

# Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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## Being a Servant of God: By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit

In our series "Being a servant of God" we are going to look at the subject of "Fruitfulness" in John 15:1-17.

The chapter begins, *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser"* (John 15:1). To understand the teaching of our passage we have to look carefully at the illustrations the Lord Jesus uses.

When Moses sent spies into the Promised Land in the Book of Numbers, they visited the Valley of Eshcol. There they found a cluster of grapes so large it was carried on a pole between two men (Numbers 13:23). This image is still used as the logo of Israel's Ministry of Tourism. It visualised the fruitfulness of the land God had promised to His people. In Psalm 80:8 Israel is described as *"a vine out of Egypt."* God's expectation was that the nation would bear the fruits of righteousness and be a testimony to His power and goodness.

The nation failed in this testimony. Isaiah the prophet writes about God's disappointment with the House of Israel, which He calls *"the vineyard of the LORD"* (Isaiah 5:1-7). Jeremiah also writes of Israel, *"Yet I had planted you a noble vine, a seed of highest quality. How then have you turned before me into the degenerate plant of an alien vine?"* (Jeremiah 2:21).

It was against this background of spiritual and moral unfruitfulness and Israel's imminent rejection of Jesus as the Messiah that Jesus says, *"I am the true vine"* (John 15:1). He is describing Himself as the Son of God in all the fruitfulness and glory of His life in fulfilment of God the Father's will and delight.

He adds that His Father undertakes the role of the vinedresser (John 15:1). A vinedresser is a highly skilled specialist engaged in the pruning and cultivation of grapevines. This ancient profession ensures vineyards produce successful crops by tending to each vine individually.

Jesus develops the illustration of the vine to include its branches: *"Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away; and every branch that bears fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit"* (John 15:2).

The branches here are used to make a distinction among those who are associated with the Person of Christ. We could describe them as professors and possessors.

Professors are those who outwardly profess Christ but do not have life in Him and bear no fruit. Many people have a close relationship with Christendom without ever truly believing in Christ and receiving life from Him. Some within Christendom actively deny the Person and work of the Lord Jesus and the teachings of the Word of God. Ultimately such professors come under the judgment of God.

Possessors, on the other hand, have life in Christ and, in the words of Romans 7:4, *"bear fruit to God."* God the Father works by the power of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of Christ in the lives of those who truly believe in Jesus to produce the fruit of holiness: *"But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life"* (Romans 6:22).

The distinction between these two classes can be seen in the difference between Judas and Peter. Judas was one of the twelve (see Matthew 10:1-4). He shared in the miraculous ministry of the disciples when they were sent out in service by Jesus (see Matthew 10:5-15). But he never possessed life. It is a serious matter to associate oneself with the Person of Christ whilst in reality denying Him. Peter, on the other hand, failed Jesus when fear overwhelmed him and he discovered the frailty of self-confidence (see Luke 22:54-62). But he believed and loved his Lord, and was restored (see John 21:15-19).

In John 13 Jesus washes the disciples' feet. When Peter protested, Jesus answers, *"If I do not wash you, you have no part with me"* (John 13:8). Peter responds, *"Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!"* (John 13:9) Then Jesus explains, *"He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you."* For he knew who would betray him; therefore he said, *"You are not all clean"* (John 13:10-11). This

distinguishes between Peter who possessed life in Christ and Judas who did not.

In the second part of John 15:2 we need to consider the words *“every branch that bears fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”* In this part of the verse we are introduced to the idea of an increasing fruitfulness. We have the words, *“bears fruit”* and then *“more fruit”* and, in John 15:5 and John 15:8, *“much fruit.”* In that John 15:8 we read: *“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be my disciples.”* Increasing fruitfulness glorifies the Father and evidences likeness to Christ.

John 15:2 also explains that it is God the Father who prunes the branches. This conveys the idea of cleansing to bear more fruit. The following verse explains that the Word of God is active in this process: *“You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.”* (John 15:3). Hebrews 12 teaches us how God uses spiritual discipline in our lives so that we may share in His holiness and produce the *“peaceful fruit of righteousness”* (see Hebrews 12:7-11).

In John 15:4 Jesus goes on to explain how those who have life in Him become fruitful: *“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.”*

The life we have in Christ enables us to live fruitful lives for God. The very first chapter of John’s Gospel provides us with a helpful illustration of this principle: *“Again, the next day, John stood with two of his disciples. And looking at Jesus as he walked, he said, ‘Behold the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, ‘What do you seek?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and remained with him that day (now it was about the tenth hour). One of the two who heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus”* (John 1:36-42).

In this simple incident we discover the principle of being fruitful. The two disciples wanted to know where Jesus was staying and He invited them to stay with Him for the day (John 1:38-39). This fellowship with Jesus resulted in fruitfulness in the life of Andrew when afterwards he goes and finds Peter and brings him to Jesus (John 1:40-42). Bringing people to Jesus is one aspect of fruitfulness; later we shall consider others. The principle of fruitfulness is having life in Christ and abiding in the One who is the source of that life and one’s life bearing the features of Christ.

Jesus emphasises this in the next verse, *“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5).

In John 15:5 Jesus impresses on His disciples that He is the power by which fruit is produced. He is the source. Our responsibility as Christians is to abide in Christ. This living fellowship with a risen Saviour, the indwelling Spirit of God and God the Father’s love and discipline empower us to be fruitful. The Word of God also has a sanctifying effect on our lives.

In John 15:6 Jesus re-emphasises the judgment associated with religious profession: *“If anyone does not abide in me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned.”*

In John 15:7 Jesus links abiding in Him with His words abiding in us, and the promise of answered prayer: *“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.”*

John 15:7 needs to be considered carefully. It is not a blank cheque! As we abide in Christ and His word directs our lives, our desires begin to harmonise with the will of God. James helps us with this teaching when he writes of those who prayed for personal gain: *“You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures”* (James 4:3).

The key to prayer is the will of God, and His promise to answer our prayers is always related to that will. This important principle is demonstrated in the very next verse in John 15: *“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be my disciples”* (John 15:8).

God’s will is always consistent with His glory. Christ glorified His Father on earth (see John 17:4), and fruitfulness in our lives is the manifestation of the features of Christ in us. It is also the result of abiding in the love of God: *“As the Father loved me, I also have loved you; abide in my love”* (John 15:9).

Abiding in the love of Christ is in turn also related to obedience: *“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love”* (John 15:10). The obedience of Christ to God the Father is at the foundation of His work of salvation. It serves as an example and encouragement to us.

In John 15:11 Jesus explains a key reason for the things He had taught them: *“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.”* He wanted His disciples to experience joy. Living in fellowship with Christ and living productive and fruitful lives for God is a joyful experience.

Jesus also leaves His disciples with a commandment - to love another in the same way as Jesus had loved them: *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you”* (John 15:12). How had He loved them? Completely! *“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends”* (John 15:13). There is no greater love than to sacrifice one’s life for others, particularly for one’s friends. It is wonderful to hear the Lord Jesus describing His disciples as His friends, but this relationship is linked to obedience: *“You are my friends if you do whatever I command you”* (John 15:14).

But this obedience is characterised by the relationship of friends rather than the relationship of servants: *“No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from my Father I have made known to you”* (John 15:15).

A servant simply obeys out of duty and the relationship is a distant and formal one. But Christ brings us close and shares with us the purposes of the Godhead, leading us to greater service. And He does this on the basis of obedience.

He closes our passage with the themes of fruitfulness, prayer and love: *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. These things I command you, that you love one another”* (John 15:16-17).

Fruitfulness as a servant of God has been the subject of our passage.

I would like to end this talk by answering the question, “What is the fruit developed in the lives of God’s servants?” To answer this question we need to look at the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23.

There are nine characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit:

1. Love;
2. Joy;
3. Peace;
4. Patience;
5. Kindness;
6. Goodness;
7. Faithfulness;
8. Gentleness; and
9. Self-control.

These nine characteristics are contrasted with the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21). Works suggests our energy and activity. But the fruit of the Spirit is produced in the life of the Christian through abiding in Christ (as we have seen in John 15:1-17).

The nine characteristics can be looked at as three groups:

- Those which are Godward: love, joy and peace;
- Those which relate to others: longsuffering, kindness and goodness; and
- Those which relate to ourselves: faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

## Love

The first characteristic is love. In the Greek the word is *agapaō*, often used of God’s love to men, as the related verb in John 3:16. This love has been shed abroad in our hearts (Romans 5:5). It suggests we should love others as God loves them (1 John 4:7). This is very challenging and takes first place. God is love (1 John 4:8) and the other characteristics flow from this source. The love of God is expressed to everyone no matter how they react towards Him. This is seen perfectly in the Lord Jesus at the cross and we are encouraged to *“Bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you”* (Matthew 5:44). Love is also characteristic of our fellowship: *“By this all will know that you are my disciples if you have love for another”* (John 13:35). The scope of this love is taken up in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13.

## Joy

The second characteristic is joy and its source is the Saviour:

*“These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full”* (John 15:11).

*“And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation”* (Romans 5:11).

Joy is linked to the presence of Holy Spirit: *“And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit”* (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

Joy is a deep contentment and delight in the ways of God, and its possession enables us to welcome different forms of trials or testing in life: *“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials...”* (James 1:2).

## Peace

The third characteristic of the Fruit of the Spirit is peace. In the New Testament we have

**Peace with God** (Romans 5:1) *“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Then we have the **Peace of God** (Philippians 4:7) *“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”*

And we have the **God of peace** (Philippians 4:9) *“The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you.”*

Peace is a tranquillity in life that comes from knowing salvation, living in the good of it and knowing the God who loved us.

## Patience, or Longsuffering

The first of the second group of characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit is patience, or longsuffering. This is shown towards other people. It is also shown by God:

*“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”* (2 Peter 3:9).

Patience is demonstrated by tolerance when others annoy or oppose us or test our patience. We do not lose our temper or seek to retaliate but turn away from all thoughts of anger and revenge. We seek to act towards others as God did toward us.

## Kindness, or Gentleness

The next characteristic is gentleness, translated as “kindness”. It is used of the kindness of God: *“But when the kindness and the love of God our Saviour toward man appeared...”* (Titus 3:4). It is linked to the word translated “easy” which Christ uses in Matthew 11:30: *“For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* We should be marked by a gentle kindness and compassion for others.

## Goodness

The final characteristic in this second group is goodness. It is similar in meaning to the previous characteristic, kindness. But commentators suggest that kindness expresses the gentler features whereas *goodness* has the sense of doing good to others, but not necessarily by gentle means, for example by rebuking and correcting: *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend”* (Proverbs 27:6). Also see Hebrews 12:5-11.

## Faithfulness

In the final group the first characteristic is faithfulness. This marks us out as being loyal, trustworthy and reliable. It takes its character from God: *“God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”* (1 Corinthians 1:9). And from the Lord Jesus: *“... and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth”* (Revelation 1:5).

In us it expresses trustfulness and assurance that God is working *"all things together for good to those who love Him"* (see Romans 8:28). It puts into practice the truth that *"love ... believes all things"* (1 Corinthians 13:7) We trust God and are trustful towards others.

### **Gentleness, or Meekness**

Meekness is the second characteristic and, as mentioned earlier, it is seen in the Lord Jesus in Matthew 11:29: *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

Meekness is the opposite of self-assertiveness, arrogance and violence. It describes one who is gentle and mild. However it is not weakness. The Lord's meekness was demonstrated in His submission to the will of God. This suggests that meekness is power under control. Moses was the meekest man upon the earth (see Numbers 12:3). It is associated with wisdom in James 3:13, 17-18: *"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom ... But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."*

### **Self-control**

Lastly and importantly, the final characteristic is self-control, and it relates to all circumstances. In 1 Corinthians 9:25 the athlete's discipline of his body is necessary to be the victor: *"And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown."* Let us be self-controlled by the power of the Holy Spirit

### **Conclusion**

This whistle-stop tour of the characteristics of the Fruit of the Spirit demonstrates the features which emerge in the lives of the servants of God as they abide in Christ. The quality of life takes its power and character from the Person of Christ. It is not work or ambition or forcefulness but becoming Christlike that enables lasting fruitful lives to be lived for God.

It is hard to find men who devoted more to serving Christ than Peter and Paul. They led the way in evangelism and teaching to spread the Christian faith throughout a Roman world so resistant to the Gospel.

What was the secret of their spiritual success? I think they give the answer in their own words.

Paul writes in Philippians 3:8-10: *"I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death."*

And the last words that Peter wrote: *"... but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever. Amen"* (2 Peter 3:18).

Perhaps it's time to listen to the words of Peter and Paul.

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