blustery, blundering friend of Jesus, had denied our Lord at the crucial moment (Matthew 26:69-75) but was repentant and restored to relationship (John 21:15-19). Then, at Pentecost, Peter and the other followers of Jesus were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4) and became witnesses of God’s love.

Peter’s sermon (Acts 2:14-41) shows the change that can happen to a person who has been repentant and has turned his life over to God. Peter, who would not even acknowledge that he knew Jesus before this transformation, becomes so bold a witness to Jesus that it would ultimately lead to his martyrdom. Peter, whose sin was that he didn’t love enough, becomes the epitome of the love of God.

Peter had been purified in the furnace of his own experience. It shouldn’t surprise us that what he had learned through his own pain is the very thing he preaches to the assembled crowd. Peter wants to prevent others from making the mistake he had made. He tells them about this Jesus who is both Savior and Lord. His words convict them (v.37), and he then calls them to repent and be filled with the Holy Spirit through baptism that they might begin their journey toward wholeness. “About three thousand were added to their number that day” (v.41)!

R&D Prayer: *God, give me the strength to let go of everything in this world and to seek only You.*

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on the fact that religions are ways of seeking God whereas Christianity is God's way of trying to reach us.*

Read: Exodus 20:4-6; Acts 17:16-31

Faithfulness to God as Commanded

“You shall not make for yourselves an idol” is the Second Commandment. A zealous Pharisee named Saul had made a form of religious practice his idol (Acts 22:3-5). It had taken a dramatic encounter with the risen Christ to bring him to repentance and a desire to change (Acts 9:1-19). He, like Peter, would go on to become so bold a witness to Christ that it would ultimately lead to his martyrdom.

In Athens, Paul saw a classic example of what the worship of idols was like. It was said that there were more idols in Athens than people! Instead of ridiculing the Athenians because of this, Paul seized on it to show them a better way. The worship of idols leads to superstition, confusion and spiritual destruction. Faithfulness to the one true God, as evidenced by Paul, is the way to life everlasting.

Among all the idols in Athens was one to the “Unknown God.” Paul noted that the people were very religious (as he had been). It has been said that religion is our way of trying to reach God whereas Christianity is God's way of trying to reach us. Paul wanted to move the Athenians from religion to Christ. Thus he told them about the God who had been unknown to them.

Just as the Holy Spirit had emboldened Peter to preach on Pentecost, the same Holy Spirit guided Paul in the wisdom through which he preached to the Athenians. He didn't recite Jewish history as Peter had done, because that would have had no meaning to these people. He took the situation as he found it, and built upon that. Likewise, as we grow in the fruit of the Spirit we know as *faithfulness*, God will work in us to lead others to Christ.

Prayer: Father, help me to center everything in You, thoughts, words, actions and desires.

Transformational Thought: *When was the last time your lack of patience caused you to open mouth and insert foot?*

Read: Exodus 20:7; Acts 16:22-34

Patience as Commanded

“You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God” is the Third Commandment. Impatience with ourselves and others is often our excuse for becoming disappointed with God and even “taking His name in vain” (i.e., using His name, or Jesus’, in inappropriate ways).

Paul and Silas give us a good example of the exercise of *patience* as a fruit of the Spirit rather than falling into the trap of violating the Third Commandment. In the passage from Acts, the two had come to Philippi where they were gathering converts to Christianity. But a slave girl who, by an ungodly spirit, was making money for her owners was also making a nuisance of herself as far as Paul and Silas were concerned. Even though what the girl was saying about Paul and Silas was true, it created a problem for them to seem to be receiving a commendation from an ungodly source. There had to be a clear distinction between this girl’s source of knowledge and the Holy Spirit of God. Thus, Paul rebuked the spirit to the financial detriment of the slave girl’s owners, they stirred up trouble, and Paul and Silas were stripped, severely beaten, and thrown into jail.

Left to their own devices, Paul and Silas would have reacted to their situation (as would we) in a predictable way. There they were giving their lives to the glory of God, and look what had happened to them! It would be easy to curse God under such circumstances. But Paul and Silas weren’t left to their own devices (and neither are we). They were filled with the Holy Spirit and bore the fruit of patience. They believed that if they worshiped God rather than misusing Him name, He would come through for them. And, of course, He did.

The example of these two men in bearing the burden of humiliation, pain, and imprisonment with grace was a witness to the jailer and his family. New converts to Christ resulted. We never know how God may use us in trying times if we simply manifest patience as a fruit of the Spirit.

Prayer: Father, help me to remember that people are watching and judging me as a Christian. Grant me the patience to honor Jesus in every situation.

Transformational Thought: *Is there something you do because of your love of God, perhaps a ministry to others, that gives you peace and joy?*

Read Exodus 20:8-11; Acts 13:13-33

Peace as Commanded

“Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” is the Fourth Commandment. Although we should be in prayer and other forms of worship more than one day a week, the Sabbath is set aside to be especially devoted to our worship of God. And, as we have noted earlier, it is in our relationship with God that the fruit of the Spirit we know as *peace* is deeply rooted.

As we see in the passage from Acts, Paul, on his missionary journeys, began his efforts in an area by going to the synagogues on the Sabbath. The Jewish people were scattered all over the area Paul was visiting, and he saw his mission as being initially to the Jews and “God fearers” (Gentiles who had accepted the one true God). These were the people he would, of course, find in the synagogue on the Sabbath. And, as a faithful Jew who had found fulfillment of his faith through the Messiah who had come, it was his duty as well as his joy to be able to worship on the Sabbath.

Paul shares with these people the Good News. He reviews their history for them, showing all that God had done for them down through the centuries. Then he tells about Jesus, “the one to come” (the Messiah) and what had happened to him. Then comes the clincher: “We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus.”

Think of what Paul had to endure to take this message from village to village in the ancient world. Think of the hostility he faced, and the physical and mental anguish he suffered for the Gospel. Yet here was a man who was filled with the fruit of the Spirit and had peace deep within because he was doing what God wanted him to do. It is much less challenging for us to experience this peace in our Sabbath worship; but our peace should be much more than comfort, and there are undoubtedly uncomfortable things God is calling us to do!

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for using me to bring glory to Jesus and letting me help bring about Your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

Transformational Thought: *Does thinking about your parents give you joy? If you are fortunate to have parents still alive, call them and thank them for being your parents.*

Read Exodus 20:12; John 19:25-27; 1 John 1:1-4

Joy as Commanded

“Honor your father and mother” is the Fifth Commandment. The first four commandments have to do with honoring God; the fifth is transitional in that it changes the focus to the honoring of people. It should bring the fruit of *joy* to our hearts to be able to honor our parents.

From the cross, Jesus asked the Apostle John to assume responsibility for the care of his mother (Joseph having apparently died, because he is not mentioned during the years of Jesus’ ministry). “From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” We can assume that Mary was with the other followers of Jesus at Pentecost (see Acts 1:14). What a privilege and what a responsibility John experienced in Mary becoming like his own mother. And what a joy.

Perhaps influenced by this relationship, this is the John who has given us a gospel and epistles that express love and joy. In the epistle we read today, John begins by talking about the one whom he had heard, seen and touched. This can be even more meaningful to us as we realize that John had an extremely close relationship, not only with Jesus, but maybe even more so with Jesus’ mother. John isn’t someone talking theory, this is one who knows whereof he speaks.

John writes about fellowship with the Father and the Son that is possible for all Christians. He tells us this “to make our joy complete” (v.4). We say we love God, but God we cannot see. Thus we show our love by the way we treat other people (1 John 4:20). Treating other people, especially our parents, with the respect that is due them can make our joy complete.

Prayer: Father God, thank You for the parents You gave me. Thank You for the joy I have remembering them and the times we had together. Grant them eternal rest with You.

Transformational Thought: *Can you remember a time when you did not have choices about how to react to certain situations; you just reacted? When did you start to realize that you could respond with kindness, love, and self-control?*

Read: Exodus 20:13; Acts 6:8-10, 7:54-60

Kindness as Commanded

“You shall not murder” is the Sixth Commandment. Jesus pointed out (Matthew 5:22) that this means that we shouldn’t be angry. We show *kindness* as a fruit of the Spirit by being forgiving toward those who might otherwise have incurred our anger.

Stephen, one of the seven deacons chosen by the church leaders, was a man full of grace and power. He was so effective in doing signs and wonders among the people that he soon drew the wrath of the Freedmen (Jewish slaves freed by Rome who had their own synagogue) and, later, the Sanhedrin (the council of Jewish leaders who had condemned Jesus). However, none “could stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke” (v.10).

The result is that, called before the Sanhedrin, Stephen answered the charges against him by reviewing the history of the Jews and the coming of the Messiah (much as Peter had done at Pentecost, Acts 7:1-53). Thrown into a rage by these words, they dragged Stephen out of the city to stone him. Instead of pleading for his life or cursing his oppressors, Stephen asked God to forgive them (v.60). This was the ultimate act of kindness and parallels the words of Jesus from the cross (Luke 23:34).

Fortunately, we won’t be likely to face the sort of challenge that Stephen faced, but we all have a choice of anger or kindness concerning situations that confront us every day. If we have asked God to remove our shortcomings and are letting the fruit of the Spirit grow within us on our journey toward wholeness, it will be increasingly possible to choose kindness when anger would have been a more likely expression of our natural selves.

Prayer: Thank You, God, that I am now capable of responding to situations as Jesus would respond. Thank You that I can now ask, “What would Jesus do?”

Transformational Thought: *In what area of your life do you need to better exercise self-control?*

Read: Exodus 20:14; Acts 18:18-28

Self-control as Commanded

“You shall not commit adultery” is the Seventh Commandment. Jesus also took this commandment a step further in saying, “Anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). *Self-control* is the fruit of the Spirit through which God can help us remove any shortcoming we have experienced or are experiencing in this area of our life.

There aren’t many good examples of happily married couples in the Acts of the Apostles (the period in the Bible during which we have an opportunity to see how people lived after being filled with the Holy Spirit). The focus of Acts is on spreading the Gospel, and individual people are the ones through which we see this happening. But we do have Priscilla and Aquila.

Priscilla and Aquila were friends of Paul. He stayed with them and they traveled with him. After Paul had left them in Ephesus, a Jew named Apollos arrived on the scene. Apollos was a learned man who had a thorough knowledge of Scripture, but the only baptism he knew was the baptism of repentance as taught by John the Baptist. Thus, Priscilla and Aquila had the privilege of explaining the Holy Spirit to Apollos and sending him productively on his way. In Priscilla and Aquila we have a couple whose love of God and their sense of call to Christ’s mission directed their lives. When our focus is on God and what He wants us to do, the fruit of self-control can grow in us most effectively. God-control produces self-control, leaving little room for lustful thoughts and actions.

Prayer: Father, thank You, for Your perfect gift to me, my mate. Thank You for making me aware that You speak to me through my mate.

Transformational Thought: *Do you see yourself as having a generous spirit? On what do you spend your time and money?*

Read: Exodus 20:15; Acts 4:32-37

Faithfulness as Commanded

“You shall not steal” is the Eighth Commandment. Jesus took it a step further in saying, “If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well” (Matthew 5:40). In other words, instead of stealing, be one who gives. This involves the fruit of the Spirit we know as *faithfulness* to others, and Barnabas was a classic example.

Barnabas showed his faithfulness to Paul after Paul’s miraculous conversion. When Paul came to Jerusalem and tried to befriend the disciples, they were afraid of him because of the work he had done in persecuting Christians. It was Barnabas who stood by him (Acts 9:27) and gained Paul’s acceptance by the church. In another instance, after John Mark had left the company of Paul and Barnabas on a previous missionary journey, Paul no longer wanted John Mark to accompany them. In this instance, Barnabas showed loyalty to John Mark, who would later write the Gospel of Mark and be a friend of both Peter and Paul.

In the passage we look at today, however, we see yet another aspect of the fruit of faithfulness being manifested in Barnabas. He understood the principle that the positive side of the Eighth Commandment is to give rather than to take. He sold a field he owned and gave the money for the apostles to use. He was certainly, as his name indicates, an encourager.

In the affluent world in which we western Christians live today, stealing (including fudging on our income taxes, padding our expense account, etc.) should be the furthest thing from our minds. Instead, we should be grateful that, to meet the many needs around us, we have the privilege of giving generously to meet those needs. That’s the faithfulness that shows that the fruit of the Spirit are growing within us, and our shortcomings are being removed.

Prayer: God, give me a spirit of gratitude and generosity. Thank You for all the material benefits You have given me and my loved ones.

Transformational Thought: *Reflect on the extent to which your words are always positive, kind and loving.*

Read: Exodus 20:16; Acts 8:26-39

Gentleness as Commanded

“You shall not give false testimony” is the Ninth Commandment. Jesus, in relation to this commandment, said that people will have to give an account for every careless word they have spoken (Matthew 12:36). Instead, we are to be *gentle* in our speech.

Our reading in Acts tells about another of the initial seven deacons, Philip, and how the Spirit led him to speak gentle words at a crucial moment in the life of the early church. Philip was told to go south to the desert road from Jerusalem down to Gaza where he encountered an official of the queen of Ethiopia. The man was reading a passage from Isaiah but didn’t understand it. Philip used the occasion not only to explain the passage but to show how it pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. The man was so moved by what he heard that he wanted to be baptized, and Philip performed the rite.

In 1 Peter 3:15 we are told, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” It is seldom helpful to argue about our faith in Christ. As we discuss with another what Jesus Christ means to us, it is essential to convey warmth. Gentleness of speech and respect for the other person can speak much more powerfully than our words alone.

In all our dealings with others we need to remember that constructive comments build relationships while destructive ones destroy. The positive way of looking at the Ninth Commandment is that it tells us the better way: we watch our words to avoid careless speech by using gentle words instead. That doesn’t mean we fail to speak the truth when it needs to be spoken, but we speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Prayer: God, grant that I may learn to listen instead of talk, understand instead of being understood, love others more than myself.

Transformational Thought: *People who are busy helping others rarely have time to think about themselves. Are you finding joy in your life helping others?*

Read: Exodus 20:17; 2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Goodness as Commanded

“You shall not covet” is the Tenth Commandment. Jesus said, in Luke 12:15, “Be on guard against any kind of greed.” Instead of envying what others have or being greedy in any way, the Holy Spirit would lead us toward doing what we can to make things better for others, the fruit of goodness.

In our passage from Corinthians, Paul is encouraging generosity toward the struggling church in Jerusalem by citing the example of the churches in Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea). But Paul doesn’t begin by talking about the grace of the Macedonian churches in making the gift; instead, he mentions the grace that God had given them! Although under trial and living in poverty, they wanted to share whatever they could with their less fortunate brothers and sisters in Christ. It was their joy that they were able to do this.

Such is the fruit of the Spirit we know as *goodness*. It cannot be outgiven. It flows from deep within and is based on our love of God, our gratitude for what He has done for us and our joy that we can do for others in His name. It is another way that, by repentance about the way we have been and a desire to turn our shortcomings over to God, our lives can be completely turned around and headed in a godly direction.

Over these last 40 days, we have had an opportunity to think about ourselves and what we need to do to be free of our sinful past and gain the abundant fruit (of the Spirit) the Lord wants us to have as we journey toward wholeness. It is a journey that does not end here. If we are willing to look to God to do those things in us that we cannot do in ourselves, it will be a journey that will never end until we are with Him.

Prayer: Thank You, God, for meaning and purpose to life found in helping others. Thank You for the joy I get helping others.