



## Reading: The Fruit of Christ's Character

A little girl and her mother were talking as they walked out of church. The mother asked her daughter how she liked church that day. The girl replied that she thought it was good, but she was a little confused. She said, "The pastor said that God was bigger than we are. Is that true?" Her mother responded that it was true. "He also said that God lives inside us. Is that true, Mommy?" "Yes." "Well then," said the girl, "if God is bigger than we are, and if he lives inside us, then shouldn't some of him show through?"

This cute story points to the heart of what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is one in whom Christ dwells. One of Paul's favorite shorthand phrases that captures this is "Christ in you." Earlier in his letter to the Galatians Paul portrayed himself as a midwife vicariously experiencing labor pains on behalf of the Galatians, who are going through the birth process. "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19).

As the living Christ takes over more and more of our will, we will give off the scent of Christ. This is how Paul describes himself and his companions: "But thanks be to God, who . . . through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:14-15).

So whether we use the image of spreading the scent of Christ or of producing the succulent fruit of Christ, Christ is to be manifest through our personality. Galatians 5:16-23 reminds us of Jesus' description of our relationship to him as branches connected to a vine (John 15:1-11).

What is the fruit we are to bear? The clue to the nature of the fruit we are to bear is the cu-

rious use of the singular *fruit*. Paul writes, "But the fruit of the Spirit is . . .," when we might expect the plural, "The fruits of the Spirit are . . ." (Galatians 5:22). This is because the fruit is the multifaceted character of one person, Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. The image of the vine and branches describes the fruit of the Spirit as being like a cluster of grapes. There is a single stem attached to a vine, from which a cluster grows. Each grape in the cluster is a characteristic of Jesus.

Let's take a look at the grapes in this cluster, one at a time. Then we will examine how they are grown in us.

### LOVE: UNCONQUERABLE BENEVOLENCE

Heading the list is the definitive quality that shines through Jesus and is to mark his followers. Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). To love your enemies and forgive those who intend your destruction is a love that comes from above.

The story of a Korean couple illustrate this kind of love. Their son, Ho Ho, had graduated with honors from Eastern College and was completing his medical degree at the University of Pennsylvania. While mailing a letter to his family, Ho Ho was surrounded by a gang of teenage hoods, robbed of his pocket change and beaten to death. Ho's parents sat through the entire trial saying nothing. Only after the guilty verdict was announced were they given the opportunity to speak. They stepped forward and knelt in front of the judge's bench. The crowd sat in stunned silence as the parents begged for mercy for their son's murderers. And not only that, but they asked the judge

to release the teenagers so that they could give these boys the home they never had. They told the judge that they were Christians and therefore wanted to show the same grace they had received from God to those who had done this grievous evil.

Love is God's unconquerable benevolence.

#### JOY: BASKING IN THE FATHER'S DELIGHT

When we see ourselves as street urchins deserving punishment and yet are forgiven by the same one who should condemn us, joy is the result. The prodigal son came home to a father's embrace and became the honored guest at a party. Joy is living under the pleasure of the Father's delight in you. It is knowing that we are the apple of his eye. Can you believe that the Lord considers us his inheritance? What the Lord deems as his treasure for all eternity is us.

Joy transcends circumstances. We often confuse happiness and joy. Happiness has to do with "everything going my way," whereas joy can coexist with suffering and grief. Joy is stable, because it is rooted in hope. Jesus said, "Take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Hope grounded in Christ's death and resurrection is knowing how the story ends. Joy is that we know there is a happy ending.

#### PEACE: SERENITY FROM SECURITY

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Our peace is a result of God's making his peace with us. The Holy God, whose very being is at war with our sinful character, reconciled us to himself by putting forward Jesus Christ as the peace offering for our sin. R. C. Sproul says, "When God signs a peace treaty,

it is signed for perpetuity. . . . When we sin, God is displeased, and He will move to correct us and convict us of our sin. But He does not go to war against us."<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*. Shalom is not so much the absence of war but the presence of a benevolent, just and honorable king. Shalom reigned in the land of Israel when the people knew that their sovereign was a man of character. We live in peace knowing that our Sovereign, who has made peace with us, sits on the throne of the universe, moving "all things . . . for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). It is serenity from security.

#### PATIENCE: LONGSUFFERING

The word translated "patience" is a compound word meaning longsuffering. When the father of the prodigal son waited for his son to return, he did so with an open heart. He was living with the open wound of rejection. The father could have cauterized the open wound by disowning his son with a furious dismissal, yet instead he displayed one of the ingredients of patience: being slow to anger.

We often do not extend the same patience to others that we want God to have with us. I try to remember the following story when my patience has run out for those who are not living up to my expectations. A medieval peasant woman happened upon a Benedictine monk. She fell down before him and blurted out, "Please tell me, holy father, what do you men of God do up there in the monastery on the hill?" The monk answered wisely, "I will tell you, my child: We fall down and we get up! We fall down and we get up! We fall down and we get up!" If God suffers when I stumble, can't I wait in suffering for others?

**KINDNESS: FIRM BUT GENTLE**

Simple kindness is often missing in our world. We live in an “in your face” culture marked by belligerence, intimidation and incivility. We get what we want through bullying and boisterousness. The level of public hostility has reached frightening proportions.

Jesus was no pushover and displayed firmness and righteous anger toward the religious establishment, but to the vulnerable and hurting he was tender. A woman was caught in the act of adultery by the self-righteous elite who wanted to bury her under a mound of stones. Jesus said, “He who is without sin, cast the first stone” (see John 8:7). When they all walked away in self-condemnation, Jesus said to the ashamed woman, “Neither do I condemn you. . . . Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11). The Spirit speaks a gentle word through us to other bruised people, a healing salve in a hostile world.

**GOODNESS: LOVE FOR THE HOLY, MAGNANIMITY OF SPIRIT**

Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century Puritan preacher, wrote, “Holiness is the most amiable and sweet thing that is to be found in heaven or earth.” The psalmist says, “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8).

One of the definitions of goodness is a love for the holy. Goodness can also mean a generosity or magnanimity of spirit. We live in a world full of hurts, bumps and bruises. To get through this life we need a big heart. We need a generosity of spirit to survive with grace.

**FAITHFULNESS: KEEP OUR PROMISES**

God is a covenant maker and a covenant keeper. The first covenant the Lord made with Abraham was sealed in such a dramatic way that it shows us that keeping promises is at the

heart of his character. Two altars were erected. On each sat half the carcasses of a bull, a goat, a ram and two birds. Passing between these two altars were the symbols of God in the form of a blazing torch and a smoking pot. It was as if the Lord were saying to Abraham, “May I be cut in two like these animals if I fail to keep my covenant to make of you a great nation” (see Genesis 15).

Lewis Smedes said, “We are most like God when we keep our covenants.” We keep the covenants we make. Integrity must be our middle name. Jesus said, “Let your yes be yes, and your no, no” (Matthew 5:37). May it be said of us, “If she said she would do it, you can count on it.”

**GENTLENESS: POWER UNDER CONTROL**

Jesus said of himself, “I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). *Gentle* is also translated as “meek,” yet “meek” does not carry positive connotations. But Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5). It was said of Moses that he was the meekest man in all the earth. This is the same one who took on the potentate of the age, the pharaoh, and led his people from captivity. Meek has nothing to do with being weak. It is the same word used to describe a snorting stallion whose power has been harnessed and brought under the control of the bit. Submission to the power of God is what gentleness conveys.

**SELF-CONTROL: DISCIPLINE AND DIRECT OUR ENERGIES WISELY**

Self-control means not allowing our passions to run wild but harnessing them in the direction God would have them go. It’s as if we were orchestra conductors with powerful players down in the pit of our lives—passions, desires,

anger, sex drives, terrifying memories. Any one of these could take off and ruin the symphony. But the Holy Spirit gives us the power to stop these from destroying us. Take lust, for example. Lust is born when we allow a simple awareness of another person's attractiveness to become a sexual fantasy. We lose control when we dwell on sexual thoughts so that they are fanned into a flame of passion. Luther said, "We cannot help it if birds fly over our heads. It is another thing if we invite them to build nests in our hair." Self-control is keeping the birds out of our hair.

#### HOW ARE THESE QUALITIES PRODUCED IN US?

We have described our Lord when we group together the qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Since the Spirit indwells believers, these are the qualities that emerge as we abide in the vine.

In this age of self-improvement programs, self-help books and makeovers, we may think we can grow the fruit of the Spirit through sheer willpower and personal discipline: grit your teeth and out pops patience. We can try to act out the qualities that we think make up love, joy or peace, but this will be artificial fruit.

To think we can produce fruit through self-effort is failing to see that the Christian life is a battle. Our old nature, though defeated, is not dead, and it holds on and fights against the new nature of the Spirit. A university student who became a Christian soon discovered that

there was now a battle waging in him for supremacy that he had not faced before. The student described to a Christian counselor what he was experiencing: "It's like there is a mutt and a pedigreed dog inside my life, and they are fighting all the time." The counselor asked him which dog was winning. The student thought for a moment and replied, "I guess the one I feed the most."

We cannot pit our will against our sinful nature, but we must submit our will to the Spirit. Feeding the purebred dog means to submit to the rule of God in our lives. Life will flow through us when we know that apart from Christ we can do nothing. When we come to terms with the inability to change ourselves, then we allow the Lord to be our source.

Trying to see the fruit that God has produced in us is like trying to look at our eyes. You can't see that which you see through. The Holy Spirit is like our eyes. But others can see the evidence of the Spirit in our lives in a way we can't. As an exercise to close my small group, the members affirmed the fruit of the Spirit by declaring what we saw in each other. We delighted in telling each other of the evident ways that Christ's character was finding expression through our lives. I found myself saying, "Really? You see that in me? Thanks, Lord, for being at work in transforming me into your image and likeness even though I can't see it myself." We dragged our weary bodies into the meeting and walked out flying high. What a joy to know that God isn't finished with us yet!

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<sup>1</sup>R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1985), p. 197.

## Reading Study Guide

1. What is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian?
2. What does the singular use of the word *fruit* in Galatians 5:22-23 indicate?
3. Write a one-sentence definition of your understanding of each one of the fruit of the Spirit.

love

joy

peace

patience

kindness

goodness

faithfulness

gentleness

self-control

4. From this list, pick one quality where you have seen growth in your own life and another quality where you need God's grace for growth.
5. As an exercise in affirmation, focus on each person in your group and identify the fruit of the Spirit that you see showing through. What Christlike qualities mark your lives?

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6. What questions do you have about this reading?
  
  
  
  
  
  7. Does this reading convict, challenge or comfort you? Why?

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## **Going Deeper**

Take the list of the fruit of the Spirit and find examples in the Gospels of each of these qualities displayed in Christ's life.