

By Their Fruit

The scene is the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus Christ is teaching a large crowd, he closes his talk with this warning:

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. 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.¹

Jesus Christ taught that you can recognize false prophets "By their fruit". What did Jesus mean by this? John the Baptist came to prepare the way before Jesus, notice his reaction to the Pharisees and Sadducees when they approached him:

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."²

"Fruit" is being used as a metaphor for what one's life is producing; this is being particularly applied to spiritual life. One's fruit can be good or bad. Those producing bad fruit will be discarded. Jesus Christ teaching in the temple courts, with the chief priests and the Pharisees listening, told this parable:

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

"The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

"Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

"He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:

"The stone the builders rejected
has become the capstone;
the Lord has done this,
and it is marvelous in our eyes'?"

"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed."

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them.³

¹ Matt 7:15-20

² Matt 3:1-2, 7-10

³ Matt 21:33-45

The chief priests, the Pharisees and the Sadducees represented the religious establishment in Israel at that time. Quite specifically, this “by their fruit” concept is being applied to the spiritual state of affairs in the nation of Israel when Jesus appeared on the scene. This principle can be applied to the individual as well as the institution. Is this an accident? Is this merely incidental to the message? Indeed no, this is precisely why Jesus was sent. Notice how Jesus summarized this lesson (remember, he is speaking to the chief priests and the Pharisees):

"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.⁴

Is there a lesson for us in this? Just as it has always been and just as it was in the time of Christ it is the same today. The established religious institutions have by and large wandered away from God. Instead of leading their members toward God they are leading them away. In other words they are not producing good fruit. The words of John the Baptist especially apply to us in this day and age:

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.⁵

The people John the Baptist was speaking to were not practicing their religion in keeping with God’s instruction. They needed to repent. Those that repented became followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus speaking to his disciples said this:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 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. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.⁶

Christ’s instruction to his disciples is that it is necessary to “remain in me” in order to “bear fruit” here the metaphor is expressed in degrees of fruit bearing. Jesus Christ taught that bearing much fruit is an indicator of discipleship. The apostle Paul cautions believers and picks up the metaphor in this discussion:

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to

⁴ Matt 21:43

⁵ Matt 3:8

⁶ John 15:1-8

graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!⁷

The apostle does a little bit of metaphor mixing here, but it is abundantly clear that he is taking the example of Israel's rejection of Christ and making an application that certainly applies to us today. His message of encouragement comes with a warning for us against unbelief:

Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.⁸

The writer to the Hebrews makes a similar warning:

Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.⁹

The writer to the Hebrews then continues though, with words of encouragement:

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case — things that accompany salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.¹⁰

Disciples are encouraged to remain in Christ to produce fruit. The vine and branches metaphor that Christ employed emphasizes that believers are part of a community and functioning properly as a part of the whole produce fruit. Those that are not disciples are instructed to repent and produce fruit:

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.¹¹

Repentance is turning away from sin and turning toward God. We are instructed to become disciples of Jesus Christ by following in the apostles teaching. Remember the words of the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost following the ascension of Jesus Christ:

"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call."

With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and

⁷ Rom 11:13-24

⁸ Rom 11:20-21

⁹ Heb 6:7-8

¹⁰ Heb 6:9-12

¹¹ Matt 3:8

enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.¹²

Those who turned from their previous way of life and began following the apostle's instructions were added by God to the community and as a result able to produce fruit. Jesus Christ taught his disciples:

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last.¹³

This idea of “good fruit” may certainly be applied to the result of believers conspicuously following God's instruction and leading others to eternal life. To put it another way: this is how God has chosen to spread his message of salvation, by the actions and words of the community of believers.

Jesus Christ taught his disciples:

"No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light."¹⁴

How can family and friends be saved if you are not actively showing yourself to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Perhaps this message will come through others, but this is what each of us has been called to do.

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.¹⁵

Jesus Christ taught that you can recognize false prophets “by their fruit”. Jesus Christ also taught that bearing much fruit is an indicator of discipleship. Jesus taught his disciples to remain in him (continue in obedience to the end) in order to bear fruit. “Good fruit” is the product of an obedient life and encouragement to others in believing the promise and following the instruction of God.

In conclusion, words of encouragement and reassurance from the apostle Paul to the believers at Colosse:

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints—the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.¹⁶

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¹² Acts 2:36-47

¹³ John 15:16

¹⁴ Luke 8:16

¹⁵ Heb 13:15-16

¹⁶ Col 1:3-6, 9-12