

How to Tell If the Holy Spirit Is Really at Work in You

The Spirit of Christ

Picture a man everyone at his workplace respects. He's generous. He gives to every office collection, he covers lunch for the new hire, he stays late to help a colleague finish their tasks. At church he's the first to volunteer. And at home, he speaks to his wife with a quiet contempt that she has stopped bothering to answer. He would never call it cruelty. He would call it being tired.

Is that man a mature Christian?

Most of us feel the problem straight away. Something has been grown in one part of his life and left untended in another. And if we're willing to look at our own lives, many of us do the same thing in smaller ways. We keep the qualities that come easily to us, and we quietly excuse the ones that don't.

Today we're looking at one short sentence in Galatians, and one small word in it that changes how we read the whole thing.

Here it is, Galatians chapter 5, verses 22 and 23.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

GALATIANS 5:22-23

Now look at the word Paul chose. Not fruits. Fruit. One. He lists nine qualities, but he doesn't call them nine fruits. He calls them one fruit, and the nine are what that one fruit looks like.

Love comes first, and here's one way to hear the rest: as different flavours of love. Joy is love when it's glad. Peace is love at rest. Patience is love under pressure. Kindness and goodness are love reaching toward another person. Faithfulness is love that stays when staying costs something. Gentleness is love with its strength held back. Self-control is love with its appetites in order.

That means we can't pick and choose. We can't say, I'm a joyful person, and I'm just not a gentle one. It's one fruit with different flavours, and we don't get to keep the ones we like and leave the rest. The Spirit isn't producing a menu for us to order from. He's producing one thing, and it's the character of Christ. And we see that character first in Jesus himself. All nine are a description of how he lived.

Now compare that with how Paul talks about gifts. In First Corinthians chapter 12, he writes, in verse 4,

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.”

1 CORINTHIANS 12:4

And in verse 11,

“All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”

1 CORINTHIANS 12:11

No one has all of them, and that's by design, because the body needs every part. And Paul wants us to want those gifts. Gifts are good, they come from the same Spirit, and they matter.

But notice the difference. Gifts are distributed. Fruit is expected. Paul never presents the fruit as something handed to some believers and withheld from others. It's what the Spirit produces in

everyone he lives in.

And listen to how seriously Paul takes that difference. First Corinthians chapter 13, verses 1 and 2.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.”

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-2

Paul says that even the most impressive gifts, without love, count for nothing. And fruit can't be faked for long, because fruit is what a life actually produces over time. That's what makes it the diagnostic. It's how you tell what's really going on.

Jesus said the same thing. Matthew chapter 7, verses 16 through 18.

“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.”

MATTHEW 7:16-18

Fruit tells the truth about the tree. Not the leaves. Not how tall it is. Not how impressive it looks from the road. Fruit.

So how does fruit grow? Not by straining. Think about a branch. A branch doesn't produce grapes by trying harder. It produces them by staying attached. Jesus puts it this way in John chapter 15,

verses 4 and 5.

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

JOHN 15:4-5

That’s not a self-improvement plan. A self-improvement plan says, become more patient. This says, stay close to the one whose Spirit produces patience.

But it isn’t passive either. Galatians chapter 5, verse 25.

“If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.”

GALATIANS 5:25

The Spirit grows the fruit, and we keep in step. We say yes in the moment when the old reflex rises. We turn toward him when we’d rather turn away.

And it takes time. Second Corinthians chapter 3, verse 18.

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

2 CORINTHIANS 3:18

From one degree to another, and notice how it happens: by looking at him. Fruit comes in seasons. If you’ve been a Christian for years and you still find your temper short, that doesn’t mean

the Spirit isn't at work. But it does mean that growth is meant to be happening.

Here's why all of this matters beyond our own character. The Spirit is the presence of the King. He's the one who applies Christ's reign to ordinary people, ahead of the day when that reign arrives in full. So what does the King's rule look like when it shows up in a human life? It looks like patience in a traffic jam. Gentleness with a child who's testing you. Faithfulness to a promise when no one would notice if you let it slide. That's what the Kingdom looks like on the ground. Fruit is the evidence that the King is actually reigning there.

That's even what Paul is saying with the last line. "Against such things there is no law." There is no law that could stand against any of this. Nothing in these nine can be accused. They're simply what life looks like when the King's rule is real.

So here's where it gets personal.

Go back through the nine, slowly. Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. And ask yourself which one is most missing from your life right now. Not the one you think sounds best to admit. The one the people closest to you would name if you asked them.

Then tell the Spirit about it, by name. Not a general, help me be better. Be specific. I'm not gentle with the people in my own home, and I want that to change. Or, I have no peace when I lie awake, and I don't want to live like that anymore. And then think of the next situation where that quality will be tested, and decide that you'll keep in step with him there.

Can you name it? Because if you can name it, you're already standing where growth begins.

And here's the hope in all of this. Philippians chapter 1, verse 6.

“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”

PHILIPPIANS 1:6

He started it. He's the one growing it. And he will see it through to completion.

Group Discussion Questions

- 1 Why do we tend to keep the qualities that come naturally and excuse the ones that don't? What does Paul's choice of the singular "fruit" do to that habit?
- 2 Paul says that gifts without love count for nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-2). How can a church value spiritual gifts and still treat fruit as the measure of maturity?
- 3 Jesus points to abiding (John 15:4-5) and Paul to keeping in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25). What does each look like in ordinary, everyday life?

Self-Reflection Questions

- 1 Which of the nine would the people closest to you say is most missing from your life, and how do you respond to that?
- 2 Is there a place where you are noticeably different from how you are everywhere else, like the man at work and at home? What does that tell you?
- 3 What would keeping in step with the Spirit look like in the moment that quality is tested?

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