

# The Fruit of God's Spirit

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal 5:22–23)*

We all know this. We've all read this. We've all heard this from the pulpit, in small groups, and in Sunday School classes most of our Christian lives. Now...what does it mean? Called to be filled with God's Spirit (Eph 5:18), every believer is given a list of qualities or distinctive characteristics that indicate what this filling looks like. Compiled from previous posts that I've written and combined into one post here, I offer the following thoughts.

## By Way of Introduction

This is not a technical nor exhaustive study of each item listed in Galatians 5. Instead, I share my brief reflections in simple format. After an attempt at definition (which is by no means definitive), I offer highlights on each manifestation from God's Spirit with occasional practical musings. But first a few observations are in order to set the framework and tone from which to approach this content.

- Perhaps the most important observation about the Spirit's fruit is that, well, **it is the Spirit's fruit, not ours**. Galatians 5:22-23 lists evidences of God's Spirit in us, not the result of natural human effort. Sure we are involved — how could we not be with 'self-control' making the list? — but these qualities come from God and are expressed in and through us. As such, Spirit-ed fruit is not synthetically fabricated but organically grown as a result of our yielding to God's movement within us.
- Second, we are not called to show more love, kindness, or forbearance, but must be loving, kind, forbearing, et al. This is a call to being; not merely a call to doing. **Only through our intentional and habitual discerning of and yielding to the promptings of God's Spirit in us do these qualities become a part of our being and issue forth from our lives**. Of course this requires that we silence our own voice or the voice of our cultural influences (family, co-workers, friends, neighbors, etc.) long enough to hear the voice of God's Spirit. A key to this is a life that is informed by God's Word. After all, God's Spirit and God's Word speak with one voice; they are always in sync. This is not to say that being informed by God's Word is a replacement for being transformed by it. Only that the Spirit's work in us is always in accordance with the Spirit's Word to us.
- Third, **it is the "fruit" of the Spirit not "fruits" of the Spirit**. While there may be no grammatical reason to think Paul intended anything significant by using the singular, I would offer there is kind of seamless continuity between the virtues, since they are from a singular Source. One can hardly be loving and not patient, kind but not gentle, etc. The virtues of God work together in one harmonious and united fashion to display the divine persona of God in our being. As we increasingly "walk by the Spirit" (Gal 5:25), or progressively and actively move in the direction God intends, our lives look less like us and more like Jesus (2 Cor 3:17-18).
- Finally, in a seemingly ironic twist of the biblical storyline, **it was the abuse of fruit that set us on our way toward ruin (Gen. 3) and it is the fruit of God's Spirit that will guide us out of the maze of destruction and restore our fallen human condition (Gal 5:19-21)**. The gradual and steady expression of God's Spirit-ed fruit actually begins to reverse the effects of the Fall and moves us onward toward that glorious optimal human existence as originally created by God!

And so....

## "The fruit of the Spirit is love."

The Spirit's love actively places supreme value on the loved.

1. **The Spirit's love is sacrificial**. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25) "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

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And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters” (1 Jn 3:16; John 3:16). As the primary virtue that kicks off this list, the Spirit's love is the foundational agent that bonds together all other virtues, disabling factions and dismantling the friction that splits apart the community of God (see esp. Col. 3:14). If indeed God is love (1 Jn 4:8) and the fruit of God's Spirit is love, then this attribute ought to be the most prominent feature of those born of God.

2. **The Spirit's love is practical.** “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth” (1 Jn 3:17-18).
3. **The Spirit's love relentlessly pursues us and radically demonstrates his commitment to us, despite our unloveliness.** “The Lord said to me, “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another. The oft noted biblical word for love (agape) does not always translate to something like “selfless, sacrificial, unconditional love.” It can refer to Amnon's incestuous rape of his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam 13:15, LXX) or Paul's lament that Demas “loved this present, evil world” and forsook him and the ministry (2 Tim 4:10). A blanket definition for everywhere agape occurs simply will not do. It's erroneous to assume that agape always means a special kind of divine love (see D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, p. 30ff). As always, context is king. man and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods.” (Hosea 3:1) “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (also Rom. 5:8; Dt 7:7-8).
4. **The Spirit's love takes the first step; it always makes the first move.** “In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will” (Eph 1:4-5) “We love because he first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19).
5. **The Spirit's love is extended to everyone without distinction.** “But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back” (Lk 6:35).
6. **Similarly, the Spirit's love is extended to all believers without distinction and is the identifying mark of our discipleship.** “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:34-35).
7. **The Spirit's love is more than a feeling in us; it is an objective expression of our allegiance to Christ.** “If you love me, keep my commands...Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me...Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching” (Jn 14:15, 21, 23).

## “The fruit of the Spirit is joy.”

The Spirit's joy not only results from our circumstances turning favorably, but is an attitude going into them. Joy is often a quiet, inner confidence in God's sovereign control over our circumstances no matter what. The Spirit's joy is both given by God and expressed from God.

1. **The Spirit's joy provides vision; it is forward-focused.** “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). Our future hope necessarily impacts our ability to withstand suffering in the present.
2. **The Spirit's joy bestows perseverance for trials.** “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (Jm 1:2-4; also 1 Thess 1:6; Col 1:24).
3. **The Spirit's joy supplies enduring peace.** It is a settled conviction that God is in control of all circumstances; it is an inner strength that only God gives. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philip 4:4-7; also Jn 16:22).
4. **The Spirit's joy inspires hope.** “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Pt. 1:8); “May the

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God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13).

5. **The Spirit's joy restores our body and our soul bringing healing and renewal.** “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice” (Ps 51:8); “Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me” (Ps 51:12; also Ps 94:19).
6. **The Spirit's joy invigorates for evangelism.** “So they shook the dust off their feet as a warning to [those in Pisidion Antioch] and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 13:51-52). Despite the persecutors, Paul and Barnabas were not discouraged and moved on to Iconium to spread the Gospel message.
7. **The Spirit's joy is not only given by God but expressed from God toward us.** “The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing... The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” (Zech 3:14, 17). Eight words for joy or joyful expression are used in these 2 verses (“Joy.” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*).

## “The fruit of the Spirit is peace.”

The Spirit's peace is not only the absence of conflict and hostility, but the presence of harmonious rest and well-being in relationship with God, self, and others.

1. **First and foremost, the Spirit's peace is a product of a faith that justifies.** Dr. E.V. Hill once said, “We cannot have the peace of God until we have peace with God.” God's peace is only realized in and from a right relationship with him. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1). More than anything else, peace with God means we are no longer in opposition to God (Rom 5:10; cf. Eph 6:15). When the relationship with our Creator is set right, then peace with self, others, and the world around us becomes not only possible but actual.
2. **The Spirit's peace is that state of rest achieved by those who prayerfully trust God's meticulous sovereignty.** “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philip 4:4-7). Our natural reaction to stressful circumstances is to complain and/or try and fix them. Instead, we should rejoice and be thankful, which is only possible if we believe “the Lord is near.” When we fail to be joyful and thankful, peace is displaced by anxiety. When we respond with joy and thanksgiving, then God's peace reigns in our hearts because “the Lord is near” lovingly and skillfully crafting our circumstances for our good and his glory (see Rom. 8:28).
3. **The Spirit's peace yields hope as we trust in God.** “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:33).
4. **The Spirit's peace uniquely belongs to Christ, comes from Christ, and is unlike any other kind of peace.** “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27). As the “Prince of Peace” and mediator of peace (Isaiah 9:6, 7), Messiah Jesus alone offers peace to his people. Rather than worldly peace that is obtained through military might or political posturing, Christ's peace is secured by the voluntary sacrifice of his own life in our stead. It is a peace that drives out all fear and exceeds all other peace both in quantity and in quality. Christ's peace is uniquely his and uniquely ours.
5. **The Spirit's peace is a trademark of God's people and must be our pursuit.** “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9). “Make every effort to live in peace with

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everyone” (Heb 12:14); “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom 12:18); “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace” (Col 3:15). Christians must be known as peacemakers, not just peacekeepers.

6. **The Spirit's peace unites all believers into “one new humanity.”** Christ himself is “our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Eph 2:14-18). All social barriers, ethnic hostilities, and gender wars are dismantled by the cross of Christ as all members of Christ's body are reconciled to one another in peace (see esp. Gal 3:28; Mk 10:42-43).

## “The fruit of the Spirit is forbearance.”

The Spirit's fruit of forbearance or patience given to believers is a “state of emotional calm in the face of provocation or misfortune and without complaint or irritation” Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*

1. **The Spirit's forbearance enables us to wait patiently for promises fulfilled.** We are called to “imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised” just as “God made his promise to Abraham” who “after waiting patiently...received what was promised” (Heb 6:12-15). Being content with God's timing is mark of a mature faith (see also Rom. 4:20; 2 Cor. 1:6).
2. **The Spirit's patience is to be evident of believers toward everyone.** “Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with...patience” (Col 3:12). Just as our clothing is a predominant feature of our physical presence, so too must patience be evident of our spiritual presence (cf., Eph. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:14).
3. **The Spirit's patience endures difficulty over time, but is not eternally tolerant.** While “love is patient” (1 Cor 13:4) and God patiently waits for the salvation of unbelievers, his patience (and ours) must not be confused with unending tolerance. In fact, if God were eternally tolerant, then the flood of Gen. 6-9 makes little sense, evil would be tolerated, and Hell would be empty. All judgments, including those rendered positively would be vacuous. It is true “the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Yet it is equally true that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare” (2 Pet 3:9-10; see also Rom. 2:4-6; 9:22-23; 2 Pet. 3:15).
4. **The Spirit's forbearance respects the limitations God sets over our circumstances.** Just as a farmer recognizes he has no control over the growth of his crop, so we must patiently persevere waiting for God to bring blessing in his time. Too often we seek change in our circumstances instead of patiently enduring them. Consequently, by moving ahead of God we forfeit the blessing of growth in patience that God seeks to bring about in our lives. Believers endowed with God's Spirit can have the “patience of Job” (James 5:7-11)! Where we have no control over our negative circumstances (and often we do not), the only biblical response is forbearance, perseverance, and patience (see also Rom 12:12).

## “The fruit of the Spirit is kindness.”

Kindness manifests in acts of benevolence toward others. Kind behavior wrought by the Spirit tangibly and noticeably extends favor to those in need with a glad heart. Simply put, kindness is taking delight in being helpful. It is the antithesis of selfishness and is always behavior that is others-focused.

1. **The Spirit's kindness is characteristic of divine love and cannot be humanly manufactured.** “Love is kind” (1 Cor. 13:4). When someone says “that was kind” they are witnessing not merely a human act,

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but a human act inspired by love. To be kind by helping others is to be loving toward them and vice versa.

2. **Though a product of God's Spirit, all believers must intentionally pursue kindness. It must be a distinguishing mark of God's people.** "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with...kindness" (Col 3:12). As previously mentioned, the metaphor of "clothing ourselves" is not random. Just as clothing distinguishes our physical appearance in the presence of others, so must kindness highlight our moral presence to them. Each act of intentional benevolence moves us one step closer to developing a character of kindness. And, the converse is equally true.
3. **The Spirit's kindness goes hand-in-hand with forgiveness.** "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph 4:32). It is impossible to forgive anyone and not extend kindness to them. Forgiveness entails being kind toward those who offend (pending their repentance; see Luke 17:3).
4. **The Spirit's kindness includes our speech.** "When we are slandered, we answer kindly" (1 Cor 4:13). It is natural to lash out at those who speak ill of us. It is supernatural to respond kindly, and do so gladly.
5. **The Spirit's kindness is not partial but extends to all people, just as God is kind to all.** "But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked" (Lk 6:35). "Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy" (Acts 14:17; see also Rom 2:4).
6. **The Spirit's kindness is expressed regardless of any chance for reciprocation.** "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:4-5). Just as God unconditionally extends kindness to us in salvation, despite the fact that we deserve only judgment and no favor whatsoever, we must show the same to others.

## "The fruit of the Spirit is goodness."

A deliberate and persistent preference for right over wrong, moral beauty over indecency, generosity over greed, the Spirit's goodness is the unique evidence of the new birth in Christ. In a world punctuated with antithetical qualities, the Spirit's goodness truly "stands out in a crowd" as Leon Morris notes "there appear to be no examples of the use of the term [goodness, ἀγαθωσύνη] in classical writers" (Galatians, p. 174).

1. **The Spirit's goodness is reflected by virtue of being a child of light.** "For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness)" (Eph 5:8-9). As God is good to Israel by giving her abundant provision in the promised land (Neh. 9:24-25), so do God's children reflect generosity toward others showing themselves to be children of light.
2. **The Spirit's goodness is so plainly evident in all believers that it is overwhelmingly obvious.** "I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness" (Rom 15:14). This is no up-talk or positive speak trying to lift the psychological spirits of his readers. Paul is "convinced" God had done his work in the Roman believers. So too for every believer. The Spirit's "persistent preference for right over wrong, moral beauty over indecency, generosity over greed" is clear.
3. **Goodness of the Spirit is not deposited in one lump sum, but must be something that is pursued more and more.** "With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness" (2 Thess. 1:11). Believers not only have the Spirit's goodness, but desire more and more of it.

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## **“The fruit of the Spirit is faithfulness.”**

Resolute commitment, complete confidence, firm allegiance all sum up the notion of faithfulness. One who is faithful is one who is dependable and trustworthy. Those in whom God's Spirit-ed faithfulness lives are those who are loyal and can be counted on. Both the gift (Rom. 12:3; 1 Cor. 12:9) and fruit of God's Spirit, faith/faithfulness is a firm conviction in the truth and the persistent pursuit of its practical ends.

1. **Faithful people have a sense of duty to others so a bright light shines on the Good News of God our Savior.** “Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted [shown to be faithful], so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (Tit 2:9–10).
2. **God's leaders care that their public lives are trustworthy.** “Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith[fulness]” (1 Tim 4:12; also 6:11).
3. **Faithful people are entrusted with greater responsibilities, become guardians of truth, and worthy examples to follow.** “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable [faithful] people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Tim 2:2). “You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith[fulness]” (2 Tim 3:10).
4. **Faithfulness must be taught in the church and is for every believer.** “Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith[fulness], in love and in endurance” (Tit 2:2; also Lk 12:42; 16:10; Rev 13:10).

## **“The fruit of the Spirit is gentleness.”**

So often I encounter people who are not merely assertive but aggressive, predominantly coarse rather than careful; people who are eager to expound their opinions and knowledge rather than reserved and reflective, thoughtful and socratic in dialog. Consequently, they often lack an understanding about what others are saying because they don't listen well. Should they happen to hear what I'm saying, they might acknowledge it only to treat it as fodder for a polemical reaction. In fact, the things I just described are true of me most every day. The grimaces on the faces I encounter regularly remind me of this!

Gentleness can be likened to being mild mannered, having a calmness of spirit, softness in speech, or meekness of heart. It is the absence of harshness or cruelty or behavior that frightens or alarms the senses.

1. **Gentleness is the very quality of Christ in which every believer is invited to share.** “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle.” (Mt 11:29; also 2 Cor 10:1).
2. **Gentleness of God's Spirit is the tone from which erring believers are to be restored to fellowship with God.** “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently” (Gal 6:1; see also 2 Cor. 10:1).
3. **The Spirit's gentleness is not reserved for mature believers only, but must be evident in all believers, however small or great.** “Be completely humble and gentle” (Eph 4:2). “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.” (NIV 2011, Tit 3:1–2).
4. **Gentleness is the manner in which arguments are confronted.** “And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 2:24–25; see also Prov 15:1).

In a culture where disagreement runs deep, Christ's gentleness truly stands out. It is the means by which controversy is destabilized and arguments are disabled. A gentle demeanor is neither manufactured nor artificial, and it cannot be feigned. Like all the qualities of God's Spiritual fruit, its source is in God alone and, for that reason, is unique and unmistakable. When the gentleness of Christ is “evident to all” (Philippians 4:5),

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conflict is disarmed, ears are opened, and hearts are softened to catch a glimpse of God's love and the peace that he brings. Gentleness may not be the primary posture I have during a heated discussion, but if it were, I suspect my relationship with those who are disagreeable would be significantly improved.

## **“The fruit of the Spirit is self-control.”**

The Spirit's presence in us has a tethering effect upon us and a focused influence over us such that what is within our vision can become our victory in God as we live within limits.

1. Contrary to Greek philosophy (and much of today's), which prized **the ability to control one's life entirely through sheer self-determination, the strength to live a consistently balanced life comes from God and is not within one's innate capabilities.** Knowing this is the beginning of Spirit-inspired self-control.
2. It seems natural for humans to indulge. Though some are not as flippant as others in life, everyone lacks restraint with some things at some point. Knowing this, **God imparts his divine nature to us (2 Pet 1:3), which includes a supernatural ability to live within limits (2 Pet 1:6).** Though all believers are called to increase in this virtue, every believer has at their disposal the ability to live a disciplined life.
3. Rather than falling prey to temptations, believers can “Just say no” to those alluring vices that tug at us. Notwithstanding biological / physiological concerns and all things being equal, **no believer is a slave to their nerve endings or psyche, held hostage to lusts, or made a victim of desire (2 Cor 10:13)!** Through the restraining influence of God's Spirit, victory over vice and happiness over despair can be ours in increasing measure as we avail ourselves to the power of God living within us.
4. For any person who enters a competition expecting to win a prize, self-control is required (1 Cor 9:25). Likewise, **if we hope to achieve anything in this life, we must exercise the relevant restraints in an effort to reach a goal.** There simply is no other means whereby success is realized.
5. **Good leadership** is identified, in part, by one who **consistently lives under restraint (Tit 1:8).** Moreover, no one values a leader who is out of control. Why? Because the habit of reacting with little or no thought for consequences or the frequent indulging of destructive behaviors suggest weakness in character and a lack of moral strength. The net result of a leader who lacks self-control is a capricious, unreliable set of results!

## **Summing Up**

Since no law (whether divinely given or humanly written) produces these virtues in us nor can any law find fault whenever they are expressed, then no one can be expected to perform them on their own. Ironically, when God's Spirited fruit is expressed, no one is ever condemned because of them (Gal 5:23)! Belonging to Christ Jesus means possessing God's Spirit (Rom 8:9-14) and being free from the reign and domineering power of the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal 5:1; 24), which are displaced with the fruit of God's Spirit.