

## BEAR FRUIT

### I.) FRUIT

It was a great shock to me, especially as I was just coming out of seminary, that some churches really didn't care very much about bearing fruit – not for Jesus, or for God, or for the Kingdom. Hard to understand how things got that way. A great sadness. But in time I got used to it; not content or happy with it – not resigned to it either – just used to it. A great many churches show little evidence of any great desire to bear fruit for their Lord. It makes it even more of a privilege to be part of a church that wants to bear fruit. I have been blessed to be part of several that wanted to bear fruit very much indeed. And now I am again. I am very grateful.

Yet it never seems as easy or simple as we think it ought to be. We need to keep remembering our basics: We bear fruit by staying on the vine. What other people think about our fruit is not nearly as important as what Jesus thinks about our fruit. Fruit likes to grow. It is the nature of fruit to grow. We do not need to *make* it, force it, or threaten it into growing. Sometimes, in small ways, we can protect, encourage, reassure, free, and even keep out of the way. It is God who creates and brings the growth.

### II.) WHAT ABOUT *YOUR* FRUIT?

Frequently I warn you to be careful about the sideshows. Christianity in our time has a lot of people focused on the sideshows, forgetting about the main event. There is a time for charity, and a time for thinking about world problems and world missions. There is a time to be appreciative of famous people and the great leaders of former times. But when it comes to fruit, what really matter are your own family, your own vocation, your own circle of friends. That's where you can truly make a difference, and Jesus is bright enough to know that. That's where He wants and expects to be most influential and make the greatest difference in your life. I only mention it because this sounds strange and questionable to so many ears today. It has become almost classic liberal-church thinking today that Christianity is only about people you do not know and will never have a personal relationship with. I don't mean to suggest it is intentional, but what a convenient way to make sure that religion cannot have very much impact on our lives: if it is always somewhere else, and about somebody else.

The vast majority of your time, energy, caring, love, devotion, and commitment is rightly spent on your family, vocation, and circle of friends. If you were God, isn't that where you would want to be most involved in the choices, cares, concerns, and efforts of your people? Don't spend a lot of time on the sideshows. Keep paying attention to the main event. That is where the growth, the excitement, and the opportunities really are, and that is where the fruit grows (with occasional exceptions). "But then what about the church?" someone might ask. I don't understand the question. You do not *go* to church – you *are* the church.

Do you remember our discussion a while back about angels? We noted that there are lots of different kinds of angels, one of them being "herald angels." That is, proclamation angels – angels carrying a Message. Herald angels look for where it is dark; they watch for places where the hope is dim or forgotten; they are on patrol looking for the places where doubt is overwhelming, or fear is taking charge. In our Christmas stories, those first shepherds that the herald angels came to had not been decorating trees or wrapping presents. They were on the low end of the pay scale in Roman-occupied territory, caught between the temple and taxes, watching sheep between Bethlehem and Jerusalem that were on their way to be sacrificed.

Today, as evANGELists (another word for herald angels, by the way), you have a chance to do things Jesus' WAY. And Jesus, I have come to believe, is asking far less of us on the outside, and far more of us on the inside. If we see and accept our assignment as evangelists, we will not be trying to "reach the masses." We will worry less, feel less guilty or uncommitted, spend less time on the generic and general and more time on individuals – and accomplish far more for the Kingdom.

Frenzy, anxiety, guilt, overwork, and haste are trademarks of Satan's will and way. In Christ, we end up spending more and more of our time differently. But the burden is light, and the yoke is easy (meaning, it fits right).

You know Christmas, and you rejoice. That is, you know the source of peace and serenity, of meaning and purpose, of confidence and courage, of destiny and vocatio. You know that you are loved, where that love comes from, and that there is more where that came from. You know about a surrender that kills fear, pride, and depression. I am only reminding you of what we get to carry and spread. Its applications are unending.

With apologies to visitors and newcomers for the lack of explanation, Jesus asks us to carry this Message to six people. Tell them what we know. Teach them what we have learned and experienced. Care about them the way we have been cared about. We become Christian friends if they will receive it – if they will accept and allow it. Train and stay with your six until they each have their six also. You never need to feel guilty because you are not reaching more than six. If somebody moves or turns away from you, you try to replace them. That's it! That's all. The most powerful evangelism model ever known. If every Christian in the world took care of their six, you would not have to feed the world; they would already be fed. By trying to be grand and impressive – and continually taking on too much – the world is always hungry, lonely, and lost. Well, the world is unlikely to catch on to the idea of the six, and so is the church. But if you work the pattern yourself, you will grow in faith and wisdom, your soul will increase, and God will work miracles through you.

Still, we have to remember our basics: We are not responsible for the results. We are only asked to carry the Message. We are not expected to do it all. God has other servants. We mind our own business. Rejoicing, we pray every day; study some passage of the Bible every day; find and keep exercising our vocatio; get and keep ourselves in a *koinonia* group; choose and keep talking to our Mentor; start choosing our six, and carry the Message to them. That's all! That's it. Actually, it is quite a lot – more than most Christians are managing. Nevertheless, anything else is extracurricular. Anything else is probably a pride trap, unless the Spirit was specifically nudging you in your prayers. God does not want a lot of exhausted, anxious, guilt-ridden servants. That's the part we like to add on.

### III.) THE TENSION

Now, that was a fast reminder of a lot of things we speak about quite a bit around here. But it was just the introduction – the preamble to the issue I feel needs to be raised today. It keeps coming up over and over and over. It's not your fault; the atmosphere reeks with it. And I'm not trying to get you to stop bringing it up until it stops bothering you. That will not happen until you can take your own stance with confidence – knowing why you believe what you believe, and where your authority comes from. So, to the issue.

Jesus is the Savior. Is Jesus, then, necessary to salvation? Will any Buddhists go to Heaven? Most Christians are oblivious to the fact that no good Buddhist would *want* to go to anything a Christian would call Heaven. But since I do know that, it complicates the issue for me. Will any Muslims go to Heaven, since they *do* believe in Jesus but consider Muhammad far superior? Every devout Muslim, by the way, believes that Jesus was born of a virgin. You do know that, don't you? Muslims qualify on a technicality, but don't mean it in the way we do.

I happen to believe that my friend Larry McGinty will go to Heaven, even though he is an avowed atheist. He's going to be really pissed when he gets there, but that's beside the point. Of course, I expect that he will change some of his theology shortly thereafter. On the other hand, I expect mine will start changing a good deal too. In any case, I am caught with the awareness of my own love and respect for Larry, and I am more than hesitant to presume that my love and understanding are greater than my Lord's. I also happen to know some Jewish teachers who taught very clearly that at least some Jews would go to Heaven without any assistance from Jesus of Nazareth. Since those teachers were Jesus Himself and the Apostle Paul, I find it difficult to have any respect for those who make up different rules out of thin air, claiming an authority that I believe Jesus would have chased out of the temple a lot faster than He drove out the moneychangers.

Do not readily accept some of the claims and statements so familiar in our time – and so adamantly set forth by people who do not know their Bibles as well as they think they do, and who do not know the nature and purpose of God as well as I hope all of you do.

So now, with apologies to all other religions, I confess that I have no way to speak or think of any of this except out of my own Christian perspective and convictions: in or out of any camp or definition you can name, Jesus is *the only reason* why I think that God cares about anybody. Obviously my concepts are hopelessly prejudiced, and I have no time here to get to most of the details behind any of the things I will say and claim. But I will comment that the most frequently quoted authority for claims that there is “no salvation apart from Jesus” is the Gospel of John. That is not because John is more exclusive than the other New Testament writers. If anything, the opposite is true. But people don't pay attention to John's own definitions. “*I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the father but by me.*” (John 14:6) Who is speaking? The earthly Jesus – Jesus of Nazareth? NO! John takes pains to make it clear that he is jumping dimensions to the highest

identity of the Preexistent Christ. From the *first* verse in the *first* chapter of John's Gospel: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" It is *this Word* that became flesh and dwelt among us. John is connecting the revelation in Jesus Christ with the spirit and love of God that has cared and worked and planned for eons, *even before time or creation*. What a travesty to use John's words to limit God's love and purpose, when John *purposefully* wrote to expand our awareness of the limitless magnitude and love and caring of God.

I don't like it when people outside the church accuse God or Jesus of a lot of hateful, unlovely attitudes and motives. Guess how I feel when people *inside* the church do it – smearing His reputation, corrupting His Message, telling the world that Jesus is more like Satan than Satan himself?!

How do we get fruit to grow? By threatening it? By acting as if it's no good, thinking it's no good, or telling it it's no good? By yanking it off the tree it's growing on, with no real chance of grafting it in at a better place? There is a vast difference between telling people what they *have to* believe, and creating a place where people can *come to* an awareness of what they truly believe. No, I haven't forgotten about trust. Only, people never trust what they *have to* believe. They only trust what they have truly *come to* believe.

Not to convince anybody, but just while we are collecting our thoughts, here are a few Scripture passages for your later pondering:

*“John answered, ‘Master, we saw a man casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him, because he does not follow with us.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Do not forbid him; for he that is not against you is for you.’”* (Luke 9:49-50) Have you ever spent a few hours just letting this teaching sink in?

*“And every one who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but he who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.”* (Luke 12:10; Matthew 12:31-32) “Son of Man” is Jesus' favorite title for Himself. In this passage, He gives express permission for people to *not* get their salvation from Him!

“But wait a minute,” you say. “You're playing fast and loose with the Scriptures. What about the verses just before that?!”

*“And I tell you, every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.”* (Luke 12:8-9) Am I playing fast and loose, or am I the one paying attention? Jesus is talking to His friends, and clearly says so (verse 4). If I deny Jesus, He will deny me before the angels because we know each other, we’re friends. I have claimed relationship, loyalty, and allegiance. But what about someone who has never had or claimed such a relationship? They can say anything they want against Him and He will *not* hold it against them. *“Every one who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven.”* Of course, a lot of Christians know better, yet they preach and teach otherwise in His name. But this is what Jesus says.

*“I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”* (John 10:14-16) John is still talking about the high identity of the Preexistent Christ. He is also talking about a time when there will be one flock, and one shepherd. And he is talking so far beyond any definitions we have today of race, culture, denomination, country, or religion that most people never *hear* him. I am aware of the many ways people try to reduce such passages down to their own tiny little boxes. The sad thing is, they then have to live inside those tiny little boxes. They will invite you to come live inside with them, but don’t go. It’s far too cramped, and God is much too vast and glorious to fit inside them.

Lots of you know the classic tension between LAW and GOSPEL. Well, LAW versus GOSPEL is also the tension between the individual and the collective. I obey the Law for the good of the collective, which ends up being good for me too, in a general way. That certainly beats anarchy! But if I turn to Gospel, I am no longer living to please or bring benefit to the group. Allegiance has shifted to God, through a love-bond relationship that God initiated. As a Christian, I think first of the Incarnation: Jesus the Messiah, coming to us on earth in human form – and as a real human – to reconcile us to God.

I know, as much as any of you do, how often people try to get me to minimize this. They seem eager to get me to admit that Jesus was not the Messiah, or that there are other equally great spiritual teachers and guides. It’s no go! Like Peter, I have spent my time with the rooster

crowning, and I didn't like it any better than he did. Everything that matters to me – everything I know or trust – is based on Jesus Christ, and Him crucified and resurrected. You can tell me until you are blue in the face that you know everything I know and more, and that you got it from some other source. I will try to be polite, and sometimes I might even be interested. But Jesus is my WAY, and after all these years and all my experience of His mercy and grace, you will not get me to reduce my appreciation, adoration, devotion, trust, or love for Him. I like to play with theories, but they come and go. I have watched, felt, seen, and experienced Jesus at work in many lives, including my own, over a great many years now. If somebody wants to argue with my faith, that is what they are up against. And when somebody wants me to minimize the importance of Jesus, that is what I am up against.

It is, of course, this very loyalty and devotion to Jesus that, unless we are very careful, sets us up for a blunder Jesus Himself would despise. One of the very remarkable things about Jesus was that He trusted God – and His own identity and truth – so much that He could afford to stay humble. When is it okay for His followers to lose their humility? We are going to protect everybody from error, and proclaim and defend the absolute truth? In *this* world?! And against the very WAY of our Lord?

Okay, so Jesus is my source – my WAY – and I am totally sold on Him. Does that make me oblivious? Can it not also make it so that I can understand other things I would not have understood *except* for my relationship with Him?

When Moses has his experience with the burning bush, does that not register in my comprehension as a “Christian encounter” – an encounter with the Holy Spirit? And do I not read the writings of the early fathers of the church, and Christian teachers and preachers down through the centuries, and know that they saw it this way too? Moses is not obeying any “Law”; that part of the story has not happened yet. Moses is in dialogue with the Living God, and God has a plan and a purpose for Moses' life. Moses, by the way, is fighting, in every way he knows how, to get loose from this Being who thinks that he, Moses, is important and has a special destiny and purpose to fulfill. And failing to break loose from this PRESENCE, Moses makes the classic “Christian response,” which is: regardless of Pharaoh, Zipporah (Moses' wife), or anything he ever thought was reality – and anything he ever expected or wanted from his life before – from now on, he is living by whatever light and guidance he can get from this Being who has chosen him, who thinks he is important, and who has plans for his life. Does Jesus make

me blind to this, or want me to minimize or disrespect it somehow? Does it honor Jesus if I pretend that Moses was not saved because he did not “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ”?

Friends, the burning bush is Gospel, not Torah! I know that we live in a literalist, broken, not-very-wide-awake world, and that our world likes to make simplex distinctions at the lowest possible level of awareness. It saves a lot of thought and energy that way. But most of you are getting past that level, aren't you? Remember the Mount of Transfiguration? Moses and Jesus are friends! Jews and Christians are not always friends, but Moses and Jesus *are* friends. Paul keeps pointing to Abraham as the first Christian. “*He put his trust in God, and God counted it to him as righteousness.*” Paul wants us to see that the heart and core of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is back there at the beginning of Judaism with Abraham. (Romans 4) We are saved by faith – trust – just like Abraham was two thousand years before Jesus.

Jesus did not *invent* God; He reveals him. Why do so many Christians want to make it sound like God was not really alive or caring or loving his children until Jesus came along? Is Jesus superior to God – teaching God how it should be done? *Jesus does not invent God; He reveals him!* Jesus does not invent Christianity either. He reveals it: makes it clearer; blazes the Path of this WAY more brightly than the world had ever imagined it before. But just because we give it a new name, “Christianity” does not mean that the Way never existed before or that nobody ever walked the Way before. If we care about TRUTH, which doesn't just start or end at human whim, and if we care about a Living God who cares about all his children and always has, then we cannot keep thinking in terms of little man-made formulas and categories that we use either to beat each other over the head with or to make sure we are included in some imagined “in group.”

Do you think God cares in the least what label the world puts on you ... if you have turned your life over to him, and do your best each day to obey his guidance and discover his will and purpose for your life? And do we think God is impressed with the highest titles or the best “Christian credentials” on earth ... if on the inside a person pays no attention to him, or is unwilling, when *asked*, to go against all the institutional religious expectations and formulas and demands of their time? Like, as a matter of fact, Abraham, Moses, Amos, Jeremiah, Jesus, Paul, Luther, John Hus, John Wycliffe, George Fox, John Robinson, John Cotton, and hundreds of the rest of our very best leaders were asked to do?

If some Muslim or Buddhist tries to the best of their ability to track and obey the will of the Holy Spirit for their own lives – though they use words unfamiliar to us to identify that presence – are they not living what we would call the “Christian Way”? (Not that we should insult them by claiming for them a thing that would be offensive and blasphemous from their point of view.) And if some “Christian” is naming Jesus in prayers and conversations dozens of times a day but turning the Way of Salvation back into legal formulas about what you have to say, believe, and confess in order to be saved – things, by the way, that can all be said and still never lead to a personal encounter with the Living Christ, or to a new WAY of Life that walks with Jesus in the realities of everyday decisions and efforts and purposes – then do we really think that God is as blind as we are about who is *living* the WAY, and who is not? The constructs of this world are never the true reality. Wouldn't you think *all* Christians would know that by now? If *God* loves somebody and they do not “know” Jesus, can that person be saved? Is Jesus now bigger and meaner than God?! How very insulting it must be to Jesus that His followers could even posit such ludicrous constructs and questions. Yet I am asked these very questions in one guise or another several times every week. Of course, I realize that sometimes the questions are just a ploy. Some people want to pretend that Christianity is inherently stupid and hateful so that they won't have to pay attention to the Holy Spirit tugging at their lives.

Does every member of this church community walk the Christian WAY? By the way, when Christians get together, it is voluntary. In the Way of the Law, you belong to the community because it is *required*. In the Way of the Gospel, community is a choice we make to come together for mutual support and affection – a voluntary covenant – a love-bond that starts not between us, but between each of us and God. In the Way of the Gospel, community comes after awakening (or conversion) – a special gift God gives us for responding to his love. In the Way of the Law, community comes beforehand – as a requirement – one of the tests you have to endure and pass in order to get saved. In the Catholic church, which (without meaning any insult to the Jews) is far more Jewish than Christian, you *have* to belong to the church, you *have* to go to communion, you *have* to be a member in good standing in order to be saved. That's how the LAW approach works. In the GOSPEL approach, community is a gift – a way to further the blessings, opportunities, and growth of the LIFE God is already giving us. Salvation does not depend on it in some wooden way; community is simply part of the Salvation Way. Salvation, as always, depends on the

love of God. Community and love – and learning how to live together – are part of the joy and result of God’s mercy. To say, “Oh good, God loves me and has saved me, and therefore I can now live an isolated life and have nothing to do with his Kingdom or his other children” – that would seem a strange response to the Gospel of grace and love. Church is not a private affair; sitting in your living room all alone is a private affair. There is a difference between love and narcissism.

I personally have no language, experience, or concepts by which to trust, comprehend, or give myself to God apart from the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus my Lord. But one of the things I know and trust most about Jesus is that He was about a great deal more than Galilee, or 30 A.D., or one Nazarene carpenter turned preacher. And He was certainly about more than the tiny little constructs, borders, and categories that a foolish world tries to chain Him to and define Him as. This Jesus – whom I confess I tend to worship in His higher identity – kept pointing to God. He kept talking about the Kingdom of God, and in ways that made it much bigger than any little category contained on earth. He kept praying to God, and obeying what He heard in His prayers as if He Himself were not the real show. He kept claiming that God was the source of all His power, and of everything He taught and believed. It is even remembered that He wanted to be about His Father’s business, and not His own.

I think it makes Jesus very sad that so many of His followers get stuck on Him – paying so little mind to what He Himself believed and taught, and how He lived and why, that they actually turn Him into a barrier between many people and God – when His whole purpose was to reconcile us to God.

Let me suggest that we all add this P.S. to our covenants:

“I am a herald angel. I have started looking for my six, one at a time, and in prayer. I am rejoicing, even if my knees are knocking. And I promise never to assume or presume that I know anybody, for any reason, that God does not love and that Jesus will not eventually save. It may not be what they believe, but it is what I believe. He is my Savior! And I trust Him. And I suspect He is a lot better at what He does than our world has ever imagined.”