

“The Fruits of the Spirit”

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Paul’s letter to the Galatians 5:22-23 lists nine “fruits” of the Spirit. These are actually suggested alternatives to the vices listed in the previous passage. The list of vices is much longer, by the way, but Paul’s list of good things, of “fruits,” is concise, to the point, and rather all inclusive of the best of human nature. If we follow his advice, the world will be a much better place. He lists love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Please understand that Paul was writing in first-century Greek. The virtues I have quoted are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, or NSRV. The first translation into English of the Greek meanings, not just the literal words, was actually not done until William Tyndale performed the feat in 1522 a few years after the Protestant Reformation began, and his translation read as this: “But ye frute of sprete is loue ioye peace longesufferinge getlenes goodnes faythfulnes meknes temperancye.” Quite a different list than the NSRV.

In some cases, words in the NSRV translation were not even in common use until the early 18th century. But this is the list that we have all grown up hearing, reading and reciting - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – and this is the list that will be used in this meditation of the “fruits of the spirit.”

Our first task in exploring this remarkable list is to deeply understand each one of these special qualities, characteristics which will make us better people to ourselves and one another, people more akin to the spark within each of us that reflects the all-loving nature of God the Creator. In order to understand these deceptively simple nouns, it is helpful to find archaic or obsolete definitions, as they may be closer to what the original Biblical editors had in mind for Paul’s list.

I have reflected on these multiple definitions and compiled brief characterizations that may more fully explain each of Paul's fruits.

But it is also helpful to think of these traits out of the arbitrary order in which they were written in his letter to the Galatian community, and perhaps derive yet more insight into Paul's meaning by corresponding each spiritual fruit to the traditional meanings of Biblical numbers as compiled by Dr. Willmington in his Book of Bible Lists (1987). We can also then relate each spiritual fruit to some edible fruits, and create a sort of compote so that we may take each component of Paul's list into our bodies as well as our hearts and minds.

The number **one** represents singleness, that something is whole and complete in and of itself. It needs nothing further to be added. It is the essence of itself. This numerical meaning relates very well to the quality of **faithfulness**. This quality is an enduring fidelity to ideals and promises despite peer pressure or the risk of repudiation. Faithfulness is not fleeting, and it can be an immovable object in the face of irresistible forces. It means keeping one's word to other humans, to oneself, and to God. But it also implies having abstract standards that can never be abrogated, abridged, or compromised. There are several edible fruits mentioned in the Bible, according to Willmington, eight to be exact. The fruit of the olive tree is mentioned in Deuteronomy 8:8 as part of an admonishment to remember God's promises, to never give up. Olives are not particularly sweet, so for the purposes of our recipe, we will replace them with **honey**, the fruit of hard labor of bees that may never live long enough to see a full comb. That's faithfulness if there ever was any!

The number **two** is the number of witness and support. Numbers 11:5 mentions the **melon** in a lesson about not letting good memories make you bitter about your present suffering. That seems like **patience** to me. Patience, like offering someone support, is a quality that is all about the present tense. You can show patience by allowing someone to be themselves, or to do something at their own pace, without complaining or losing your temper. Tyndale called it "long suffering." It's hard, that's true, but the rewards are infinite. And like the

melon, you can't handle people too roughly, or they crack unevenly and spill juices that are much better savored.

Number **three** represents unity, accomplishment, and the Universe – all that is. It is similar to one in that it represents completion, but whereas one already is complete, three has just arrived. It was something else, and now it is what it is. That, my friends, is **peace** in a nutshell, if you'll pardon the potable pun. Peace is not merely calm, however; it is a *natural state* of calmness. Science informs us that the entire Universe seeks entropy, the state where all atoms are evenly spread apart and nothing can go any further away from anything else and all is at absolute rest. Peace is the freedom from annoyance, distraction, anxiety, conflict and disorder. It is a natural state of serenity and silence. Peace is not noisy and disruptive. But it can not be imposed upon someone else. Peace, remember, is the *natural state* of ordered quiet and contentment. Peace happens either by a conscious decision within oneself, or by mutual consent. But it is never an accident. Peace is the way things are *supposed* to be. When he describes himself in the seventh chapter of his collected wisdom and experiences, the prophet Amos mentions that he tends sycamore trees. He is telling what he is with no self-judgment or expectation of judgment from those whom he addresses. This is an example of peace: "I am what I am." The Egyptian sycamore tree Amos tended has quite an interesting fruit. It is the chosen nest for a species of wasp, and must be cut open within a certain time after the female lays her eggs inside in order to be sweet. American varieties of the Sycamore tree also produce an edible fruit that is encased in a ball that hangs from a short stalk. It is difficult to find the fruits any time of year except in April, so for our recipe we will use another round tree fruit that hangs from a short stem, the **cherry**.

Four is the number of things of earth, of creation. The *joie de vivre*, the joy of life, permeates all of creation. There are two fruits, nuts actually, that are mentioned in the same passage in Genesis 43:11. The passage is a list of things God suggests carrying to strangers in another land. **Joy** is actually something that is supposed to be shared, or rather, spilled over onto others. Joy means

elation, profound happiness, and delight. When you are delighted, you delight others. You spread light. You share. And so I think for joy, we will add **almonds** to our compote, as mentioned in the list. They are solid fruit of the earth, and joy is meant to be a tangible gift as well.

The prophet Jeremiah, in chapter 24 of his exploits, tells the parable of the good figs and the bad figs. While treating certain people badly is *not* something to emulate, the part about treating the “good figs” as family is very much like **gentleness**. Often people think of being gentle as being tender, as if the object of the gentleness was fragile or delicate in some way. In fact, the reason we perceive such behavior as being “gentle” is because the word gentleness means deliberately treating someone or something as family, close kin, as if they are of noble birth just like yourself. When you demonstrate gentleness, you are polite, respectful, and chivalrous. The number **five** represents grace. Like the blood tie that binds families with no other reason, that bond which allows no insult from outsiders, that protects, defends and supports family members, grace, like gentleness, is unconditional. So **figs** go into the fruit bowl.

The number **six** corresponds to mankind, or humanity in general. Humans are inherently social creatures. We form close bonds and attachments. So it seems appropriate to mention Paul’s characteristic of **love**. When you love, you seek to be pleasing to another person or thing. You are not seeking to *be* pleased. Showing love means showing a deep and enduring affectionate concern for another’s well-being without any thought of compensation. Mankind is multi-faceted, and likewise, love is merely the collection of faithfulness, patience, peace, joy and gentleness into one expression. What is the fruit of love? Why the fruit that Eve used to please Adam, of course – the **pomegranate**. It is one of the fruits mentioned in the Bible, including in the book of Numbers.

Our seventh spiritual fruit is **self-control**. This word is an English word that has only been around for two or three hundred years. Simply put it means restraint, delayed gratification. Tyndale calls it temperance. That word can

mean abstaining from alcohol, or more generally, moderation. There is a wonderful lesson in Deuteronomy 23:24 which instructs a man to take whatever **grapes** from his neighbor's tree that he could eat, but not to put any in a container to take home. This is the essence of self-control: take what you need, but no more. And the number **seven** itself represents divine perfection. Isn't that expressed by creation? It has exactly what it needs, no more. Everything has a purpose, a place, and a time of its own. God didn't go crazy; He had self-control.

Kindness is another virtue that is often oversimplified, or in this case, overcomplicated. Nowadays kindness is almost a sort of charity, a gift, something to be repaid. But what it really means is to be intentionally friendly. That's all. Kindness is Cinderella thanking the wild animals and creepy crawly things for helping her clean the house, or make a dress, or whatever. Kindness is smiling at someone you disagree with because you understand that they are not an enemy and deserve your friendliness. Tyndale called this attribute "meekness." In defining that word, we find that it has the implication that one is being kind or humble despite provocation from others. I have made kindness number **eight** because according to Willmington, eight is the number of new beginnings. Don't all new beginnings start with simple kindnesses, small shows of friendliness? There is a touching anecdote about a Christmas Eve on the German Front in World War II. Realizing what day it was, the local troops called a truce and sang and shared cigarettes and played soccer together. Friendliness, kindness, just because they were human. The lesson in Matthew 23:23 mentions **mint**. It's not technically a fruit, I'll admit, but it will add a little zest to our recipe, just as consciously being friendly can add zest to a situation. The lesson in Matthew is about doing the right thing without being a hypocrite. Doing the right thing *because* it's the right thing to do. That's kindness.

And now we only have one left. If you've been keeping track, number **nine**, the number of blessings, is **generosity**. Generosity means being ready to give. It means not being petty-minded. The blessings are to be given, not received. (Getting blessings means someone *else* is being generous in their turn!) It can be giving money, sure, but your heart better be in the right place for

it to be *true* generosity! Generosity has the connotation of having an end in mind, not of what you'll get out of it, but of what shape your actions will take after you're done acting. For instance, that monetary donation – when you give, think about where the money will go, whom it will help, and what situation it will improve. Generosity means sharing of yourself – your attention, your time, and your goodwill – without the expectation of a reward for yourself. It can also be like patience; you allow others the space to be themselves. You're not giving permission; you are getting out of the way. By not being petty-minded, you are grand-minded, and give the best you have. That's why the passage from Genesis that we related to joyful giving also applies here, and provides us with the last ingredient in our fruit salad: **pistachio nuts**. The passage is about giving to others the best of what you have to give. Tyndale called this trait "goodness." Being generous is simply a good way to behave.

When taken as a whole, this list has a few repeated themes: don't count our differences with someone against them, intentionally act in certain ways that may not always be the easiest course of action, and allow others (and us) to be their natural self.

So, that's our recipe: olives or honey for faithfulness; melon for patience; sycamore fruit or cherries for peace; almonds for joy (I really didn't think of the candy bar until now, honest!); figs, "good figs", for gentleness; pomegranates for love; grapes for self-control; some mint leaves for kindness; and pistachio nuts for generosity. It sounds delicious, and it's a recipe we can all live with.