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I once read an article that suggested a healthy way to eat: mix a variety of colors of food in your diet, so I decided to try that idea as I made fruit smoothies for breakfast. Some colors were easy: strawberries for red, blueberries for blue, oranges for orange, banana for yellow, grapes for purple. Other colors were a bit more challenging, such as green. I didn't have any green fruit, such as kiwi, so I added spinach and kale. Even though they weren't fruit and may not sound tasty, when blended together, this mixed fruit drink with a few vegetables was not only delicious, but healthy too!

Paul seemed to have the same idea in mind when he wrote a letter to the church in Galatia. He suggested a balanced diet of fruitful behaviors, what he called fruits of the Spirit. Maybe you even memorized these at one point in your life. Let's see if we can name them: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Just as making a fruit smoothie for breakfast offers me health, Paul suggested that a mixture of

fruitful behavior offers health to not only the church, but to the broader society around us. He suggested that if we live by the fruit of the Spirit, we will be guided to avoid behaviors that tear us apart, such as arrogance, competition against one another, or envy.

That sounds wonderful, doesn't it, but how many times have you found it difficult to live this way: do you always offer the fruit of *generosity*, or have you sometimes wanted stuff for yourself rather than sharing it? Have you always been *patient*, or do you sometimes get in a hurry? Do you always have *joy*, or do you sometimes get grumpy? How many of us have expressed loss of control rather than *self-control*?

I imagine we're more like a bag of mixed fruit with a few pieces of other ingredients mixed in. Sometimes we are a smoothie with fruits of the Spirit, and at other times we're an odd mixture of not-so-tasty ingredients.

One might object to this focus on fruitful behaviors by quoting another part of Paul's letter:

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“For freedom Christ has set us free.” One may ask: Why focus on behaviors, for doesn’t freedom mean we can do anything we want? As we prepare to celebrate our Independence Day next weekend, some may want to interpret the idea of freedom to mean we can do whatever we want, and may leave us with other questions: Does freedom mean we can storm our nation’s Capitol to stop an election and not have consequences? Does freedom mean we can hoard resources so that others go hungry? Does freedom mean we can use a weapon against anyone who insults us?

Paul suggested that we measure our freedom by how we serve one another in love, not by what we get for ourselves. It appears that some in the early church were confused by their newfound freedom since they no longer had to follow the religious regulations of dietary laws or circumcision. In hearing that they no longer had to do these things to be part of the church, some began to wonder if they had to follow *any* rules. Living in Galatia, they saw many examples of other ways of living,

including worshipers known as Galli who castrated themselves and those who worshiped the emperor. Is that part of freedom too?

As one commentary noted, “Having accepted Paul’s message of freedom, the Galatians found, ironically, that the freedom of the gospel made them anxious and gave them a precarious social identity. They were unsure now about the moral rules for everyday living.”¹ It’s a paradox—you’re free from religious law, and yet, you are to serve one another in kindness, so you’re not free to do anything you want that harms another person’s faith.

I think we’ve forgotten that basic idea in our society, for we focus on instead on what I call “Me Freedom,” getting what I want, regardless of how it impacts those around me. For example, those who speak for the freedom of guns without restrictions take away the safety of those who want limits against those who use guns for violence to kill school children. Those who want limits on guns take away the freedom of those who want guns for

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safety or hunting. Both sides want freedom, but the danger occurs when we impose Me Freedom on someone else.

Another example: Those who wanted to overturn abortion laws take away the freedom of women who face life and death decisions about their own health in a pregnancy, while those who do not want to restrict abortion limits take away the freedom of the unborn child. Freedom—it's a paradox, but Paul recognized that we measure our freedom through our fruitful living and serving one another. Sometimes that involves thinking about the other person before ourselves, even those with whom we disagree. What's good for everyone is a better measure of freedom than Me Freedom.

Paul emphasized the freedom that comes from following Christ, but he also knew the dangers of too much freedom, as one person suddenly recognized while having a conversation while riding with a child in a car.

Not long ago I was riding with a friend of mine when he was taking his eight-year-old son to school. While driving down the freeway

the boy noticed a large flatbed truck with a forklift on the back. His eyes widened and he said, "Boy, I sure would like one of those."

Curious as to why an eight-year-old would want a forklift, I inquired, "What would you do with a forklift?"

With a real determined look on his face he said, "Anything I want to."²

Some people choose to use their freedom like a forklift, doing anything they want, using their Me Freedom to push people around. But that's not what Paul suggested our religious freedom is for. He instead used the imagery of the fruits of the Spirit—when one follows God, the fruit of our lives offers a sweetness to the world, making our communities better places to live for everyone.

Last weekend during the Poor People's Campaign rally in Washington D.C., I listened to stories of those who traveled from all 50 states to talk about the challenges that 140 million people face in our nation. For four hours we stood or found a place to sit to listen to the pains of those faced with economic challenges, those who struggle with

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health due to environment issues, those who have low wages that prevent them from climbing out of poverty. The event encouraged us to take steps forward together, not backward.³

We are a nation of mixed fruit—many colors and shapes, tastes and textures—and yet, we are healthier for all the colors and tastes within our nation. That’s what freedom is all about—providing a place where our mixed fruit can grow, where even you and I can live serving one another with

gentleness and kindness, sprinkled with the sweetness of love, joy, and peace, along with a topping of self-control and generosity. As we prepare to celebrate our nation’s freedom, let’s also celebrate the mixed fruit that comes from the fruit of the Spirit.

¹ Brad R. Braxton, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year 3, Vol. 3.

² Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #358.

³ www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/june18