

Alcoholics Anonymous groups call it “stinkin’ thinkin.” They’re talking about people who approach life with a negative attitude. Do you know anyone like that? Whether or not it’s justified, New York cabdrivers are notorious for having a bad attitude. A man approached one such driver in New York. “Take me to London,” the potential fare said. The cab driver told him that was not possible. He couldn’t drive across the Atlantic. The customer insisted it was possible. “You’ll drive me down to the pier; we’ll put the taxi on a freighter to Liverpool; when we get there, you’ll drive me to London, where I’ll pay you whatever is on the meter.”

That sounded pretty good to the driver. He agreed to make this absurd journey. When they arrived in London, the passenger paid the total on the meter, plus a thousand dollar tip. Even a New York cab driver couldn’t complain about that, but what was he to do now? How would he get back home? He roamed aimlessly around London for a while not knowing quite what to do. Then an Englishman hailed him and said, “I want you to drive me to New York.” The cab driver couldn’t believe his good luck. How often do you pick up a guy in London who wants to go by cab to New York? When the passenger began to say, “First, we take a boat . . .” the driver cut him off.

“That I know,” the driver interjected. “But where to in New York?” he asked.

The passenger said, “Riverside Drive and 104th Street.”

The driver thought for a moment and then responded drily, “Sorry, I don’t go to the west side.” He was willing to go across the Atlantic, just not across the city.

Some people are like that. They want to do things their way or not at all. If things do not go their way, they voice their unhappiness loud enough for everyone to hear.

Are there any children in our congregation who watch *Sesame Street*? If so, then you know about Oscar the Grouch. Oscar is probably the world’s most famous grouch. He manages to insult everyone he meets. Of course, if we lived in a trash can, we might not have the world’s best attitude either.

It’s interesting how Oscar the Grouch got his name. In the early days

of *Sesame Street*, Jim Henson and Jon Stone, *Sesame Street's* director would meet to work on the upcoming show at a Manhattan restaurant. The name of the restaurant was Oscar's Cavern. Each time they ate there they were waited on by a man who was consistently rude and grouchy. He was so over the top with his grouchiness that they actually went to the restaurant looking forward to what he might do or say next. Call it an exercise in masochism, I guess. The result was that the waiter's attitude was forever immortalized on *Sesame Street* in the character of Oscar the Grouch.

I thought of Oscar the Grouch when I read St. Paul's words to us in verses 22 and 23 in our lesson for today from Galatians 5: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Wow! No grouchiness there.

**These are the characteristics of a follower of Jesus Christ.** Let me read them again: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Do you know anyone like that? Unfortunately, it's probably easier for most of us to think of someone with a contrasting disposition.

If I were looking for a mate, these are also the exact characteristics I would hope to find in a person I would want to spend the rest of my life with. I am fortunate in that I *have* a mate—and that my mate of 38 years *has* all of those qualities. What more could you hope for? Some people seem to be born with a sunny, wholesome disposition. For the rest of us, the kind of attitude we have is ultimately a matter of choice.

Here is something we need to understand: **None of these characteristics that Paul lists as fruit of the Spirit depends on external circumstance.** No matter what happens to you from the outside, you can *still* possess love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The Irish tenor, Ronan Tynan, had both legs amputated below the knee after a motor bike accident many years ago. How would you react to such misfortune? I'll tell you how Tynan responded. He went on to become a medical doctor, a well-known Irish tenor, and an excellent athlete. In the 1984 and 1988 Paralympics, he won four Gold Medals in the discus, shot-put and the long jump. He even rode show horses. A tall man, he had a special set of artificial legs made for riding. He became an equestrian

master.

A reporter once asked Tynan, "How tall are you, really?"

Tynan replied, "I'm adjustable."

I love it! What a great attitude. Some of us think that if we lost our legs, the world would come to an absolute end. It doesn't have to. We, too, can be "adjustable."

People who confront difficulties and overcome them are an inspiration to all of us. They are a living testimony to the truth that what happens on the outside of us is not nearly as important as what we have on the inside. And what is the key to having the right stuff within? **The positive characteristics that Paul lists do not simply come from an optimistic attitude, as precious as that is. They are the fruit of having the spirit of God within our hearts.**

That is obvious from our text. Paul writes, "But the **fruit of the spirit** is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." In other words, if we want to bear such fruit, we must first have the Spirit of God living within us.

Somehow people even within the church family miss this message. They grow up in the faith, they may even come to church regularly, but they're still seeking for the key to happiness. They're still walking around with a God-shaped void in their life. Listen, here is the key to life. Pray right now, "Lord Jesus, let your Spirit rule my heart." That's it. That's the key. It may not happen at once, but it will happen. Pray for Christ's Spirit to take charge of your heart. You will have not only the form of godliness, but also the Spirit of godliness as well.

Evangelist Alan Walker once told about a girl who had a rich and lovely voice. She was singing in the choir of a church in East London. She had this wonderful voice, but she had also been well-trained in vocal technique. Her fame as a soloist spread until one Christmas she was invited to sing one of the lead parts in "Messiah" at the Queen's Hall.

One of her closest friends went to her teacher, asking whether he thought she was equal to it. His response was this: "If she focuses on what I have tried to teach her and merely follows the rules of correct breathing and voice production, she will break down. But if she can forget everything and think only of the wonder of the message she is singing, she will be all right."

The night came. This lovely young woman stepped forward and began singing, "I know that my Redeemer liveth." The music flowed in great beauty from her lips. And the best hopes of her teacher were fulfilled. She forgot the audience and the occasion, and sang as one who knew the meaning of it all. She sang in the strength of the living Christ whom she knew intimately and who was in power within her own life. As she sang, the audience was strangely moved. That night was one to be remembered. Why? Because she was not trying merely to follow directions or obey a set of external rules; she had found a Spirit of power, within.

Do you understand the difference? Many people are religious. They keep the *rules* and the *traditions* of our faith, but they have no *music* within. They have never invited the Spirit of God to take up residence within their lives. This is how some people are able to deal with tragedies that would undo most of us.

Someone has said that *what spills out when you hit a bump in the road is what you are full of*. That's somewhat crude, but it is still true. If you are filled with the Spirit of God, *that* is what comes out when you come to a difficult time in your life. If you are full of something else, *that* is what spills out, as well. That is important.

I've started an exercise for myself recently that I want to share with you and invite you to try it too. In the moment, I ask myself, are the words I say, the decisions I make, the actions I take, the thoughts I think, the emotions I feel, what's in charge of all this? What's driving me, my ego or my spirit? It can only be one or the other. When I curse at slow drivers and red lights, when the Rockies blow a lead, or when some words pop out of my mouth to another person that I'd like to have back, I *know* what's in charge. We have these internal wars going on. St. Paul wrote about his own internal struggle with the ego and the spirit. "What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (Romans 7:15). Internal wars lead to hostility, blame and external wars. I don't remember such hostility and blame as is going on now in the world. There's always been hostility and blame, but there's a spirit all over the world that seems to me more powerful than before, that wants to take charge inside us, that wants to divide people from each other, to get them to take sides and say "*You're not like us. You're evil.*" The media reports it, you may receive it and pass it along in emails, or not, and you may hear it from some of your friends and

share it with some of your friends, or not. The first order of business according to this spirit is pointing fingers and placing blame. I'll tell you what's evil: *that's* evil. The hostility and taking sides we see in the world and feel ourselves—is it from the ego or the spirit? I think you know. Now please listen carefully to what I'm about to say. **Thoughts and feelings are either love based or fear based.** (Repeat.) *Fear based thoughts and feelings are from the ego. Love based thoughts and feelings are from the Spirit.* We are not victims. We have choices, and these choices are ours to make.

Now I want to be clear. I don't want you think I'm saying you should forget your passions or your views or your biases, or that they are not important or that there is something wrong with them. I'm surely not going to forget mine. What I *am* saying is that if you look through the lens of the Spirit instead of the lens of the ego (that's the *unholy* Trinity, me, myself and I), your passions and views and biases will be shaped into a holy perspective instead of a self-centered one.

I invite you to do these two things with me: *Pray for his Spirit to take charge of your heart, and focus on giving up your fear based thoughts and feelings to be replaced by love based thoughts and feelings.* Then you will experience the *fruit* of the Spirit--love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. As you invite the Spirit to take charge of your heart, and offer up your fear based thoughts and feelings to be replaced by your love based thoughts and feelings, you will find your life transformed. You will find the joy that you seek.