

Good morning everyone. Welcome. It is good to be here together today. When we meet together, we know that God is here with us. This morning's sermon is the last in this series on the kingdom of God but I know that the kingdom of God will continue to show glimpses of itself in other messages as well as we move through the year.

As I begin I will pray...

Gracious Lord Jesus,

Shine the light of your Spirit on us this morning

Guide us, encourage us, challenge us I pray

Draw us to you, the one who loves us so much

I ask in your holy name

Amen.

When I started doing my preparation for this series on the kingdom of God, one of the things that I did was to look at all the verses in the Bible where the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven was mentioned. Then I grouped verses that were like each other together so that I could see the themes that were there, and I could start to understand what the Bible was saying about this. It was a little like matching socks that come off the washing line.

Putting things together and making pairs....

And I found that there were some distinct themes about the kingdom of God.

Now one of these themes that I found, I decided to call "fruits of the kingdom." And that is what we are looking at today.

It is about the sorts of behaviours and attitudes that people who are part of the kingdom of God show over time. What you could call kingdom living. The fruits of the Spirit that grow in people's lives as they follow Jesus. The new normal, the new attitudes, the new ways of thinking that need to come over time as people follow Jesus.

Now it is not about being good enough to enter the kingdom of God. Since we can never be good enough, entering the kingdom of God is about Jesus and what he has done for us, not because we are good. Jesus even told a story to the Jewish chief priests and their elders, the religious leaders of that community who were people who thought that were going to be in God's kingdom just because of who their parents were. To those people, Jesus said in Matthew 21: 32, look tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

So it is not about being good enough to enter the kingdom of God. But as we become followers of Jesus, we ask God into our lives. God through the Holy Spirit in us leads us. And then there are attitudes and behaviours that we have in our lives that change as the Holy Spirit guides us. Just like fruit grows on trees. There are fruits of our new life, the fruits of the Spirit, the fruits of the kingdom of God.

Now the passages that talk about this are found in letters in the Bible that are written to churches, so they were written to people like us here in Flaxmere.

There are a number of passages that touch on this, but the one I am focussing on today is Galatians 5: 16-26. I will read this passage now.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.¹

Did you hear how this passage talks about the fruits of the kingdom of God, but it starts out with another list of behaviours and attitudes as well.

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ga 5:22–26). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

And it says, those things over here, they are the bad stuff. Those are the things that needs to be left behind. Don't do those things.

But instead there are new things, good things, these things over here to do instead.

The passage starts by talking about the bad stuff being the desires or works of the flesh. That is the way that the Bible uses to describe our natural human desires, the things that will get us into trouble if we spend our lives just doing what we feel like.

And as the passage goes on it includes a list of those human desires. A list that includes jealousy, anger, envy as well as all kinds of problems with addictions and problems with sex being out of place. And the Bible says look if that is what your life is full of. If after being on the journey for years, if after all that, these are the things that fill your life. Well you are skating on thin ice... you are really pushing your luck...

Galatians 5: 21 even says

*"I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."*²

Ouch...

Now it is good to remember that these passages were written to churches because the people in those churches were struggling with these things. That is why they are there. If everything was always

totally sweet then these passages would not need to be in the Bible. If you struggle then you are not alone, but I would also encourage you to pay really close attention this morning. To hear the total passage and to hear what God has to say.

It is also good to remember that passages like these are in the bible for us as a warning. They are God saying to us, look where you are living is not safe, you are in the red zone. You need to move from there to over here.

Now those bad things, the things the Bible describes as works of the flesh, those desires of the flesh are aspects of our human nature that can get us into trouble. They are part of who we are and the natural way we do things. Let me give you an example.

If I am in a car that is parked on a hillside and I don't start the engine, but just take the brake off then the car that I am in will roll downhill. That is the natural way that things happen.

Now if that happened to me, I might be extremely fortunate and avoid a disaster, sometimes you hear stories like that, but the most likely thing to happen is that I would crash.

Our human nature is like being in a car parked on a hill and the natural thing to happen if we just go with the flow is that we will go downhill and crash...

So these passages provide a warning for us about that. They also provide a contrast, they show the good things that we can do instead of the bad.

The passage talks to us about the contrast to all the bad stuff being

the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Those things are wonderful and good. They are the attitudes that need to grow in our lives. They are the things that replace all of the jealousy, anger, envy and addictions. Our natural desires are the old way of acting, thinking and living. The fruit of the Spirit is the new way of acting, the new way of thinking, the new way of living.

Now this passage shows two sets of behaviours and they provide a real contrast, it says those are the works of the flesh and these over here are the fruit of the Spirit. But there is something else that I find interesting, the passage does not say anything about the circumstances that we might be facing changing. In fact the circumstances that we are in may not change. The same type of storms might keep on blowing our way. The things that we face might still be very similar. But it is how we react to them that changes, because of what has happened deep down inside, in the core of who we are.

But for fruits to form, there are things we need to overcome.

For us to learn self control, it means that there will be times when we don't feel like controlling ourselves.

For us to learn how to love, it means that there will be times when we don't feel like loving.

But instead of reacting one way to what happens, the old way that is there because of our human nature, there is a new way to react instead, the way of the Spirit, the way of the Kingdom of God.

As we follow Jesus, as the Spirit is in us, this new way of doing things, the way of the Spirit becomes natural, it becomes part of who we are, our new nature, the nature of God. But sometimes it is tough getting there, it is hard to change the way that we react to things. We have had a lifetime of learning bad habits. A lifetime of our mind deciding how to react.

That is why the passage describes us as needing to crucify that part of our human nature with all of its passions and desires.

That is why other passages describe us as needing to renew our minds through the power of the Holy Spirit.

You see, God provides us with more help than just giving us two lists and saying move from here to there.

There is a path that God gives us, a path that God provides for us to follow. And the Holy Spirit is there as our guide along the path, the Holy Spirit is there to support us in our walk.

The first words in this passage in Galatians are

Live by the Spirit,

Don't just go with the flow - instead live, live by the Spirit.

I have highlighted all the times that the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the passage, and the words that are used. The passage talks about us needing to live by the Spirit, to be led by the Spirit, to live by the Spirit, to be guided by the Spirit.

When we follow Jesus and ask God into our lives, God's Holy Spirit is in us, God's Holy Spirit can help us.

God's Holy Spirit can lead us and guide us.

So what is that like?

How does that work?

- Well the Holy Spirit is there prompting us when we might be going off track. Speaking to us in a still small voice, speaking to us through the Bible, through the words of others.

It is a little like having one of those GPS navigation systems. I have never driven in a car with one of them. But I have seen them on TV and have talked to people who have used them. And if you have one and it is all set up properly, it will tell you when to turn, it will give you instructions if you go the wrong way. It will help you get back on track. It won't drive the car, but it will give the person who is driving instructions on how to get to where they want to go.

That is what the Holy Spirit guiding us is like.

But that is not the only thing that the Holy Spirit does.

The Holy Spirit also help us break patterns of behaviour, helping us to decide what to do when we stop doing one thing and start doing another.

Helping our mind to learn new ways of doing things, new ways of reacting. As we stop doing one set of things and start doing another.

That is what it means to live by Spirit, that is what it means to be lead by the Spirit and to be guided by the Spirit.

It means replacing one way of behaving, with another...

Now this morning, God's Holy Spirit has been at work. Prompting us, speaking to us, with that still small voice.

There may be things from the past that are still there in our lives.

Habits, ways of doing things, attitudes that are part of our old human nature. And God might have been prompting us this morning to change, to repent, to turn your back on that behaviour or attitude.

And instead of doing things the old way, reacting like we always have reacted, to replace it with something new, doing something new, that has its source in one of the fruits of the Spirit.

I know that God has been speaking through the power of the Holy Spirit. But it is up to each of us to listen to what God has to say...

Now what I am going to do this morning, is to provide a space, an opportunity for us to listen to God, and to choose how to respond in our own heart to what God is saying to us.

Last Wednesday was a very special day. It was the anniversary of the Christchurch earthquake and it was also the start of Lent - a day that is called Ash Wednesday. There is a tradition, something that often happens in Anglican and Catholic churches where they have a special service on Ash Wednesday. Ashes, made by burning the palm branches of the previous years Palm Sunday are used. Ashes that symbolise our frailty, sadness, mourning, and how often our plans end up in ashes. And in traditional churches, the leader will dip a finger

into the moist ash, make a cross on each person's forehead and say words like consider yourself dead to sin and alive in Jesus Christ. Now we are not going to do that this morning, but it is a timely reminder to us. That we need times like these when we do examine ourselves and reflect on our attitudes and behaviours. There are times when we need to repent, to say to God that we are sorry for some of the things that we have done. And we need times when we decide to change.

So as I lead us in this time together, I will start with a prayer of confession, and follow this with a time of reflection, and there will be space for for us to respond.

prayer confession

God of mercy and grace,

We confess to you our sinfulness,

The attitudes that we have that come from our old human nature

The way that we have ignored your voice

Lord we have hungered after that which does not satisfy

We have doubted your power to protect us

Forgive us O lord, for our lack of faith

Have mercy on our weakness

Lord speak to us I pray...

Silence.

Lord than you for the assurance that you give,
That you have forgiven us,
That we are cleansed and set free.
That you will give us rest.
Thank you for the prompting of the Holy Spirit
Lord give us the courage to change.
I pray...

The Lord God said
I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you
I will remove from you a heart of stone
and give you a heart of flesh

Brothers and sisters, In Christ all God's promises are "Yes"
hear the good news.
Through Christ, our minds and hearts are cleansed, healed and
renewed.
Amen.