



LESSONS IN LIVING

“Trees of Life”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Justin McCready
July 26, 2026

Scripture Reading: Galatians 5:22-25 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against these sorts of things there is no law! Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their ego, with its passions and desires. So since we live by the Spirit, let us follow her lead.

Sermon

The Tree of Life is one of the most ubiquitous symbols in the Bible. We see it used in the tabernacle to describe the lamp which is shaped like a blossoming tree shedding light in the Most Holy Place. That lamp is based off the story from Genesis of Creation and it's meant to remind us of the Tree of Life that sits in the Garden that is the source of us all. Later Christian writers will refer to it as well when they speak of the New Heaven and New Earth. But why am I talking about the Tree of Life when the verse is about the fruit of the spirit? I'm glad you asked!

Good trees bear good fruit. A friend of mine once said, “Justin, when I look at a branch and see apples, I know it's an apple tree, and when I see figs growing I know they are hanging off a fig tree. Now Justin, what's hanging off your branches?” Paul uses fruit to describe these virtues for a reason. Now bear with me just a moment. Think about what fruit tastes like, that sweetness. Think about biting into a peach, or a plum, or an apple. You taste those sugars, those things our bodies require just to exist. It's the energy source for the 30 trillion cells in each of our bodies. But it's not just the sugar that the fruit carries. Oh no. It also carries the seeds. This makes more trees. Where there once was just a seed, there can now be an orchard producing fruit in abundance.

Now Paul gives us nine fruits of the Spirit and even though I am from a Pentecostal background and I have been in some services with preaching that went on for hours, not even I can handle a nine-point sermon. I just want to focus on two in particular. The first fruit, which is love, and the last, which is self-control.

Now this passage starts off as a contrast to what was previously addressed. In this case it's the works of the Flesh. The easiest way to sum those up is, for the most part, they are based in selfishness. It's the mindset that says, “I've got to get what I can while I can get it because all

that matters is what I want right now.” Now the fruits of the Spirit go in a totally different way. They focus outward, on others. It’s completely concerned with how we treat our human family.

The first fruit is love. Like we’ve sung so many times in this sanctuary, “Love, love, love, that’s what it’s all about!”. Although, usually, there are more young and young-at-heart up here, today, y’all just get me. Love is the prime motivation. Love is what gave Jesus the strength to preach a new way of living, a new paradigm, to institute a radical worldview that is still putting fire in the hearts of people all over the world today. That spirit of Love animates us, giving us life and power, motivating us and firing us up to change the world. Dr. Cornel West said famously, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” He’s right. Our sense of justice is intrinsically tied with our love for others.

We can all agree, justice is a fantastic goal for us to work toward. The Bible has multiple passages about it. The problem is, what might look like justice for one person, isn’t justice for another. I admit it, I grew up in the 80’s and 90’s. My idea of justice was shaped by action movies with heroes getting justice with two fists and a lot of explosions! Looking to guys like Bruce Willis, Clint Eastwood, and Kurt Russell as examples. But that’s skewed. That isn’t what real justice is.

It seems like our current national idea of justice is caught up with the *lex talionis*, *ayin tachat ayin*, *shin tachat shin*, and a few other non-English phrases that mean “eye for eye, tooth for tooth”. Unfortunately, this verse in Exodus 24 is all some folks see of the Bible’s demands for justice. It and the older Mesopotamian law codes that it is based on all come from the idea of retributive justice. It’s about punishing the offender. Someone must pay. The problem with retributive justice is who decides what punishment is enough? How much does the transgressor need to suffer? Some scholars say that the portions of the Hebrew Bible talking about the punishments are placing limits on the penalty that can be put on someone, but I don’t know. In our current justice system, as someone who is familiar with both the offender and the victim’s sides, I would argue retributive justice isn’t about justice, it’s just about vengeance and suffering. It’s vendetta with a veneer of legality. That isn’t saying we don’t hold people accountable. Please understand that. This isn’t about just letting things go. It’s about the focus of justice.

The Bible makes thousands of other references to justice, justice for the poor, justice for widows, orphans, justice for the stranger. Justice for those who do not have power, influence, or even a voice in their society. The type of justice that it advocates for, I would argue, is a better form, and it is that of restorative justice. Instead of it satisfying some vendetta, instead of an honor killing or ceremonial punishment, we see the argument for restoring to the victim that which was taken.

The scholar, John Dominic Crossen, says that G_D’s heart is for restorative justice, and all the proof we need is to look at the symmetry of the Bible. In Genesis 1, G_D is creating the heavens and the earth. All that is needed for the plants and animals, of which humanity is a part, is given to us. This planet has food, water, air, everything we need not just to survive but also to thrive. And those of us who read past Genesis 1 also know what a mess has been made. But bookended to Genesis 1 is Revelation 22. It ends with the New Heaven and the New Earth with the Tree of Life, and says that G_D will wipe away every tear, and death will be no more, and mourning and

crying and pain will be no more. This is a beautiful symmetry. The way the Bible starts and the way the Bible ends. G_D restores all of nature to this Edenic state and we, as part of all peoples, are a part of it.

The most dramatic versions of this idea of restorative justice that are not some cosmic fixer-upper but instead are personal, human interventions are seen in Elijah and Jesus's ministry. Elijah, in I Kings 17, sees the widow at Zarephath who has been feeding Elijah from the last of the food meant for her and her son. She's weeping as her son has died, and she asks Elijah, "What do you have against me?" She blames him for causing the death of her son. Then the man of G_D takes the boy's body upstairs and cries out to Heaven to raise him and the miracle takes place, restoring the child to his mother. Please understand that in the Iron Age, there were no pensions, IRAs or 401k's. Most people, unless they were wealthy or in the priestly caste, were subsistence farmers. The elderly depended on their children to be able to provide for them in their later years. If her son is gone, then the widow is going to die from neglect.

In the Gospel of Mark chapter 5, we see a synagogue leader come to Jesus because his daughter is sick and at the point of death. They are making their way to the man's house, but crowds slow them down and there is a healing on the way. But as they are moving through the throng of humanity, someone came from the man's house and told him that it was too late. Jesus goes there anyway. Jesus looks over her body says to the synagogue leader's daughter, "Little girl, get up!" He restored her to her father. But I can hear you thinking, "Justin, what does raising the dead have to do with restorative justice in Texas in the 21st century?" These are extreme examples to display an overarching principle.

We are commanded to do justice. But what does justice look like? I would argue that G_D's idea of justice isn't about us smiting those who have earned the ire of G_D. It's fighting for those who are stepped on and oppressed by a worldview carefully curated by avaricious algorithms and the greed of powerful men and women. It's about restoring what an exploitative system has taken from them. It has monetized the very right to exist.

Isaiah 1:15–17 says,

When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove your evil deeds from before my eyes cease to do evil;¹⁷ learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

According to the New Yorker, DOGE's destruction of USAid has killed over 700,000 people so far and most of them are in the global south. The loss of funding is projected to be responsible for the deaths of over 7 million people by the year 2030. These are people dying for the lack of medicine costing \$0.20/day. Or a mosquito net that costs less than a 20 oz. Coke at a gas station. With SNAP funding changes, according to Aliss Higham at Newsweek, around 5 million people have increased food insecurity. Over a million of those are children. The exact number of those is, just for reference, right around the entire population of Austin.

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In the neighborhood where I grew up, around 75% of all the students at my old elementary school are on free or reduced cost breakfast and lunch. During pandemic, there were enough voices crying out to continue feeding these kids so that they would at least be guaranteed 10 meals a week. I say this because, it's my family's lives who are being saved by this. My niece goes to that school and next year her baby sister will join her there when she starts pre-k.

Now we've all heard that beloved proof text, 2 Thessalonians 3:10

"For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: anyone unwilling to work, should not eat."

But these were people who were not working because they thought Jesus's return was imminent. They were tracking the return of Jesus like an Amazon package, and they had Prime delivery and they had gotten the app update stating he was 10 stops away. This single verse has allowed immense cruelty to be done in the name of "Biblical common sense". But the worst part is, it's a single verse taken out of context. If we are engaging in a conversation that lasts over a thousand years and I say something once in a specific situation. Do you build an entire framing of who I am off of it? No. You look at the things I say over and over again. That's the take away. My judo club, at every practice they would hear me say one thing, like a mantra, "Tuck. Your. Chin." Because I didn't want anyone getting injured. Concussions are not fun. You might not remember a whole bunch of Japanese or Russian terms, but you can remember, when you fall back or to the side, tuck your chin. Why, because I repeated it over and over. "Whatever a man does 100 times a day he shall never forget ." is what one of my coaches would tell us. Yet, some folks cite 2 Thessalonians but ignore the Beatitudes, the Prophets, James, Undisputed Paul. I hate it when people weaponize the Gospel and get G_D to justify their greed or their oppression of others.

I'm fired up right now. I admit it, I'm angry. But our national drug of choice is outrage. And that family, is why we need self-control. Self-control is the difference between a movement and a mob. Self-control is the difference between overthrowing the royalty of France, and the Reign of Terror. It's the difference between a police presence at a protest to make sure no one gets hurt, and protestors getting beaten and shot. Like Miss Rachel says, *"It's OK to have big feelings"*. Which sounds a lot to me like Ephesians 4, *"Be angry, but don't sin."*

If love is the life-giving driving force behind our pursuit of justice, then self-control is the filter of our actions. It's what should keep our focus on what really matters, which, if we are claiming to be pursuing justice as Jesus would have, better have a healthy dose of universal compassion. If I only love those who are lovable, then I am in as sorry a state as those who are actively oppressing others. Again, this is not about giving folks a free pass. This is about restoring that which was taken or denied. Remember, Jesus told us in Matthew 5 that if we've wronged someone, to go and make it right. I bring this up because I'm not delusional enough to think I'll never offend anyone. But, if I expect my request for forgiveness to be met with grace, then I better be ready to extend some of my own.

Understand this isn't like a sold pardon that gets someone out of their obligation to make things right. There is a difference between foregoing punishment and a lack of consequences. If

someone steals, they should make it square. If someone lies, they should confess and tell the truth. If we wrong someone, we have to give space for them to be hurt and for them to heal. And those who do wrong to others, they need a chance to make it right. Should we stop them from hurting others? Of course! We do our best to limit harm, but family, there are some poison ideas out there, lurking under the surface and we want to stay far away from those.

Y'all, I look out and I see more than just a congregation, I see a forest filled with trees of life. Spreading love guided by self-control. And each one of y'all is capable of spreading a thoughtful and universal love wherever you go. With justice and compassion spreading out from each one of you like ripples in a pond when a stone has been thrown. Except, we all amplify the efforts of one another. We compound those effects in the lives of others. So today, look at your branches, what is hanging off of them? Let's bear that good fruit and be trees of life nourishing a hungry world with justice, through love and self-control.

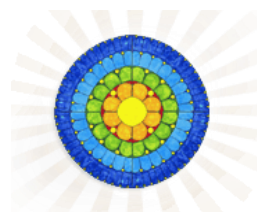
I now leave you to your thoughts.

Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

I know that all of you are going to go out from here wondering how you can be a loving presence with self-control in our wonderful world. So I would remind you that each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. And that spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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