

When the crisis exposes our heart

Galatians 5:22-23

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Research shows that Google searches on prayer have increased dramatically in recent days in the midst of the Covid-19. One evangelistic website launched new web pages with Covid-19 resources in six languages, and in the initial four weeks 173,000 people visited the website. Another one of the largest online evangelism ministries made 12.4 million gospel presentations in March alone.¹

That is great news. God is using this crisis to turn many hearts towards Christ, but that is not the whole story. Difficult times can either drive a person towards God or away from Him. While some are being driven towards Christ, others have responded to the crisis in a totally different manner.

In the recent weeks our attention has been totally focused on the coronavirus and its direct effects. There is a fear of infection, risk of becoming sick or losing loved ones, as well as having difficulties financially. We talk of hospitals, masks, gloves, social distancing, quarantine and lockdown, but there are a whole other number of issues that are happening in the shadows, in the wake of the virus.

There are many problems that are taking root during these days of isolation, lockdown, stress and crisis. People are turning to alcohol to handle anxiety, stress and boredom. "Some doctors fear that people could be drinking so much alcohol during the coronavirus lockdown that a 'second health crisis' is on the way."²

A similar trend is seen in the use of pornography. It continues to increase during these days of isolation. It is the perfect environment for it. Anonymity, isolation, boredom, loneliness and endless opportunities online. One large pornographic website has seen a "57% rise in Italy, a 39% rise in France and a 61% rise in Spain."

¹ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/april/coronavirus-searches-online-converts-pray-cru-bgea-wmo.html>

² <https://metro.co.uk/2020/04/16/drinking-much-lockdown-doctors-fear-new-health-crisis-alcoholism-12564601/>

I recently spoke to one of the doctors in our church. He is a general practitioner but said that one of the common issues that he is now dealing with is that of anxiety attacks and mental health. It is the natural result of people being confined to their apartments, isolated, afraid and confronted with the condition of their own hearts, minds and desires.

Research is also telling us to expect thousands and thousands of households dealing with increased levels of stress, anxiety, fear, anger, irritability, emotional exhaustion, and depression.³ Many of us can relate with this.

The Spanish Ministry of Equality has reported that domestic abuse has increased greatly in recent days. The number of women and children who have been physically abused continues to increase during this time of lockdown.⁴ There are similar reports coming from China, France, Italy, Great Britain, and now even a statement by the United Nations' Secretary General António Guterres, urging governments "to put women's safety first as they respond to the pandemic". One abuse victim said this, "During the epidemic, we were unable to go outside, and our conflicts just grew bigger and bigger and more and more frequent" she said. "Everything was exposed."⁵

That last phrase was more telling than she probably knew. In many ways, as we walk through this crisis, many things are being exposed. Crisis and pressure bring to the surface characteristics that were already in our hearts before, but were just hidden.

For many, this type of isolation and uncertainty are a perfect setting for temptations, phobias, addictions and other expressions of escapism. It exposes the emptiness of man's hearts and our vain solutions to fix or at least numb ourselves to the real spiritual issues. It exposes our inability to control our situations and manage our own lives.

Being Christian does not make us immune. Even in the midst of the church there are likely those who are ensnared with alcohol, pornography, mental health issues, and domestic abuse. For those who are, please reach out to us so that we may walk with you. You do not have to pass through these days alone. Call out to God for help and let us be there with you in the process.

Whether we are struggling with these issues or other issues, we must take note of what is happening in our lives. When life squeezes us, as this crisis is, what is on the inside comes out. What is coming out of us during these days? Is it love or bitterness? Is it joy or sadness? Is it peace or anxiety? Is it patience or irritability? Is it kindness or rudeness? Is it gentleness or is it anger and harshness? Is it self-control . . . or self-indulgence? With Christ we have a choice. If we are followers of Christ, the Holy Spirit has come to dwell within us. In Him we have the resources to walk in holiness and love, even in the midst of these trying days.

³ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/this-is-the-psychological-side-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-that-were-ignoring/>

⁴ <https://www.euroweeklynews.com/2020/04/02/domestic-violence-calls-to-016-in-spain-increase-by-18-the-during-covid-19-lockdown/>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/world/coronavirus-domestic-violence.html>

In Galatians 5:22-23, we find these words:

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

If you could change one thing about your character from this list, what would it be? It is very likely that for some of us more than one character trait came to mind. In Galatians 5:22-23 we see that change is possible.

Throughout scripture we see this idea of bearing fruit. Fruit is seen as the words, the actions, the emotions, the thoughts and the desires that come out of our lives. In Matthew 3:8, it instructs us to ***“bear fruit in keeping with repentance”***. Psalm 1:3 talks of the blessedness of a man who delights in the law of the Lord. ***“He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”*** In Luke 6:45, we learn that ***“the good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil.”*** Biblically speaking, the words, actions, emotions, thoughts and desires that come from our lives originate from our hearts. Good heart, good fruit. Bad heart, bad fruit.

God desires that our hearts and our lives will bear righteous fruit. In Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul writes of a war that wages within each of us. It is between the flesh and the Spirit. The flesh is our old godless sin nature. The Spirit is the new life of Christ that now indwells us. The old nature has been defeated, and yet when we do not submit to the working of the Spirit, when we do not believe and obey the truths that are found in God’s Word, the flesh seeks to draw us back to our old sin patterns, our old ways of trying to meet our own needs.

As we walk in the flesh we seek to meet our own needs and fulfill our own desires. We are driven to selfishness, jealousy, covetousness, pride, greed and the manipulation of others. Walking in the flesh results in many types of sin. In contrast, as we walk by the Spirit we have been freed from the power of sin and are now compelled by love to serve Christ and to serve others.

A few verses later, in verse 25, it describes how to walk in the Spirit. It says to ***“keep in step with the Spirit.”*** This phrase “keep in step” was a military term. The soldier did not set the pace, or the direction. He merely submitted to the stride and the speed of his commanding officer and kept in step. The soldier was to completely trust his commanding officer, even to the point of following him into battle. That is our role with the Holy Spirit. We are not to get ahead of Him or behind Him. We surrender to His guidance, fully trusting in His leadership and purpose of where He leads us.

As we walk in step with the Spirit our needs are now met in Christ. Our desires are drawn to holiness and godliness. As we submit to the Spirit He works in us ***“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”***

Now some will read this listing of fruit of the Spirit and respond, “That was possible for Jesus because he is the Son of God, but I will never be able to bear these types of fruit.” Scripture would agree with you. You will never be able to bear this type of fruit, but the Spirit of Christ who dwells within every believer

can. It is Christ in us, who is our hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). Did he not say, ***“whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father”***? (John 14:12)

Probably one of the best known passages in scripture about bearing fruit is found in John 15:5. Jesus said, ***“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.”*** It is as we walk closely with Jesus in obedience that we are empowered to bear fruit. The moment that we draw away from his lordship and his resources we are drawn towards selfishness and sin once again.

As one reads this list of fruit of the Spirit it is not meant to bring condemnation, but a holy discontentment, a longing for more of God and more of the life He has provided for us. As we see our failings may it drive us back into God’s arms of grace where once again the gospel comes alive to us.

We need to be mindful that religious works are not the same as fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the spirit are not, “attending church regularly, serving on the hospitality team, paying for your children to attend a Christian school, witnessing, or even studying your Bible every day.” Those can be done by a person who has no relationship with Christ. The fruit of the Spirit are the supernatural characteristics of your life that can only be present through the workings of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Our fruit will either give testimony to our walking in the flesh or our walking by the Spirit.

We will never become like Christ in our own power, will or discipline. We will never become like Christ if we are motivated by fear, guilt, shame or pride. We will always return to our sinful ways and our old sin nature. The external motivation will never be enough. Something has to change on the inside, at the deepest level of who we are. Our nature has to change, and that can only be done when the Spirit of Christ comes to live inside of us. In that moment everything begins to change.

Some might ask, “What if I am not experiencing what Paul is describing?” One of three options is occurring. The first is the possibility that you are not walking by the Spirit because He does not live in you. If you have never turned from your sin and believed in Jesus Christ, then the Spirit of God does not live in you. He is the only one who can bring the fruit of the Spirit to pass in our lives. You might consider reading “The Parable of the Sower”, in Luke 8, where it describes different types of people who have received God’s Word. Some have heard it and disregarded it immediately. Others have at first rejoiced in hearing the good news, but once tested they turn away. Others continue in the Word of God for a while, but are drawn away by the cares, riches and pleasures of this world. Only those who receive God’s Word and “hold it fast in an honest and good heart” are truly in the faith. Have you ever repented of your sin and believed in Jesus Christ? If not, please consider it today and be saved.

Others might ask, “What if I am a follower of Christ but I am not experiencing the Fruit of the Spirit? One of two options is likely occurring. One is that you are not experiencing the Fruit of the Spirit because you are not abiding in Him. Abiding is similar to the child who stays near the father and benefits from all the resources that the father offers for the child’s care. But it is also more than this. It is the child’s heart becoming like the father’s heart. It is more than just receiving gifts from the

father. It is becoming like Him. If a person is a child of faith, but is not bearing the fruit of the Spirit, it is likely that they are not walking near to God on a daily basis.

Another possibility is that a person is a child of God and they are walking near to God, but they are still not experiencing all of the fruit in their lives. In Philippians 2:12, we are told to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. It is not saying to earn your salvation. It is saying that now that you are in Christ learn how to walk in it. It takes time. It is a process. As we see these characteristics evident in our lives in an increasing measure we can be encouraged that we are in the faith (2 Peter 1:8). It would be similar to a man who has been in prison for 50 years and is now free. They are free, but they now must learn how to live as a freeman. This could be said of each of us. We have been counted righteous through the blood of Christ. Now, day by day we grow in our faith, seeking to bear more and more righteous fruit. As we follow Christ, more and more character traits of our lives are brought into submission to the lordship of Christ.

So how does one begin to move towards a life that bears the fruit of the Spirit? It is somewhat like healing hypothermia. Let me explain. Hypothermia is when a person's body temperature drops to an abnormally low level.

A case of mild hypothermia (32.2°C to 35°C) results in high blood pressure, shivering, rapid breathing and heart rate, constricted blood vessels, apathy, fatigue, impaired judgment, hunger and nausea, dizziness, difficulty speaking and lack of coordination.

A case of moderate hypothermia (28°C to 32.2°C) results in an irregular heartbeat, a slower heart rate and breathing, lower level of consciousness, dilated pupils, low blood pressure, and a decrease in reflexes, shivering may stop, slurred speech, significant confusion, drowsiness, apathy or lack of concern, and a weak pulse.

A severe case of hypothermia (less than 28°C) results in labored breathing, nonreactive pupils, heart failure, pulmonary edema, and cardiac arrest.

Listening to all of these complications reminds us of our spiritual life sometimes. There are so many improvements needed it is almost overwhelming. Where do we start? How will we be like Christ?

The cure to hypothermia is not to focus on each and every symptom. The solution is to rewarm the body. There are various ways that this can be done depending on the situation and the resources available, but there is only one focus. Rewarm the body. If you start concentrating on the eyes that are dilated, all could be lost. If you focus your time on alleviating the nausea, all could be lost. If you only focus on ways to help the confusion, all could be lost. There is one focus to saving someone from hypothermia. You must rewarm the body. If it is done soon enough, the person will be saved and the symptoms will disappear.

Our pursuit of spiritual fruit is the similar. Our solution is Christ. We are not to focus all our attention on each and every different deficiency in our spiritual life. We are to let our failings drive

us near to Christ as our only hope. Whether our struggle be with impatience, anger, pornography or pride, it should drive us to surrender at the feet of Christ. When our focus is to draw near to Christ, greater spiritual fruit will be the natural result. When the Spirit is nurtured in our lives, fruit will always be the result. As we walk with the Spirit we will be more sensitive to the sin in our lives. We will experience the forgiveness of God. We will desire holiness in a greater way. We will love others in a greater way. We will grow to have the heart of God, and the sin patterns of the past will gradually be replaced by the fruit of the Spirit.

Do not let your failings become your focus. Admit your failings. Be humbled by your failings. Then lay them at the feet of Jesus. Our failings are to drive us back to Christ. If our focus is dominated by our failings, that will likely draw us to self-centeredness and either self-righteousness or self-loathing. It is much like the Prodigal Son found in Luke 15:11-32. Once we finally recognize our rebellion and hopelessness for what it truly is, it drives us back towards Christ. As our failings drive us towards Christ our hearts are warmed and our spiritual health returns to a healthy state. In this way of thinking, Christ is primary and spiritual fruit are secondary. In this way the Spirit thrives and we are transformed.

Today, in the midst of this crisis, as life is squeezing you in so many different ways, be humbled by your failings. Bow at the feet of Christ and submit yourself to Him as the Deliverer, Savior and Lord of your life. As you cling to Him out of desperation the process of bearing the fruit of the Spirit will have begun.

Discussion questions:

- 1) What from this sermon most caught your attention?
- 2) Difficult times can either drive a person towards God or away from Him. Can you think of a time in your life that this was true? Would you be willing to share the story with us?
- 3) When life squeezes us, whatever is on the inside comes out. How would you explain this in your own words?
- 4) When Galatians 5:22-23 talks of the fruit of the Spirit, it lists “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Which of these characteristics do you need more of in your life?
- 5) Only the Holy Spirit can bring about the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. If a person does not have the fruit of the Spirit in their lives, what could be the reason?
- 6) How would you explain the hypothermia illustration in your own words?
- 7) What do you think God wants you to remember from this sermon?
- 8) How can we pray for you as you seek to apply it to your life?