

## September 21<sup>st</sup>, 2025 Sermon

### Scripture Intro:

What do you love? Really?

We all likely have two sets of answers, the things that we know *should* be the answer, and then the honest ones.

When I broke my wrist they put me on some very heavy medication, and I was speaking and saying things that I didn't remember, and I remember being honestly worried. What if some of my nastier thoughts came out? What if I said the things that pop into my mind but that I push away?

We like to control what people see; to curate a version of ourselves so that others think we're tough, or kind, or smart, or funny, or thoughtful. But you can only fake it so long. Your family likely knows the real you. Or the people you work with who see you stressed. Or the fast-food server who gets your order wrong.

The real us is in there, and it's likely more obvious than we think. But sometimes we struggle to see it ourselves. It can take an accident or major life change to wake us up, but why wait to find out? There's a quicker way.

If you take a look at how you spend your time, what does it say? What about how you treat the people around you? And here's a tough one: what about the thoughts that fill your mind?

Whatever the answer, there is hope.

As Paul reminded us last week in 2 Corinthians, our confidence in what Jesus has done frees us to live out our identity as new creations. Jesus has saved us, and that work was finished on the cross. We don't earn our way into God's kingdom; because it was already bought for a price.

But what now? If we have freedom to sin and just keep being forgiven, then why not?

Is there a better way to live than seeing what we can get away with? A more fruitful and fulfilling way to live? God says there is. Let's read what Paul has to say:

### Scripture: Galatians 5:13-26

<sup>13</sup> For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. <sup>14</sup> For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** <sup>15</sup> But if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another.

<sup>16</sup> I say, then, walk by the Spirit and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. <sup>17</sup> For the flesh desires what is against the Spirit, and the Spirit desires what is against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you don't do what you want. <sup>18</sup> But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

<sup>19</sup> Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, <sup>20</sup> idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, <sup>21</sup> envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things. <sup>24</sup> Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

### **Sermon:**

If you know me, you'll learn that I love to evaluate and understand things. While sane people are just enjoying something, I'm running through a dozen ways in my head that it could be better, and trying to figure out exactly how it works.

So, when I go for a walk in the woods, I don't just want to see a tree, I need to know what *kind* of tree it is. For example, surrounding the church in Belfast, there are a number of gorgeous red oaks, likely about as old as the church itself. You can tell they're deciduous and not evergreen because they lose their leaves each year, and have leaves and not needles. The leaves have equal swoops and points in a shape that's different from a maple or poplar or birch tree. There are also the acorns, the bark, and all kinds of other traits that prove it, because sometimes the leaves are gone, or look a bit different. Once you know what to look for, it becomes easy to tell.

Our own lives are like this. If you look deeply, not just at one particular action or word, but at the whole, you can begin to get a pretty good idea of what drives a person. In biblical language, if you look at the fruit of someone's life, you can see what lies beneath the surface, just like you know what type of tree it is by the fruit it produces. If you see a tree full of apples, you don't need to wonder if it's a magnolia tree.

Paul challenges us to take an honest look at ourselves and ask: what kind of fruit is it producing in my life? If the thing growing most in our lives is lust, anger, envy, and giving into damaging substances and habits, then we're still relying on ourselves. We're looking to the world as it is to satisfy us. But if love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self control are growing, we can see tangibly how God's Spirit is at work within us.

There are two mistakes that we make when we hear this: the first is to despair and say, "I'll never measure up, I keep trying and no matter how I try I can't change." The second is to say, "I need to buckle down and stop doing the bad stuff, and make myself better."

If I get a headache that makes me irritable and unfocussed, I naturally reach for a painkiller that will make it go away for a few hours, and that might work. But if it keeps coming back, and persists, I need to look deeper. Have I had enough water? Did I get enough rest? Because if the answer is no, I can keep trying to solve the problem with surface solutions, but it won't last, it'll only get worse. If my headache is the fruit of dehydration, a painkiller stops me from feeling the effect, but it doesn't solve the deeper problem. I need to address the root issue.

Paul's solution is not simply "try harder", but "look deeper". If you keep falling into cycles of selfishness and anger the problem might not be that everyone around you is terrible. And if you're falling into unhealthy sexual habits, the problem isn't that someone was wearing tight-fitting clothing. If you're in a cycle of addiction, the problem isn't just that life is too hard.

Those may be triggers for our behaviour, but they aren't the real problem. The real problem is that we're relying on ourselves instead of the Holy Spirit, because we trust our vices more than God's voice.

This is why Jesus, and John, and Paul, and Peter, and Ezekiel, and Hosea, and so many others call for repentance. It's a word that has got a bad rap, but it's actually good news, because it is a word of hope.

Repentance is a word of change: changing how we think about things, and the fruit of that is changing how we do things as well. But so often we just try to stop doing things, or start doing things, and we miss the most important step. Fear or reward can make us do things for a while, but change only sticks when we truly believe something.

If I don't sleep around because I think I'll be punished, or because someone says I shouldn't, temptation is always there. Because I still *want* to do it, and I like the idea of it, I just don't like the consequences. But if I believe God's promise that faithfulness allows a deeper level of love and trust, and that it's for my good, and the good of my family and community, that changes things. I'm not fighting against something; I'm fighting *for* something. And that makes all the difference.

No one ever chooses something that they truly believe is for the worst. We might know it's wrong, but we believe the cost is worth it. We decide the release of getting angry is worth the hurt we'll cause. We feel the escape of a drink or another hit is worth the setbacks and damage it will cause. We justify our jealousy and self-promotion by saying it's just a healthy desire. We go our own way because we decide our right to be right is more valuable than the unity of God's body.

Everyone does what they feel is best in that moment. Which is why we need to be so careful of what we value; what we root our love in determines what fruit we produce. Because we can be convinced that evil things are actually good. We can justify our lust and crude comments and actions by saying it's just natural. That it's healthy to do whatever we want to whoever we want because it's what we want.

But God knows that there is nothing more dangerous than calling good things evil, and evil things good. Sin starts out small, but it's never content to stay there. Just a look, becomes just a touch, becomes so much more. Just an angry thought, becomes a word, becomes a broken relationship. Just letting off some steam, becomes losing control, becomes damage that's hard to repair.

Repentance is so powerful because it doesn't just say "no" to the old, damaging habits and choices that have controlled us. True repentance says "yes" to the new life-giving fruit of God's Spirit.

Jesus did not come to take away the good things that we like. That's the lie that we believe, and as long as we believe that God is taking something good away from us, we will fight and fail to change. This chapter begins with these words: "For freedom, Christ set us free. Stand firm, then, and don't submit again to a yoke of slavery." Jesus came to free us, but the things that enslave us won't let go easily.

It might seem like exaggeration to say that sin enslaves us, but that's because we don't recognise just how terrible sin is. We explain it away, or believe that we can stop any time we want. But we can't. Anytime someone says, "I could stop any time I wanted" it's almost guaranteed that they couldn't. Because sin makes slaves.

We are told that we can escape from the closed-minded people and life we knew and enjoy money, and pleasure, and freedom if only we trust in a seductive stranger. It starts out feeling good, but it quickly becomes clear that sin is a cruel and heartless master.

Evil always wants to make itself look good, or at least good for us. But the promises that are offered are a bait and switch. We are promised freedom, and receive slavery. Promised happiness, and end up with crushing sadness. Promised love, and are shown hatred.

As long as we buy the lie and look to ourselves instead of the Spirit, our lives will be confused: struggling to understand why the things we love leave us empty and hurt. That is why repentance is good news. It is the promise that change is possible. That we were slaves, but Jesus frees us to choose what is right. When we see that Jesus came to *release* us from the evil that enslaves us, turning away from our sin isn't begrudgingly give up things that God hates, but running toward the one that we love.

Each of the fleshy works that Paul lists are different ways that we try to fill a space that only God can fill. Each one is a twisted desire that takes something good, and makes it evil. There is nothing wrong with sex and desire, they are gifts from God in the proper place and time, but there is tremendous pain caused when we treat people as things to be used for our pleasure. There is nothing wrong with wanting what is good, but lots of grief from wanting what other people have, or wishing for their failure. There is nothing wrong with passion and feelings, but endless trouble from anger and constant dissatisfaction. There is nothing wrong with wanting to enjoy a good party, or food and drink, but if you want to escape life, or lose control of who you are, the emptiness, or shame, or loneliness will only feel worse the next morning.

The fruit of God's spirit is not only getting rid of evil, but cultivating what is good. Most of us tend to focus on stopping the bad stuff, but have you noticed that doesn't usually stick? Jesus spends a lot more time on "do" than on "do not". We need to replace evil with good. Hating sin isn't enough, we need to love God.

Because what you do becomes who you are. Jesus says repeatedly that you can know what kind of tree it is by the fruit. We can see how God has transformed us by the fruit of our life.

When we walk in the Spirit, it changes us. God renews us. So that the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control that marked Jesus' life mark our lives as well. The evidence of God at work in our lives is not that we immediately become perfect, but that these fruits are evident in our lives. Not that we try harder to seem good to the people around us, but that gradually, and sometimes surprisingly, our hearts are softened, and our thought patterns change.

So how do we cultivate good fruit? How do we know that it's "working", when it doesn't seem like there is any progress? At times it will feel like God is moving more quickly than we would like, and at other times it feels like nothing is happening at all. When we refocus on the reality that the Holy Spirit is a *person* to have a relationship with, and not a force to bend to our will, things become clearer.

Relationships cannot be forced or formulaic. But spending time, and genuinely caring for the other person are always good places to start. God spends every moment of our lives

with us, and he invites us to take specific time to spend with him because he wants us to know his love, and to grow in our love for him.

God doesn't pencil us in, or tell us he's too busy to see us, yet we still find it hard to set aside the time to make use of his gifts of prayer and scripture. You can't love people that you don't think about or spend time with. And if we wonder why our love for God is lukewarm, or has never really begun, then making a habit of spending time with him is a good place to change that.

I can't force God to work the way I want him to, but I can cultivate a deeper relationship with him, and seek his will for my life in the big and small moments. I must admit that it's something I'm not nearly as good at as I wish I was, but I'm trying to make some concrete steps to change that.

I've found that when I take time during the day to bring my anger, my desires, and my temptations to God, instead of taking them into my own hands, it makes a difference. On our own, it can feel impossible to change, but spending time bringing it to God right in the middle of our days has the power to change things. Ten seconds to pray when the kids are testing your limits, or when you're tempted to give into an unhealthy habit, could be the difference between responding with love or making choices that wound deeply and take years to heal.

It might not seem dramatic, but like any relationship, it's the consistent time over years that builds into real love. We can't force fruit, but we can cultivate it. And God promises that as we grow in our love and dedication to him, that he will produce fruit in us.

There are always good excuses. But think about this: have you ever struggled to pencil in your vices? I've never heard anyone say, "I just can't find time for that bag of chips in the evening." Or "I really wish I could find time for my addiction, but it'll have to wait until next week."

We make time for the things that we love. So make time for things that bring you closer to God. Ask God this week to grow one fruit of the Spirit in you that you have been struggling with: he longs to give good gifts to the children he loves.

So do we love Jesus? What does the fruit of our life show? Are we growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self control? Or have we allowed lesser loves to win our heart?

You can give your love to things that will never love you back. Things that will take and take from you until there is nothing left. Or you can choose to make a change. To turn away from the slavery of sin, and turn toward the freedom and love of God.

No matter who you sleep with, or what you watch, it won't fill the hole in your heart. But genuine love will. Filling ourselves with more food, and drink, and stuff will never bring us lasting happiness. But the joy of Jesus will. Fighting and putting ourselves first will never bring us the satisfaction we're looking for. But real peace does. What part of our lives wouldn't change for the better if we grew in patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control?

So who do you love most? If the honest answer isn't God, then today is a wonderful day for that to change. Jesus challenges us to let go of the false loves that pretend to help us, but only enslave us, and to take hold of the freedom that he offers to us in love.

Uninvite sin from your morning walk or drive, and invite the Spirit instead. Make real change, because God is so much more than deserving of our love. If we repent together, we will experience the fruit of the Spirit in powerful ways that renew our lives and our world. And it's starts with God's love for us, and our love for him.