

*The Fruits of the Spirit* passage from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*:

“But what happens when we live God’s way? God brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good—crucified.”

Earlier this month, in St. Paul, Minnesota, Bill Moyers gave the keynote address at the annual National Conference for Media Reform. **In the course of his speech, he told the story of a Cherokee tribal elder telling his grandson about the battle the old man was waging inside himself.** He said, “It is between two wolves, my son. One is an evil wolf: Anger, jealousy, sorrow, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.”

“The other is the good wolf: Joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.”

**The boy thought this over for a minute, and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf wins?”**

The old Cherokee replied, “The one I feed.”

We’ve been thinking and talking about maturity. Today, I want to leave us with this final thought: Mature people are those who enhance life, not diminish it. **Or staying with our analogy—mature people know two wolves battle within them, and give careful thought to the wolf they feed.** They feed the habits and attitudes that enhance life. They starve the habits and attitudes that diminish life.

This past school year, Spencer told us he wanted to run track and cross country. He has never been big on organized sports, so we were surprised, but also pleased. **He has an abundance of energy which he expends by tormenting Sam, so we were grateful to see it spent in more appropriate endeavors.** Like most Gulley men, Spencer’s strong suit has never been discipline. We tend to be impulsive and like to put off until tomorrow what we should be doing today. **We’re not as disciplined as we should be.**

At the start of summer vacation, Spencer said he was going to wake up every morning at 5:45 and run. **I didn’t say anything, but I thought, “Yeah,**

**right.”** But his discipline has surprised me. I was speaking with his coach the other day and he told me, “Spencer’s one of our hardest workers. He’s always on time and he really pushes himself.”

**I asked, “Tall boy, brown hair, Tennessee Volunteers baseball cap?”**

“That’s the one,” he said.

It’s really paid off. His times are better. His endurance has improved. **But what’s really neat is that self-discipline, training, and practice are transferable skills.** We tend to think those habits are only useful in athletics, but they’re necessary in any endeavor. **If we want to feed the good wolf, if we want to cultivate the habits and attitudes that enhance life, that takes self-discipline, training, and practice, too.**

Think for a moment about how many of our actions are reactive. Someone does or says something, and we react with little thought or mindfulness. **Perhaps they said something that hurt our feelings, or made us feel threatened, or angry, or sad.** We respond on an unconscious level, almost automatically, with little consideration for the consequences of our actions.

I know a man who worked for years for a poorly managed company. **It appeared the company would fail without a large infusion of cash, so in a rash moment, fearing the loss of his job, he wrote them a large check.** Not surprisingly, because the company owners had a history of poor business

decisions, they didn't use his money wisely either, the company folded, the man lost his money, and almost lost his home.

I was visiting with him. **He was having what we call a teachable moment.** He said, "Why did I do that?"

I asked him if that was a rhetorical question or if he really wanted an answer.

He said, "I want an answer."

I said, **"Well, I think the answer to why you did that is because you're impulsive. You take irrational risks without advice or reflection, and while emotions are important, you rely too heavily on them at the expense of reason and careful consideration."**

I'd been rehearsing that speech for years, but he'd never asked for it, so I'd never had the opportunity to deliver it. **He landed another job, tried for awhile to make good decisions, but lacked self-discipline and is headed right back to where he was, feeding the bad wolf, making choices that diminish life instead of enhance it.**

That's an example of business and finance, but it's not limited to those things. **We all know people who make the same bad decisions, over and over, in relationships, in family life, in their spiritual lives, in their vocations.** Eventually, they ask themselves, "How did I get here? This isn't where I want to be in life. How did I get here?"

We got there because we stopped practicing, we stopped training. **We got there because we forgot to feed the habits and attitudes that enhance life.** We got there because at critical times we were reactive instead of thoughtful, reckless instead of deliberate, rash instead of wise. We got there because we forgot we had to practice good habits and attitudes.

**It was really fun watching Tiger Woods win the U.S. Open.** Well, technically, I didn't watch it. I always find out about these things after they've happened, so have to see it on YouTube. But just amazing golf. The 13<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> holes. Incredible. He made it look so easy. **But how many times do you suppose he's practiced those shots?** How many hours do you think he's spent perfecting his game? I bet for every shot he's ever taken in a tournament, he's taken hundreds of thousands, if not millions, in practice.

How often do we practice the habits and virtues of love, of careful listening and thinking? How often do we practice the habits of generosity, compassion, truth, and faith? **If we wait until we're in a crisis before we start practicing clear thinking, we're going to be in trouble.** If we play fast and loose with the truth, we'll be at a loss when integrity is crucial. If we're cheap and stingy, we will be ill-equipped when situations require generosity. **So we need to practice these virtues every chance we get.**

In the book of James, in the first chapter, he writes, “Count it all joy, brothers and sisters, when you meet various trials...” **Count it all joy.** Read that verse a blue million times. Never did like it, never tried to understand it. I’d read it and think, “Yeah, right...treat everything that happens to you as a joy. Sure.”

Then I read that passage in Eugene Peterson’s commentary and had an *Aha!* moment. **“Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.”**

Don’t try to get out of anything prematurely. Let your tests and challenges do their work, so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

**The tests and challenges we face in life, and we all face them, present us with two choices.** We can say, “Well, this is terrible. Other people have made my life so hard. Nothing ever works for me. I can never catch a break.

My problems and challenges are so overwhelming, I am powerless to fix them.” **That is a choice many, many people make.** They feed the bad wolf.

But James talks about another response available to us when life is hard. **It’s the decision to feed the good wolf.** It happens when we say, “I am grateful for this opportunity to be a better, stronger person. This is good practice for me. I will not only meet this challenge, I will be a better person for having faced it. I will respond to this difficulty with love, hope, and serenity, with kindness, empathy, and generosity, with truth, compassion, and faith. Thank God my life hasn’t always been so easy that I would have been ill-equipped to handle my difficulties when they arose.”

**There are two wolves within each of us.** Which one will you feed?