

August 16, 2020

Fruit of the Spirit

Summary and Goal

Paul directed the Galatians to walk in the Spirit instead of giving into the desires of the flesh. One of the ways he taught to identify the manner in which one was walking was by discerning the fruit that was evident in the person's life. As Jesus Himself taught at the close of the Sermon on the Mount, the fruit of the tree will always reveal the nature of the tree that produces it.

Main Passages

Matthew 7:13-23 (with Galatians 5:16-26 as background)

Session Outline

1. The Two Ways in Life. (Matthew 7:13-14)
2. The Fruit Reveals the Nature of the Tree. (Matthew 7:15-20)
3. The Fruit Reveals Relationship. (Matthew 7:21-23)

Theological Theme

Justification (salvation by faith) is inextricably linked to sanctification (growing in Christlikeness).

Christ Connection

The life that Jesus modeled during His earthly ministry is the pattern into which His followers will grow under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Missional Application

As believers grow in their Christlikeness, they increasingly bear witness to the world of the love of Christ. The love of Christ, lived out among believers, offers hope and light to a world of darkness and confusion.

Introduction

As Paul continued to encourage the believers in Galatia, he focused their attention on living holy lives as a way of both combating the legalistic doctrine of the false teachers and remaining unified in their faith fellowship. As he did so, Paul included a list of the expressions of the fruit of the Spirit that the believers should expect to see in a growing capacity in the lives of true believers. He urged the believers to continue in holiness and, as they did, the fruit of the Spirit would continually develop in their lives.

The harmony of the believers in their faith fellowship had tremendous bearing on their ability to testify to the goodness of the God they served. If they could not even demonstrate the love of Christ to one another, for instance, how could the unbelieving world around them be expected to take seriously their efforts to preach the Gospel to others? To that end, Paul was addressing both the health and the mission of this Galatian network of churches. What made the matter all the more difficult was the presence of those false teachers who subverted true doctrine and embraced and expressed licentiousness and fleshliness.

Jesus taught pointedly about the importance of the inevitable fruit that a person's life bears, which revealed the character of the person. As a part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' most famous sermon, Jesus taught that no amount of posturing or pretending could cover up a person's true heart condition. The fruit of their lives would reveal the truth – both to man and to God. Jesus' teaching about the fruit of a person's life is the subject of this week's lesson and is found in Matthew 7:13-23.

- Why do you think the ability for a church to act in a Christlike way toward each other is so indicative of the fruitfulness of their ministries to those outside the church?

- Who in your life have you witnessed demonstrate a Christ-like demeanor in the midst of tense or volatile conditions? How did watching that person handle himself or herself impact you?
- What type of influence do you desire to have on others in light of your view of Christ? How has that changed over the years? How often do you consider this topic?

Biblical Background

The Gospel of Matthew was written by the apostle of the same name, who had been a tax collector until Jesus called him to follow Him. Matthew was also known as Levi, as he was more commonly referred to in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. Each of the gospel writers demonstrated distinct interests in the writing of their versions of Jesus' life and ministry. Matthew's Gospel was written to primarily Greek-speaking Jewish believers. As such, Matthew spent more concerted effort to connect the life and ministry of Jesus with the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. Matthew quoted the Old Testament much more frequently than the other synoptic writers (Mark and Luke) and even opened his Gospel account with the lineage of Jesus, which proved His Davidic lineage.

The Sermon on the Mount, which included this week's passage, is one of the most widely studied literary passages in history – by biblical and secular scholars alike. Due to its literary beauty and practical wisdom, the Sermon of the Mount has been one of the most quotable bodies of wisdom in any discipline. For all of its accolades as a body of literature, however, the Sermon on the Mount contained Jesus' most expansive body of teaching on what the "kingdom of heaven" is like.

1. The Two Ways in Life. (Matthew 7:13-14)

Verse 13-14 marked the beginning of Jesus' conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount. This last section of the Sermon on the Mount turned the focus to true versus nominal discipleship. To put it more plainly, Jesus draws a line of demarcation between those who claim to believe in Him and those who actually believe in Him. One of the indicators of a great teacher is the ability to answer the "so what?" question with regard to the content that teacher has been sharing. How do the truth principles shared give evidence in a person's life who applies those principles? That was the question Jesus was answering in these closing verses of the Sermon on the Mount.

To begin His closing remarks, Jesus presented the two ways, or two gates specifically, that each person will have to choose from with regard to his or her defining pursuits. Jesus' first statement, which was in the form of a command, was "enter through the narrow gate." Interestingly, at this point Jesus made no mention of where that gate ultimately led. From His initial command, His hearers could only infer that the gate was harder to find and more difficult to get through. "The implication is that something of an effort must be made to enter the narrow gate, for there is another that is much more easily perceived." (Morris) Without splitting hairs or becoming overly semantic, Jesus set the tone that the path that His followers must choose to follow would require discipline and intentionality. Noted scholar D.A. Carson described it this way: "God's way is not spacious, but confining. Poverty of spirit is not easy; prayer is not easy; righteousness is not easy; transformed God-centered attitudes are not easily achieved. In fact, these things are impossible for us, apart from grace....There is no room for me to set my opinion against the Lord's."

The case for the broader gate was different. Jesus immediately identified it with the path that led to destruction. Therefore, tracing the logic of the command thus far, His hearers should choose the gate that is harder to find and requires discipline and intentionality because the alternative was a path to destruction. Tragically, the pathway that was easiest to find and effortless to follow and led to destruction would be the one that the majority would choose. The widespread acceptance of the broader path did nothing to change the fact that it led to death.

- How do you think Jesus' teaching that there are two – and only two – paths resonates with cultures popular opinion? Why do you say so?

- In what ways does Jesus' teaching about the two gates help you process current events? Do you feel like it helps clarify the lens through which we perceive those events?

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had been turning conventional wisdom on its head. Statements like, "the meek shall inherit the earth," "unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven," and "beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them" had confronted and corrected the beliefs and practices of the day in order to reveal a holier ethic. In keeping with that pattern, verse 14 told of the gate that led to life being narrow and that only a few would find it. Carson described this statement as "another way of expressing a truth which emerges repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount, that true disciples of Jesus will not play to the galleries, nor form their values according to the passing approval of faddish whim. The beatitudes tell us that it is God's approval alone which is of ultimate importance...and here in Matthew 7 He tells us that the way to life is narrow and not as popular as the way to destruction."

In alignment with Jesus explanation of His identity in John 14:6, there was one path to life and Jesus was it. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Any who would come to the Father, must do so through the only way, the only gate, that would lead to the Father – Jesus Himself. All other paths were merely tributary pathways leading to the greater heading of the broad path that leads to destruction.

2. The Fruit Reveals the Nature of the Tree. (Matthew 7:15-20)

In light of Jesus' extremely clear explanation of the two gates and the paths that accompanied them to life or destruction, the logical question in the minds of His hearers would be how could they know if they had chosen the correct gate. As though anticipating their question, Jesus transitioned to another two-part metaphor: a good tree or a bad tree. Transitionally, Jesus spoke of the importance of recognizing inner character in verse 15 by addressing the false prophets that were present among the people and exercising their influence. Validating this danger, Paul still dealt with it in his letter to the Galatians. Indeed, the presence of those that would seek to mislead Jesus' followers has been a perpetual problem throughout church history. The appearance of such false prophets would have been in line with the true disciples of Christ; their sheep's clothing allowed them to appear to belong. However, the fruit of their lives revealed a more sinister reality. They were not there to benefit the disciples of Jesus, but to destroy them. While it is unclear if Jesus had a particular group in mind, "the term is wide enough to cover any who falsely claim to set forth the way of God, and the unhappy truth is that the people of God have never lacked false teachers whose emphasis is such as to lead them away from God." (Morris)

The earnest believers would be able to identify the disingenuous followers by the fruit in their lives. The ability to discern inward character was critical because the nature of such false prophets would have included a flawless exterior persona. "Their inward character indicates that they will always be wolves who try to further their own interests at the expense of those of the flock." (Morris) The fruit that Jesus' of which Jesus spoke would be the ultimate revealer of the presence of inward transformation or the lack thereof. While Jesus used many agricultural metaphors throughout His earthly ministry due to the immediately relatability with His hearers, the metaphor of fruit in this instance packed a substantial punch. Fruit was a natural outflow of the inner characteristics of the tree that produced it. It was unavoidable for a tree to produce fruit reflective of the defining characteristics of that tree.

Not to be overly technical in His imagery, Jesus broadly divided the two trees into simply a good tree and a bad tree. His examples ranged from vines that produced grapes to full trees which produce figs. The size of the tree was of no consequence. The only matter at hand was if the fruit was good or bad. Useful and nutritional or prickly and repulsive. The fruit was, without exception, indicative of the character of that which produced it. This was how the disciples were to discern the false teachers and predatory influences from the rest of the flock.

- How do you think being in Christian community aids in helping to discern the fruit in a person's life?

- Why do you think it is important for believers to adopt the responsibility of watching over the flock? What would you think the result would be if that responsibility is left unattended?

Pairing this section of Jesus' teaching with the sermon's passage this week, which highlights the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians provides the church with a set of examples for what one should find in the life of a Christ-follower. Paul listed the virtues of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..." as fruit of the Spirit, or natural byproducts of the indwelling Holy Spirit in a person's life. While Paul did not intend to give an exhaustive list of the holy virtues, he did provide a list of virtues modeled in the life of Christ. The point, then, was that those who follow Christ will naturally and increasingly produce "fruit" that is congruent with the life and character of Christ Himself.

As Jesus continued in His teaching, He added that there was an eternal component of this metaphor. Those trees that does not bear good fruit was to be "cut down and thrown into the fire." As Jesus had compounded metaphors and would continue to do so through the remainder Matthew 7, the two gates and the two trees were to be understood together. Those who chose the narrow gate that led to life were those that would produce good fruit. Those that went the broad path were those that produced bad fruit, and, as Jesus made clear, their end was destruction. "In the case of orchardist the *fire* is literal; the burning of a worthless tree removes the possibility that it will infect other trees. But *fire* is often used of the fire of hell, and this meaning may not be far away. Jesus is making it clear that discipleship means a great deal more than religious activity." (Morris)

3. The Fruit Reveals Relationship. (Matthew 7:21-23)

The previous verses provided context for the well-known biblical rebuke that not everyone who says to Jesus, "Lord, Lord" will enter heaven. Keeping the subject of the previous verses in mind, these final three verses underscored the ultimate end of those spiritual charlatans that choose to broader path while proceeding with all of the outward appearance of the faithful. When their inevitable bad fruit found them out, all of the religious busyness and putting on of airs would make no difference. God cannot be mocked or deceived.

The two gates and two trees were now followed by two claims. There were two claimants, though only one was specifically addressed by Jesus. The group Jesus addressed would approach Him reverently and rightly, "Lord, Lord..." They would say the right things, use the right words, and have the right experience. "Moreover, they have an impressive record of spiritual experience. They have prophesied in Jesus' name, they have exorcised demons in Jesus' name, and in Jesus' name performed many miracles. The Lord does not deny any of their claims, and neither should we." (Carson) In spite of all these outward realities, the hearts were far from Him. Their inevitable fruit outweighed the manufactured apparent fruit of their own exterior design.

- What does this passage indicate about the importance of not being swayed simply by external acts? Does this seem like an observation or estimation that comes quickly or over time?
- Given Jesus' explanation of what fruit is and the presence of good works in the lives of the imposters, how would you explain the difference between a person's fruit and their observable behavior? How are the two related? How do they contrast one another?

The warning from Jesus was a harrowing word that would cause immediate introspection from everyone who heard it. How, then, would the true disciple know that he or she were a true disciple if outward righteous works were insufficient? As in so many instances, Jesus gave the answer at the beginning – "so every good tree bears good fruit." That fruit, instead of the outward works one could perform regardless of heart condition, had everything to do with submission to Jesus. "What, then, is the essential characteristic of the true believer, the genuine disciple of Jesus Christ? It is not loud profession, nor spectacular spiritual triumphs, nor protestations of great spiritual experience. Rather, his chief characteristic is obedience." (Carson) That obedience applied to character and deed. The fruit that determined the true disciple was obedience that grew naturally out of passionate following of the One who called him or her to follow Him.

Conclusion

Paul's instruction to the Galatians about the fruit of the Spirit is one of his more well-known passages, most likely because the list can be easily memorized. However, when it is read and understood in the context of his encouragement to believers dealing with their own false teachers and persecution, it takes on deeper significance. Paul's equipping of the Galatians to not only live according to the leading of the Spirit, but to also recognize the absence of His fruit in the lives of false teachers was critical for the congregation's spiritual health. When we combine Paul's teaching about the fruit of the Spirit with Jesus' instruction about bearing good fruit, we realize the importance of being mindful of our spiritual condition. Here are some important considerations.

First, the good fruit that Jesus spoke of is the result of the work of God. One of the reasons that believers cannot conjure up good fruit on their own is because it is actually beyond their capacity to do so. The fruit of the Spirit that draws believers into Christ's likeness and, as a result, testifies to the presence of the Holy Spirit living within the believer. The list that Paul provided for the Galatians and the contents of the Sermon on the Mount are impossible for a man or woman to live out in his or her own strength. However, as the disciple continues to grow the attitudes and desires are increasingly conformed to the likeness of Christ as the Holy Spirit works in the believer's life. This cannot be counterfeited.

Second, fruit is revealed over time. One of the main reasons that Jesus used agricultural metaphors when talking about spiritual realities was to convey the time that was required for transformation to occur. No one plants an apple tree, for instance, as a sapling and expects to go out the next morning and start collecting bushels of apples. So too, as the believer grows in Christ under the direction and work of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit will gradually and increasingly emerge. That is an important realization for the believer who could easily become discouraged or frustrated in seasons in which spiritual growth comes more slowly than others. God is effectively and sovereignly accomplishing His sanctifying work in each believer's life at His own divine pace.

Third, though fruit becomes evident over time, there should be some indication of growth in a believer's life. Consider the list in Galatians, for instance. If someone looks at the time that has elapsed since their salvation experience, he or she may see that they have grown in those areas, but not to the degree that he or she would like. That is understandable, given the fact that God works at His own pace, which can sometimes feel slow in the believer's experience. However, if there is no sense in which a person has developed with regard to love for others, residual joy, peace even in calamity, kindness, gentleness, or the others, that could indicate that that person's salvation experience has yet to occur. The indwelling Holy Spirit brings growth.

Fourth, unfortunately there is just as much likelihood of the presence of those with only the exterior trappings of a relationship with Christ as there was when Jesus initially spoke these words. As Carson warns, "Jesus is not encouraging a heresy-hunting mentality here. After all, the same Jesus has only recently condemned judgmental attitudes. Yet false teachers must be identified. If they are not recognized immediately by their doctrine, then sooner or later they may be recognized by their lives." The body of Christ must gracefully walk the tightrope between zealously searching for the slightest misstep in a person's life in order to denounce them as a false teacher and dismissively allowing others to live in any way while we mind our own business. Fruit must be gracefully inspected for the good of the body and for the protection of the vulnerable.

Fifth, obedience matters. The manner in which fruit grows in the believer's life is through the work of the Holy Spirit as the believer obediently seeks to live according to the model of Christ. There was never any sense in Jesus' teaching or the writings of the New Testament that faith in Christ allows the believer to dispose of any interest in obedience. In fact, if such an attitude prevails in a person's heart, that is a good indicator that perhaps their salvation experience has yet to occur. Jesus was very clear in His Farewell Discourse in John's Gospel that those who love Him would obey His commands; not legalistically, but out of a desire to know Christ as fully as possible.

- What would you say has been the most significant change in your life spiritually in the last five years? The last year? The last 6 months? How does viewing your spiritual growth over a protracted period of time help you discern growth?
- Why do you think it is so important for the body of Christ to give attention to the fruit in the lives of its fellowship? Why is that especially important for leaders?
- If you were going to make a brief list of how those close to you would describe the fruit in your life, what do you think they would mention? Why do you think it is helpful for believers to encourage one another according to the evident ways God is growing them?

** Notes referenced were taken from:

Carson, D.A. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: An Exposition of Matthew 5-10. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 1999.

Morris, Leon. The Gospel According to Matthew. TPNTC. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishers. 1992.