

# Chapter 24

## How to have a fruitful life

In my garden is a young plum tree. One year it produced a good crop of juicy fruit and the following year there was so much early blossom that I was hopeful for a repeat performance. Then we had an unexpected frost, the flowers died and with them most of the hoped for fruit. To be fruitful is how things were meant to be for all living things. Among the saddest couples in a medical practice are those wanting children but who never have any of their own despite all the help now on offer.

Yet there is a kind of fruit that any of our lives can produce when handed over in gratitude to God for what he has done for us and wants to do through us. This is the work of the Spirit of Jesus, who comes to live within us when we open up to him in answer to that patient knocking. Jesus once promised to give his followers a completely full life.<sup>1</sup> This can happen even when something was at the time a dreadful disappointment, seeming to empty life rather than to fill it. Yet by waiting on him (again!) we sometimes look back and see that he has brought a greater good than the earlier lost hope would have given, often bringing benefit to others as well. Jesus' disciples must have found much the same thing when Good Friday gave way to Easter Sunday, with all that followed to bless them and so many others, including us.

### Father, Son and Holy Spirit: our three-in-one God

When still with his disciples, Jesus promised that when he left he would ask the Father to send them his Spirit, and we have already seen how that promise was dramatically fulfilled at Pentecost. The way that Jesus foresaw this is interesting. First he said of the coming Spirit that the world would not accept him (just as it had rejected Jesus). Jesus added, 'But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.' So far, Jesus was the one who had been living *with* them, the Spirit already acting in and through him. When he left them the Spirit would come to be *in* disciples, sent by the Father in the Son's name to remind them of all his teaching.<sup>2</sup>

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is also variously spoken of as the Spirit of Jesus, or of Christ, or of God.<sup>3,4</sup> The Spirit had descended on Jesus as John baptised him, remaining with him as the source of his authority and giving the seal of his Father's approval.<sup>5</sup> Father, Son and Holy Spirit are thus inseparably intertwined in our three-in-one God. We have the privilege of approaching our Father God through the way opened up by his Son, Jesus, and our prayers and progress are assisted by the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> Although the idea of an indivisible Trinity may be hard to take in, a sign following faith will be the Spirit-given assurance that through Jesus we are truly God's children finding daily spiritual strength and guidance.

### Fruit is grown, not manufactured

Opposition, or disappointment, can hit the lives of those who have committed themselves to serving the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith in him is not an insurance policy against future troubles but instead we are assured of his constant presence and power as we meet them. Sadly, some find the difficulties too much for them and the early promise of a fruitful spiritual life is cut off, just as the frost cut off hope of fruit from my little tree. Yet fruitfulness does not depend entirely on us, or our circumstances, for it is the result of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. Jesus compared himself to a vine, and vines are intended to bear grapes, just as my plum tree was intended to bear plums – but he was referring to spiritual, not literal, fruit.<sup>7</sup> His message was that to be fruitful we need to abide in him, to stay close to him. The results of our own unaided efforts would quickly die away or receive a frosty reception and then, discouraged, we could be tempted to give up altogether. The secret is that his Spirit is the one who works through us, guiding and helping us with day to day tasks and giving perseverance and endurance for whatever comes our way. How does he do this?

### A fruitful life depends on the work of the Holy Spirit

There may be those known to us who have little idea of what is spilling over from their lives. Focused on and devoted to serving God and others, despite their trials, they may quite unconsciously show evidence of the love, peace and patience that are all different attributes

of the one fruit of the Holy Spirit. Paul gives us a full description of the fruit of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians:

*‘The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control... Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.’<sup>8</sup>*

Paul’s decision to send what was a corrective letter to the Galatians was because they risked being side-tracked in spite of at first running their race well.<sup>9</sup> Others had cut in on them, teaching that they needed more than to fix their eyes on Jesus in faith but should also be ticking a few legalistic boxes (such as the rite of circumcision) before being genuine disciples. This still happens whenever it is said that faith alone needs an add-on extra to make us acceptable to God. In effect, this would mean tying on counterfeit fruit, not that produced by the Spirit.

Paul reminded the Galatians that the old covenant has been replaced by a new one (see our earlier chapters 7 and 8). Centuries before the law was given to Moses, Abraham had received a promise that still held – it is faith alone that saves (not faith plus something else).<sup>10</sup> Paul’s readers had been accepted into God’s family by faith in the atoning work of his Son, Christ Jesus, and had been baptised to bear witness to that faith, so why on earth were they (or we) going back to laws that no longer held? Ritual circumcision, for example, was no longer needed. They believed that they loved God, this being the expression of the faith that puts him first, the rest of the law summarised in the all-embracing command, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’<sup>11</sup>

Love should make the world go round

The first aspect of the fruit of the Spirit is love. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if everyone in the world obeyed the command to love their neighbour as they loved themselves! It is so evident that this is not so. Perhaps it is all too easy to sing or say, ‘All we need is love’, but not to clarify which of the many uses of the word ‘love’ we have in mind.

When a junior doctor says, ‘I love orthopaedics,’ does he (usually ‘he’!) mean that he loves the idea of straightening crooked children (the

original meaning of the word) or that he loves working out the mechanics of repair for disordered parts of the skeletal system? He may even mean that he favours the variety of old and young patients who come for help, but he would be saying something quite different if instead of loving orthopaedics he had spoken of his love for his girlfriend. Is love just a mental exercise, a thrilling feeling, or a decisive costly commitment?

### Self-giving love

There must be some standard to show us what true love should involve, and the remark of a young mother probably comes close to it. Speaking of her new baby she wrote, 'I now know what it's like to be willing to give up my life for someone else'. Such selfless love is rare, but is the kind that heads Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit. In one of his last conversations with his disciples, Jesus had conveyed the same thing when he said, 'Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.'<sup>12</sup> Jesus went on to put belief into practice, giving his life for enemies as well as for friends. His love was (and is) so selfless that all over the world ever since, much enmity has been broken down by it. As he and the Holy Spirit are one, this is the kind of love that can be expected to grow when the Spirit is allowed to bear his fruit in our lives. It makes an interesting Bible study to find how Jesus' own life illustrated all the other aspects of the fruit of the Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

### Lack of fruit

Before telling us of the fruit of the Spirit to be expected in a committed life, Paul listed the open sins we hear of daily in our media and also the hidden attitudes others do not always know about, such as secretly held hatred, jealousy or selfish ambition.<sup>14</sup> Those who have gratefully invited the Lord Jesus to forgive their sins and give them a new start should have no further desire for such things and find them wholly unattractive. Instead we have the offer of a new attitude of mind.<sup>15</sup>

Yet just as a surgeon is upset when his operation proves unsuccessful, or a gardener finds that the expected bunches of delicious grapes are

small and sour, so we can grieve the Spirit. This happens when supposed believers act unkindly, without compassion or forgiveness, or still hang on to some of those secret sins that hurt other people. We who have been forgiven so much should be ready to forgive each other.<sup>16</sup> Even so, all of us must know regrettable moments when things were said, done or thought that we should not have allowed so we need to ask for forgiveness from God and from others we have offended.

### Keeping in step with the Spirit

The secret of continued fruitfulness is to walk in step with the Spirit, tuning in each day as he helps us to pay special attention to something we read in the word of God or are reminded of in some other way. When we do get out of step we feel uneasy until we identify what is wrong and ask for help to put it right. When Jesus took the burden of our sins on the cross, we died to them with him and now find that his resurrection life is ours as well.<sup>17</sup> He gave us a new nature with his Spirit, but unless we co-operate with him our old nature tends to keep popping up again – dead but it won't readily stay down all the time.

For our comfort, all gardeners know that weeds need constant attention and that growth and fruit-bearing take time. As Jesus said in his parable of the vine, pruning improves fruitfulness. When discomforts great or small come our way it may help to think of them as being like the gardener's shears, designed to cut out useless, unproductive parts of our lives and to encourage more fruit to come.<sup>18</sup> Most busy people find it hard to cultivate patience, long-suffering or, at times, kindness, but that means lots of opportunities, with the Spirit's help, to practise and produce them!

### As fruit grows, it shows

Christians have sometimes had a reputation for being killjoys but as part of the fruit of the Spirit is joy that too should be growing in us. Having been taught this, a young Christian medical student started to take one attribute of the Spirit's fruit from Paul's list each day and pray that it would grow in her. One 'joy day,' another student unexpectedly said, 'You look happy today'. Without her being aware of it the Holy

Spirit was quietly at work (though his joy is deeper than happiness, so often dependant on happenings).

Years later, as a young doctor, the same person struggled to put up an intravenous drip into a small baby's tiny vein. As she finally succeeded, the assistant nurse accidentally dislodged the needle and the whole process had to start again. With a quick SOS prayer, tongue and temper were controlled and the job completed. The relieved nurse commented, 'You are so patient, doctor,' and the doctor thanked God that his Spirit had helped her to exercise self-control and kindness, and to learn more patience. Peace and joy would return later, but if instead she had snapped out an angry rebuke, to keep in step with the Spirit would have meant an apology, both to the Lord and the nurse. Sometimes that prospect holds back the outburst in the first place – but there are better motives. The fruit is to bring glory to God, not merely to add to our reputation.

### For further thought

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- When you can, read John 15 and 16, and make a note of some aspects of the fruit that the Spirit of Jesus wants to grow in our lives.
- Have you seen these growing in the lives of others?
- What do you think stops them growing in you? Surely not lack of opportunity?

### Further resources

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- Drummond H. *The greatest thing in the world*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H Revell, 2002

## References

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1. John 10:10
2. John 14:16-18, 26
3. Acts 16:7
4. Romans 8:9
5. Matthew 3:13-17
6. Romans 8:16, 26
7. John 15:1-10
8. Galatians 5:22-23, 25
9. Galatians 5:7
10. Galatians 3:11-14
11. Galatians 5:6, 14
12. John 15:13
13. Galatians 5:22-23, as shown by Jesus eg: love (John 13:1); joy (Luke 10:21); peace (John 14:27); patience (John 14:9); kindness (John 8:10-11); goodness (Luke 23:41); faithfulness (John 17:4); gentleness (Mark 5:41, 43); self-control (Matthew 26:62-63)
14. Galatians 5:19-21
15. Ephesians 4:22-24
16. Ephesians 4:30-32
17. Galatians 2:20
18. John 15:1-2

