

Getting at the Fruit by Way of the Roots

Luke 6:43-45

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 15, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

⁴³“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; ⁴⁴for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. ⁴⁵The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:43-45, NRSV)



Consider yourself blessed when people hate you. Right? Rejoice when people persecute you because of your faith. If nobody is persecuting you, you should wish they would start. If you are weeping now because you are consumed by grief, be encouraged because a time will come when you will laugh. Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you. Pray for those who abuse you. Don't judge other people, thinking you are somehow better. Go easy on people, not hard. Clean your own life up before you go around cleaning up other people's lives.

These are the sorts of teachings we've been hearing from Jesus recently in our journey through Luke's Gospel. And as a friend of mine said to me this week, this is really hard stuff! Who can possibly live the way Jesus seems to expect his followers to live? Can any ordinary person actually live like Jesus lived?

The short answer is 'Yes.' To be a Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus, to be somebody who is following after Jesus, living your life as Jesus would live your life if he were in your shoes. Jesus himself made this clear in the Great Commission when he said to those first disciples, **“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”** A Christian is a disciple of Jesus, and disciples of Jesus are to learn to obey *everything that Jesus commanded us*.

You see, we have to get this idea out of our heads that to be a Christian means to be somebody who simply believes certain things so that you can be saved and then go to a better place when you die. Does a Christian believe certain things? Yes, of course. I believe one God exists in the three persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I believe Jesus is God's eternal

Son who came to earth, took on human flesh, died on the cross, and rose again on Easter and that whoever places his or her faith in Christ as Lord and Savior will receive eternal life. Doctrine and theology are extremely important in the Christian faith, but they are not enough. The Christian faith is never simply about information but ultimately about transformation! It's about what we believe *and* who we become.

Imagine a young piano student who works hard to secure a place sitting under a master piano teacher, one of the best in the world. It's a coveted spot that countless other students would love to have because who doesn't want to learn from the best? Who doesn't want to be associated with the best? But then imagine that same student sits and listens to all that her master piano teacher has to teach her, even memorizes it all, yet she never actually puts any of it into practice so that she can work towards becoming a pianist who plays like her master. For her, just being associated with this master and knowing what this master knows is enough. Years of instruction and association but no transformation!

In his teaching Jesus often used the word 'hypocrite'. That word in the Jesus' world came from the theater and literally referred to somebody who was play acting, putting on a mask or a costume to pretend to be somebody they were actually not. Jesus uses it to identify the person who, on the one hand, goes around saying that he is associated with God as Lord, but then, on the other hand, never allows for that association to actually lead to transformation, specifically transformation into the likeness of God. That person is a hypocrite. He's just play acting, putting on a mask to fool himself or others, content with the association alone.

Listen to me. Jesus Christ died for us. The Son of God gave his life on the cross so that we could be forgiven. Then he rose from the grave, forever conquering not only sin but death as well. When a person places their faith in Christ, their very life in his hands, that person is literally then caught up in the resurrected life of Christ. As Christians, he is in us and we are in him. This life in Christ therefore becomes a life of conforming to Christ. And this isn't true only for the super-spiritual among us, whoever they are, but for ordinary Christians like you and me. In II Corinthians 3:18 Paul writes, **“We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory,**

are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

I've heard it put this way, that as followers of Christ (i.e. Christians) we are to take on the *character and competence* of Christ himself. First, our character should increasingly resemble the character of Christ. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control¹ – these are the characteristics of Christ that the Spirit of Christ ought to produce in our lives. Second, we ought to find ourselves increasingly competent in doing the things Jesus did. In John 14:12 Jesus declared, “...**whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these.**”² Followers of Jesus ought to find themselves empowered by the Spirit of Christ to heal as Jesus healed, to preach with power as Jesus preached with power, to make disciples as Jesus made disciples, and so on. The word ‘Christian’ ought to mean ‘little Christ’. If you are a Christian, your life ought to be undergoing a constant transformation that is leading you to look more and more like Jesus.

So is it? That's the question. This is not a day to think about somebody else's life. The worst thing we can do with Jesus' teaching here is to apply it to somebody else. No, this is a call for self-examination, for a self-diagnosis. Forget about the person sitting next to you, if you are a Christian is *your life* reflecting in increasing ways the character and the competence of Jesus?

How can you tell? Well, Jesus shows us here exactly how we can tell. It's all in the fruit. **“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.”**

What we have here is a very basic principle of life in this world that we all understand. If you are walking down the street and you see a tree with oranges on the branches you don't say to yourself, “I wonder if that's an apple tree pretending to be an orange tree.” If you walk into an orchard full of orange trees and one tree is producing sickly fruit you don't wonder if that tree is a healthy tree that just happens to be putting out rotten fruit. No, the fruit of the tree, that which you can see, tells you everything you need to know about the roots of the tree, that which you cannot see.

Jesus says here that the same is true of us. The fruit of our lives, our actions and especially our words, will reveal the roots of our lives, that which is found at our deepest core, our thoughts and being, what we value, our identity. This ought to be obvious to us, and accepted by us all. But it's not. In fact, lots of us have convinced ourselves that it's perfectly natural to disconnect the fruit of our lives from the roots of our lives.

When some rotten fruit is exposed in us, when we are caught saying something or doing something others see as unkind or unloving, we like to excuse ourselves by saying that this one isolated action or word was “out of character”. Listen, for instance, to the apologies of public figures after they are caught on tape saying something unflattering. Almost every apology includes some statement like this: “Those things I said were out of character. What I said doesn't really reflect the person I am and what I believe.” Yes it does. It always does. Oranges do not grow on apple trees. Rotten fruit doesn't grow on healthy trees. Unkind and unloving words do not come out of people who are, at their core, completely kind and loving. Now it's true, those words may not reflect *everything* that is in you, but unless some alien life form temporarily took control of your brain and your mouth those unkind words actually do reflect at least a part of who you actually are as a person.

We have a huge challenge in the Christian church today. There are lots of people who profess to be followers of Jesus on Sunday mornings who then go around the rest of the week saying things and doing things that Jesus would never say or do. Then as the rest of the watching world notices this, the witness to the Gospel is compromised. At the very least we end up making it harder for people to know Christ than it ought to be. Gandhi nailed it when he once admitted, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

So I would say that the first thing we must do to address all this is to repent, to allow God to change our thinking here on this matter. Look honestly at your life, at your actions, motivations and words, and recognize that there is a problem. There is in all of us. Some of the fruit is not good and it reflects a problem with the roots, a problem that's been there a long time. I heard a colleague of mine – sadly, another Presbyterian minister – say just this week that “everyone is born perfect...just the way they are.” What? Not me. There is some rotten stuff in here that has been here for a long time. Envy. Jealousy. Lust. Disdain for others unlike me. Racial prejudice. An unhealthy affection for material wealth and personal comfort. A willingness to deceive when it works to my

¹ From the fruits of the spirit as listed by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23.

² NIV

advantage. A lack of self-control. A hard heart towards the poor. And on top of it all a real reluctance to admit any of it is there in the first place. And I can cover it up pretty well at times, especially on Sunday mornings, but the rot in my roots always finds its way out in the fruit. Just ask those who know me best and see me at my worst. And I have a strong suspicion I'm not the only one here that fits this description.

But here is the good news. For reasons I will never be able to explain, the creator of this universe is a God who lovingly receives us just as we are, though rotten to the roots in many ways as we may be. There is nothing our Father in heaven would not do to hold on to us and to give us every good gift that is his to give. Nothing! And the proof of this is that while we were still rotten to the roots, our backs turned in defiance towards him, love compelled God to send his only Son Christ to give his life *so that we could be made righteous at the roots just as he is righteous at the roots*. That is the power of the cross and the resurrection! Those who place their faith in Christ are forgiven, restored, set free, made into beloved sons and daughters in whom God delights. Not because we deserve it but simply because of grace.

II Corinthians 5:21 declares, **“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** Just think about that for a moment. Do you believe it? Do you? If you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, you have become, at your roots, the righteousness of God. Your status before God today is the very same status that belongs to Christ because by grace and through faith you are in Christ and Christ is in you.

But my life doesn't reflect that! Is that what you're thinking to yourself? No, it doesn't, not in every way. Neither does mine. But what is true all at once in our roots, by grace through faith, takes a lifetime to bear out in our fruit. Our salvation is a gift given freely all at once, but once given it must then be worked out in our lives.³ Yes, in grace God sees us as we are, loves us as we are, and accepts us as we are. But also in grace, God does not leave us as we are. And because the Christian is now in Christ, literally sharing in his resurrected life, he or she now has access to the power that raised Christ from the dead and now is able to transform a life to increasingly take on the character and competence of Christ. The focus, however, must

³ See Philippians 2:12-13 – “Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

remain on the roots. In fact, you can never change fruit, on a tree or in a human life, by focusing on fruit. The problem is always in the roots. But change the roots and change in the fruit will eventually follow.

I asked a friend recently how she imagined God saw her. It's a question I ask a lot of people. Even though she was a Christian she told me that she imagined that God looked at her mostly with disappointment and even disdain because of the way she lived her life. “If I could be a better Christian,” she told me, “then maybe God would change his opinion of me.” And as I listened to her I saw in her a person trying to make a diseased orange tree produce good fruit by taking healthy oranges and tying them onto the branches to make a good show of it. That would never work! And it is just as foolish to think that by trying to display before God some good fruit in your life that somehow he will be convinced to think differently about the roots of your life. You will never change the way you act and speak by simply trying to change the way you act and speak. Again, the secret to good fruit always lies in good roots. If you are in Christ, your roots are righteous! Now you need to work on seeing that righteousness push its way out to the fruit. But how?

Dallas Willard is somebody I respect as much as anybody when it comes to understanding spiritual formation – that is, how people are changed to become like Jesus. If you are somebody who recognizes a need to change the fruit in your life, somebody who truly would like to see your inner life conform to Christ so that in turn your outer life would also reflect Christ, he says there are three things we need to embrace.⁴

First, we need to accept the fact that God is going to use hardship in our life to change us.

We have a lemon tree in our backyard that was not producing the sort of healthy lemons we hoped it would produce. So we invited a friend to come by who knows a lot about fruit trees and the very first thing he told us is that if we want this tree to produce healthy fruit we need to cut it back, to prune it. It's a principle we all understand. A fruit tree wisely pruned by a skilled gardener will produce far healthier fruit than a tree just left to grow as it would naturally grow.

You see, we have to get past this idea that when you become a Christian, life is supposed to get easier. If you started out to follow Jesus and your life got easier and easier it probably wasn't Jesus you were following in the first place. James writes, **“My brothers and**

⁴ See Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission* (Harper, 2006), see Chapter 4.

sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”⁵

Similarly, Hebrews 12:7 declares, **“Endure trials for the sake of discipline; God is treating you as children.”⁶**

I know a man who is fighting pancreatic cancer. It’s a very serious diagnosis. And yet through the terribly painful journey thus far he has experienced the love and grace of Christ in such profound ways that he is now telling others that, live or die, he would not trade this journey for anything because of what God has done though it in his life. That’s a radical example, I know, but if we truly desire to see Jesus transform our lives to reflect him are we ready to accept the fact that God is going to use hardship in our lives to do so? Good fruit never comes without pruning. If we believe this we begin to receive hardship in life with joyful expectation, wondering when it comes what good thing God is up to now.

Second, we need to then learn to walk moment by moment in life in joyful dependence on Christ who is always present. Again, we are in Christ and Christ is in us. In his very last words on earth Jesus promised his followers, **“I am with you always, even to the very end of the age.”⁷** Christ, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, walks with us every moment and gently awaits our invitation to act upon us, within us, through us, and for us.

Just imagine what it would be like to have Jesus walk with you all through the day. You come face to face with a temptation you know usually does you in, and so you simply turn and ask Jesus to help you resist. But then some sin overcomes you, maybe the same sin that has tripped you up before, but just as you feel the weight of guilt pressing down you look to Jesus for forgiveness, which he freely offers. You come across a problem in a relationship you have no idea how to solve so you turn to him and ask for his counsel. Patience with a trying co-worker is desperately needed so you ask for it. You find out a friend has betrayed you and, knowing you can’t forgive on your own, you turn to Jesus for help. You recognize an incredible blessing in your life and take the opportunity to turn right then and there to thank the one who provided that blessing.

⁵ James 1:2-4, NRSV

⁶ NRSV

⁷ Matthew 28:20.

Can you imagine what it would be like to walk through each day, every day, in the very presence of the one who created the whole world and has access to infinite power, infinite wisdom, infinite grace, infinite joy! But you do! Can you see that? We all do! In Galatians 2:20 Paul declares, **“It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”** Do you believe what Paul believed, that your life is in Christ and that through Christ you have every necessary resource available to you constantly to be increasingly transformed into his likeness no matter what circumstance is before you. John Calvin once wrote, “What Christ requires is not a precise and complete perfection, but only a simple and sincere affection.” That we would simply learn to walk, moment by moment, humbly and gratefully with our Lord.

Finally, in addition to an acceptance of God’s use of hardship to shape us, and a willingness to learn to live moment by moment in joyful dependence on Christ, we also need to commit ourselves to train in the disciplines that Jesus himself modeled for us.

Jesus says here, **“It is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”** The fruit flows from the roots, and what is stored up there. So let’s just take the example of our words, because Jesus uses it here. Let’s say you are a person who has a hard time controlling your tongue. Maybe it’s gossip or slander. Maybe you tend to lose your temper and say things you regret saying. Maybe you use humor at the expense of others, or tend to tear down rather than build up with your words. Whatever the problem, you are not going to solve it by simply trying harder to say kind and helpful words. That’s aiming at the fruit. No, you have to aim deeper than that and there are disciplines which Christ modeled for us and which the church has cultivated which we can embrace.

If, for example, unkind speech is a problem, you may need to practice the discipline of silence in your life so that you can pay attention to what it is that has gone rotten in your heart and is now producing rotten fruit in your words. Or maybe your unkind words are rooted in the fact that you are always so rushed and frantic and any little speedbump sets you off to take it out on others. So maybe you need the discipline of sabbath, a day to stop and remember that the world doesn’t depend on you as the center of it. Or maybe your gossip is rooted in a deep insecurity and what you need is the daily discipline of being in God’s Word where you can be regularly reminded that your identity has

nothing to do with comparing yourself to others but only in the truth that you are a beloved child of God.

You know, if you don't play piano but want to be a great pianist, it's not helpful if I tell you to go sit down at the piano and play Mozart. Try all you want, it's not going to happen. What is helpful is to sign up for piano lessons, learn your scales, practice every day, listen to Mozart, basically to incorporate all the disciplines that, if applied in your life, will eventually help you learn to play Mozart. That's what a spiritual discipline is – scripture, prayer, solitude, silence, sabbath, worship, celebration, and the rest – those practices which you can do by direct effort which eventually enable you to do what otherwise you could never do by direct effort. And they are all the more powerful when we remember that it is in these disciplines that Christ meets us and empowers us to be transformed at the roots so that the transformation will ultimately show up in the fruit.

Dallas Willard once wrote, “The single most obvious trait of those who profess Christ but do not grow into Christ-likeness is their refusal to take the reasonable and time-tested measure for spiritual growth.”⁸ So accept hardship as God's pruning in your life used to shape you. Learn to live moment by moment in joyful dependence on Christ. Then commit yourself to train in the disciplines Jesus modeled for us, doing the things you can do which then enable you to do that which otherwise you could never do.

Here's what I want you to do. Take the mandarin I gave you this morning. Don't eat it right away. I'm giving it to you as a reminder to find a time in the next day or two, maybe even this afternoon, when you can sit alone or take a walk alone for at least thirty minutes with your mandarin. As you hold this fruit, think about your life. Remember Jesus' teaching about fruit. He's serious. He wants your life to produce the same fruit that his life produced. He has promised that it can. It really can! Not all at once, of course, but increasingly so and in this life. You are in Christ! Christ is in you! He is alive, ready to transform your life to look like his life!

So is it? Ask yourself that hard question. What does the fruit in my life, especially my words and actions, tell me about the roots of my life? The fruit doesn't lie. And then open yourself up to Christ, this one who loves you and is absolutely committed to you, and ask him what he wants you to do about it. Tell him what you need him to do about it, what you are willing to have him do about it. Then take a step in that direction.

Then, if you like, you can eat the fruit.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Jesus' words in Luke 6:43-45. It's a short passage but it's loaded. What stands out to you here?
2. How are people like trees in that we are also known by our 'fruit'? What do you think Jesus means by this?
3. Jesus says that out of the heart the mouth speaks. What is it about our words that they so accurately reveal the state of our hearts?
4. Is it realistic to expect, or even suggest, that as followers of Jesus we are meant to actually become like Jesus, to take on his character and competence?
5. As you look at the fruit of your life (i.e. your words and actions), what can you tell about the roots of your life?
6. II Corinthians 5:21 declares, “**For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**” What does that mean to you, that through Christ the Christian has become the 'righteousness of God'?
7. Dallas Willard talks about three things necessary for spiritual transformation in Christ: accepting trials as God's means of growth; learning to walk moment by moment in dependence on Christ; and training in the spiritual disciplines as modeled by Christ. Which one of these seems like it most needs your attention at this time?
8. Do you want to become like Jesus in all aspects of your life? Why or why not?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

How do you change to become more like the person God wants you to become?

⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission*, p. 30.