

Sandra Brown
Fruitful: LOVE
Galatians 5:16-23
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If you go to my favorite scripture search engine, www.biblegateway.com, and type in the word “fruit,” you will find that the word fruit appears in one form or another nearly 250 times in the Bible. And if you start to scroll through all the references to fruit, one thing that becomes very clear very quickly is that from the very beginning, God created the world to be fruitful. We see this all the way back in Genesis 1:27-28: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply . . .”

The connection between being blessed and being fruitful is set up from the start. In fact, to be blessed IS to be fruitful, in the Hebrew scriptures. To have children, to tend flocks and herds that reproduce, to work the land and harvest what you plant—that is what it means to be blessed in the Old Testament. When God pronounces blessing on someone, it’s always tied to fruitfulness—children and animals and bumper crops.

Today, most of us don’t farm for a living anymore, but most of us would agree that a good day at work is one that is fruitful. Crossing things off our list. Accomplishing tasks that will ultimately lead to results. Today we call fruitfulness “productivity.” Today we want our TIME to be productive. (A good day for many of us is a day in which we get a lot of stuff DONE—and even on our days off, we still want to get stuff done, just different stuff).

Jesus talks about fruit, too. The parable of the fig tree, the parable of the sower, the warning about false prophets when he says, “By their fruits you will know them.” (“I am the vine, you are the branches.”) We’ll look at more of these in the coming weeks.

Did anyone here grow up on a farm? Those of you who grew up on farms or have large gardens today can probably testify to how much work they are. Preparing the soil, planting, watering, hoeing, watching out for pests and all that. Then, if all goes well, the hard work of bringing in the harvest. I love the story my dad tells of a summer that he spent helping the farmers when he was a student pastor in Eastern Washington. He helped bale hay in the days when you had to throw the bales in the truck yourself, and he helped drive the wheat truck, too. The farmers often had him over for dinner and fed him well, but the nights he was on his own, he'd come home to the little parsonage and make a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese and eat the whole thing with a can of green beans before falling asleep.

When we read in this famous passage from Galatians this list of the fruit of the Spirit, here's the really good news. This is not a list of qualities that we have to work on and try harder to be. If you hear this list and think, "Oh, great. More things I have to get better at," you aren't hearing the Gospel. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness and self control are the fruit of the SPIRIT. The SPIRIT is the grower. The SPIRIT is the one doing the work here.

Remember that Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. . . Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The fruit isn't something we accomplish, but something the Spirit accomplishes through us. I know you think there's got to be a catch here somewhere—"What do you mean, I don't need to work at being more loving and patient and kind???"—but there's not. This is going to be foundational to this whole sermon series, so if this point doesn't sink in today, or you just don't believe it, don't worry—we're going to come back to this a LOT. For today, what I want you to do is just marvel with me at the image of the Spirit busily working away within you and within me, tending to us, doing everything possible to make us fruitful.

So the first point is, God has created us to be fruitful, and the second point is that fruit is something the Spirit produces through us, not something we come up with by ourselves, and the third point is this: Note that Paul says, “The Fruit of the Spirit IS,” not “The FRUITS of the Spirit ARE”—all nine qualities together make up the fruit. So if the Spirit is working productively within you, if you are becoming more patient, you are probably also becoming more kind, and more merciful. A rising tide raises all the boats, as the old saying goes. That’s not to say that some of these don’t come more easily than others for some of us, but it’s a package deal, or a whole fruit basket.

And all of us have all of them, ready to emerge. They’re already all present in all of us, we’re just at different stages of development. It’s only a matter of when and how they will emerge. (Michelangelo famously said, “Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it”—similarly, each of us has the seeds of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, mercy, and self-control inside us, and it is the Spirit’s task to discover and draw all nine of these out of us.

Now let’s take a look at the first item on our list. Of course it’s love—it had to be love. And for me, love is well represented by apples, as I shared with the children earlier. When we love someone, we might say, “She is the apple of my eye.” My husband, Rod, said, “Is that one of those things that people think is in the Bible but it isn’t?” Actually, it is one of those things that people DON’T think is in the Bible, but it is! Like when the Psalmist prays to God, “Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings.” It is also used to describe the way God loves God’s chosen people. The apple of your eye is the someone or the something that you cherish above all others. The reason my dad worked so hard during that harvest, in

addition to his student pastor gig, is because he was earning the money to buy an engagement ring for my mother, who was the apple of his eye.

Love is the key word in our church's mission statement, "Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose." We've talked a lot about love over the years, and we'll keep talking about it, but here's the love story I want to tell you today:

On February 24th of this year, I preached a sermon on Luke 6:27-38. This is when Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, PRAY for those who abuse you." At the end of that sermon, I challenged you: "Picture someone who doesn't like you, or somebody YOU don't like, somebody who really gets under your skin, somebody you avoid as much as possible." And then I said, "Pray for this person every day this week. Every day. Once in the morning, once at night. Hold them in the light and love of God, and pray for them." And I concluded the sermon with these words: As Jesus said to that great crowd so long ago, "Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High."

I don't know if any of you tried that or not, but I did. There was somebody in my orbit at the time who had given me some grief about something, and I was stewing about it. I was thinking through what I wish I'd said, and considering what I should say in the future. I was judging this person in my mind for what I saw as their offenses against me. It was very clear that this was the person I was supposed to be praying for. So I did, but I didn't pray all that much. Just a quick, "God bless so and so," in the morning, and then as I thought about it during the day.

And it was a funny thing, but by the end of the week, I was not mad at this person anymore, nor did I view them as a problem, as I had before. I actually felt a softening in my heart towards this person, and was reminded of all their good qualities and good intentions. So I thought, well, I'll just keep praying for this person, and I did, and pretty soon, I could even smile

when I thought of this person. Eventually, I thought, wow, I sure do appreciate this person. And finally: I just LOVE this person!

Then I had a similar experience with somebody else—I felt misunderstood, and unfairly attacked, and even a little resentful, maybe. And then I prayed, every day, “God, bless so and so.” The exact same thing happened with this person. And I just kept going. Every time somebody irritated me or confounded me or disrespected me or whatever, I just started praying, “God, bless so and so.” Oh, my goodness—it is changing my life. I believe what is happening is that praying in this way is giving the Spirit the little crack she needs to get in and harvest the love inside of me that has been growing in there all along. I am NOT trying to love these various individuals—all I’m doing is praying for them in a very simple way. The Spirit is doing all the work, and I mean ALL. I’m just going along with it . . .

Yesterday morning, Rod said, “I’m going to pray lots of prayers for you today, as you write your sermon,” and I said, “Thank you, honey.” His commitment to pray for me meant a lot, because I had spoken sharply to him the night before about a thing or two. And I shared with him that I planned, as part of my sermon, to tell this story of how praying for my enemies is changing me. And I said, “Sometimes I have to pray for you, too, Rod, when you keep leaving your dishes on the counter instead of putting them in the dishwasher, and when you keep tracking mud into the house.” And he said, “Well, why do you think I pray for so hard for YOU? Come on in, honey, the water’s warm.”

It is pretty humbling to think that sometimes we are the ones that somebody else is praying for, because we irritate or threaten them. But the bigger point is that the Spirit will use any opening she can find to help us produce LOVE. Stay tuned till next time, because there’s much, much more . . . Amen.