

Fruitfulness

Fruitfulness in our lives is one of the characteristics of obedience to God. It is also a key to a happy and fulfilled Christian life.

Confusing fruitfulness with business

The world is driven by performance measures and outcomes indices. Coming from such a framework, we are apt to confuse fruitfulness with numbers, knowledge, activity and cost-effectiveness. Our culture constantly reinforces the notion that if we want to be worthwhile and productive people we must learn to stand on our own feet, stand out in the crowd and aim for higher output. Church life can also be like that, if we over-emphasise programs, participation and laws.

Make no mistake, God is interested in output. It is in the heart of God for His work to continue and prosper. Whenever that purpose is frustrated something is lost. Consider the sense of incompleteness in the following: a net without fish; a well without water; a banqueting table without guests; a shepherd without sheep; a field without a crop (or a stalk without seeds), a proclamation without a response; a promise without fulfilment; clouds without rain; a lost coin that is never found; a sheepfold where a lost sheep is never found.

However, fruitfulness goes beyond mere activity. God is a Creator and He loves his creation. The first command recorded in the Bible was to, “be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth” (Genesis 2). Having created the universe and everything in it out of absolutely nothing (theologians call this “ex nihilo”), he endowed plants, fish, animals and finally men and women with a divine capacity to continue the same creative work. Fecundity is a gift from God. Drought in our lives is a consequence of the Fall. Every time a tiny seed is formed or germinates, every time a flower is pollinated and turns into fruit, every time a life is formed in the womb and brought into the world, a miracle occurs.

The handiwork of God continues. I was at the birth of each of my children and the sense of creation is overwhelming – how much the One who made it all possible! The Bible says that all things have been (and are still being) created for God’s pleasure (Revelation 4:11).

God made man to be creative. He wants each of us to be fruitful and has given us the mandate and means to do so. Imagine the result of doing otherwise. The prophet Jeremiah lamented, “the harvest is past, the summer is ended and we are not saved”. (Jeremiah 8:20) People were hungry and crying out for relief, but the crop failed one again and they were left facing disaster. I know people who are spiritually empty; they have nothing to show for busy lives, their hands are empty and they pass by feeling they have not realised the purpose for which they were born.

This principle extends beyond the concept of bringing something new into the world. It embodies the whole purpose of life. On one occasion, Jesus disapproved of a fig tree without fruit at a time of the year when it should have been covered with juicy figs. The Holy Spirit is grieved at the life of a Christian without spiritual fruit. Our fruitfulness brings glory to God and is a sign of our discipleship (cf Luke 6:44-45).

What is fruitfulness?

The concept of fruitfulness is used in the Scriptures to indicate a non-hierarchical view of the church. Using imagery of the vineyard, fruit-trees and fruit, Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). He wants our goal in life to be to produce fruit for Him. Genuine Christianity is about producing fruit for God rather than measuring ourselves against other Christians.

Often, when we talk about fruit, someone will open the Bible at Galatians 5:22, 23, which teaches us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. An important list, but being fruitful Christians and churches is much more than these. The fruit of the Spirit are largely about character. What about the results of who and what we are? Striving harder to be fruitful is not an adequate response. Jesus said, "Abide in me." Abiding is not striving. It is about relationship. Fruitfulness is a natural consequence of a developing relationship with Jesus Christ, not just what other people see in our lives.

It is much deeper and richer than numerical growth or the amount of things we do. God is primarily concerned about the kind of tree we are, rather than how busy we are. If we are part of the correct plant, the quality of fruit will take care of itself (Matthew 7:16-20). Fruitfulness is being like the parent plant in nature and reproducing its life (cf 2 Peter 1:4).

God wants to bless us and make us blessings in our community. When we operate in His life, we are equipped to overflow to the world. Filled so that we can overflow. Made fruitful so that others can enjoy the benefits. Releasing faith so that the needy can be touched by His presence. Spreading good news, restoring relationships, filled with love, faith and the sense of His purpose. As people see the appropriate fruit in our lives they will be attracted to Christ for all the right reasons.

How to be more fruitful

If God wants us to be more fruitful, how can this come about?

First, we have to strengthen our connection to Christ, graft ourselves firmly onto the vine and draw deeply on the sap of the Holy Spirit. The absence of fruit in the branch of the vine casts doubts on its union with the central stem. If we are really fruitful in every area of our lives, this will extend to our family life, work, play, church, personal habits, words, deeds, vertical relationship

with God and horizontal relationships with others. In the natural world, the branches of a tree hold the leaves which, through the process of photosynthesis, convert the sun's light they catch into nutrients, which they then in turn move on into the plant. More leaves grow and fruit is produced by the branches. Faith and fellowship with God are like that (cf Psalm 1:1-3; 92:12-14; Jeremiah 17:7-8). However, if the branches are not solidly connected to the vine stem, the sap cannot flow freely to nourish them, and fruit is not borne as it could be.

Second, we need to allow God to cut out of our lives things that hinder growth and fruit. The planting and nurturing of a vineyard requires constant and intensive care. No plant bears fruit instantaneously; it is the result of a process, and so it is with us. Jesus said God will remove unfruitful branches. Therefore, even a large, apparently thriving branch in our lives may need to be lopped off because it is unfruitful; to leave it there will impede the growth of branches that are fruitful. What is the point of having prolific growth if the vine has lost its goodness (cf Jeremiah 2:21)?

Third, we need to allow the Holy Spirit to be free to reproduce His fruit in our lives. Our role as maturing Christians' is to yield to the Spirit of Christ in us. It is only His power, not our strength, learning, wisdom or personal charisma that makes us fruitful for God.

Do we, as branches, truly *abide* in Jesus Christ—or do we only occasionally connect to Him? Is the good fruit of God being produced in us through this ongoing, unbroken relationship with His Son? Are we being nourished by the True Vine, and what evidence can we produce of our spiritual growth?

God evaluates us only in terms of our growth to fruitfulness, expressed as Christ-like love and personality. Such fruitfulness comes only from our interrelationship with Him. God deals with us in whatever way will lead to further growth - sometimes it is gentle, sometimes it appears harsh. It is always for the same purpose, to bring out the fullness of our potential as fruitful branches, deeply rooted through Jesus the vine, and bearing fruit to the glory of God.

Fruitfulness doesn't just happen by chance. To be fruitful in every-day life can be daunting, as we all constantly fall short. However, if we truly, perfectly abide in Christ as the true Vine, this process of fruit-bearing is, as it were, natural or automatic, the product of this mutual indwelling. The more we abide in Him, the greater the fruit that is produced.

Fruit in the desert

Fruitfulness does not depend on our personal circumstances (though how we react to those circumstances is important). There are times in our lives when we feel we are in a spiritual desert. It is hard to get excited if there is nothing obviously sustaining us. No great church, deep teaching, meaningful Christian friendships, only hot, dry, sandy conditions that make us want to

give up. But even there we can draw on the life of the Spirit to sustain us. Let me give an example from nature.

Years ago I travelled through the desert of northern Chile, near the city of Arica. As far as the eye could see there was only sand. Sandy plains. Sandy hills. Boring, windless, quiet. I was told it had not rained there for many years. Some parts of the Atacama Desert had not seen rainfall for nearly a hundred years. The Humboldt Current, flowing north from the Antarctic region cools the coast for many months of each year and creates dense fogs that hang around and impede storm clouds. It was desolate land. No one lives there. The water table was too low to consider planting a settlement, even if there were justification for doing so.

Three months after my visit it rained. Clouds rolled in from the Pacific Ocean and dumped inches of water across the landscape. Sandy hollows were now pools. And life started to emerge. Scientists were excited to learn that the hitherto parched wastes actually covered the seeds of tiny plants, exquisite species that produced beautiful flowers and tiny fruit. The seeds had been there all along, lying dormant, full of potential. All they needed was precipitation. When that came, millions of seeds burst into life.

Dry seasons of our lives can be frustrating. We may feel nothing is happening, that the odds are against us and we are buried by our difficulties. The one person who continues to see the potential is the Holy Spirit. He sees every seed, every life, every unborn dream and vision, every hope that appears to be going nowhere. When he comes he causes even the desert place to spring into life and fruit to be produced. Humanly speaking, it may not be much to look at, but given the odds its existence is a miracle.

God made you to be creative

God made you to be creative. Are you “abiding” in Christ, getting close to him? Is the Holy Spirit conceiving in your life the small beginnings of new fruit that will remain, evidence in your life of the presence and character of God, of who and what He called you to be, for His glory? This is the first step to maximising your potential and a satisfying life.

Faithfully trusting God is the only pathway to true fruitfulness. The world offers other options, other standards, but none results in lasting fruit. Only as we place our faith in Christ for daily guidance will we bear fruit for eternity. Begin each day by reading God's Word. As He reveals His mind to you, obey everything you understand and ask for wisdom when you don't. The Holy Spirit will teach you what you need to know. That's the way to bear healthy fruit that will last forever.

Whatever your personal circumstances, you can make a difference. The fruit the Holy Spirit develops in your life can be the very thing that attracts others to Christ.