

Adventuring with God

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July 2009

Bearing Fruit for God

We have a beautifully developed tomato plant in our backyard. It started out as a tiny plant optimistically placed in a huge container. Both Tony and I were excited to see it take root and begin to fill out with impressive branches full of healthy leaves. Under his careful nurturing of it with rich soil, regular watering, occasional infusions of Miracle Grow fertilizer, and a prime place in the sun, its stalk grew thick, and soon the plant was spreading out to fill what had once seemed an enormous pot.

We were so encouraged by the plant's obviously healthy condition that we turned a deaf ear to the advice of more experienced gardeners who seemed alarmed by the plant's rapidly accelerating height. "It will get too big for that pot and won't be productive in growing tomatoes for you," they cautioned. But we were too taken with the beauty of the plant itself to consider hacking it down to half its size. After all, which beautiful branch would we lop off? We figured anything that healthy just couldn't help but produce a bountiful crop, so we continued to let it grow, both up and out.

As the weeks went by, we saw hopeful blooms appear on many of the branches. But few of them developed into anything. One that we were watching, a small tomato hanging underneath the plant about halfway up the stalk, only got to a certain size and then dried up. "What on earth could be wrong?" we wondered. We were being diligent to water the plant and give it plenty of

sun. We still fertilized it faithfully, and by all appearances the plant was doing fine. We couldn't figure out why it wasn't producing the kind of plump red tomatoes promised on its tag.

It's now well into July and all the nearby farms have truckloads of tomatoes to sell on the side of the road. The plant we had such high hopes for hasn't produced a single tomato we can eat. So we have to admit that our gardening friends were right. When all the nutrients are going into maintaining an overgrown and thirsty plant, there is nothing left for developing fruit. The plant still looks impressive, but it has proved to be a colossal waste of potting space, water, and fertilizer. We have no reward for all our effort.

I suspect our heavenly Father feels the same kind of disappointment when He sees how little fruit we have to show for the wonderful care He has poured into us. Oh yes, we do many things for Him and build our spiritual kingdoms to preside over. We grow strong and tall as we take in more and more information about His Word and let others carry us into His presence through skillful musical worship. By all appearances, we are flourishing in the protected environment of North American Christianity. But how well do we reflect His character in our everyday lives? How much of the spirituality we display at our church services is carried over into our neighborhood, our work environment, and our home life? That's the real test of discipleship.

Jesus told His disciples in John 15 that He had chosen them and appointed them for a very specific purpose: “to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last” (v. 16). Earlier in the same chapter He laid down the conditions for producing lasting fruit—it would be the result of being in intimate relationship with Him, abiding in the same way a branch must be attached to its life-giving vine. It wasn’t something the disciples could do on their own, so they wouldn’t be able to boast in it or gain any glory from the process.

Even more interesting, from what Jesus said, the disciples wouldn’t be the primary benefactors in this process either. Fruit-bearing would first and foremost please the Father, and as a secondary benefit it would demonstrate to the world that they indeed represented the Son: “This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (v. 8).

Maybe that’s why most of us give little attention to this question of bearing fruit for God—it’s not about us! There is no immediate gain for us in this life; in fact, the process seems to draw us into a whole lot of trouble. If we exhibit the character traits of Jesus, we invite all the negative reactions that He received.

How much easier it is to just let ourselves grow unhindered under the lush conditions of our environment. If some spiritual fruit happens to develop as we go about our business, that’s great of course. But to think about humbling ourselves in order to increase our chances of producing fruit is not a pleasant idea. To remove something that makes us appear strong and attractive to the world is certainly not something we rush to do. We’d much rather preserve our lives than lose them for the Kingdom.

Most of us talk a good game about surrendering our lives to Jesus, giving Him the preeminence in our hearts, and wanting all glory to go to Him, but so often our day-to-day actions don’t corroborate our story. We spend far more time and energy on making sure we have what we want, when we want it, pursuing our own goals and ambitions,

and making a good impression on other people than we do on staying vitally connected to the Vine. No wonder we aren’t seeing many people impacted for God around us. No wonder the church has lost its influence and voice in our communities.

So what’s the answer? Do we just give up and decide the standard is too high? Do we declare ourselves too fleshly to ever bear the fruits of the Spirit? I think we can learn a lot from our tomato plant, because the reason it couldn’t produce fruit is often why we fail to as well. Our nutrients—our energies and efforts—are being siphoned into the wrong things. We’re essentially starving the spiritual fruit seeking to develop by diverting the nutrients it needs to make ourselves—our branches and trunk—look strong and impressive.

We have to decide how we will use the nutrients available to us. Will they be sent into activities that make us feel good about ourselves or impress people in the world? Or will we choose to ignore the needs of our flesh, take the less comfortable role of servant, and send our nutrients into the things that will bless and nourish others?

Jesus had to make these critical choices as He ministered on earth, and He expects His disciples to make them too. Many of the things we must decide upon aren’t necessarily sinful. They may simply be a distraction from what is more helpful and productive in fulfilling God’s will for our lives. To transform a natural life into a spiritual life isn’t easy or automatic, even with the indwelling Holy Spirit. It is an ongoing process of refining our lives to better reflect the goals, purposes, and desires of the Father.

The apostle Paul made these kinds of moral choices on a daily basis. Often they meant great personal sacrifice for him, but the investment he made paid out great dividends for others even centuries later. His fruit was the lasting kind. Chambers writes of him: “Paul became a sacramental personality; wherever he went, Jesus Christ helped Himself to his life. Many of us are after our own ends, and Jesus Christ cannot help

Himself to our lives” (*My Utmost for His Highest*, February 24).

Paul clearly laid out what is involved if we want to be more spiritually productive. “Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. Live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.” SO... “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time *we will reap a harvest* if we do not give up” (Galatians 5:13, 16, 22-23; 6:7-9).

If we don’t discipline ourselves in these matters, sometimes the Master Gardener, the Father, must step in and cut us back (prune us) before we become so overgrown that we’re useless to Him. (See John 15:1-2.) He sees the value of humbling our flesh life so more of our nutrients can go into the more important work of plumping out the spiritual fruit trying to develop on our branches. It’s not a fun process, but it’s necessary and it’s motivated out of love for us. It’s something that Tony and I foolishly neglected to do with our tomato plant.

I’ve read somewhere that older plants need even more pruning than young ones to stay productive. I suspect that’s true in the spiritual realm as well, probably because at some point we mistakenly think we’re arrived, that we’ve mastered the principles of the Kingdom after years of serving

Him. Older plants like me are more likely to get settled in their pots and wilt at the first sign of pruning shears. But the truth is, we should welcome God’s attentiveness to us, even if it does mean cutting us back. He has made a wonderful promise in Psalm 92:14 that if we abide in Him we “will still bear fruit in old age.” What a blessing to know that it’s never too late to bring glory to Him and to bless others with the life-giving fruit of the Spirit.

It was because the Lord Jesus was willing to be humbled for a time that He was able to produce the precious fruit of the cross. In the same way, we must be willing to crucify the works of our flesh in order to become fruitful and productive members of His body. It all boils down to choices we make, choices that give the Holy Spirit more access to our lives for the purpose of fruit-bearing. Discipline is never as exciting as just doing as we please each day. But can you think of a more authentic way to offer gratitude to God than to conform our wills to His? To finally live out what we so glibly profess?

Paul knew the eternal value of considering everything else loss for the sake of Christ. Throughout his life he continued to “press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12). May I not be content until I better reflect Christ’s image and produce the fruits of the Spirit that will please the Father and lead others to Him. Paul’s prayer for the Colossians is a good one for all of us who name His name and have been bought by His precious blood: “That you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: *bearing fruit in every good work*” (1:10).

I Want to be Like Jesus

“I have one deep, supreme desire, that I may be like Jesus.

To this I fervently aspire, that I may be like Jesus.

I want my heart His throne to be, so that a watching world may see

His likeness shining forth in me. I want to be like Jesus.

He spent His life in doing good; I want to be like Jesus.
In lowly paths of service trod; I want to be like Jesus.
He sympathized with hearts distressed; He spoke the words that cheered and blessed;
He welcomed sinners to His breast. I want to be like Jesus.

A holy, harmless life He led; I want to be like Jesus.
The Father's will, His drink and bread; I want to be like Jesus.
And when at last He comes to die, "Forgive them, Father," hear Him cry
For those who taunt and crucify. I want to be like Jesus.

Oh, perfect life of Christ, my Lord! I want to be like Jesus.
My recompense and my reward, that I may be like Jesus.
His Spirit fill my hungering soul, His power all my life control;
My deepest prayer, my highest goal, that I may be like Jesus."

"I Want to Be Like Jesus" by Thomas O. Chisholm, 1945