

For our teachers, students and parents, this weekend was the last of the summer even though our calendars remind us we have more than a month left! For staff, they've already gone back to the classroom, whether for in-service days, classroom prep or lesson planning. Students are actively counting down how many free days they have left. Many are not excited about going to school. As much as there are good things about school there are also hard things, waking up early, having to get stuff done by deadlines, not eating a snack whenever they want. Most students know there are good things and will see them soon but right now it's a little harder to let the good shape the attitude. I've been thinking a lot about this rhythm of school as we wrap up this series. Today in our final week in *The Fruits of the Spirit* we look at faithfulness, gentleness & self-control. Just as the ones before flow from love the same is true.

Faithfulness – loyal, constant, true, devoted to the practice of faith. Just as athletes in the Olympics train, long before they compete – being faithful is the practicing of our faith day in and day out. Unlike students who take a summer break, being faithful & practicing our faith is an everyday thing just as eating & sleeping.

Gentleness – is often describe by what it is not, harsh, hard, rough. Water (a light fall of rain that is refreshing) or hard rain

where you can't see anything and damage being done. A gentle babbling brook or a flash flood. The first is something that we love to stumble across as it soothes but the flash flood what takes down anything in its path is something we avoid. How gently we practice our faith has vast consequences. If we are beating people over the head we know people are less likely to believe our message or God's love, mercy, peace & joy.

Self-control – ability to regulate. This may be the hardest of them all. Because as much as we would like everything in our lives to be a gentle babbling brook, sometimes it's the flash flood. When our lives feel out of order & chaotic the discipline of being self-control helps us reign in the chaos.

When we put the *Fruits of the Spirit* into practice they not only give us a model to strive to but they shape our witness in the world as a testament to the one who gave us life; they also tell us about God who embodies love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control throughout scripture and in our lives. We can quickly lift up verses & stories showing us how God practices what is preached. We can also look to our own lives to find ways in which we have experienced God in the fruits of the Spirit. But as much as we probably think of love first (and rightfully so) it is gentleness that stands out – especially given the time in which this letter was written. So much of the

ancient world was brutal – whether it be from conquests or authoritarian leaders who demand life to be according to their whims and desires. But God not so much. Let's be clear, God does command how we should live but does it in a gentle way with grace upon grace leading us to grow in our lives.

One of the hallmarks of Methodism is the focus on Grace. God's unmerited love & mercy that is freely given to us. When I first began ministry in Texas, I served with a pastor who had, what I thought was an odd response whenever he was asked how he was on any given day. He would always answer, "better than I deserve." It caught me off guard the first couple of times that I got that response to my question and I quickly started asking follow-up questions or more direct questions to get the spirit of what I wanted. But no matter what was going on around him, his answer was steadfast, better than I deserve. 15 years later, I still hear his voice in my head when someone asks me how I am doing. He's reframing of whatever he was working in & through has clearly had a lasting impact on me. John Wesley & Rick Sitton were always pointing to the grace that is all around us even when we may not see it immediately.

As John wrestled with how to personally grow his faith and later with others in large & small groups John always focused on grace. His Means of Grace has both a systematic & pragmatic way

to grow that is centered in experience God in our lives both individually and communally. I've taught this before, that John lifted up 2 broad categories to experience God's grace & growth in our lives. The categories should always be used in tandem in a both and way and not an either or.

Works of Mercy

Individual Practices - doing good works, visiting the sick, visiting those in prison, feeding the hungry, and giving generously to the needs of others

Communal Practices – seeking justice, ending oppression and discrimination (for instance Wesley challenged Methodists to end slavery), and addressing the needs of the poor

Works of Piety

Individual Practices – reading, meditating and studying the scriptures, prayer, fasting, regularly attending worship, healthy living, and sharing our faith with others

Communal Practices – regularly share in the sacraments, Christian conferencing (accountability to one another), and Bible study

When we use the means of grace individually & collectively, we are living into the prayer and promise of the kingdom of God one earth as it is in heaven as well as letting the Fruits of the Spirit speak in our lives. God's Grace has, is and will continue to shape our lives in sometimes unseen ways we are still expected to take an active part to grow our capacities to practice love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness & self-control both for our own journeys but also as communities of disciples of Jesus Christ.

As our schools re-open we know they are committed to practicing growth so that our students know & do more in May than they can in August. May we commit our lives to the same endeavor so that God can use us to live out grace & peace, love & joy in a world that needs us. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.