

## Growing in Christ

### *Part 5: 'Fruit of the Spirit'*

Before we can really grow in Christ and become all that God intended us to become, we have to first acknowledge that our entire Christian life is a growing process in the first place. Now that sounds so obvious but I believe it needs to be stressed over and over again. If you look at the way many Christians are living today you would deduce that their conversion was their destination and that they reached their goal when they came to faith in Jesus Christ.

Until we come to the point of accepting that our conversion was only just the beginning of a long journey and that we must progress through the stages of maturity in our spiritual life just as we must in our physical life; until we acknowledge the need to grow and change and develop every day, 'Growing in Christ' will be nothing more than the title of a teaching series. It will certainly not be our experience. Once we acknowledge our need for growth; once we commit to travelling this road to maturity, then we must ask, as we did a couple of weeks ago, 'What is our purpose in life?' Until we know why we are here; until we know what this 'maturity' is that we seek, then our pursuit of it will be futile. I believe we established our goal already in this series - can you remember?

What is our purpose in life? What is this maturity which we long for every day? It centres around two words: *becoming* and *doing* - becoming more like Jesus and doing the works of Jesus. That is why we are here; that is what we were left on this planet for; that is our primary reason for being. God's will for each and every one of us is the same: we are to be conformed into the image of His Son, Jesus and as that transformation takes place we therefore act more like Jesus and do the things Jesus did when He was here. His mission was to seek and save the lost.

He was sent to preach good news to the poor, open blind eyes and deaf ears and bring life to the lame - to heal the sick and broken-hearted and free the oppressed. We are surrounded by those who are blind, deaf and crippled physically, emotionally, relationally and spiritually. Just as Jesus came to set those captives free and take back everything the devil has stolen, so too is our calling and our purpose today and every day.

Therefore, as we are transformed more and more into the image of Jesus, it will affect our character and then our actions. It will affect who we are as well as what we do. Both go together, but I want to stress again that *who* we are always comes first. Who we are deep inside is always more important than what we do. In fact it is supposed to be the source for what we do. If our works and actions are to bear any real fruit at all they have to come from the depths of who we are.

So with that in mind, let us continue our journey of growth in Christ.

#### **Galatians 5:22-23**

*"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."*

Notice that these things are called the fruit (singular) of the Spirit, not fruits (plural). This is so very important to understand. These things come as a single package because they come from one source - Jesus Christ, imparted to us by the Holy Spirit.

This fruit is not something we can develop within our own selves. This is a supernatural work of God in our lives. This is not something we put on when we are in Church and take off when we get home. It is godly character that becomes part of the real us, as we learn to walk and live in the Spirit. We may try to "put on" these things by manufacturing masks that give the appearance of spiritual fruit, yet they only work for a while in hiding the real fruit in our hearts. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot bear this fruit. Jesus made that very clear a long time ago:

### **John 15:4-5,8**

*"Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing . . . This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."*

When we are born into His kingdom, we become "trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord" (Isaiah 61:3). Jesus said, "Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted shall be rooted up." (Matthew 15:13). Fruit always comes from the heart of the plant. If the life of an apple is in the tree - it will bear apples. Simple. It's guaranteed. It's automatic. So too with us - unless we have the life of Christ in us by the indwelling of His Holy Spirit - we will never bear His fruit. A true Christian is known by their fruit:

### **Matthew 7:16-20**

*"By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."*

### **Matthew 21:18-19**

*"Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, 'May you never bear fruit again!' Immediately the tree withered."*

Jesus hungers to see the fruit of the Spirit manifest in our lives. We are as cursed as that fig tree if we are not bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit! Then He told this parable:

### **Luke 13:6-9**

*"A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"*

In this parable, Jesus is the man who owned the fig tree. The 'dresser of the vineyard' is the pastor. The fig tree is a person who has come into the Church, but after three years – is still not fruitful. The 'dresser' (pastor) made intercession for the unfruitful person, because the owner wanted to know why it was allowed to take up the ground, since it did not bear fruit. Truly God does not want us to just take up space in the Church. The pastor, evangelists, teachers and leaders preach and teach the Word of God faithfully, and the pastor and leaders pray for the new Christian, but after a while, he/she is expected to take personal responsibility and become a fruitful Christian.

## **Luke 8:5-8**

*"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*

Jesus gave us the interpretation of the parable in verses 11-15. He informed us that the seed is the Word of God. The sower is someone who shares the Word. The varied conditions of the soil represent the varied conditions of the hearts of those who hear the word:

- a) The first kind of soil are the paths between the rows where people walk. This ground is hard. When the Word of God is shared with people whose hearts are hard, it is not received, and the truth shared with them is quickly taken away by the devil.
- b) The second type of soil (rocky ground) represents people who hear the Word, and receive it with joy, but they never get rooted and grounded in the truth. They also lack moisture (they never receive and submit to the Holy Spirit) and so they soon dry up.
- c) The third type of soil (thorny) represents people who receive the Word of God and embrace it fully. They go forth and begin to live the Christian life. But they are never very fruitful because they become distracted and choked with the cares, riches and pleasures of this life.
- d) The fourth type of soil is the receptive heart that receives the Word gladly and becomes a fruit-bearing disciple: The seed in good soil represents those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it and by persevering, produce the fruit God intended. (Luke 8:15).

## **HOW TO BE A FRUITBEARER**

> *Allow the Holy Spirit to fill you and saturate all that you think, say and do.*

The fruit we are talking about here is the fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit will not force Himself upon you. He must be invited, welcomed and freely submitted to - or we will not see His ministry in our lives. We will not see the character of Jesus emerging in us and therefore we will not bear any fruit for Him. It is our daily choice to either allow the Spirit to rule in our hearts or to quench Him and rule ourselves. This is what 'taking up our cross' really means. This is what 'denying ourselves' really means. This is what 'discipleship' really means. This is Christian maturity.

> *Read and meditate upon the Word of God.*

### **Psalm 1:2, 3**

*"But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."*

We have to hear from God. In John 5:19 we read where Jesus said, *"I only do what I see the Father doing."* So part of the reason we submit to the Holy Spirit is so that we are in tune with the Father at every point. Jesus only spoke the words given to Him by the Spirit and Jesus allowed the Spirit to show Him the Father's heart at every point in His life and ministry among us.

This was a moment by moment adventure. Not a quick prayer at 6am then rush off down and do whatever you think sounds OK. No - Jesus was in tune with the Spirit every step of the way. We have been given such a wonderful gift in the Scriptures. So much of God's heart and God's purpose has been written down for us to read and meditate upon. These words of man contain the very Word of God and we have no excuse for not hearing His voice. This is certainly not the only way God will guide us, but it must always be our first port of call in discerning His will and it should be our last port of call in checking all other sources of His voice to us.

> *Put your trust in the Lord.*

### **Jeremiah 17:7-8**

*"But blessed is the man or woman who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."*

One of the most honest confessions we can make is to admit that we simply don't trust God enough. That so many (if not all) of our struggles, challenges and failures in life stem from an unbelieving heart. We need to trust God to be Who He said He is and do what He said He would do. We should not allow doubt or fear or man's wisdom and experience to get in the way of pure child-like trust.

Yet again, it comes down to our character deep within. It comes down to our inner nourishment. If our roots are firmly planted in the soil of God's heart; if we are drawing from the living water supplied 24 hours a day by His Holy Spirit, then we will be able to withstand the strongest wind, the hottest day and the coldest night. A tree has no life other than what it draws from the soil and water below. So too with us. Unless we make the choice to plant ourselves beside the stream of God's life-giving water, we will not stand.

> *Let the Lord work on you.*

### **2 Peter 1:5-8**

*"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

It is a daily choice, my friends - just as it was with Jesus. As you crawl out of bed in the morning and look at that face in the mirror, ask yourself a question: Who will they see today: Jesus or me? Will I allow my flesh and its desires to dominate my choices today or will I submit to the Spirit of Jesus within me and allow Him to guide my tongue, my feet, my hands, my choices, my prayers and my heart? It sounds so simple - and it is that simple. The only reason it becomes hard is because our heart is desperately wicked and our desire to feed our flesh and our fallen humanity is very strong.

Most mornings we don't even want to look in that mirror, must less ask such a confronting question. But until we do - until we make that choice every day, then the fruit of the flesh will remain and the fruit of the Spirit will not be seen in us. We will not move at all in our journey towards spiritual maturity. In fact, worse than that, like the fig tree - we will wither and die spiritually. Our spiritual effectiveness will be reduced to zero.

If seeking the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is not on the top of our priority list then forget about the gifts. Read 1 Corinthians 13 and you will see that having the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit achieves very little. But you might be thinking how can it be possible to have one without the other? Easy - the gifts are tools for ministry; the gifts of the Spirit are given to the Church so that we can effectively do the works of Jesus. Whereas the fruit of the Spirit flows from our very character. **The fruit of the Spirit defines who we are becoming. The gifts of the Spirit are tools for the ministry which flows from that.**

It's not a matter of going through the list of words in Galatians 5 and ticking them off one by one: 'Let's see . . . love, joy, peace, patience . . . etc.' No. As I said at the beginning, the fruit here is singular. This list is simply a description of the personality of Jesus Himself, indwelling us through the Holy Spirit. It is a package deal – it's all or nothing. You either have them all or you don't. Our task is far simpler than we think. We don't have to struggle and strain trying to fulfil this high calling and this list of character traits.

Galatians 5 does not exhort us to be more loving and joyful and peaceful and kind and forbearing - not at all! The exhortation is to do one thing and one thing only: submit to the Spirit of God and allow Him to bring all the fruit (singular) into our lives - and He will, in increasing measure, as soon as we get this key point into our head. **We cannot produce anything but the fruit of the flesh.** That is all that's inside us. We are wretched, fallen, lost and evil. We cannot bear anything but bad fruit. So the more we struggle in the flesh, the more we do and the harder we try in our own strength, the less likely we are to see the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

Submission is the key - letting our flesh and all its well-intentioned efforts die with Jesus on that cross – that's the key here. That is how we grow up into Christ. It comes from brokenness, contrition, submission, confession and repentance. It comes from acknowledging every single day that unless the Spirit of God is allowed to release the life and character and loveliness of Jesus in me today, then I may as well stay in bed, for I will achieve nothing of any value for God's Kingdom.

Brothers and sisters hear the Word of God here: no matter how much it offends your fallen mind and wounds your rebellious heart: **This is not about us - it is all about Jesus.** The only reason you still live and breathe is so that you can radiate the life of Christ into the darkness of this world. Yes, you are free - it is for freedom that you were set free by the grace of God - that is true. God is going to love you no more and no less regardless of what you do with your life. But don't you want to know what He planned for you before the creation of the world? Don't you want to know what He longs for you do? Don't you want to know what He had His only boy murdered to empower you to do?

God went to incredible lengths so that you could 'be Jesus' in a needy world. That's why God left you here. If your enjoyment, pleasure and freedom was the only purpose of your salvation, then He would have taken you home to heaven when He saved you. He left you here because the mission of Christ is not complete. He left you here so you could be Jesus to those around you. He left you here to be transformed into the image of Jesus and do the works of Jesus.

How then shall we live? Sadly, probably the same as we did last week. But if we decide to take any of this stuff seriously; if we really allow what God is saying to get into our heart, then we will not be same person this time next week. That, I can promise.