

Abiding in Christ and Bearing Fruit

Acts 8:26-40 and John 15:1-11

If we want to be fruitful for God we must stay closely connected to Jesus. He is the vine and we are the branches. This beloved passage from John 15 uses this agricultural imagery to explain how fruit is produced in the life of a believer. Within this metaphor there is a warning that we shouldn't overlook; a lack of fruitfulness can result in being cut-off from the vine, thrown into the fire and burned; that's certainly an outcome we all want to avoid. Thankfully, the gardener, our loving heavenly Father, will seek to prevent that from happening by cleaning us and pruning us.

The word for prune in verse 2 can also mean clean; and clean makes sense in the context because verse 3 refers to being made clean by the word Christ has spoken to us. A gardener will look for the branches of a vine that are dragging on the ground, getting dusty, dirty and unproductive, and will raise them up, clean off the dirt, and perhaps tie them onto a trellis so they can stay clean and become fruitful. In the same way, when we receive God's word into our hearts, we are raised-up and revitalized. As we live in obedience to God's commandments, our spirits are strengthened, and the Holy Spirit works to transform our lives into the image of Christ. As a result, we become fruitful believers.

The image of pruning also relates to our Christian experience. Just as a gardener will prune a bush or vine, cutting off the dead ends of branches to enable new growth, God will likewise prune us. And sometimes we need to be pruned because our spiritual growth has become stunted due to our ungodly activities or attitudes, or simply neglecting our spiritual life, lagging in our discipleship. God may prune us by allowing difficulties to come into our lives. As we lean into God and respond to those difficulties with prayer, a Christ-like attitude and perseverance, our faith muscles and godly character will develop and move us towards spiritual maturity.

Leaning into God, staying vitally connected to Christ by allowing the Holy Spirit to flow into our lives and out through us to bless others, requires the daily practice of spiritual disciplines such as prayer, reading and meditating on scripture, and consciously seeking to walk with Jesus and imitate him in what we say and do. This is what it means to abide in Christ. And as we abide in him, Jesus promises that we will bear much fruit for him.

So, what does it mean to bear fruit? What does spiritual fruit look like in the life of a Christ follower? John 15 refers to some spiritual fruit, such as in verse 17. It says, "if you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." Having our prayers answered, then, can be seen as a fruit of abiding in Christ. But the key thing to our prayers being answered is how closely we are living and asking according to God's word. When God's word is truly in our hearts, we will develop the mind of Christ and will desire the things that God desires for us and for others.

Then when we abide in Christ as we pray, we will be praying according to God's will and not just our own human will, and we will be aware of God answering our prayers.

In verses 10-17 obedience to Christ's commands is connected with remaining in his love. So it's very important that we be aware of what Christ's commands are, that's why Bible Study is so important. Christ affirmed God's moral commandments, which are summarized in the 10 Commandments. And throughout the New Testament, loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, is seen as the fulfillment of God's law. Therefore, obedience to Christ's command, loving God and loving others can also be viewed as spiritual fruit.

In vs. 11 Jesus said, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." So we can certainly say that joy is a spiritual fruit. Galatians 5:22 affirms this, and gives us an expanded list of spiritual fruit saying, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." This certainly isn't an exhaustive list because we can also say that boldness, assurance, perseverance, grace, forgiveness and many other godly attributes are also the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The fruit of the Spirit is the work of the Holy Spirit within us. They are the by-products of Christ's control in our lives; we can't obtain them by trying to get them without his help. If we want the fruit of the Spirit to grow in us, we must join our lives to his. We must seek to know him, love him, remember him and imitate him; that's what it means to abide in Christ.

And the closer we walk with Christ, the more we will learn to hear and feel the nudges of the Spirit who will direct us to where God wants us to go and to share the gospel with whom God calls us to share it with. So another example of fruit-bearing is our obedience to God's call in our life, and communicating the gospel to others. This will lead to the fruit of leading others to Christ, and that's what our story from the book of Acts, chapter 8 clearly shows us.

Acts 8 describes Philip's obedience to the direction of God and the fruit of winning someone to Christ that resulted from his abiding in Christ. Philip was a Grecian Jewish Christian who was one of 7 men chosen to help with the food distribution after a complaint arose that the Grecian believers were being overlooked in the distribution. He and the 6 other deacons are described as being men who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. Therefore, they were given this responsibility. We don't know whether Philip was someone who knew Jesus before his death and was a long-time follower who, along with the other disciples, had seen the risen Christ. Or if Philip was someone who had just recently come to faith in Christ through the preaching of the disciples. But he was certainly someone who understood the word of God, having been taught by them. And he had a mature and abiding faith, producing fruit for Christ.

In Acts 6, Stephen, one of the other 6 deacons, was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin for stirring the people up due to his miraculous signs and persuasive preaching about Christ. In chapter 7 Stephen preaches a lengthy sermon to them describing how Jesus fulfilled their scriptures, but this infuriated the Jewish leaders and therefore they stoned him to death. Chapter 8 begins by telling us that a great persecution broke out against the church that day and all the disciples, except the apostles, were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Those who had been scattered preached the good news of Jesus wherever they went. The rest of the chapter then focuses on the ministry of Philip, who was the first of the believers to preach in Samaria.

Acts 8:6-8 describes Philip's ministry in Samaria this way, "When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city."

So Philip was having a successful ministry preaching to the people in that Samaritan city and he may have wanted to stay there and continue preaching and discipling the people. But when God called him to go south to a desert road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza, Philip didn't hesitate to obey. And when he headed in that direction, he didn't meet a crowd of people. Instead he met just one person traveling in a chariot. But that one person was a significant one; he was an important official, a eunuch in charge of the treasury of the Ethiopian queen. Plus he was already a believer in Israel's God and at that very moment he was reading a portion of scripture from the prophet Isaiah and struggling to understand it. Talk about God's timing!

The Holy Spirit told Philip, "go to that chariot and stay near it." And, when he did, he heard the man reading from Isaiah and was able to ask him "Do you understand what you are reading?" Then the eunuch replied, "How can I unless someone explains it to me?" and he invited Philip to come up into the chariot and sit with him. Then we realize that Philip was a man who had studied the scripture and knew how to connect the gospel of Jesus with the Old Testament prophecies. And that discipline prepared him for communicating the truth about Jesus to that eunuch using that passage from the book of Isaiah. Philip's disciplined study and obedience to the Holy Spirit produced the fruit of bringing this important Ethiopian official to faith in Christ. This Ethiopian was so convinced about Jesus by what Philip told him that when they traveled up to a body of water, he immediately wanted to be baptized, proving his faith in Jesus Christ.

Now, at this point, Philip may have wanted to stay with the Ethiopian a bit longer to help teach him some more, but, once again, God had other plans for Philip. And Philip must have been totally open to wherever the Lord wanted him to be, because vs. 39 says that just after the Ethiopian was baptized the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away. This was a miraculous transport, and the Ethiopian must have felt that Philip had just disappeared. Maybe he thought Philip was an angel in disguise!

But this miraculous sign must have certainly convinced the Ethiopian about the truth of what Philip had been teaching him because verse 39 says, “the eunuch did not see Philip again, but he went on his way rejoicing.” And just imagine the impact that this important Ethiopian official had on those who came into contact with him in his home country. I’m sure the Lord used him to bring many more Ethiopians to Christ. Because of this we can see that Philip’s fruitfulness in bringing that Ethiopian to Christ was multiplied many times over as more Ethiopians came to Christ through that official’s testimony.

But God had even more plans for Philip because verse 40 tells us that Philip appeared at Azotus and he traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea. Azotus is another name for Ashdod, one of the ancient Philistine capitals. The Philistines were the ancient pagan enemies of Israel. The fact that Philip was in Azotus proves that the Lord desired the good news of Christ to quickly reach the Gentiles. And Philip continued to bring Jews and Gentiles to faith in Christ as he traveled up the coast to Caesarea. It’s possible that when he reached Caesarea, God may have led him to stay in that city to bring many to Christ because we don’t hear about Philip again until about 20 years later in Acts 21. During Paul’s 3rd missionary journey, while traveling back to Jerusalem Paul and his companions stayed in Caesarea in the home of Philip, the evangelist, one of the 7, according to Acts 21:8-9. And Philip must have gotten married because he had 4 unmarried daughters who prophesied.

I like this last reference to Philip because it shows that he also produced fruit for Christ in his own family, having 4 daughters who believed in Christ and were producing their own fruit for the kingdom as they prophesied.

Philip, then, is a wonderful example of a man who knew what it meant to abide in Christ as he exuded the fruit of discipline, obedience, bravery, boldness, and successful witness, bringing many others to faith in Christ. May we all be inspired by his example to faithfully abide in Christ, and as we abide in Christ the vine, we too will produce abundant fruit to God’s glory.