



God expects to see the fruit of His Spirit growing in the lives of His people. This 11-day Journey will show you what that fruit looks like—and how to cultivate it in your own life.

LifeHope & Truth

GETTING STARTED

HOW TO USE THIS JOURNEY

Dear Reader,

As Christians, we need to be growing.

So much of that growth happens in private—deep down where no one but God can see. But it doesn't stay private—who we are on the inside always, sooner or later, makes its way to the surface.

Over the next 11 days, we're going to talk about the fruit of the Spirit—a list of nine godly traits Paul highlighted in his letter to the New Testament church in Galatia.

These traits aren't some arbitrary collection of nice-sounding words. Taken as a whole, they paint a picture of exactly what kind of growth God expects from His people—and, just as important, they give us a road map of how to pursue that growth in our own lives.

Every day of this Journey, you're going to find three things:

- That day's reading.
- Recommended verses and chapters from the Bible relating to that day's subject.
- Supplemental material from Life, Hope & Truth for digging deeper into that day's subject.

You'll see it at the end of the first day's reading, but be sure to keep our **Works of the Flesh vs. Fruit of the Spirit Word Study** handy throughout this Journey—it's a great way to keep track of what Greek words Paul used for the fruit of the Spirit (and what they mean).

Being a Christian means growing, and growing means developing the fruit of the Spirit. We hope this Journey will help you find the path and the motivation to do just that.

Are you ready to put what you've learned into practice?

Let's begin!

All the best,

Your friends at [LifeHope&Truth](http://LifeHopeandTruth.com)

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DAY 1

LED BY THE SPIRIT

How do you know you're a child of God?

Easy. Paul gives us a litmus test: "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God" (Romans 8:14).

Simple as that.

Except, of course, for the fact that the Spirit of God is typically invisible, intangible and incorporeal in our physical world.

That complicates things. We believe God's Spirit exists—we believe that it's present in the lives of God's people and that it's making a measurable impact on those lives—but we can't just point directly at it and say, "Here it is; I'm clearly being led by it." It's not that easy.

But it *is* important.

It's important because the opposite of Romans 8:14 is also true—if we're not being led by the Spirit of God, *then we are not the children of God*.

So, then—what proof do we have that this invisible and intangible Spirit is active in our lives? If following this Spirit is the mark of God's children, what can we do to verify we're being led by it?

When the New Testament Church began, God made it obvious that He was pouring out His Spirit on His people. Everyone present heard the sound of "a rushing mighty wind" (Acts 2:2). "Tongues, as of fire" (verse 3) appeared over the disciples, and they began speaking in foreign languages—at which point "the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language" (verse 6).

For this monumental occurrence, God gave visible signs of the invisible so that it would be quite clear what was happening. He did something similar during several other key moments of the early Church (see Acts 10:44-48; 19:1-6). But generally, that's not what happens when people receive the Holy Spirit. The heavens don't generally open, fire doesn't typically sit on anyone's head, and people

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don't usually start speaking in other languages. In fact, when God gives His Spirit to someone today, there's no evidence that He provides any external indication of that gift.

After the events of Acts 2, Peter laid out the process for receiving God's Spirit: "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:38-39).

After true, genuine repentance and after being baptized by a minister of Jesus Christ, we are given God's Spirit through the laying on of hands (Acts 8:14-17; compare 2 Timothy 1:6-7). This isn't just something that *might* happen—this is a promise from God that we can count on. If we follow the steps Peter laid out, God *will* give us His Spirit.

But we must not stop there. We must then be led by God's Spirit. If we aren't, we are in danger of neglecting this great gift or quenching the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). This can be the difference between being part of God's family and not, so it's vital that we figure it out—which, of course, brings us right back to the original problem. What does being led by an invisible, intangible Spirit even *look* like?

The answer isn't actually that complicated. Jesus explained to His disciples, "For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:43-45).

In other words, "What's inside gets out." Bad or good, who we are at our core invariably shows in the things we say and the things we do. We might be able to hide it for a while or put up a smoke screen, but our true colors don't stay hidden forever.

That's where being led by the Spirit comes into play. God's Spirit is a lot like the wind—we might not be able to see it, but we can easily see (and discern) its impact. If that Spirit is active in our lives—if we're allowing it (and, by extension, God) to lead us, it's going to begin to change who we are on the inside.

And, just as Christ promised, that change is going to make its way to the surface. It's going to show itself in how we talk and how we act. Every tree is known by its fruit, and the Spirit of God produces fruit too.

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Paul described that fruit in one of the more famous passages of the Bible. He began by contrasting it with something he called “the works of the flesh.” Like the Spirit, the flesh—that is, human nature devoid of God’s Spirit—produces recognizable fruit:

“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

The works of the flesh are abominable to God—they include the absolute worst our human nature is capable of, and they’re the very traits that will exclude us from God’s coming Kingdom.

“But the fruit of the Spirit,” said Paul, “is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:22-24).

Being led by the Spirit of God means replacing the sinful works of the flesh with the nine traits Paul identified as the fruit of that Spirit. The extent to which those nine traits are present in our lives is a direct reflection of the extent to which we are being led by God’s Spirit. The more those traits grow, the more we are in alignment with that Spirit. And the more absent those traits become, the more we’re losing contact with God’s Spirit.

We’re going to make those nine traits the focus of this Journey. Every day, we’re going to take a single trait and dissect it. What word did Paul use for this trait? What does it mean? Why is it significant? How do we develop it? How can we hinder that development? What does it look like in practice? At the end of it all, we’ll aim to walk away from this Journey with a more complete picture of not just the fruit of the Spirit, but what it means to be a Christian—what it means to be led by the Spirit of God.

But before we go any further, we need to talk about a common misconception when it comes to the fruit of the Spirit:

It’s not “fruits.”

Paul didn’t write about the *fruits* of the Spirit; he wrote about the *fruit* of the Spirit. If you’re wondering why that matters, consider this:

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The fruit of the orange tree is round, orange, juicy, pulpy and surrounded by a rind. When we're talking about an orange, all those things are true, all at the same time. A round orange isn't different from a pulpy orange—it's the same fruit, with the same characteristics.

But sometimes we talk about the fruit of the Spirit as if it's more than one fruit—as if a single tree were growing apples and oranges and lemons and mangoes, and they all existed independently from one another—as if we could pluck faithfulness from this tree without disturbing longsuffering and self-control.

That's not how it works. The fruit of the orange tree is round, orange, juicy, pulpy and surrounded by a rind. It's all of those things at the same time. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. It is also all those things at the same time. Each trait only describes a facet of that fruit—a single part of a bigger picture.

As we move through this Journey, it's essential that we view each of these traits as part of the whole. We cannot have peace without joy and still call it the fruit of the Spirit. We cannot have love without faithfulness and still call it the fruit of the Spirit. Every facet must be present and accounted for, or else the result is a flawed and defective fruit, like an orange without a rind.

God has entrusted us with His Holy Spirit, and with that Spirit comes both the potential and the responsibility for incredible growth. But here's the thing: that growth isn't going to be a straight line. Walking this path means we'll have ups and downs—good days and bad days. Faith, love, joy, peace, all of it—there will be days we have a better handle on the fruit of the Spirit, and days when we don't.

That doesn't mean we're not growing. It means we're human and that sometimes we fall short. What matters is that we get back up after each shortcoming and, with God's help, try again. And as we examine the fruit of the Spirit more closely, we'll come to see why that growth matters and how to ensure it takes place in our lives.

Let's get started.

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FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- Galatians 5:16-26 [↗](#)
- Romans 8:12-17 [↗](#)
- Psalm 139 [↗](#)

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- What Is the Holy Spirit? [↗](#)
- How Do You Know You Have the Holy Spirit? [↗](#)
- Works of the Flesh vs. Fruit of the Spirit Word Study [↗](#)

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DAY 2

LOVE: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

On our own, we don't know how to love.

It's easy to bristle against a statement like that. We don't know how to *love*? Might as well say we don't know how to breathe or how to blink. Of *course* we know how to love. What about the love of a mother for her children? The love of husband for his wife? The love of a soldier for his country? Everything around us tells us that love is one of the most fundamental human emotions.

Except ... it isn't.

The love that is produced by the Spirit is more than just an emotion, and most important, *it's not human*.

This love is also an action, and it's divine.

"Beloved," wrote the apostle John, "let us love one another, for *love is of God*; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for *God is love*" (1 John 4:7-8, emphasis added throughout).

Before the first man drew his first breath—before the first star twinkled in the inky expanse of space—there was God, and *God was love*.

"We love Him," said John, "because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

In English, the word *love* is more flexible than an Olympic gymnast. We can love our country enough to die for it ... and we can also love a cheeseburger. They're clearly two different sentiments, and yet we use the same word to describe both.

The Greeks had several words that express different aspects of what we lump together as love in English. The specific word for love used by Paul and John in the verses we've looked at is not as flexible as the English word. John said that "everyone who loves is born of God," but it's pretty obvious that

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loving a cheeseburger doesn't somehow make us born of God. Our English word doesn't do the concept justice, so we'll have to turn to the Bible for a clearer definition.

The Greek word Paul and John used to write about love in these verses is *agape*. It doesn't show up much in other ancient Greek writings, but it does show up more than 100 times in the pages of the New Testament. By looking at those verses in context, we can build a working definition of what biblical *agape* really means—and why it's part of the fruit of the Spirit.

Toward the end of His human life, Jesus told His disciples, “As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love” (John 15:9-10).

If you keep My commandments. Continuing in God’s love is contingent on whether we’re actually doing the things He told us to do.

Paul explained further: “He who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:8-10).

Some people think Paul was replacing God’s law with love, but the truth is quite the opposite. God’s law helps us define what love *is*—and what it isn’t. If you love your neighbor as yourself, you’re not going to have an affair with your neighbor’s spouse. You’re not going to kill your neighbor. You’re not going to steal from or lie to your neighbor, and you’re not going to covet the things your neighbor has.

Because you love your neighbor, you aren’t going to do the things God’s law prohibits—“therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

And that in itself tells us something important. Godly love is more than a feeling or an emotion—it’s a commanded *action*. It’s a decision we’re each capable of making regardless of how we might feel in the moment.

To show love to our neighbors, we seek their good by obeying God’s laws. And by the same token, “loving God means keeping his commandments” (1 John 5:3, New Living Translation).

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Love—*agape*—is an aligning of ourselves with God. It's desiring what God desires. It's valuing what He values. It's thinking the way He thinks. And on our own, that's something we don't know how to do.

God's love is unnatural. It's *supernatural*. It flies in the face of human instincts, and without God's Spirit in our lives, it's not something we can fully develop or even understand.

Here's what Paul said about that love: "For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7-8).

While we were still sinners. While our lives were still forfeit. While we had nothing of value to bring to the equation, the Son of God—the immortal, eternal Son of God—took on a fragile human body and died a gruesome death on a wooden stake.

For us.

In our place.

That's what love looks like in action. "For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation" (verses 10-11).

Godly love transforms us from enemies of God into children of God. Godly love gives us a reason to rejoice when we don't deserve it and offers us reconciliation when there is no possible way for us to earn it.

It's also the mark of a true Christian. The love that we receive from God through Christ ought to transform us from the inside out. Jesus told His disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; *as I have loved you*, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

The love of God is life-changing, and we have access to it through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and through the Spirit of God. The more godly love takes root in us, the more we can extend it to others, loving each other as Christ loved us.

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The fruit of the Spirit starts here, with love. It's the first aspect Paul listed, and it's the foundation for everything that follows. Until we begin to understand and reflect godly love—until we strive to align ourselves with the *source* of that love—the rest of the fruit of the Spirit will be forever out of our reach.

“Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2:1-4).

That's asking a lot. Frankly, in terms of our own humanity, it's asking the impossible. Unity? Humility? Altruism? These things are difficult enough on an individual level, but to ask an entire group to operate according to the same mind and the same love?

On our own, we can't do that. We'd all have conflicting principles and motivations. But that's the whole point of the fruit of the Spirit—*with God, we can*. When we let the Spirit of God guide and direct us, this is the kind of impossible fruit we'll begin growing in our lives.

It won't be easy. It won't always be intuitive. But it will be *possible*. Little by little, we'll develop more and more of God's character as it becomes part of who we are.

Love lays that foundation. As we align ourselves with God, we open the door to developing all the aspects of the fruit of the Spirit that would otherwise be beyond our reach—joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control all become attainable if we start with a foundation of true, godly love.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- [1 John 4:7-16](#)
- [Romans 5:1-11](#)
- [Luke 10:25-37](#)
- [1 Corinthians 13](#)

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- [Fruit of the Spirit: Love](#)
- [God Is Love](#)

DAY 3

JOY:

WHAT HAPPINESS CAN'T SEE

Would you like to be happy?

So would most people—but for the majority, happiness is proving to be more of an elusive dream than an attainable reality. The Harris Poll found that in 2017 only one out of every three Americans was truly happy, while the World Happiness Report for that year pegged the United States as the 14th happiest country in the world.

The 14th happiest country in the world, and two-thirds of its citizens are unhappy.

Those aren't exactly encouraging numbers—especially when you consider that the United States was founded on the belief that “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” are three immutable, God-given rights that governments are honor-bound to protect and foster.

For almost two and half centuries now, the American people have been pursuing happiness—and in spite of living in a land of incredible opportunities with an enviable economy and a historically unusual amount of freedom, Americans are often riddled with stress, anxiety and depression. Happiness, not so much.

Why? What are we missing? Why is happiness so hard to find?

Here's the problem:

Happiness is the wrong target.

It sounds counterintuitive. Why on earth *wouldn't* we want to pursue happiness? After all, Paul listed joy as a component of the fruit of the Spirit. Joy is part of what it means to be a follower of God. It's something all Christians should have in their lives.

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That's true, as far as it goes. But joy is a lot like love—it's a word we can use a lot without always understanding what it really means. Joy is an important part of the fruit of the Spirit, but it isn't necessarily tied to what most people would call "being happy."

When we make happiness our goal, we often couch it within conditions. "I'll be happy *when ...* " or "I'll be happy *if ...* " In this framework, our happiness depends on the state of our life—if the conditions change, our happiness can change along with them. That makes happiness a transient, fleeting thing—having it today is no guarantee of having it tomorrow, and vice versa.

That's not how godly joy works. When the New Testament talks about joy, it's rarely in the context of a situation where everything is going well. James opened his letter to the Church by saying, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials" (James 1:2). Peter talked about rejoicing "with joy inexpressible" (1 Peter 1:8) despite being "grieved by various trials" (verse 6). Paul told the Corinthians, "I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation" (2 Corinthians 7:4). And when the early disciples were threatened and beaten for spreading Christ's gospel message, the Bible shows them "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41).

These are not situations where most people would normally expect to find happiness. And there is the primary difference between joy and happiness—while happiness tends to exist *because* of our circumstances, joy often exists in *spite* of our circumstances. Happiness is a response to the moment; joy is a way of looking at the world that sees beyond the present moment. There's nothing wrong with happiness, but what a Christian really needs—what *we* really need—is joy.

Like true, godly love (and like every trait we'll be covering during the rest of this Journey), joy isn't something we can conjure up on our own. It's produced by the Spirit, not our human nature—which means the secret to lasting joy rests with God. If we're looking to find it deep within ourselves, we'll come up short every time.

The secret to joy is perspective. The reason the New Testament writers could talk about joy in the middle of severe trials was because their focus was somewhere else.

Let's look a little deeper at what they wrote and see if we can figure out where their attention was focused.

James wrote, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, *that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing*" (James 1:2-4).

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DAY 3

JOY: WHAT HAPPINESS CAN'T SEE

Trials hurt. They stretch us to our limits and wear us down. It's hard to be happy when we're struggling to keep our head above the water.

But the book of James doesn't tell us to be happy. It tells us to have joy.

Why?

Because the trial we're experiencing is a tool God is using to perfect us, sanding off our rough edges and filling in what's missing. It's there to refine us, to help us overcome our own weaknesses and shortcomings. And that's a reason for our rejoicing. The various trials we fall into have purpose and meaning, and each one is bringing us closer to becoming the child of God we were called to be.

Peter's encouragement followed a similar line of reasoning: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7).

Yes, trials can grieve us. Yes, they can cause us pain and discomfort and even, sometimes, agony. Joy looks past all that, because joy understands the purpose and sees the finish line. Trials are the flames used to refine gold. Trials shape our faith into something that will bring praise, honor and glory at the return of Jesus Christ.

It doesn't mean we stop hurting. It doesn't mean we pretend like everything is fine when it isn't. But knowing there's a purpose behind it all can help us to rejoice when life looks bleak. When we understand that God is preparing us for His Kingdom, we can learn to look at trials as the stepping-stones leading us there.

Paul was not a stranger to trials, but he wasn't a stranger to joy, either. "I am filled with comfort," he told the Corinthians. "I am exceedingly joyful in all our tribulation. For indeed, when we came to Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were troubled on every side. Outside were conflicts, inside were fears" (2 Corinthians 7:4-5).

Things weren't looking good, but that's not where Paul's focus was. Paul was focused on the work God was doing: "Nevertheless God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming, but also by the consolation with which he was comforted in you, when he told us of your earnest desire, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more" (verses 6-7).

Paul saw God actively building His Church. He saw the developing faith and zeal of God's people, and that was a source of joy for him.

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Paul told the Corinthians that he'd been "in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:26-28).

In spite of all that, he had joy. Joy because of what God was doing. Joy that he had the privilege of being part of it all. Joy that he and all of God's people were moving steadily toward the Kingdom.

Joy doesn't just happen. It takes effort and practice to train ourselves to have a positive outlook in the middle of life's storms. But once we have that perspective, we can weather the worst of those storms with joy, secure in the knowledge that something magnificent is coming and that God has chosen us to be part of it.

Before His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples, "A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you" (John 16:21-22).

There's nothing wrong with happiness. God *wants* us to have happiness in our lives—but it's the wrong focus. Happiness is impermanent and transitory—joy isn't. Happiness depends on what's happening in our lives—joy doesn't. When we make joy our goal, we make the choice to use God's Spirit to see beyond our present unhappiness and focus on the purpose of the trials in our lives—to refine us for God's Kingdom.

In the middle of a difficult trial, one psalmist called God "my exceeding joy" (Psalm 43:4). He understood an important lesson—the closer we are to God and His Spirit, the better-equipped we are to maintain a sense of joy regardless of what we're facing. When we look to God as the source of our joy, we look toward a time and a place where the trials of this life will be nothing more than a distant memory.

If we want to find a joy that no one can take from us, we'll only find it here, in the fruit of the Spirit.

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JOY: WHAT HAPPINESS CAN'T SEE

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- Psalm 16 [↗](#)
- Psalm 43 [↗](#)
- Philippians 3:7-14 [↗](#)

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- Fruit of the Spirit: Joy [↗](#)
- 4 Ways to Find Joy in Trials [↗](#)
- Happiness Is... [↗](#)

DAY 4

PEACE: FINDING THE CALM IN CONFLICT

Immediately after the creation week, the world had peace.

It didn't last long, though.

The first man and first woman threw away their place in a literal paradise by refusing to follow God's simple instructions, and ever since then, the world has been something of a mess. The first murder happened shortly afterward, and within nine generations, the human race had grown so wicked and corrupt that God decided to wipe the slate clean and start over with one righteous man and his family.

Even then, it only took a couple of generations before mankind was back to rebelling against God and ignoring His instructions. The families of the world became warring factions, which became warring city-states, which in time became warring nations. Kingdoms rose and fell, conquerors came and conquered—and while there have been pockets of human history with fewer conflicts than others, the sad truth is that for the last 6,000 years, our world has not known true, lasting peace.

That's because peace is a fruit of the Spirit and—you guessed it—isn't something we can understand on our own.

Peace is more than just the absence of conflict. Just because two people (or groups or nations) aren't actively fighting, that doesn't always mean they're at peace. Things can look calm on the surface, but underneath, where no one can see, tensions can simmer until a wrong look or stray word reignites the conflict all over again.

That's not the peace Paul was writing about when he talked about the fruit of the Spirit. God's Spirit doesn't produce the kind of temporary, impermanent peace that falls apart the second something goes wrong. Isaiah wrote to God, "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You" (Isaiah 26:3).

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PEACE: FINDING THE CALM IN CONFLICT

There aren't any other strings attached to this promise. It's not, "You will keep him in perfect peace, as long as the world around him is relatively peaceful too." It's not, "You will keep him in perfect peace, as long as he isn't going through an especially rough time." It's, "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You."

There's a lot to that. For starters, it's not a promise that we'll be kept in peaceful situations. Jesus asked, "Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division" (Luke 12:51). He knew the gospel of the Kingdom was going to be a highly polarizing message, and that it would even set family members against each other (verses 52-53).

That's a far cry from peaceful—and yet it doesn't contradict what we just read in Isaiah. Even when the world around us isn't *peaceful*, God promises that we can still find *peace*.

During His time on earth, Jesus leveled a charge against Jerusalem, the city whose inhabitants would ultimately crucify Him: "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes" (Luke 19:42). Jerusalem didn't understand the things which made for its peace—and as a result, it was destroyed by its enemies shortly thereafter (verses 43-44).

Do you know the things that make for *your* peace?

It's not a secret, but it's also not common knowledge. The prophet Isaiah watched on as his countrymen separated themselves from God through their sins and disobedience (Isaiah 59:2). He then observed, "Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths. The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways; they have made themselves crooked paths; whoever takes that way shall not know peace" (verses 7-8).

There's a *way*, a *path* toward peace, and that path is marked by justice and righteousness. We cannot, in other words, just do whatever we want and still find peace. We have to be living inside God's established framework of right and wrong before real peace even becomes a possibility.

But there's more to it than just doing the right thing. You could do the right thing all day, every day of your life, but that doesn't guarantee peace in a stressful situation. Paul explained to the Romans, "The kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ... Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another" (Romans 14:16-19).

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DAY 4

PEACE: FINDING THE CALM IN CONFLICT

There's that concept again. Peace doesn't just happen. It must be made. *Pursued*. Otherwise it will remain forever out of reach.

In His darkest hour, Jesus showed His disciples what true peace looks like. He told them, “Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:32-33).

Jesus was about to experience one of the most excruciating deaths a human being can experience. His closest companions were about to scatter in fear. And yet, somehow, He had peace—and He offered His disciples that same peace too.

Jesus had peace because He was “not alone.” No matter what happened, Jesus had the Father to draw His strength and comfort from.

Earlier, He told His disciples, “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming back to you.’ If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, ‘I am going to the Father,’ for My Father is greater than I” (John 14:27-28).

Peace, as we've already established, isn't about what's going on around you. It's about what's going on *inside* you. Christ had peace before His death because He knew what He was doing, He knew *why* He was doing it, and He knew He could count on the Father being with Him through it all.

That's the formula for our peace too. Peace is part of the fruit of the Spirit because the more God works in us, the more those same things become true for us. We know what we're doing, we know why we're doing it, and we know that, no matter what, God the Father is guiding and protecting and strengthening us. That's the secret to real, lasting peace—not an absence of external conflict, but a wholeness that comes from our unity with our Creator and our trust in Him.

But peace doesn't stop there. It starts internally, yes, but it's contagious. It spreads. Over time, our internal peace becomes external peace, working its way into our relationships with others and shaping how we interact with the world. Paul told us, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18) and to “let the peace of God rule in your hearts” (Colossians 3:15).

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He also reminded us, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

Peace doesn’t mean we never want or ask for anything. Peace doesn’t mean we’re always approving of the way things are. Peace means that we only concern ourselves with the things we have the power to change, while trusting God to handle the things we can’t, knowing that He has the power and the wisdom to deal with them better than we can. The more we learn to do that, the more we’ll discover what it means to have “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” guarding our hearts and minds.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- [Isaiah 26:1-9](#)
- [John 16:28-33](#)
- [Mark 4:35-41](#)

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- [Fruit of the Spirit: Peace](#)
- [The Way of Peace](#)

DAY 5

LONGSUFFERING: PATIENCE WITH A PURPOSE

When Paul described the fruit of the Spirit, he listed the fourth component as “longsuffering.” A lot of English translations use the word *patience* instead, but the Greek word Paul used conveys something deeper than that. *HELPS Word-Studies* describes it as the opposite of being short-tempered—“long-tempered,” if we had such a word.

There’s some level of nuance here—longsuffering isn’t just the ability to wait things out without ever getting angry. *HELPS* describes it as divinely regulated patience that results in “waiting sufficient time before expressing anger” and avoiding “the premature use of force (retribution) that rises out of improper anger.”

In other words, longsuffering doesn’t mean we never get angry. Longsuffering means we get angry at the right time, in the right way, for the right reasons—which is every bit as difficult as it sounds.

(Interestingly, there are two Greek words commonly translated as “patience” in the New Testament—*makrothumia* and *hupomone*. The word Paul used here, *makrothumia*, generally refers to patience with people, while *hupomone* generally refers to patience with situations and trials.)

Think back to the last time you got angry. What was the reason? Did something set you off unexpectedly, or was your anger a measured response directed toward something that truly deserved it? Longsuffering is the difference between anger as a knee-jerk response and anger as an intentional decision with a specific purpose.

So what does that look like in action?

It can be hard to understand the anger of a loving God. Anger and love can seem almost incompatible—but as we explore longsuffering, we’ll see that the two actually go hand-in-hand.

God revealed Himself to Moses as “the LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression

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LONGSUFFERING: PATIENCE WITH A PURPOSE

and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6-7).

David knew God as "good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You ... a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth" (Psalm 86:5, 15).

God is ready to forgive. He *wants* to forgive. He wants a relationship with all of us—it's why He created us. And that's why He's patient with us. That's why He shows us longsuffering when we fall short of His perfect standards. He *wants* us to repent. He *wants* to help us get back on track and into a right relationship with Him.

But His standards aren't arbitrary. They exist for a reason. They exist to show us the boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong (Deuteronomy 30:15). When we ignore those standards and refuse to obey God, we heap misery on ourselves and those around us. And eventually, that road will lead us to the edge of God's longsuffering.

Paul asked the Romans, "Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who 'will render to each one according to his deeds'" (Romans 2:4-6).

What we're seeing here are two sides of the same coin. Even though He sees our sins as the abominable choices that they are, God is patient and leads us to repentance. "You have burdened Me with your sins," He told Israel. "You have wearied Me with your iniquities" (Isaiah 43:24). And yet in spite of that, He reminded them, "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins" (Isaiah 43:25).

God stands ready to forgive—but He won't endure evil forever. For those who refuse to repent and change, there is coming a "day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God." And that raises an important question:

How long does longsuffering suffer?

The answer is, "As long as it needs to." That's not the same as "forever," even though it can feel like that in practice.

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In the Old Testament, the section of the Bible where many accuse God of being rash and impatient, we actually see Him displaying quite a lot of longsuffering.

It's true that God eventually sent His own people into captivity, but before that, He spent decades, even *centuries*, pleading with the nation of Israel to forsake their pagan ways and return to Him. Through Jeremiah, He said, "I have sent to you all My servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, saying, 'Oh, do not do this abominable thing that I hate!' But they did not listen or incline their ear" (Jeremiah 44:4-5).

God was patient. He gave His people opportunity after opportunity to change their ways, but they refused: "As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD, we will not listen to you!" (verse 16). There was no changing their minds, no reasoning with them at all. Instead, they "built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or speak, nor did it come into My mind" (Jeremiah 19:5).

They were burning their own children as human sacrifices to gods that didn't exist. They were committing every sort of immorality, over and over again. Eventually, God stopped pleading. Because of their sins, God withdrew His protection and sent other nations to conquer His people.

But even then, God wasn't finished. He had a plan. Centuries later, Paul asked, "Has God cast away His people? Certainly not!" (Romans 11:1). He explained that God still plans to work with Israel (most of whom "were blinded" to the truth, verse 7) and that one day "all Israel will be saved" (verse 26).

It doesn't end with a single nation, though. God's ultimate plan is to work with all people from every era of human history. There are billions upon billions of people, living and dead, who have yet to truly know the God of the Bible—but that doesn't mean God has cast them away either. They will all have the opportunity to learn God's way and join His family, because "the Lord ... is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that *all* should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Not that everyone *will* come to repentance. Even with their eyes fully opened to the truths of the Bible and God's existence, some people will refuse to repent. The Bible is clear that only "those who do His commandments" will be given "the right to the tree of life" (Revelation 22:14).

Eventually, we'll reach the cut-off point, where God will completely and irrevocably destroy all those who insist on disregarding His laws. He won't do this in some kind of emotional rage, but simply because additional longsuffering would change nothing.

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LONGSUFFERING: PATIENCE WITH A PURPOSE

God is patient for a purpose. He wants all of us to be part of His family, and He's willing to wait as long as it takes to give each of us the best possible opportunity to succeed. That doesn't mean He'll wait forever or turn a blind eye to sin, but it does mean He's willing to wait much, much longer than any of us deserve.

And that's our template. God isn't eager to give up on anyone—and we shouldn't be either. His patience with us—His *longsuffering*—is tied to His desire to see us repent and overcome our sins and become His sons and daughters. He doesn't give up on us just because we have a setback or an off day, and even though He holds us to His standards, He's overjoyed to see us repent and return to Him after we've wandered off the beaten path (Isaiah 1:16-20).

If God can have that kind of longsuffering with us, then the least we can do is learn to extend similar patience to others. It doesn't mean we make excuses or exceptions for wrong behavior—in fact, Christ's own example shows us that there are acceptable times and ways to express anger at sin (Mark 11:15-17). But it does mean we should learn to be “long-tempered.” It means learning to not fly off the handle when something gets under our skin. It means learning to give others the opportunity to change and correct their mistakes, just like God does for us. It means learning to take a deep breath and look at the bigger picture when we'd rather just lash out.

And here's the bigger picture:

The whole human race was created with the potential to become children of God. It's why any of us exist, and it's the goalpost God is moving us toward, slowly but surely. It's a plan that's been in motion for millennia, because God decided it was worth waiting for. More to the point, He decided that we were *all* worth waiting for.

We begin to truly grow in longsuffering once we start agreeing with that assessment.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- [Romans 12:9-21](#)
- [Matthew 5:38-48](#)
- [James 5:7-11](#)
- [Psalm 5:4-8](#)

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- [Fruit of the Spirit: Longsuffering](#)
- [Patience Is a Virtue That Can Build Relationships](#)

DAY 6

KINDNESS: KNOWING WHAT'S NEEDED

Paul listed the fifth aspect of the fruit of the Spirit as “kindness”—or rather, most English translations list it that way. In the original Greek of the New Testament, Paul used the word *chréstotés*, which doesn't translate perfectly into English. “Kindness” is part of *chréstotés*, but there's more to it than just saying nice words and doing nice things.

HELPS Word-Studies **describes chréstotés** as “*well-fit for use (for what is really needed); kindness that is also serviceable.*” The kindness that grows out of God's Spirit—the kindness Paul was writing about—is a kindness that focuses on providing something that's truly helpful to the person receiving it.

Like the other aspects of the fruit of the Spirit, kindness doesn't exist in a vacuum. We can't express kindness without first having someone to be kind *to*. And that requires effort from us. If kindness means providing what is really needed, then it also means understanding what others really need (and not just what *we* think they need). That means getting to know others well enough to know what they're going through—caring enough to understand the challenges they're facing, the trials they're dealing with and what we can do to make their lives better.

That's a tall order—and like all the traits contained in the fruit of the Spirit, it doesn't come naturally. We might be filled with good intentions, and we might even actually *do* kind things for others, but truly understanding what someone needs and knowing the right way and the right time to provide it—well, that's an ability that can only come from God. It's little wonder, then, that He sets the standard for us when it comes to showing kindness.

The word *chréstotés* (and the related *chréstos*) doesn't show up much in the New Testament, but when it does, it's usually talking about God's mercy. We're told that “the goodness [*chréstos*] of God leads you to repentance” (Romans 2:4), that God shows us “the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness [*chréstotés*] toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7) and that Christ's sacrifice was the result of “the kindness [*chréstotés*] and the love of God our Savior” (Titus 3:4).

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What can we glean from all that? Well, quite a few things. For starters, it reminds us that kindness isn't something we give to others when we feel they deserve it. Kindness is meant to be part of who we are, regardless of whom we're interacting with.

Jesus Christ died for the sins of the whole world, not just a handful of people He felt deserved it. It was Jesus Himself who told His disciples, "Love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind [*chréstos*] to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful" (Luke 6:35-36).

It's easy to be kind to those who are kind to us, but God's Spirit compels us to do more than that, to *be* more than that. It reminds us that "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). We could never have earned that kindness—and no human being should ever have to earn *our* kindness. It should be something that flows from us freely.

But kindness wasn't intended to make us pushovers either. Jesus certainly wasn't. Even though His sacrifice is meant for the whole human race, there are still requirements for those of us who would accept it. In other words, we can't earn His kindness, but there are still standards He expects us to live up to.

As it turns out, even those standards are kindnesses. Jesus told the people of His day, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy [*chréstos*] and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Christ called His yoke *chréstos*. Kind.

Not nonexistent. Not insignificant. *Chréstos*. Something good. Something we *need*. If we're willing to take that yoke—if we're willing to submit ourselves to the standards set by God—we benefit. We need those standards and those rules to live the best possible version of our lives. Without them, all we can do is guess at the right way to live and hope it works out.

In His kindness, Christ provides a yoke that teaches us how to live without having to make costly mistakes or guesses.

Earlier, we noted that kindness requires getting to know others on a deeper level—but the Bible has a warning about that too. "Do not be deceived," wrote Paul. "Evil company corrupts good [*chréstos*] habits.' Awake to righteousness, and do not sin" (1 Corinthians 15:33-34).

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The people we choose to spend time with will have a huge impact on the kind of people we become. Evil company—people who disregard and mock God’s standards—will influence and shape us if we aren’t careful. Paul warns specifically that evil company corrupts good (*chréstos*) habits. It’s much harder to seek the good of someone else if you’re with a group of people who find that whole idea laughable.

Thankfully, the reverse is also true. Spending time with a group of people who value the right things makes it that much easier to *do* the right things. As Solomon wrote long ago, “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed” (Proverbs 13:20).

But that doesn’t change the fact that God expects us to show kindness to everyone, just as “He is kind to the unthankful and evil.” God isn’t asking us to be best friends with those who refuse to obey Him (in fact, He tells us to avoid that), but we are instructed to “do good to *all*, especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10).

God gives us forgiveness we haven’t earned along with strength and love we don’t deserve. He doesn’t just enable us to do whatever we want, whenever we want—He holds us to certain standards and expects us to live up to them.

And that’s the core of all of this—not just kindness, but every aspect of the fruit of the Spirit. The closer we are to God—the more in tune we are with His mind and His ways—the more the fruit of the Spirit can develop in us.

Paul wrote, “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32).




That’s our template. That’s what kindness looks like. We push away the evil things, refusing to let them into our lives, and then we take our cue from the kindness God has shown to us. It’s as simple—and as difficult—as that. As we let God’s Spirit guide us in providing others with serviceable kindness that meets their needs, we’ll find ourselves one step closer to developing the true fruit of the Spirit.

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FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- [Colossians 3:12-17](#) 
- [1 Peter 2:1-3](#) 
- [Titus 3:1-8](#) 

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- [Fruit of the Spirit: Kindness](#) 
- [Don't Cut Corners on Kindness](#) 

DAY 7

GOODNESS: STARTING INSIDE OUT

A rich young ruler once asked Jesus, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16). Christ’s answer was short, but full of points to consider: “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments” (verse 17).

Let’s start there. Paul listed “goodness” when describing the fruit of the Spirit, and here Jesus was emphasizing something important—that kind of goodness is exclusive to God and God alone. If the fruit of the Spirit produces goodness in God’s people, *that goodness has to come from God, not us*. It’s not something we can produce in ourselves apart from Him.

If that sounds a bit extreme, it’s because we use the word *good* pretty loosely in English. We can have a good day, eat a good meal with a good friend, do a good job on an assignment, or perform a good deed—all very human actions that people perform every day without access to God’s Spirit.

But that’s not the kind of goodness Jesus and Paul had in mind. The Greek words used here for “good” and “goodness” refer to something that is *intrinsically* good—that is, something that is wholesome and upright down to its very core. Your sandwich might be good, but it’s not *that* kind of good.

Jesus told the young ruler, “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” That’s the key—and Paul knew it. In a letter to the Romans, he affirmed, “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12). God’s commandments show us what goodness looks like in action. They’re a reflection of the very character of God, providing us with the fence posts and boundaries we need in order to live a godly and righteous life.

But there’s a problem—not with God’s law, but with us. Paul knew that too. He wrote, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. ... I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good” (verses 18-21).

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GOODNESS: STARTING INSIDE OUT

Our human nature struggles with goodness. It doesn't come naturally—in fact, the opposite tends to come more naturally. Even when we *want* to do the right thing, it's easy to find ourselves doing the wrong thing instead. Sometimes we don't know what the right thing is, and sometimes we don't have the willpower to put what's right above what we want. It's easy to justify and reason our way around God's standards when it's convenient for us, and that's a symptom of the bigger problem Paul was writing about: "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells."

If we're trying to grow the fruit of the Spirit, that's going to be a problem.

Goodness isn't just about *doing* good. It's about *being* good—all the way to the very core of our being. It's about doing the right thing not just because we have to, but because we want to—because that's just who we are. That's the goodness God has, and it's the goodness He'll help us develop as we tap into His Spirit: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

Did you catch that? Seeing us walk in good works has always been God's plan for us. But He also knew that it wasn't a goal we'd reach overnight. We need help—and help is exactly what He gives.

Paul urged the brethren, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2). God has a radical plan to remodel us from the inside out—to transform us by removing what doesn't belong and reshaping us to have His character and His goodness.

That process isn't easy or comfortable. Our human nature is going to resist those changes. It's going to push back and refuse to give up quietly. While God's Spirit makes these changes possible, the process is still going to require effort from us. Paul describes part of that transformation as our learning to "abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:9, 21).

But before we can *do* what is good, it's vital that we first *know* what is good. And that's not as easy as it sounds.

Satan the devil is a trickster, a liar and a deceiver. He was the one who "helped" Eve to see that the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden was "good for food ... pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise" (Genesis 3:6). And he's been causing similar trouble ever since. He knows how to

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GOODNESS: STARTING INSIDE OUT

disguise himself as “an angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14), and he knows how to make the wrong things look right.

The good news is that his imitation game isn’t perfect—we can learn to spot his counterfeits if we stay close to God. “All Scripture,” we’re told, “is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Satan is a convincing con artist, but the Bible gives us the tools we need to see through his forgeries. The more time we spend with God’s Word—the more we allow God to show us what good *really* looks like—the better equipped we’ll be to put that knowledge into action. “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:8-10).

What does that look like, exactly? That’s a question David asked and answered a long time ago, and his answer, found in Psalm 34:12-14, is still true today:

Who is the man who desires life,
And loves many days, that he may see good?
Keep your tongue from evil,
And your lips from speaking deceit.
Depart from evil and do good;
Seek peace and pursue it.

It’s not a complicated set of instructions, but it drives home the point that goodness isn’t passive. Internal goodness produces good actions—good must be *done*, peace must be *sought* and *pursued*. Evil and deception must be actively resisted. None of it just happens on its own. It has to start at an internal level.

At the beginning of this Journey, we explored what Jesus had to say about that: “Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them” (Matthew 7:16-20).

What’s inside eventually finds its way outside. As we let God show us through His Word and through His actions what goodness looks like, we can strive to make that same goodness part of us, letting God’s Spirit shape and mold us to be more like our Creator.

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GOODNESS: STARTING INSIDE OUT

Like every aspect of the fruit of the Spirit, goodness isn't going to come naturally to us. It's going to take effort on our part to emulate the perfect example of our Father, but we do have those encouraging words from Christ Himself: "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit."

The closer we get to God, the better we're going to be at growing the kind of fruit He's looking for in His trees.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- Psalm 34 [↗](#)
- Acts 10:34-38 [↗](#)
- Psalm 25 [↗](#)

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- Fruit of the Spirit: Goodness [↗](#)
- God Is Good [↗](#)

DAY 8

FAITH: SEEING THE UNSEEN

A long time ago, there was a father who had a demon-possessed son. For years this father watched helplessly as his son was wracked with convulsions, rolling on the ground and foaming at the mouth.¹ Worst of all, the demonic spirit would often “cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him” (Mark 9:22, English Standard Version).

The father couldn’t do anything to stop this demon. He could only watch it all happen and try to care for his son’s injuries.

Over.

And over.

And over.

And then one day, the father heard about a Man who was traveling around the country doing the impossible: Casting out demons. Healing the sick. Even raising the dead.

Jesus of Nazareth, they called Him.

So the father did what any loving parent would have done—he took his son to see the miracle-worker, hoping beyond hope that this Jesus could save his child from a lifetime of torment. But Jesus’ disciples couldn’t heal him. And then when the boy came near Jesus, the evil spirit seized him once again and sent him into convulsions.

The father had heard the stories about the Man from Nazareth, and he wanted them to be true. He wanted his son to be whole again, and this seemed like his only real chance. But with that hope, there was doubt.

¹ It’s important to note here that, although the son’s symptoms might appear similar to a grand mal seizure, the Bible is not somehow equating seizures with demonic possession. All we’re told is that in this specific instance, these specific convulsions were caused by a demonic presence.

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FAITH: SEEING THE UNSEEN

Was it really possible? Could this one Man have the answers to a problem his family had struggled with for years? Could it be that easy?

“If You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us” (verse 22).

If. The doubt was there; the question marks were showing through. None of the man’s internal struggles were lost on Jesus Christ, who replied, “If you can! All things are possible for one who believes” (verse 23, ESV).

For the father, there was only one response: “Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!’” (verse 24).

In just a handful of words, the boy’s father encapsulated the most difficult, most frustrating thing about faith:

It’s not binary. It’s not either/or. Just having some faith isn’t enough to make all the doubts go away. It’s easy to find ourselves wrestling with dozens or hundreds of question marks that fill us with hesitation and uncertainty.

But that doesn’t mean we don’t have any faith. It just means that, like the father who cried out to Jesus, we need help with our unbelief. Paul listed faithfulness as part of the fruit of the Spirit, which means faith is something that ought to *grow* over time. It also means that faith doesn’t start out complete—it starts out small.

For us, that means we can expect to encounter times in our lives where our faith isn’t as strong as we’d like it to be. And that’s okay. What *isn’t* okay, however, is being content with our faith staying at that level. If our faith stagnates, *we* stagnate. We stop developing as Christians, because “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Before the father brought his son to Christ, Christ’s disciples had tried to cast the demon out on their own—but they couldn’t. It wasn’t the first evil spirit they’d encountered—Jesus Himself had given them the authority to cast out demons and heal the sick (Matthew 10:1, 8)—but for some reason, they couldn’t do anything with this particular demon.

For Jesus, this demon wasn’t a problem: “And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him; and the child was cured from that very hour” (Matthew 17:18). Afterward, the disciples came to Him privately (and no doubt embarrassed) and asked, “Why could we not cast it out?” (verse 19).

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Jesus explained, “Because of your unbelief; for assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting” (verses 20-21).

The disciples had unbelief too. Jesus told the disciples if they had faith the size of a mustard seed, it would be enough to move mountains.

But when it came time to move those mountains, their unbelief got in the way. They believed, but not fully. And unlike the father who came to Christ, these disciples had been traveling with Jesus long enough to see Him perform miracle after miracle with their own eyes. But when it came time to put that faith into practice, they fell short. (Jesus also remarked that this kind did not go out except by prayer and fasting—indicating a need to be closer to God to perform such a task.)

So if that’s us—if that’s where we are in terms of faith—how do we get better? How do we drive out doubt and nurture faith?

To answer that, we first have to understand where faith *comes* from.

Paul told the Romans, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). He later emphasized that “God has dealt to each one a measure of faith” (Romans 12:3).

In other words, faith comes from God.

Not from us.

That might sound a little strange at first. Our faith in God comes *from* God? But it turns out, yes, that’s exactly how it works. To the Ephesians, Paul explained, “By grace you have been saved through faith, *and that not of yourselves*; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We can’t generate our own faith in God. That’s a door God opens. The very ability to trust in God is a gift given to us by God Himself. We can’t *earn* faith—but we can use it. In fact, we *must* use it if we want to please God.

The apostle James asked, “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?” (James 2:14). To James, faith without works was as pointless as trying to wish good deeds into existence (verses 15-16). Just as seeing a physical need and not

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taking action accomplishes nothing, he saw faith as part of something bigger—an impetus for action. Because we believe, we must *do*.

“Show me your faith without your works,” he challenged, “and I will show you my faith *by* my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. *Even the demons believe—and tremble!* But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?” (verses 18-20).

Sure, it’s important to believe in God—but even the demons know God exists. That’s not enough. Unless we couple that belief with action, our faith is dead in the water. If we trust God, we must also *obey* God. Faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the Word of God—and that Word—the Bible—exists to show us the kind of life we ought to be living.

Again, it’s not that obeying God or doing good works somehow earns us faith or grace. It doesn’t. It *can’t*—those things are gifts from God. “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. ... Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, *we establish the law*” (Romans 3:28, 31).

By having faith in God, we also have faith that God’s “law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12)—and is therefore something we ought to obey.

We get our faith from God. But that doesn’t relieve us of all responsibilities—the strength of our faith depends largely on *our* choices, *our* decisions. We grow in faith by putting that trust into practice—by learning God’s way of life and living it, day in and day out. And as that faith grows and our doubt shrinks, that same faith points us toward the future God has planned. If we can trust that He exists, and if we can trust that His law is there to guide and direct us, we can ultimately trust His promises too.

The author of Hebrews called faith “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). When we have true, unshakable faith in God, it’s as if the invisible things are visible. We trust Him and His promises to the point that the future we’re looking toward might as well already be here—in our minds, that’s how unshakably certain it becomes.

The rest of Hebrews 11 is focused on the men and women who did exactly that—heroes of faith who met life’s challenges and trials head-on, secure in the knowledge that God can and will fulfill His promises. “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (verse 13).

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These were men and women who “through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again” (verses 33-35).

They were also men and women who “were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth” (verses 35-38).

But they didn’t receive the promises they were waiting for.

They still haven’t.

Why?

“And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (verses 39-40).

The men and women of Hebrews 11 died with absolute certainty that God would raise them from the dead and into a future He had prepared for them. And although God *will* do that, He hasn’t yet.

Because of us.

He’s giving us a chance to join their numbers. He’s giving us the opportunity to grow in faith by living it. When we trust Him in the little things and in the big things, we’ll live a life that reflects that trust.

God gives us our faith through His Spirit—and the more we put that faith into practice, the more the fruit of the Spirit will grow and blossom in our lives.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- [Hebrews 11](#)
- [James 2:14-26](#)
- [Proverbs 3:5-8](#)

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- [Fruit of the Spirit: Faithfulness](#)
- [How to Grow in Faith](#)

DAY 9

GENTLENESS: THE OTHER SIDE OF STRENGTH

Does being gentle mean being weak?

Some people think so. When Paul talked about gentleness, he used a Greek word that can also be translated “meekness”—which is, in turn, an English word often mistaken for “weakness.”

But is that what Paul was implying? That the Spirit of God produces ... weakness?

In his Gospel account, the apostle John introduced Jesus Christ this way: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1-3, 14).

The Word, the divine being who came to earth as Jesus Christ, was the same divine being through whom the world we live in was created—and not just our world, but the universe and everything in it. Every star, every planet, every atom in all of time and space exists because He made it so.

And yet during His time on earth, Jesus said, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30).

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the unchanging, immortal, eternal, all-powerful Creator of the universe, is a long, long way from being weak.

But He *is* gentle. And if we are truly being led by the Spirit of God, we need to be gentle too.

The difference between gentleness and weakness is pretty straightforward:

Weakness is a state of being. Gentleness is a choice.

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Praotes, the word Paul used for gentleness, is “the most untranslatable of words” according to New Testament scholar William Barclay. Aristotle used it to describe the balance between “excessive anger and excessive angerlessness,” or knowing how to express anger always at the right time and never at the wrong time.

A form of the word is used to describe tamed animals under a master’s control—animals possessing strength and proper restraint at the same time. *HELPS Word-Studies* describes *praotes* as meaning “gentle strength,” or strength tempered by gentleness. Imagine holding a trinket made of glass—you wouldn’t say you’re being weak with it; you’d say you’re being gentle with it. You *could* shatter it, but you choose not to.

That’s part of what gentleness looks like. But another part is a willingness to take blows we don’t deserve. Jesus said, “I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also” (Matthew 5:39-40).

That’s an idea Peter explored in depth—an idea he linked to meekness and gentleness: “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. For it is better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (1 Peter 3:15-17).

In this life, you’re going to be mistreated. People are going to lie to you, take advantage of you and cheat you—and how you respond in those moments is going to reflect on the God you claim to serve. Will others be able to see Christ in us if we respond to suffering by seeking revenge?

Peter continued, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God. ... Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind” (1 Peter 3:18; 4:1).

When we’re slapped, literally or metaphorically, others will be watching. Responding with the gentleness of Christ is rarely easy, but it’s part of who God calls us to be.

But there’s more to the story. Gentleness isn’t the complete and total refusal to use strength—it’s *tempered* strength. It’s the ability to use the right *amount* of strength at the right time, in the right way and for the right reason.

That’s not easy.

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When Martha had her focus in the wrong place, Christ's rebuke was a gentle one: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things" (Luke 10:41). But when Peter made his own blunder, Christ's words were sharp: "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (Matthew 16:23).

Different people, different situations—but both of these responses came from the same Jesus who was "gentle and lowly in heart." He knew that Peter needed bluntness in order to learn and grow, but He also knew that the same approach would probably hurt Martha more than it helped. Because He was gentle, Jesus took those factors into consideration as He dealt with both circumstances.

Throughout the Gospel account, it's clear that gentleness—that is, gentle strength—played a role in everything Jesus did. An Old Testament prophecy about Him promised, "He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth" (Isaiah 42:2-3). He didn't come to earth to crush the spirits of the weak—the bruised reeds and smoking flax, barely hanging on—He came to strengthen them.

But at the same time, He took action when it was necessary. When He saw money changers taking financial advantage of worshippers at God's temple, He drove the animals out of the temple area and "poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, 'Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!'" (John 2:15-16).

With just a handful of examples, it's obvious that different situations call for different levels of gentleness. What's *less* obvious, though, is how to tell those situations apart.

While there's no one-size-fits-all rule for determining how to employ gentle strength, there are some general principles we can use to determine what's wise and what's not.

The first thing to consider is that gentleness is only *part* of the fruit of the Spirit. None of those parts exist independently. Instead, they all build on and interact with each other. That means we're not just talking about gentleness. We're talking about a gentleness that's driven by a godly love, bolstered by longsuffering and kindness and rooted in goodness, joy, peace and faithfulness.

The key to using gentle strength is to understand that, ultimately, it's about the other person. Godly love prompts us to focus on the well-being of others, and gentleness is that focus in action. We temper our strength by choosing to act in whatever way will prove most helpful to the person we're interacting with.

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For God, who knows everything and is responsible for everything, sometimes that strength takes the form of tough love. In the Old Testament, when God was in the process of punishing Israel for their wickedness and unfaithfulness, He asked, “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? ... My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred. I will not execute the fierceness of My anger” (Hosea 11:8-9).

Even though God’s people would have to suffer because of their continued sins, God’s ultimate plan was to bring them back and resettle them after they’d learned their lesson:

“I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from him. ... Ephraim shall say, ‘What have I to do anymore with idols?’ I have heard and observed him. I am like a green cypress tree; your fruit is found in Me” (Hosea 14:4, 8).

Every time we have a reason to be forceful with others, the important question to ask ourselves is, “Why?” What is our motivation for using strength in this situation? Is it really for the good of the other person, or are we acting out of frustration or bitterness?

When we’re wronged or mistreated, human nature encourages us to get even at the first opportunity—to give our enemies a taste of their own medicine. But the Bible tells us to do exactly the opposite—to turn the other cheek, rather than lash out: “Do not say, ‘I will recompense evil’; wait for the LORD, and He will save you” (Proverbs 20:22).

That’s true whether we’re in a position of authority or we just find ourselves with the opportunity to get back at those who have treated us poorly.

At the end of the day, gentleness is about using as little force as possible to do what needs to be done, acting out of love instead of hate and trusting God to handle the injustices for us.

Is that easy? No. Does it come naturally? Not even close. Growing in gentleness takes work and practice and usually comes with a lot of missteps along the way—but without it, we can’t truly follow in Jesus Christ’s footsteps:

“For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ‘Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth’; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed” (1 Peter 2:21-24).

Again and again, Jesus showed us what true gentleness looks like. Growing in the fruit of the Spirit means learning to do likewise.

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FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- [Titus 3:1-8](#)
- [Galatians 6:1-10](#)
- [James 1:19-20](#)

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- [Fruit of the Spirit: Gentleness](#)
- [Blessed Are the Meek](#)

DAY 10

SELF-CONTROL: THE KEY TO VICTORY

When Paul looked at his calling, he saw a race. “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize?” he asked. “Run in such a way that you may obtain it” (1 Corinthians 9:24).

Paul was running the same race all of us must run—a race against ourselves. A race against our flaws, our shortcomings, our bad habits, our sins. This was the same Paul who wrote, “For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. ... I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good” (Romans 7:15, 21).

For most of us, that’s a pretty relatable sentiment. We *want* to do good, we *want* to do the right thing, we *want* to have the fruit of the Spirit visible in our actions, but when it comes right down to it ...

We fail. A lot. We look in the mirror and find that “evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.” Paul looked deep into that mirror and concluded, “I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find” (verse 18).

But Paul wasn’t without hope. His flesh—his human nature—didn’t have the answer, but the fruit of the Spirit doesn’t grow out of human nature. It grows out of *God’s* nature. In fact, when Paul described the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians, he started by contrasting it with the “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19-21)—including some of the worst things that human nature can produce.

The fruit of the Spirit, which is grown *by* God’s Spirit, directly opposes those works of the flesh. It’s a fruit designed to change us from the inside out—if we’ll let it.

Without self-control, though, those changes can only be temporary. Without self-control, we’ll only show godly love ... sometimes. We’ll only express kindness when it’s convenient. We’ll only be at peace when it’s easy.

And that’s not enough.

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If the fruit of the Spirit were an orange, then self-control would be the rind—the protective layer holding everything together. Without self-control, our attempt to grow in the fruit of the Spirit would be exposed, vulnerable and easily ruined.

When Paul looked at his calling and saw a race, he also saw the key to *winning* that race: “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:25-27, ESV).

Raw talent wasn’t enough to win the competitions Paul was writing about. Any athlete with a hope of winning would need to master consistency—employing the right technique at the right time, over and over and over again. They needed to maintain that level of consistency even when they were exhausted or hungry or in pain, or else another athlete with more self-control would snatch their victory from them.

Paul knew his own weak points. He knew himself well enough to know where his flesh was likely to give him trouble, so he focused on mastering himself instead of letting his human nature call the shots.

In the ancient world, Stoic philosophers saw self-control or self-mastery as an entirely internal affair. A person had to master himself through sheer force of will—every impulse, every desire had to be managed and controlled through willpower and nothing else.

That’s an admirable approach to life, but in practice, it rarely works. Trying to master our human nature with our human nature only works until we find ourselves up against a temptation we struggle to resist. We can’t always count on ourselves to have that kind of strength—because when it really matters, we’ll find ourselves coming up short, just like Paul did.

The alternative is God—because God *is* strong enough. “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed” (James 1:13-14).

And that right there is the crux and the irony of self-control: we are powerless to truly master ourselves until we are first willing to be mastered by God. Until we can admit that our own human willpower

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isn't enough—until we can hand the reins over to God and allow His Spirit to start making changes in our lives—we'll never develop true self-control.

That's the first step. It's where we have to start—by looking to God for the strength to control ourselves. And as we submit ourselves to Him, we'll discover the truth of what Paul told Timothy: “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Timothy 1:7, ESV).

It won't happen overnight. Like the rest of the fruit of the Spirit, growing in self-control is a gradual process. As we come to a better understanding of what love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and gentleness look like in action, we can ask God for the self-control to put those traits into practice—especially in the moments when our human nature encourages us to make an exception.

The good news here is that this is all built around a positive feedback loop. When we focus on growing in one facet of the fruit of the Spirit, it makes the others easier to grow in too. More love makes it easier to develop more kindness. More peace makes it easier to develop more longsuffering. More faith makes it easier to develop more joy—and so on.

Paul knew that too. As we've made our way through the nine aspects of the fruit of the Spirit, you've probably noticed that Bible verses often reference these aspects in clusters instead of on their own. Paul told the Colossians, “As the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering. ... But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts” (Colossians 3:12, 14-15).

He urged the Ephesians to walk “with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2). He told Timothy to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness” (1 Timothy 6:11). He described God's servants as living “by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love” (2 Corinthians 6:6).

These traits are all deeply interwoven, each one building off the other in powerful ways—and self-control is the essential ingredient that allows them to keep building.

Like all of us, Paul struggled with consistently doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason. He called himself a “wretched man” trapped in a “body of death” (Romans 7:24)—but he wasn't content to stay that way. He was running a race where self-control was a key to victory, and he spent his life honing that ability.

The very last epistle we have from Paul is a farewell letter to Timothy, his young protégé. According to extrabiblical tradition, Paul died from a beheading under the reign of Roman Emperor Nero. But however it happened, he knew as he wrote to Timothy that he was not long for this world. He wrote:

“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

There are two important truths to glean from this passage. First, that Paul was able to develop self-control to the point where he could confidently claim to have finished the race, and second, that *we can do the same thing*.

At the end of his race, Paul knew—not felt, not thought, not hoped, but *knew*—that he would be receiving his crown. Being a Christian isn’t always easy, but it is possible. Paul did it, and so can we. At the end of your life, you, too, ought to be able to look back at the fruit you’ve grown through the Holy Spirit and know—not feel, not think, not hope, but *know*—that you finished *your* race.

We’re left, though, with one big, important question:

What kind of life does the fruit of the Spirit grow best in?

We’ve spent this Journey exploring the fruit of the Spirit, but tomorrow, we’ll end by taking a closer look at the environment that fruit needs if it’s going to reach its fullest potential.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- Proverbs 25:28 [↗](#)
- 1 Peter 5:5-11 [↗](#)
- 2 Timothy 1:6-12 [↗](#)

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- Fruit of the Spirit: Self-Control [↗](#)
- Measuring Your Spiritual Growth [↗](#)

DAY 11

THE GOOD GROUND

Before Paul ever wrote about the fruit of the Spirit—in fact, before Paul ever called himself a Christian—Jesus told His disciples a story about a man who went out to sow some seeds. In the story the man scattered seeds on four different types of ground. Some seed fell by the wayside, some fell on stony places, some fell among thorns, and some fell on good ground.

Each type of ground provided a different environment for the seeds to grow in, which resulted in varying levels of growth. The seeds on the wayside were devoured by birds before they could start growing. The seeds on the stony places grew almost immediately, but the stones made it hard to put down substantial roots. When the sun came out, those plants withered and died just as quickly as they had grown. The seeds among the thorns managed to grow—but because they were competing with the thorns for nutrients, the thorns stunted the growth of the plants and prevented them from ever producing fruit.

The only seeds with a happy ending were the ones that landed on good ground. They “yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (Matthew 13:8).

For 10 days now, we’ve been examining the fruit of the Spirit—the result of God’s Spirit working in our lives, changing how we think and behave. What we haven’t talked much about is the environment necessary for *growing* that fruit.

The parable of the sower gives us a lot of insight into that environment, although it requires a little digging on our part. Even Jesus’ own disciples were confused at first, so they asked Him, “What does this parable mean?” (Luke 8:9).

Within Christ’s answer is a blueprint that can guide us as we seek to give the fruit of the Spirit a better place to grow in our lives.

Jesus started by explaining the most important facet of the story: “Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God” (verse 11). No matter what ground it lands on, no matter how it’s received, the

Word of God is the same in every situation. It's the same message, the same promises, the same commandments. The only thing that changes is how others interact with it.

In reference to the first type of ground, Jesus explained, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside" (Matthew 13:19).

The wayside in this parable is a well-traveled footpath—a dirt road so compacted by footstep after footstep that it may as well have been concrete. The seeds that landed on that dirt never had a chance. Satan had no trouble swooping in and snatching them away.

Any part of our lives can become a spiritual wayside when we allow ourselves to become hardened to God's message—when we resist His instruction and commandments. If we want to produce the fruit of the Spirit in our own lives, we have to make sure God's Word can put down roots in our soil. Traits like pride, stubbornness and self-centeredness make for compacted, impenetrable spiritual soil where God's Word will never grow.

To fix this ground, we need to work with God to break up the things in our lives that are preventing His Word from having a place in our lives. It's not an easy, comfortable process, but it's essential for growth: "Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD, till He comes and rains righteousness on you" (Hosea 10:12).

But even as we break up the waysides of our lives, the parable of the sower reminds us of other obstacles waiting for us below the surface. Christ continued, "But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles" (Matthew 13:20-21).

There are a lot of reasons to be joyful about God's Word. It's filled with inspiring verses and amazing promises. But if we treat God's calling as if our lives will be filled with nothing but blessings and sunshine, we're in for a rude awakening. Jesus warned His disciples, "In the world you *will* have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Part of being a Christian means being honest with ourselves about what Christianity involves. The rocks in our soil can include our own false ideas about what our lives should look like if we obey God. Even though He promises to take care of us, He never promises that life will be free from difficulties.

In fact, He promises just the opposite, warning us that as we pursue the Kingdom, we'll have to make sacrifices and face serious trials.

The fruit of the Spirit—which includes joy, peace and longsuffering—is going to grow much better in a life prepared to face trials than it will in a life that expects no hardships.

The fewer rocks in the way of God's Word, the better.

The third and final danger Christ mentions in this parable comes after we've broken up our compacted soil and after we've cleared out our stones. "Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful" (Matthew 13:22).

It's not enough to just believe God's Word. It's not enough to just clear out a place for God's Spirit to grow and then leave it alone. If we're not diligent to tend that ground—to weed it and keep it from intruders—life *will* get in the way.

Jesus identified the thorns as "the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches." Caring about things in this world is not necessarily wrong. Having riches is not necessarily wrong. But when we let those things become just as important as our spiritual calling, the end result is a life that struggles to produce godly fruit. When God's Spirit has competition—when our calling stops being our primary focus—we'll never live up to our true potential. We'll always be a plant choked by thorns.

Paul looked at the sacrifices he had to make throughout his life—the trials he had to endure, the pleasures he had to give up—and declared, "But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him" (Philippians 3:7-9).

For the fruit of the Spirit to produce anything meaningful in our lives, that's the attitude we need to have. Jesus concluded His explanation of the parable of the sower by saying, "The ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience" (Luke 8:15).

In the parable of the sower, the seed is the Word of God, the dirt is our heart and the water that makes it all grow is the Holy Spirit. Throughout this Journey, we've explored the many facets of the fruit of

the Spirit—what it means to have love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. But before that fruit can truly grow, we need to provide God’s Word with the water of the Spirit and “a noble and good heart” to grow in.

That’s the ground that yields a crop—“some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Matthew 13:8-9).

Break up the dirt. Dig out the stones. Uproot the thorns.

Be the good ground.

FURTHER READING

Scriptures

- Revelation 22:12-21 [↗](#)
- 2 Peter 3:14-18 [↗](#)
- Philippians 1:3-11 [↗](#)

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- What Do You Do With All Your Time? [↗](#)
- Putting Character to the Test [↗](#)

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We’d also love to hear from you. Send your questions, comments and feedback to info@lifehopeandtruth.com, and we’ll be in touch!