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FRUITFULNESS IS FUN!

In John 15, Jesus says that fruitfulness is fun. In fact, the theme of John 15 is that Jesus wants us to live fruitful lives. Look at verse 16: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He may give it to you.”

Let me share with you what I consider to be fruitfulness according to the Bible. When God speaks in His Word of a fruitful life, He means active, positive attitudes. The passage of Scripture that deals with the fruit of the Spirit, Galatians 5:22-23, is the premier passage on fruitful living. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” Fruitfulness is exhibiting positive, active attitudes on a daily basis in our lives. When that happens, we begin to sense real joy and to see positive things happen in our lives. When we put these attitudes together, five “PRs” appear.

First of all, there are *positive results*. When you begin to inject these attitudes into your society, you’re going to see constructive results.

You’re going to have *positive relationships*. You will begin to develop fruitful relationships with others.

You’re going to have *positive reactions*, especially in areas that were previously tough problem areas for you. You’re going

to find that you receive reactions that are positive when you begin to have these active, positive attitudes.

You'll receive *positive reinforcement*. Life is like a mirror: what you show is what you see; what you put in is what you get out. When you encourage others, you'll find that they will encourage you. Attitudes are contagious.

Last, you'll have *positive rejoicing*. That's what Jesus says in John 15:11. "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full." People often tell me they're not happy; they say they're unfulfilled. They talk about not having joy in their lives. I get the impression that seeking for joy has become their purpose in life – but joy (or happiness or fulfillment) comes to us not when we seek it, but when we put the right principles into practice in our lives. It is a by-product of doing what is right.

It is when we live by the right principles that we begin to love the right principles. Most of the time, we want to *love* first. We want to fall in love with what is right and then have it happen to us. That's backward – it's when we learn what's right and live according to it that we begin to *want* to be right; then we begin to have the by-product, which is joy. You have probably seen the bumper sticker that asks, "Are we having fun yet?" Every time I see that bumper sticker, I want to write another one: "Are we doing right yet?" If we're doing right, we'll be having fun.

OUR POWER SOURCE

In John 15:1-10, Jesus gives us the principles of fruitful living. Let's look at them together. First, our potential for fruitful living is unlimited because of our source. Jesus starts by saying, "I am the true vine" (v.1). Jesus is our source. When we realize that, then we understand why Paul could say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil.

4:13). We become fruitful when we tap into the right source.

A friend of mine was discussing the implications of Micah 6:8 with his seven-year-old grandson: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The little boy, who was memorizing this verse, said, "Grandpa, it's hard to be humble if you're really walking with God." That's great theology coming from a seven-year-old. When we begin to get a glimpse of the unlimited resources at our disposal – the power of God Himself – then and only then will we sense the assurance that we are fully equipped to do whatever it is that God calls us to do.

We might feel like the little mouse who was crossing a bridge over a very deep ravine with an elephant. As the elephant and the mouse crossed the bridge, the bridge shook. When they got to the other side, the mouse looked at his huge companion and said, "Boy, we really shook that bridge, didn't we?"

When we walk with God, that's often how we feel – like a mouse with the strength of an elephant. After crossing life's troubled waters, we can say with the mouse, "God, we really shook that bridge, didn't we?"

Hudson Taylor, the great missionary to China, said, "Many Christians estimate difficulty in the light of their own resources, and thus they attempt very little, and they always fail. All giants have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on His power and His presence to be with them."

Like David, who said, "The battle is the Lord's" (1 Sam. 17:47), we also need to understand that Jesus is our source, and we can be directly connected to Him.

THE CARE OF OUR OWNER

In this passage of Scripture, Jesus says that we have poten-

tial for fruitful living not only because of our source but because of our care. Just as Jesus is the source, the Father is the vinedresser. The vinedresser takes care of the vine; he would be a man of skill and knowledge, an expert at growing grapes. But in this passage of Scripture, He is also the owner. When you think of an owner, you think of personal interest. You think of commitment – something more than knowledge and skill. As branches we not only have our source from the vine, but we have God who oversees us, takes care of us, and prepares us to be productive and fruitful.

You've probably noticed that the person who owns something, whatever it is, has a certain pride that a mere observer never has. I remember when I was a little kid, my grandfather often walked me around his farm. As we walked and looked, he would find uniqueness and beauty in things I wouldn't have looked at twice. He would see great potential in a rundown shed on a back lot; I would see kindling. He would show me a rusty, old tractor and see a machine with possibilities; I would see a piece of rust-covered junk. Why? How could we look at the same objects and see different things? He owned them and I didn't. Ownership makes a difference. God owns us, so when He looks at our lives, He looks at them not as an observer but as an investor.

OUR PURGING

Our potential for fruitful living is great because Jesus is our source. The fact that God is our caretaker and owner adds to that potential. One of the things God does as vinedresser is to purge us. His purging greatly increases our potential for fruitful living. "Every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit" (v.2). God, the vinedresser removes everything that hinders our usefulness. He knows that if He doesn't cut back the deadwood, all of our resources will go toward producing more wood and we won't be fruit producers.

I have found that productive people are continually being pruned, going through this process that God uses to make us more fruitful. And God knows exactly what to prune from our lives. He's like the professional logger, who, when there's a jam on the river, climbs a tall tree, looks over all the logs, and identifies the problem area. Then he takes a little bit of dynamite and blows that part up so the logs can continue to flow downriver. Now, that's not the way I'd do it. I would probably jump in and start knocking logs around until I finally worked my way to the problem area. But God doesn't mess around with the peripherals. He goes right in with His dynamite and blows up only the areas in our lives that aren't productive. He cuts away that "sin which so easily entangles us" (Heb. 12:1), whatever it is that keeps us from becoming the persons we really want to become.

OUR PARTNERSHIP

Our potential for fruitfulness is also tremendous because of our partnership. In verse 4, Jesus talks about this partnership. (And in fact, you can see it throughout the passage.) "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me." Ten times in verses 4-10 we see the word *abide*. Basically He's saying, "Connect with the vine, and everything will be fine." When Robert Morrison was on his way to China, where he would be a missionary, the captain of the ship was skeptical of his dream and gave him a hard time. As Morrison was leaving the ship, the captain said to him "I suppose you think you're going to make an impression on China." Robert Morrison replied simply, "No, sir. I believe God will." He was in partnership with God.

This partnership with God ought to give us the same sense of confidence as the youngster had who was selling five-cent pencils door-to-door to raise money for a 30-million-

dollar hospital for the community. One day a woman opened the door, and he said, “Ma’am, would you buy one or two pencils from me? I’m going to help build a 30-million-dollar hospital for our community.” She said, “Sonny, that’s a mighty big goal for just one kid selling pencils for a nickel.” He said, “Oh, Ma’am, it’s not me alone. See that boy across the street? He’s my partner. He’s helping. We’re really doing it together.” This little boy had great faith in a partner who was probably his equal. Should we not have this kind of confidence in a God who is unequalled, a God who is in partnership with us to make our lives fruitful?

OUR PROMISE

We also have potential for fruitfulness because of the promise given to us in verse 7. “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.” There are two observations I would like to make. First, the promise is conditional: *if* we abide in Him. Second, our asking needs to be according to His Word. What Jesus is really saying is that if we abide in Him, our delight will be in Him, so much so that we will ask all things according to His will. It reminds me of Psalm 37:4: “Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart.” Delight comes before desire. If I delight, what I delight in determines what I desire. If I delight in God, my desire will be to do things according to His will and to ask according to His will. Too often we try to make this principle work in reverse.

As a high school student, one of my chores was to do the dinner dishes. I hated doing the dishes. I was dating Margaret at the time, and often the prospect of seeing her in the evening outweighed my sense of duty at home, so I would jump in the car and be gone before I was missed. When I got to her house, you can guess what she was doing! I would immediately pick up a towel and begin drying dishes – and have a

wonderful time doing it! The person I delighted in was doing dishes, and when you really delight in someone, you enjoy doing things you normally dislike. So often we lack desire because our delight is not great enough. God promises us that if we delight in Him, we will desire things we need, and He will give them to us.

OUR LIFE’S PURPOSE

Our potential for fruitfulness is great because of the purpose in our lives. That’s in verse 8: “By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.” In other words, we are created to be fruitful. That’s our purpose. Look at verse 16: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you.” Why? “That you should go and bear fruit,” that you should have active, positive attitudes in your life. We have been chosen, appointed by God, for fruitful living. Those active, positive attitudes, like love, joy, peace, and long-suffering, ought to be becoming part of our lives. When they become part of us inwardly, then we begin to pass them on.

The problem so often with us Christians is that we do not show these positive attitudes that can make us salt and light in our world. The story is told that when Berlin was being divided into East Berlin, controlled by the Communists, and West Berlin, part of the free world, a group of East Berliners dumped a whole truckload of garbage on the west side. The people from West Berlin thought they’d pick up all the garbage, put it on a truck, and dump it back on the east side. Then they decided that wasn’t the way to handle it. Instead they filled a dump truck with canned goods and other non-perishable food items, went over to the east side, stacked it neatly, and put a sign beside it. The sign read, “Each gives what each has to give.” I think they were preaching, don’t you? You can only give fruit to others when you are living a fruitful life inwardly.

THE FRUIT OF OBEDIENCE

Our potential for fruitfulness is tremendous because of our obedience. Jesus says in verses 7 and 10 that if we abide in Him and if we keep His commandments, we will be fruitful. I think the key word is that little *if*. I have a mug at home that says, “If it’s to be, it’s up to me.” I think that’s what Jesus is saying. He says if you’re going to be fruitful, it’s going to be up to you. Jesus assumes in John 15 that He will have a fruitful relationship with us. In verse 6 He says, “If anyone does not abide in Me.” He doesn’t say, “If I do not abide in you.” He’s going to be plugged into us. His question for us is, Are you going to be plugged into Me? He’s already here; He has the power; He has the strength; He has the wisdom to implant in us; He has all the resources that we need, and He’s ready to deliver. All we need to do is to plug into Him.

Why don’t we always abide in Him? Pure lack of obedience. We begin to think that we can do it on our own; we begin to have an unhealthy self-confidence instead of a Christ-confidence. When we do not have active, positive attitudes, it is because we aren’t plugged into the vine. Christians should not have to psych themselves up everyday, as the world does, to have active, positive attitudes. It will be as natural as breathing when the relationship is right. Jesus is saying that when the relationship is right, we begin to live fruitful lives. That’s when we really begin to become productive.

Everybody wants to be productive. A psychologist at Stanford University tried to show that we live for productive results, or fruit. This researcher hired a man – a logger. He said, “I’ll pay you double what you get paid in the logging camp, if you’ll take the blunt end of this axe and just pound this log all day. You never have to cut one piece of wood. Just take the end that is blunt and hit it as hard as you can, just as you would if you were logging.” The man worked for half a day and he quit. The psychologist asked, “Why did you

quit?” The logger said, “Because every time I move an axe, I have to see the chips fly. If I don’t see the chips fly, it’s no fun.” I’m convinced that there are many Christians who are using the wrong ends of their axes, and there no chips flying. In other words, they are producing no fruit, and their joy is gone. Joy has been replaced by a sense of futility, uselessness, immobility. Fruitful people like to see the chips fly.

FORMULA FOR FRUITFULNESS

Jesus gives us a three-word formula for fruitfulness in John 15. These three words are the ones I want you to remember, because they are the key to fruitful living. The first word is *remain*. Throughout John 15 Jesus tells us to remain. In fact, the word *abide* in the original language can be translated “remain.” “Remain in Me,” Jesus says. He’s talking about our willingness to take time with Him in prayer and in study of the Word. We need to let Him begin to be part of our lives and work on our lives.

The second word in the formula is *receive*. Jesus says in John 15 that if we remain in Him, we will begin to receive certain things. What we’ll receive is good, fruitful living.

The third word is *reproduce*. If we remain in Him, we’re going to receive what He has for us. When we receive what He has for us, then and only then will we begin to reproduce in our lives.

FRUITFUL FOLLOW-UP

Let me give you a couple of suggestions for applying these things to your life. First of all, I would encourage you to commit yourself *now* to a productive lifestyle. Climb out on the limb; that’s where the fruit is. All great accomplishments have to begin with an initial decision. Make up your mind that you’re going to be a fruitful Christian, that you’re going

to begin to reproduce for Christ.

Second, follow the formula for fruitfulness I just gave you, and follow it daily. *Remain* by spending perhaps fifteen minutes in prayer and meditation daily. *Receive* by spending thirty minutes every day in the Word of God, positive books, and teaching tapes. Feed your mind on things that will help you think right and then reproduce. Find someone – today, not tomorrow – with whom you can share maybe one of the truths you learned from this chapter. Pass it on. One of the quickest ways to grow is to tell someone else what you just learned. The more you verbalize it, the more it becomes ingrained in your life.

Third, list the seeds that you are planting in your life. What things are you doing right now that are going to help you to be fruitful? Think not only of today but also of a year from now and five years from now. What are you investing in the soil of your life that's going to come back to you tenfold, thirtyfold, or a hundredfold?

Fourth, list some positive results that are happening in your life. If you're connected to the vine, you should be seeing evidences of that relationship. Remember the five "PRs"? They should begin to happen in your life. Look for them. Write them down and carry them with you. As you begin to put good seed into the soil of your life, you should be starting to reap some positive benefits, possibly in and through people who have previously reacted negatively. Begin to cultivate the soil; plant some positive seeds and watch the five "PRs" come back to you. Remember the theme: "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full" (John 15:11).