

Spiritual Fruits? or Just Religious Nuts?

GALATIANS 5:13-23 (NRSV) *For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.* ¹⁴*For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* ¹⁵*If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.* ¹⁶*Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.* ¹⁷*For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.* ¹⁸*But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.* ¹⁹*Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.* ²²*By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.*

I've wanted to use this title for a sermon ever since I heard another preacher use it several years ago. His point was that a lot of folk claiming to be Christian are really just "religious nuts," and they don't really bear "spiritual fruit." And he did a lot of finger-pointing at "them," and telling us what's wrong with "their" faith.

Well, I have something else in mind; in fact, I want to suggest that it is we who are the "Religious Nuts!" In fact, I believe we're a lot like a can of mixed nuts.

Now, when I was younger, I like to pick out the cashews from the mixed nuts. The problem was: so did Jo Lynn. We'd pick up a can of mixed nuts at the store, get in the car, I'd reach into the sack, pull out the can of mixed nuts, pop the little ring and peel back the top, reach in, and ALREADY Jo Lynn would have eaten all the cashews! She was that fast!

Early in our marriage, it got to be a problem. Big fights! I mean, our marriage was on the line! "Jo Lynn, you've eaten all the cashews!"

"No, I didn't! I only had five."

"You only had five? I only had three! Don't try to tell me there were only eight cashews in this can! Look at the picture on the can! There were more than eight cashews in there!" [...like some of the earth-shattering things you fight about with your spouse, right?] It was terrible!

I'll never forget the day all that changed. We were at the store. We were a two-cart family, by then. When we were first married we'd just get one cart, and I'd follow her around; but it just got on my nerves. She was so slow! I mean, sometimes she'd spend fifteen minutes in lettuce!

So, some time while I was in seminary we came up with the idea: tow carts, two lists. I'd not have to stand there like a nervous wreck. I'd have my own cart. I'd usually start with cereal: to over to the cereal and check out the prizes in the cereal boxes.

One day I was wheeling around in the grocery store [with my own cart] and I came to the nut section. As I was reaching for a can of mixed nuts, I spotted a can of cashews! 100% cashews! Nothing but cashews!

I thought, "Boy! I'll bet they really make you pay for this!" And they did! It cost \$1.60 more than the can of mixed nuts, same size.

Remember: I was in seminary. Money was tight. A little voice in my head said, "Well, Robinson, you gonna' do it? You gonna' spend that extra money? Remember your friend, Ralph? Always broke because he's always buying expensive things and living beyond his means: fancy cars, fancy; clothes... You gonna' be a good steward and practice good money-management? or are you gonna' `blow it' on everything you see?"

Then, another voice in my head said, "Well, REALLY now! Sometimes it's worth an extra buck or two to get what you really want!"

So I put the can of cashews in the cart and went to look for Jo Lynn. I found her over in dairy products, and said, "Look! Pure Cashews! No peanuts, no pecans, no Brazil nuts... Just cashews! Shall we buy them?"

She said, "I don't care."

I said, "They're \$1.60 more than mixed nuts. What do you think?"

She said, "You do whatever you want to do. You decide."

Well, I couldn't decide. What was I going to do? But, it did feel good, wheeling around the store—my own cart—100% cashews in there.

PEOPLE NOTICED! PEOPLE SAW! Women would follow me with their eyes as we passed in the aisle, and say to each other:

"Did you see that?"

"Yeah. 100% cashews! - And he's so young!"

And they would look at me and I could see the admiration and envy in their eyes! And I decided it would be worth the extra money just for what the cashews would do for my self-image; so we bought the cashews.

When we got out to the car, I reached into the sack, got out the can of cashews, popped the little ring and peeled back the top, and there we were: sitting in Albertson's parking lot, eating cashews and waving to the admiring passers-by.

And then, after about a dozen cashews, I experienced the biggest disappointment of my life! There's not much to cashews. Cashews, by themselves, are pretty boring, really. ...just a "pop" and a "crunch", and salt. That's it. There's no joy in cashews when they're by themselves. It's really in combination with and in contrast to the peanuts and the filberts and the almonds that cashews really stand out.

Left to ourselves, we'd all do what I thought I wanted to do: the cashews would all get into a can together, and the peanuts would get into a can together, and the almonds would "get smoked" and then get into a can together [some people always have to have a gimmick.]

But here we are: sitting elbow-to-elbow: former Baptists, Presbyterian, Methodists, Episcopalians... Republican, Democrat... Teachers, lawyers, retired, full-time... all with one thing in common: IF YOU KNOW THE LORD YOU CAN GET IN THE CAN.

There are many differences between us; and yet, together we experience the mystery of God's grace. I would submit that that experience is not in spite of our differences. It's because of our differences.

You may remember my metaphor of a choir. When a choir sings in unison, if they get the notes right and in tune, and if they get the rhythm right, it's beautiful. But a choir is at its best when singing rich harmony—harmony produced precisely because the sopranos, altos, tenors and basses are singing different notes at the same time.

Pastor John Pavlovitz is one of my favorite Christian writers. Recently he wrote:

- **I believe we are all one interdependent community.**
- **I believe people and places are made better by diversity.**
- **I believe people shouldn't be forced to abide by anyone else's religion.**
- **I believe non-American human beings have as much value as American ones.**
- **I believe generosity is greater than greed, compassion better than contempt, and kindness superior to derision.**
- **I believe there is enough in this world for everyone: enough food, enough money, enough room, enough care—if we unleash our creativity and unclench our fists.**

Our differences enrich our relationships and our ministry—and our faith; and when we blend our diverse gifts into a harmony of ministries, that's when those spiritual fruits come in: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And when that's what we produce—when the world sees those things emerging out of the harmony of our ministries—then the mystery of God's will is revealed, and God is glorified.

Now, project that on a global scale. Isn't it amazing that the voices most frequently heard proclaiming this message come from the secular world: a Coca Cola commercial; a Beatles song?

As we come to the Lord's Table, we come in the awareness that Christians express faith in diverse ways. Some disagree. Some are polar opposites of others. We don't even agree on what happens at this table. But we are united here by our common need for God's grace. We come, acknowledging Christians all over this planet gather today at a table and confess, "Jesus is Lord."