

Series: The Fruit of the Spirit

Title: “Fruit,” Not Fruits

Text: Ephesians 5:9; Galatians 5:22-23

Lesson 2

I got my first job when I was fourteen years old. It involved bagging groceries at a local grocery store. As a youngster, I would have never imagined that putting groceries in cheap plastic bags could have been so complicated. My first several days on the job involved what seemed to be intense training. New hires were quizzed after we were shown a series of VHS tapes that explained the ins and outs of the grocery business. We were given tours around the store to learn about the various departments.

I still vividly remember being introduced to one department in particular — the produce department! In my mind, I can still see the sign hanging over islands of fruit. Bright letters informed shoppers that they were in the land of fruits and vegetables. I feel a bit embarrassed to admit that, up to that point in my life, I didn't know what produce was. I remember my shift manager explaining that produce was something produced from the ground; thus, fruits and vegetables were called produce!

Years later, I learned about a different type of produce. The Bible speaks of a spiritual fruit that can grow in the lives of believers. In Galatians 5:22-23, we read, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things.” During the earliest years of my Christian experience, I lived with ignorance concerning what the Bible teaches about the fruit of the Spirit. My mentality was centered on good works. I believed that I was saved by grace, but I felt being a good Christian was dependent on my abilities.

Spirit vs. Flesh

Interestingly, a similar misunderstanding is what actually motivated the apostle Paul to write the words we have in Galatians 5:22-23. He wrote to readers who were being duped and deceived by false teachers who expected Christians to obey the Mosaic Law. In particular, they made circumcision a requirement for faithful Christian living.

The Mosaic Law was never intended to be a permanent statute for God's people of all generations. It contained requirements for the nation of Israel. The purpose of Moses' Law was to preserve a special people for God who could serve as a conduit to bring God's anointed deliver to humankind (Genesis 3:15, 12:1-3). Once the Messiah had come, there was no longer a need for the civil and ceremonial laws found in Moses' writings.

The readers of the letter to the Galatians were confused concerning these matters. That's why Paul opened his letter by saying, “I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from him who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6). If the Galatians really wanted to live lives that pleased God, they needed to discover the secrets of the Spirit. They were attempting to please God through the flesh. Man-centered rules and regulations would never produce things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The purpose of this book is to help believers understand the way in which the Spirit works in the lives of believers to produce the life of Christ. Many Christians are confused about this subject nowadays. They are like I was as a bag boy at fourteen years old. They are confused about produce, not understanding how the Spirit works in their lives to produce the character God desires. To begin, we will talk about small grammatical detail from Paul's words in Galatians 5:22. Many may not notice this detail, but it has a major implications on how the Spirit works in our lives to produce spiritual fruit.

Fruit is a Result of Growth

The word rendered "fruit" in Galatians 5:22 is one that was used in the ancient world of produce that came from either a tree or vine. Generally, it spoke of "that which is produced by growth."¹ Paul qualified the word that was often used in the world of agriculture by adding the modifier "of the Spirit." In the original language of the New Testament, he used language that depicted a relationship one thing had to another.²

In particular, the syntax of Paul's grammar pointed to the source from which something came.³ Paul intended to emphasize the source from which all Christian virtue flows — the Spirit of God. One has commented on the significance of Paul's language by saying it "suggests that all these spiritual qualities, and many more, are the spontaneous product of the presence of the Spirit of Christ within the heart of the Christian."⁴

In the first-century Hellenistic world, Greek philosophy loomed large in the minds of many. One branch of philosophers, the Stoics, were known for their famous lists of virtues. In their thinking, four cardinal virtues reigned supreme — temperance, prudence, fortitude, and justice.⁵ Paul often gave lists of virtues. In doing so, he listed much more than four qualities, showing the Christian character extends far beyond the bounds of human morality.

In addition, he always linked Christian character to the presence of Christ within the human soul. For Paul, the real Christian life resulted in a real, robust change in one's disposition and demeanor. It changed the way one thought, talked, and acted. Because of the Spirit of God within the soul of a believer, real change and transformation was possible (2 Corinthians 5:17). His readers needed to learn to live according to such realities. Their pursuit of hollow, legalistic religion had duped them. They were religious, but their empty religion would never produce real change in their lives.

¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 431.

² Brooks and Winberry, 9.

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 431.

⁴ Cole, 221.

⁵ Robertson, 313.

“Fruit” vs. “Fruits”

Paul introduced the spiritual produce that comes from the Holy Spirit by saying, “But the *fruit* of the Spirit is...” (Galatians 5:22). Keen observers will notice something peculiar about Paul’s words. Though he listed nine virtues that come from the Spirit, he spoke of them with a singular noun. He said “fruit,” not “fruits.” What was his intent in his usage of language? Is there special meaning for us?

Indeed, it seems Paul was intentional in his use of the singular noun. Earlier, when he spoke of the results of fleshly living, he listed out what he called “the works of the flesh.” When one lives according to the passions and principles of mere humanity, he or she engages in a multitude of ungodly acts. Each flows from different passions and promptings. Sometimes the lust of the eyes drive behavior. Other times, the pride of life or the lust of the flesh are the culprit for ungodly acts (1 John 2:16-17).

The depravity that can come from mere humanity is both multifaceted and complex. The words of Jeremiah are true — “The heart is more deceitful than anything else, and incurable—who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). In light of the principle of indwelling sin, all must say with Paul, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). Paul’s use of the singular noun in reference to the result of Spirit-centered living provided a contrast to flesh-centered living. Whereas the works of the flesh come from a multitude of debased desires within the human heart, the demonstrations of Christ’s character in one’s life come from one singular source — the Holy Spirit.

Avoiding the Checklist Mentality

Paul’s reference to one *fruit* informs us of something that is really important when it comes to the production of Christian character. When godly virtues are listed in the New Testament, as they are in our text, they are never given as a checklist to be followed. Paul did not intend to call his readers to pursue after a multitude of moralistic commands. Instead, he intended to demonstrate the result of Spirit-centered living. When one walks in the Spirit, a single, divine work takes place in that person’s soul. Through that work, a multitude of spiritual “fruit” appears.

I used to read virtue lists like the one given in Galatians 5:22 and walk away with the wrong impression. I would dissect each term, trying to ascertain its meaning. Once I felt I had a grasp of what was involved with a certain quality, I would begin to attempt to assimilate it into my life. I believed that once I mastered the first virtue I could move on to the second. Approaching a catalogue of positive character traits like the one found in Galatians 5:22 was daunting to say the least! Mastery of nine different virtues was needed! Maybe if I worked on one a month I could exhibit some growth within a year’s time.

I naively regarded the fruit of the Spirit as I had previously regarded other lists in my life. When I was in college, I took a public speaking class in which the teacher required all students to memorize ten principles of effective public speaking. The first principle was something similar to what follows — “The Effective Speaker has a message to deliver, has a definite purpose in giving that message, and is consumed with the necessity of getting that message across and accomplishing that purpose.”

To get a good grade, I had to be able to write that principle out, along with nine other principles of effective public speaking. Not only did I have to memorize ten

principles. I had to put them into practice. All of my speeches were measured by my adherence to ten rules.

Now, please don't misunderstand me. I am grateful for what I learned about public speaking. In some domains of life, there is a need for adherence to strict lists and rules. However, Paul did not intend his list of "the fruit of the Spirit" to work in such a way. The apostle was not an advocate of cold, calloused checklist of Christian character requirements. Those who approach the fruit of the Spirit with such a perspective will be liable to spiritual trouble.

It took some year's of frustration and failure to learn that I was seeing things the wrong way. My own struggles, along with my study of Scripture, begin to shed light on the real reason behind various virtue lists in Scripture. Paul's use of the word "fruit," as opposed to the word "fruits," was an eye opener. He used the singular form of the noun to show that all nine of the virtues grow from a singular source. When one walks in the Spirit, as Paul encouraged believers to do in Galatians 5:16, things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control will grow.

Relationship vs. Religion

Paul's teaching was in alignment with that of Jesus. In John 15, our Lord taught His disciples how to produce the character qualities He desired. In doing so, He revealed that Christian virtue is not produced through mere willpower. Neither self-mastery nor a regiment of behavior-modification techniques can produce the life of Christ. Something deeper and more powerful is needed.

Jesus revealed that it is an abiding relationship with Him that leads to the production of Christian character. He said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me" (John 15:5). The word rendered "remains" is one that meant to abide, stay, or rest. It carried the idea of "to have one's home at." As used in John 15, the word was intended to evoke thoughts of close, personal connection, the type of meaningful interaction that might take place in a home amongst family members.

Jesus' teaching unearths a hallmark of true Christianity. The Christian life is primarily about a relationship. Such a relationship is with the one, true God who exists in three persons — God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:20). The very nature of the Trinity teaches us that our obedience toward and worship of the Lord must be relational in nature. God Himself enjoys a sense of interrelatedness amongst the Trinity, and He has similarly created us to function in a trinity of relationships.

Jesus alluded to this reality in John 17:21 when He prayed on our behalf saying, "May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me." God exists in what we could call a triangle of relationships. There is a perfect balance of interaction between the three persons of the Trinity. In a similar way, Christians have the capacity to function like God, enjoying a triangle of relationships with self, God, and others. This is what it means to be made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26).

One of Jesus' teachings known as "the Great Commandment" accentuates all of this. When asked which is the greatest of the Lord's commands, Jesus responded,

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-38). God enjoys a relationship between three persons. We do too. Our relational triangle consists of a relationship with God, relationships with other people, and a healthy relationship with self. It is our relationship with God that makes all the difference in life. When we “remain” in Him, as Jesus said, something transformational takes place in our lives.

Relational Realities

Many assume that a relationship with God must be so transcendent and spiritually mystical that one cannot define it. In reality, a relationship with God is like any other relationship in a sense. It involves soul-to-soul bonding through the two most common relational activities — talking and listening.

Prayer is Talking to God.

From studying Scripture, we learn that we engage in these two basic relational activities with God through a few special channels. Prayer is our means of talking to God. Scripture reading is our means of hearing from Him. In regard to the first, Genesis speaks of the way in which “people began to call on the name of the Lord” shortly after Adam and Eve’s fall (Genesis 4:26). Though humanity initially enjoyed delightful interaction with God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8), all of that changed after sin entered into the human condition. Spiritual death brought separation from God (Genesis 3:22-24). To talk to God, it was required for humankind to “call” (Genesis 4:26) out to Him. Prayer becomes the means of communicating with God. Such activity requires a degree of faith on the part of the prayer (Luke 18:8).

Scripture is How God Speaks to Us.

Scripture is a record of God’s special revelation of Himself. While many throughout human history have claimed to have heard from God, the Bible teaches that the Lord chose to specially reveal Himself through prophets (Hebrews 1:1), apostles (Hebrews 2:3), and His Son (Hebrews 1:2). He inspired men to record the revelation He gave to this group of people (2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:20-21). We now have their account preserved for us in a book we call the Bible. When we read it, we hear from God.

Don’t Forget the Spirit and the Saints.

Prayer and Bible reading are our means of maintaining an abiding relationship with God. To these two activities, we could also add some others. In particular, I think of the inner-witness of the Spirit and the gathering of God’s people. The Lord uses both of these channels to bless us and build us up in our relationship with Him. They facilitate and strengthen our attempts at listening to God and talking to God.

In regard to the inner-witness of the Spirit, the Bible says, “The Spirit himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:12). In ways unseen, and in ways that are hard to precisely explain, the Holy Spirit of God prompts God’s children, reminding them of His truth and leading them in accordance with His will. Jesus spoke of these realities in John 16:7-13. No discussion of what it means to maintain a relationship with God would be complete without mention of this truth. The

Christian life is a Spirit-directed life. It is for this reason that the Bible says things like “don’t grieve God’s Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 4:30), “be filled by the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18), and “don’t stifle the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

Those who really abide in Christ know that the inner-promptings of the Spirit are a critical part of their relationship with God. Without knowledge of the Spirit’s leadership, Christianity is reduced to a mere textbook, empty, creed-based religion centered on cold ethics and dogma. Without the Spirit’s indwelling, there is no real Christian living. This is why Paul instructed the Galatians about their need to “walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16).

It is also worth noting that the people of God have a pivotal part to play in one’s abiding relationship with Christ. The Bible instructs believers to be faithful to Lord’s Day gatherings for good reason. It is in assembling with God’s people that we often receive the encouragement we need to press on in our walk with God (Hebrews 10:24-25). The Lord has given spiritual gifts (Romans 12:6-8) and spiritual leaders (Ephesians 4:11) to equip us and build us up in the faith (Ephesians 4:12-15). When we receive spiritual nourishment from the gathering of God’s people, we are better positioned to truly abide in Christ.

A Real Relationship

Seen according to the aforementioned realities, a relationship with Christ is not an empty, mystical thing. It involves real communication, definite listening and talking. Through the Scriptures, prayer, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, and the assembling of ourselves with other believers, we experience a relational connection with Christ. We talk to Him through prayer, and we hear from Him through His Word being read, taught, or preached. It is through such an abiding relationship that His Spirit works in our souls to transform us and produce the spiritual fruit He desires.

Prognosis vs. Diagnosis

Paul’s use of the singular word “fruit” is instructive for us. It reveals that the virtues of Galatians 5:22-23 should not be regarded as a spiritual checklist. It also hints at the fact that such virtues emanate from a spiritual relationship. With these things in mind, I would like to propose a way of looking at the fruit of the Spirit that I believe can transform our understanding of Paul’s teaching.

Paul never intended to give a list for believers to follow. His aim was different than the Stoics. His focus wasn’t on prognosis. It was on diagnosis.

You know the difference between prognosis and diagnosis, don’t you? The first is concerned with a course of treatment, a pathway to health. The second is focused on discerning diseases and deficiencies. Many suffer a spiritual breakdown when it comes to the fruit of the Spirit because they regard his list of virtues as a pathway to spiritual maturity.

Paul never intended to give his readers a list of rules or virtues to follow. He was focused on diagnosis, not prognosis. He wanted to give his readers a way of discerning whether or not they were living according to the Spirit or the flesh. If they were walking in accordance with flesh-oriented religion, they shouldn’t have been surprised if the things mentioned in Galatians 5:19 were present in their lives. If they were living according to the Spirit, the fruit of Galatians 5:22-23 would appear.

Going back to the difference between prognosis and diagnosis, I can remember a visit I once made to the emergency room. After having driven myself to the emergency room in the late evening hours, doctors quickly ordered an MRI. For the entire day, I had been suffering abdominal pain.

Prior to my midnight trip, I had tried everything I could think of to get relief. I ate a good number of antacids, as I thought I was suffering from indigestion; I ate several plain baked potatoes, as I was told potatoes could help alleviate gas pains; and I went for a three mile run, as I was told that running would break up trapped gas. Finally, I went out and got myself a delicious cookies and cream milkshake. Since nothing seemed to work, a milkshake sounded like a good idea!

When the results from the MRI returned, the problem was exposed — I had appendicitis! That was the diagnosis. I was sick. My appendix was enflamed. The reason for my pain was made clear.

The prognosis was altogether a different matter. I was sick, but there was a prescribed course of action. I needed surgery, and I needed it immediately. The doctor informed me that I would go under anesthesia and that he would remove my appendix within a couple of hours.

Do you see the difference between a diagnosis and a prognosis? If we apply that difference to our study of the fruit of the Spirit, we can benefit greatly. Paul did not mean his list of nine different virtues to be regarded as a prognosis. The virtues of love, joy, peace, patience, and the like were to be seen as a diagnostic test. If such things were absent from the lives of the Galatian believers, they would know that something was amiss spiritually.

The prognosis for spiritual sickness in Galatia was the Holy Spirit. If one sensed he or she was deficient in any of the nine virtues Paul listed, he or she could be assured that a greater experience of Spirit-filled living was needed. We know this was Paul's intent because he sometimes provided virtue lists that were different than the one contained in Galatians 5:22-23. In Ephesians 5:9-10, he said, "Walk as children of light — for the fruit of the light consists of all goodness, righteousness, and truth — testing what is pleasing to the Lord."

The Bible uses several metaphors to speak of the experience of the Christian life — "live by faith" (Romans 1:17), "abide in Christ" (John 15:4-5), "walk in the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22), "walk in the light" (Ephesians 5:9), and so on. All of these metaphors referred to one singular experience — a faith-based life in which one aligns his or her life with the realities of God and thus experiences the transformational work of God's Spirit in his or her soul. Paul's intent was to force his readers to examine whether or not they were really living the true Christian life. He provided a diagnostic test by listing nine virtues to encourage them toward the right prognosis for Christian living (walking in the Spirit).

Man-Centered vs. Spirit-Centered

At the end of the day, Paul's main aim in listing out the fruit of the Spirit was to show the difference between man-centered religion and Spirit-centered religion. Mere humanity can indeed produce a level of dignified living that has an appearance of godliness. We all perhaps know non-Christians who live decent, praiseworthy lives.

Such exceptions do not disprove Paul's point in Galatians 5:22-23. They actually reinforce the need for what he taught.

While the majority of humanity attempts to produce respectable character through their own effort, there is a better way. The Spirit of God can produce the character God desires through His supernatural working within the human soul. Paul's use of the word "fruit" was meant to be an antonym for his use of the word "works" in Galatians 5:19. He wanted his readers to be aware of the true pathway to abundant Christian living. One eighteenth-century theologian rightly said the apostle seemed "to take delight to speak of salutary and praiseworthy results under this beautiful figure" of fruit.⁶ Indeed, it is a beautiful thing when the Spirit yields its fruit in the life of a believer. The Holy Spirit can do in an instant what it takes the flesh years to accomplish!

⁶ Brown, 305.