

Bearing the fruit of the Spirit has been our theme for the last couple of weeks. If you've given this any thought at all in your home, workplace, school, or anywhere else, you were interacting with another person, a fellow human being because that's where the fruit of the Spirit is born out. And if you're anything like me, you know that while you might be a virtual orange tree on Monday, by Wednesday you could be a thorn bush. That's how Paul talks about our struggle against the flesh, which we continue to live in until we take our last breath.

That what we're going to talk about this morning—what it means to bear fruit in our walk with God and with each other.

OPENING PRAYER

ROMANS 7:4-6

So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. ⁵For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

The reading this morning from Romans 7:4-6 is preceded by Paul's introduction, which goes like this: **"Do you not know,... that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives? ²For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him. ³So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man" (Romans 7:1-3).**

Paul was referring to women who weren't divorced, whose husbands hadn't abandoned them. He was saying that if a woman is married and if she has sex

with a man who is not her husband, she's an adulteress. Then he used this logic to help us understand our relationship with the Lord.

As I've pointed out before, Paul was NOT teaching unbelievers. Rather, he was addressing men and women who were born again, children of God, heirs of God's heavenly kingdom, people who had been baptized in the name of the Triune God who had received the same promises you and I have also been blessed with, promises like **"in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ"** (Galatians 3:26-27).

Clothed with Christ, when the Lord looks down upon us, he sees his Son, and we have the power to be like him. Thus the orange tree-thorn bush conundrum: Saints who have a hard time not being sinners.

Paul wrote that the law has no authority over us for as long as we are alive in Christ. We have received grace, and we are forgiven, and so long as we resist the temptation to resurrect the Old Adam, the old fleshly desires, we'll be able to serve the Lord.

God's grace is free—that's why it's called, "grace"—but the Lord gave us something else that's free: our will, that part of our conscience which so easily succumbs to temptation.

Temptation is not one thing, is it? Usually we can categorize our temptations under one of the BIG SEVEN, as in anger, envy, greed, gluttony, pride, lust, or slothfulness—those roll off the tongue a little too easily. But temptation is much more than those seven words, isn't it, because it's personal. My temptations are designed just for my very own weaknesses. Maybe there's one thing that triggers you. And when that trigger's pulled, watch out, because here I come, and there I go!

My grandfather loved to tease me saying that he thought hell sounded like a lot more fun than heaven, you know, that's where the pretty girls are. He imagined it was just one giant blowout party. But in our hearts we know that hell is not a good place to play. Indeed, we get a foretaste of it when we fall into the trap of

our temptations. Our sin steals away our joy; they are a distraction from the work God has called us to do; our hearts suffer and nothing we do feels quite right.

Another one of Paul's Baptism promises are these words: **"all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death....⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:3-4).**

In Baptism, we died, but thanks be to God the Lord didn't leave us dead. But he resurrected us with a new heart. Just like a woman whose husband has died, with our Baptism you and I are free to remarry, to be the Bride of Christ, bound only to be free, free to love and freed to be loved by the Living God.

Remember Job? He lost everything, and his body was covered with leprosy as a bonus. The only thing he had left was his wife who encouraged him with the words, **"Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9)** She was a sweet old thing.

In the midst of his sorrow, Job prayed for death. He said, **"[In death,] slaves enjoy their ease; they no longer hear the slave driver's shout.¹⁹ The small and the great are there, and the slaves are freed from their masters" (Job 3:18-19).**

Paul wrote that since we **"died to the law,"** we should **"bear fruit for God" (v.4).**

When we lived under God's law, we were under constant duress; we lived in fear; we knew that one day we would answer for every single rebellious act we ever committed against the Lord—every slip of the tongue, wagging of the finger, every misdirected glance.

But Jesus made us dead in Baptism, and we were resurrected in his Spirit, and now that we are alive, we can serve God.

This is the key: No one can serve God unless he dies first. For sin gets in the way of our relationships with each other. That's where the fruit is born, right? But when we are alive in the Spirit, we bear fruit wherever we go. Paul was talking about fruit in our relationships one with another. For example, one fruit of the Spirit is love, which is the natural centerpiece of relationships. Another fruit is joy,

which is certainly our experience in the midst of sharing the best things of our life with another person.

Peace is another fruit; when we have peace, when we have shalom in our relationships, God is present. Patience, kindness, and goodness are also fruit in healthy, Christ-centered relationships. Faithfulness is essential. Gentleness is no less important. And self-control is manifest in relationships we keep and grow in. **“Fruit for God”** is the flourishing of whole, regenerative relationships in the Christian community.

Luther said that this fruit of God comes only from a loving heart, and that a loving heart is fearless and it is free from childish desires. But because temptation is always present, and because we’re always locked and loaded and trigger happy, Paul warned us that **“when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death” (v.5).**

He reminded about how horribly wicked we once were and how horribly wicked we can become at the drop of a hat so that we will put that gun down. But sometimes this isn’t enough to keep us from pulling the trigger.

Luther said the answer is in prayer. He said, “Pray for love!” Someone here, I’m sure, is thinking, that’s like praying for patience, as in don’t do it unless you want God to make your life miserable as he teaches you how to be patient. But that’s not how we should understand a prayer for love.

God is not some Sherlock, looking to beat you into submission, to demand a pound of flesh before he blesses you! To pray for love is to pray that God’s love would well up in our hearts that we would love other people like we love ourselves. That’s what praying for love does.

When you feel temptation coming on, remember that sin never feeds love, and start looking for the exit ramp.

And remember you’re dead. Pray, “Lord Jesus, you drowned my Old Adam in the waters of Baptism, now keep that old man dead, and help me to resist sin!”

And give thanks for your new life. You were born again with a new heart and a new spirit, and you **“serve in the new way of the Spirit” (v.6)**, a way that leads to your love for other people, a love which is **“fruit for God.”**

This week, brothers and sisters in Christ, let us remember we are dead to the law which filled our hearts with fear and drove us away from God.

This week let us pray for love, asking the Lord to help us love other people just like we love ourselves, plus a little bit more.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.