

Sermon #243  
Galatians 5:16-26  
June 3, 2018 (Title Slide 1)

## The Fruitful Life

It's a barren, dry, hot, and desolate area. (Slides 2, 3, 4) Few trees if any are found there. Nomadic shepherds roam the rugged hills and deep valleys. As one pilgrim put it, "There are few places in the world where the sun beats with so fierce a heat." Scripture refers to this area often as simply the wilderness, known referred to as the Judean Wilderness. It's a long stretch of isolated land from just east of Jerusalem and the Mt. of Olives to Qumran and the dead sea. Throughout its history rebels and fugitives found their refuge there. Some, like the Essenes, retired to this barren area for religious purposes. Jesus himself was led by the Spirit into this wilderness area (Luke 4:1). I found it a fascinating area to visit, but I sure would not want to live there.

(Slide 5) Not far away, the Jezreel Valley provides a stark contrast to the Judean wilderness. Its name means, "God plants or God sows." And how appropriate! It is a beautiful and fertile valley situated between the hills around Samaria and Galilee, just a little north of Jerusalem. (Slides 6 and 7) While touring the Jezreel Valley, I marveled at the lush, green fields with abundant crops such as wheat, barley, chick peas, bananas, and many other fruits and vegetables. And the view of this valley from the tops of Mt. Carmel and Tel Megiddo is more than fascinating and breath taking. The highways through this valley formed major trade routes connecting many countries together. Throughout history many epic battles took place in this valley, the winners receiving control of the flow of commerce through the whole area. The final battle, Armageddon, is prophesied to take place right here in this valley. This is definitely a place I would like to be. It's much better than the wilderness to be sure.

I've told you about these two geographical contrasts because I would like you to think about them metaphorically this morning. Since you haven't been to Israel, maybe it would be more helpful for you to think of a wilderness area that you have visited, such as the Bad Lands in South Dakota or the Sand Dunes of lower Michigan, in contrast to a fertile area such as the Mississippi Delta or some of the rich farm land throughout the Midwest. Question: Which area would you rather be in, the wilderness or the fertile lands? Sure, the wilderness may be nice to visit and take pictures of, but it's not desirable to live there. Neither is it desirable for Christians to live in the wilderness areas of the Christian life. True, we learn a lot from them, but according to the Apostle Paul, we want to live in such a way as to live by the fruit of the Spirit and produce fruit. Last week in our sermon series we looked at the gifts of the Spirit and today our attention turns to the fruit of the Spirit.

In Galatians 5, Paul is writing to young Christians who were turning away from the gospel (1:6-9). In chapter 1, verse 6 he writes of his incredulity concerning them. (Slide 8) *"I'm amazed that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ to follow another gospel,"* which was not really a gospel at all he said,

but rather a giant distraction. The Galatian Christians had chosen the wilderness route and had forsaken the fruit of the abundant life in Jesus Christ. So, just what is this fruitful life and how can we live it out? Can we tell when we've chosen the wilderness over God's fruitful, fertile valley? Paul makes a strong distinction between two ways of life and calls his readers, even us today, to choose a much better way, the best way.

(Slide 9)

- I. Make a choice between two ways of life.

(Slide 10)

- A. Do not choose the life of selfish desires.

What is this life? We need to know, right, so that we can steer clear from it. The metaphor once again is the wilderness, the barren way where the bright sun squelches all our spiritual vitality and leaves us with nothing. In chapter 5, Paul has been talking about freedom in Christ. He reminds them in verse 1, (Slide 11) "*Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don't submit to the bondage of slavery again.*" In other words, Paul is saying, "Don't go back to the wilderness, my children, you now have been set free to live in the abundant, fruitful life."

(Slide 12 and four clicks)

Paul first describes what the wilderness looks like. In verse 19 he begins, as he often does, with a list of selfish desires or the sinful nature. He begins with the sins of a sensual nature. They must have had as much problem with that as we do today. These include "sexual immorality, impurity, and debauchery," or as one version puts it, "Doing what feels good." The second category includes sins of "idolatry and witchcraft," those particularly practices by other religions. Then there are sins dealing with relational conflicts, such as "hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy." Finally, he finishes the list with "drunkenness and partying" which have to do with excesses or out of control behavior. But he also concludes with, "and other things like that," letting us know that this list is not exhaustive (vv. 19-21).

Because of his deep concern for his spiritual children, he warns them as he has before, not to do these kinds of things, and those who do will not "inherit God's kingdom." Wow, now that is a grave consequence. In other words, those who do them are in danger of complete destruction and separation from God in hell. That's huge. Doing these things can sell out our soul on the day of judgement, just as there are many dangers in the wilderness. "Don't go there!" Paul is saying. It is dangerous. It's like skating on thin ice. You might do well for a while, but soon you will go under.

Now I think today of our congregation that most of us probably do not struggle with most of the sins on this list. Yes, we need to be careful of temptation in any of them. I imagine that most of us might be tempted in ways that might be part of Paul's "and other things like that" category. Our wilderness journey today could include some things that might not even be sins, but certainly drag us down and keep us from living the fruitful life, aspects such as "discouragement, depression, being satisfied with the status quo, lack of a prayer life, loneliness, fear, chronic worry, and much more." The

wilderness is full of traps and snares that chock out our joy and peace and leave us dry and fruitless. Thus, we need to choose a different way, and it is a choice.

(Slide 13)

B. Choose the fruitful life, the selfless desires.

What is this life? Yes, the metaphor once again is the fruitful, fertile land. Paul now goes on to list the fruit of the Spirit. This list is not exhaustive either, as more fruit can be added. Most commentators agree that Paul uses categories here too. (Slide 14) He begins with the fruit which are more general and include habits of the mind, such as “love, joy, and peace.” There are also more relational fruits such as “patience, kindness, goodness. Finally, there are principles that guide a Christian’s conduct, such as “faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (vv. 22-23).

As we look at the two lists from the wilderness in contrast with the fertile land, which type of Christian would you like to be? By which side would you like to be treated. (III.) And now, just how do we live in the fruitful life and not the wilderness? Paul gives one main solution – the only way.

(Slide 15 with clicks)

II. Live in the Spirit.

A. We are called to walk in the Spirit, be led by the Spirit (v. 16, 17, 25).

Paul knows the way and he encourages the Galatian Christians to allow God’s Spirit to work in their lives. So, in verse 16 he urges them, “*I say be guided by the Spirit and you won’t carry out your selfish desires.*” In 18 he tells them to be “led by the Spirit,” and in in verse 25 he reiterates, “live by the Spirit.” He makes it abundantly clear that the only way to live the fruitful life is by and with the Spirit. Left to our own natural ways, we, like the Galatians don’t know how to love. That doesn’t come naturally to us. Apart from the Spirit, we will choose wilderness living every time. We think we can love, have joy, have peace, be patient, be kind, good faithful, and gentle with self-control all on our own. But we can’t. Just like spiritual gifts, we don’t earn the fruit, either. We receive them from God. But we think we can, so we just try a little harder. Maintain our guard. Keep up the façade, but it just doesn’t work. We fail all the time. As Paul is saying, we have to be set free from ourselves and our bondage to sin. The only way we can truly live out the fruit of the Spirit is by keeping in step with the Spirit of God every day. And how do we do that? Paul and the rest of scripture is clear; it is only through prayer and faithful obedience to Christ.

B. We are called to prayer and the faithful obedience to Christ and his Holy Spirit that lives in us.

The way to keep in step with the Spirit is to pray, not just about things or for things. Prayer isn’t magical. It’s not a wish list to get what we want. It’s being still and letting God love us and live in and through us. Through prayer, the Spirit sets us free, not to do what we want, but to live the way the Spirit of God leads. In him, there is

victory. We don't have to live the life of idolatry, corruption, immorality, discouragement, or negative thinking. Paul says the Christians have already been set free in Christ. (Slide 16) "Those who belong to Christ Jesus," he says in verse 24, "have already crucified self with its passions and its desires." That is already a completed fact. But it's also clear that we must continue to keep in step with the Spirit of God to live the fruitful life.

Question: How is your prayer life? I'm not just talking about how often you pray or for whom you pray, although those are important. I'm talking about a prayer life in the Spirit, by being still and simply letting God be God in our lives, allowing him to take away the wilderness inside our souls. John Wesley always asked his pastors and parishioners this all-important question. "How is it with your soul?" How is it with your soul today? William Carey, the great missionary pioneer once wrote, "Prayer – secret, fervent, believing prayer – lies at the root of all personal godliness."

You've heard me say before that as a young man, a young kid even, I never really had the assurance of my faith. I feared that if I died, I would not go to heaven. That may have been partly because of all the scary sermons the evangelists preached who came to my Dad's church when I was young, although I'm glad they taught me the truth of God's Word. But I never really had the faith that I was living this fruitful life that Paul talked about nor that I would go to heaven. But all that began to change, when I really started having personal devotion times on my own and I became more involved in my youth group and learned to grow on my own and with others. I learned to "keep in step" with the Spirit of God, to be "led by the Spirit," to know the Spirit of God through fervent prayer.

And now what about our prayer life as a church, not just individuals? We always need to keep in step with the Spirit as the body of Christ. We have a prayer meeting on Wednesday mornings at 8:30. If you would like to come and join us then, we would be glad to have you pray with us for our church, our community and beyond. I would also like to start up again the prayer times we've had on Thursday at 12 noon. Maybe you can take your lunch break to come and pray with us or simply set your alarm to ring at 12 and remind yourself to pray with us at that same time. Let's begin again this very week. And while you are at prayer for our church, be also in prayer for annual conference this week and our church in general. We need to follow in God's guiding. (Slide 17)

Conclusion

The wilderness is a fun place to visit and take pictures, but it's not a great place to live. You can die in the wilderness. The sinful, selfish human nature may also seem pleasing and right at first, but it too, leads to destruction. On the other hand, there is everything right with the fruitful, fertile life of the Spirit who leads us to triumphantly live out the fruitful life in all ways. Where do you stand today, in the wilderness or the fruitful life? (Prayer) If you need to get out of the wilderness today, a great way to do that is through communion. The table is set for each of us to leave the wilderness and walk in the Spirit. Begin communion ritual.