

Still Producing Fruit?

Constant, Active Work Toward the Kingdom

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Given 24-May-26; Sermon #1877-PM

I kind of smile, but I have a bitter truth to tell you today. I see an awful lot of gray hair out there. A good percentage of the people in my audience are *old*. They are seniors. Elderly. Aged. Mature folk. The hoary headed. Retired. Pensioners. Have not heard that one in a while. We like to call them senior citizens. Actually, some of you may even qualify as fossils. Let us just say that for some of us here, our best days are likely behind us. The church in general is aging, though I am happy to say that we here in the Church of the Great God have a pretty good mix of ages.

Yet the facts of life cannot be denied. We grow old; everyone is growing older. You are older now than when I first started about two minutes ago. We have to acknowledge this fact if we desire to make the most of our lives.

Moses in Psalm 90:10 says this.

Psalm 90:10 The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

So Moses tells us in this poetical way that the average human lifespan reaches into our eighth decade. And there is that word again. Statistics bear this up. Under today's conditions and access to healthcare and things that we have learned about the human body over all these centuries, even the longest-lived persons in the world averaged little more than 80 years. I believe right now the little area of Hong Kong has the record. They reach an average of 84.3 years. Everywhere else in the world, the average is lower than that.

Let us just think about this a little bit. Let us cut that 80 years, we will just round it to 80 years, and let us cut the 80 years into quarters. So you have, you know, 1 to 20, 21 to 40, blah, blah, blah. So, we can do that and give them a name. Youth; Adulthood; Middle age; and Old Age. When we look at

these individual scores of years, we find that they are full of activity. We humans tend to do a lot in our lives.

So in *youth*, there is a lot of growth going on in our physical bodies, hopefully in our mental acuity. But we do a lot of playing when we are in this stage. And we have heard that play is very good for us, teaches us a lot. Some people tend to learn a great deal in play. But of course, then there is school. We go for normally about 12 years of schooling before we get to college. And, you know, we may dabble in sports and other lessons like driving lessons. We want to get our driver's license. I hear Gen Z is not so eager to get their licenses, but back in the good old days, that was the thing we all coveted. As soon as we turned, in most places it was 16, hey, we were down at the DMV, getting our license so we can go out and tear up the streets. And of course, high school graduation comes along. And our first couple of years of college, normally 19 and 20 were freshman and sophomores in college.

Let us move on to what I have called *adulthood*, from 20 up to 40. We are still in college, many of us, or we are at the beginning of the careers we have chosen. We do a lot of dating during the early part of this time of our lives. We probably started dating back in our youth, and now we are really looking for a spouse, and that often ends in marriage. And of course marriage leads to kids. At least that is how it used to be. I hear they do things differently these days, not according to the book, but that is what takes place in that period of young adulthood.

Of course, your job, your career is beginning and growing, and you are putting a lot of time and effort into making that grow. And of course, you have a little money in your pocket, you buy a really nice car, hopefully, or you save it up and you buy a house, and then your children populate the house and then ruin the house and you have to do a lot of repairs and maintenance and upkeep and all that stuff. But it is a very busy time as you are getting your life settled and just eagerly anticipating *middle age*, which is the next group, 40 to 60.

This is when your career really should be well-founded and you are making the most money that you have made throughout your whole life. Maybe you have even not only grown it, but you are now into management. You are

managing other people and you are the old BMOC, big man on campus or big woman on campus. That is not as complimentary. But you are up top of whatever company you are in, at least in upper management maybe, and you are thinking about retirement after these days, so you are putting money away for that. Maybe you get a bigger house because now you have a higher salary and then all your money goes away because your kids get married and you have to spend thousands of dollars on various things (I will not go into that. It would probably not be good.) But luckily, you get to look forward to grandchildren from those kids' marriages and they start to come along and you spend all your money on them too. And maybe you have enough leftover to do a little traveling. Really, it is a great time of life. A lot is happening and you have the money and the freedom to do a lot of stuff.

Notice here, I am trying to be positive as much as I can. Till now.

And we get into *old age*, 60 and up. Well, those days are the final days of our careers. These days they want you to get out at 65 or so. Some are able to get out even earlier from their jobs, so they have this, maybe, very long retirement. But that is the time of life when you begin to have some free time because nobody wants you in the workplace anymore. So you have to figure things out, so you play golf. But you know, those are days filled with gentle exercise, you go into the pool and you do your exercises in the pool and those sorts of things. You play a lot of cards, you sit around tables and chat. Oh yeah, and you spend a lot of times in doctor's offices. Hopefully, it does not go further than that and they say, "You're looking great for 78." And they let you go. But that is kind of what we see out there when people cross that threshold into old age, these are some of the things they can expect. Am I right? Or does old age seem to be the odd one out here?

The other stages of life are full of activity, positivity, growth. You look forward to them. But not old age necessarily. Old age seems to be full of care, uncertainty, negativity. And of course, there is no group, no age beyond that. This age group ends in death. That is pretty final except you have the hope of the resurrection, of course. But physically, old age is not a happy prospect, at least not as happy as the other three. Why cannot the fourth stage be more like the other three? Why does it have to be so negative?

I mean, think about it. In old age, people are at their most knowledgeable. They should have the most wisdom of any other age group. Sometimes they are also the wealthiest that they have ever been. Especially if they have to take all their money out of their retirement accounts and "Woo, we're rich!" And then you have to pay taxes on it. But also they are wealthy in time. They have the most free time to do things, except for maybe the youth. But we make sure the youth are very busy and you have these soccer moms out there taking their kids to this, that, and the other thing, and they end up being pretty busy and have full schedules. But people who are retired, they can set their own schedule and have all this free time to do stuff.

Yet, even though all of these things may be true, it often ends up that old age is the least productive time of life. I mean, many people, once they get to that point, they kind of give up. Not completely, but they stop dreaming. They stop having a lot of goals, and they are just hanging on. And that is very unfortunate.

I recently read an article by a woman named Michelle Morin. This was on the Desiring God website. She titled her article, "The Dangerous Days Past Middle Age." I will give you an idea of what she was writing about. Here is her first two paragraphs.

I have an image in my mind of the godly old lady I want to be some day, soft spoken, kind to all, full of wisdom. Having logged half a century under God's sanctifying sandpaper, I should be well on my way by now. And taking stock, I can see that I do not have to rein in my temper as much as I used to and there is precious little out there that tempts me to covet. What I am learning, however, is that as I age, I sin differently. Sin is still crouching at the door, it just comes in a different form. I can easily be fooled into mistaking apathy for godly serenity. I might take comfort in the absence of fiery sins like lust and anger, yet I may be blind to the pride, selfishness, and slothfulness that have crept into their place. Time can make us lazy, and we are all subject to its subtle drift. Perhaps the sifting question for the aging Christian is, am I killing sin, or have I just traded one destructive path for another?

She goes on to give three solemn warnings for the seasoned Christian (that is like a seasoned citizen or senior citizen) who wants to finish well. I will give you these three. She wrote several paragraphs under each one, but I will just give you the heading. She said, 1) beware the temptation to coast. 2) beware the tendency towards cynicism. And 3) beware grasping after youthfulness and not embracing the gift of years.

They are good points. It was a very good article. But you know what? They do not go near far enough, nearly far enough, if you want to use an adverb in that place. They do not go nearly far enough, and not just for seniors, but for all of us, because we can all be tempted to do those things.

Now, we speak a great deal on this day about firstfruits. We have heard some stuff over the last two days about those things. This feast does focus on the firstfruits of the wheat harvest and that wheat harvest depicts God's harvest of firstfruits when Christ returns. I think we have that pretty well established. We say God has called us to be firstfruits. And I think that is true. And we certainly want to be among the firstfruits of God's Kingdom. We want to rise in that first resurrection and meet Jesus Christ in the air.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. Are we producing fruit? Or maybe put this a little better. Are we *still* producing fruit? Especially those of us who have crossed the 60 year threshold into old age. Or are we, as Miss Morin warned, giving in to the temptation to coast? Or say, to those coming up after us, "We've done our time."

Now, back in 2001, I know that was a long time ago, but since we are old we were around then, I gave a Pentecost sermon titled "Why Count Fifty Days?" I had noticed in my study and just thinking about things during my conversion up to that point, that God told us to count to Pentecost in Leviticus 23. And in Psalm 90:12 Moses tells us there, talking to God, praying to God, "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." And so we have here in Leviticus 23, God telling us to count to Pentecost and Moses here telling us to number our days. Numbering and counting are very much the same thing. And then I began to think, okay, God tells us in Leviticus 23 to count 50 days and Moses here in Psalm 90 said that our average age is about 70 or 80. And I was thinking, well, we become accountable, according to the Bible, at about age 20. Or at least we can go

off to war if Israel decides to do that. But 20 was that dividing line, generally, between youth and adulthood. And so, if we, you know, croak at 70, do the math, 70 minus 20, you have about 50 years of adulthood, and hey, that is the same number we are supposed to count to Pentecost.

So I put these two ideas together. That since the count is 50 days and the average length of a person's converted life is about 50 years, I concluded that the 50 days of the Pentecost count can represent the years of our spiritual lives until the harvest. God wants us focused and active in our growth, producing fruit all the days of our lives.

Let us go to Exodus 23, verses 14 through 17. Makes it easy. God talks about the holy days in Exodus 23 and Leviticus 23.

Exodus 23:14-17 "Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year: You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread (you shall eat unleavened bread seven days, as I commanded you at the time appointed in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt; none shall appear before Me empty); and the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labor which you have sown in the field and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labors from the field. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God."

God here, through Moses, speaks about the three harvest festivals among the holy days. They are also the three pilgrimage feasts where once they got into the land the people would come to Jerusalem to keep those particular feasts, Unleavened Bread, Pentecost as we call it now, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Now, what is interesting here is that for the last two, God gives them different names from what we are used to. God calls Pentecost the Feast of Harvest. In the New Testament, of course, we call that Pentecost. In Leviticus 23, it is called the Feast of Weeks. And so we have a different name for Pentecost, and then the Feast of Tabernacles, instead of dwelling on the idea of tents or temporary dwellings, here He talks about ingathering, another harvest term.

Well, we need to notice as we focus in on the Day of Pentecost, how God describes this holy day. First, He does call it here the Feast of Harvest. Now,

the Hebrew word that lies underneath the word harvest is *qasir*. (Like I said before, I am not going to give you all the diacritical marks here.) And this particular word does not necessarily mean harvest. It comes to mean harvest, but the base idea behind the word is cutting or severing. And so when you reaped a field of grain, you brought in the harvest, you would cut the stalks with something very sharp, and then you would gather them up and bring them in.

Now you might wonder, is that the same word that they used for ingathering there in the middle part of verse 16? But no, these are two different words and that is why they are translated with two different English words. Ingathering is the Hebrew word *asip*, and it means to gather or to bring in, to receive, or of course ultimately it meant also to harvest. This refers not to the reaping or the harvest of grains out in the field, but more specifically, it refers to the ingathering of fruit, or grapes specifically. That is what was ripe in the fall, whereas the wheat that was gathered in and around Pentecost was ripe around Pentecost. And so it was cut out of the field, harvested, whereas at the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, the harvest was a fruit or grapes, and that was brought in, as the Hebrews thought of it. And that is what the word ingathering means, to gather or to bring in.

Let us get back to Pentecost. Pentecost is a festival celebrating the harvest of grain cut from the field. Like the wave sheaf, we heard about that this morning. The wave sheaf was cut. The priests would go out into the field before the barley harvest, and they would take a sheaf of grain and they would cut it with a very sharp implement, and this was brought in to be offered. The wave sheaf, representing Christ the firstfruits, was cut. It is a symbolic action for dying, because when you cut it out of the field, you basically kill that plant. And so, He Himself was *cut off* from the land of the living, just as a sheaf of barley was cut off from the field and offered. But then, of course, He was resurrected to glory, and He was acceptable to God as the wave sheaf offering showed. You know, it was waved before God for acceptance, and it was. Obviously He was; He was perfect, and He had finished the work and He had done everything and it was, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased."

So the Pentecost harvest 50 days later reflects the same process. We live over those 50 days, or 50 years in my analogy, and then we are cut off. But

the same thing should happen if we have produced fruit over those 50 years or however long your conversion happens to be, and we die in the faith, when we are resurrected, we will, like Christ, be resurrected to glory and be acceptable before the Father. So very similar ideas in the wave sheaf that starts the process that happened to Christ as what happens on Pentecost at the end of the process for His church.

That was the first point. This is how God describes the Day of Pentecost.

The second one is that here in verse 16 God narrows the focus of the Day of Pentecost to "the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field." This is how God thinks of this day, at least in this context. "The firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field." Notice the pronouns here. You would think "this is when you give Me offerings and glorify Me." No, God does not say that. He flips the focus toward us. The firstfruits of *your* labors which *you* have sown in the field. It is all about you, guys. Not really. But for this point, it is about you.

God highlights what His people do during this time. What are you up to during the time of your conversion? Whether it is 50 years or 50 weeks, it does not matter. What are you doing while you are out in the field? What are His people doing? What does He want to see His people doing during this time? He wants to see them hard at work, growing things in their field, and of course gathering those things in, producing. Spiritually then, this festival emphasizes the Christian's work, growth, maturity toward completion into Christ's character image. He gives us plenty of time. Whether it is a short amount of time, or whether it is a lot of time, He gives us what we need to begin showing mature fruits from our conversion, during our time in which we have God's Spirit and working toward the Kingdom of God.

So in this case here in Exodus 23:16, Pentecost is about what we do during our conversion. But we do not work alone. I do not want you to get the idea that you are out there in your field and there is no one else about, no one giving you any help. God Himself works alongside us.

Now, other points that we have made in the past about Pentecost is that God provided His law on Pentecost, on Mount Sinai. We heard that a little bit this weekend. He gave us some very basic teaching in giving us the law, but what

came with it, we are supposed to understand this as a given, all the rest of His revelation comes with that. And then, He not only stopped there as we heard from David yesterday and others, He gave us His Son, and His Son has given us the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. So not only do we have instruction, but we also have the power now and the mind of God to begin using that instruction to produce fruit.

And I cannot forget the big one here, the major gift that we have been given is Christ Himself. Because He works in the trenches with us. He is always with us by His Spirit. And we see that in the days of Pentecost, of the 50 days that we count, by the fact that He begins it all on the wave sheaf day. And by being the wave sheaf offering, He is with us every one of those 50 days. And then, of course, at our harvest, He will be with us forever! But He is always there helping us and guiding us along the way.

So we have been given three great gifts to use to produce fruit during this time. First, we have Christ and that is an inestimable gift. And then of course we have the law, His revelation, and we also have His Spirit. So we have all the tools we need and we can ask Jesus Christ or God the Father for the other things that we may need, specific helps. And Jesus tells us in John 14, 15, 16, 17, "whatever you ask in My name," I will give to you. I will be happy to give them to you. James says, "Hey, if you lack wisdom, ask the Father, and He'll give it." And that would apply to any other good thing that we need to produce fruit in our lives. So, we cannot say that standing out in the middle of a barren field, "I was never given any help." No, that is like the man that was given one talent and did not do anything with it. He did not even use what was given to him. And in the parable, what did Jesus say to that one man? He said, "You wicked servant! You did not even use the money that I gave you, put it in a bank and get interest. You did nothing!" And there was wailing and gnashing of teeth. Think about that.

Paul writes in Philippians 1:6, I am going to go ahead and quote that exactly.

Philippians 1:6 being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

This is a promise that He is going to be with us every step of the way, and He is going to complete His part. We do not need to worry about that. God is on our side. He is doing everything He can to complete us for the harvest.

And then just turn a few pages here, maybe one page over to chapter 4, verse 19,

Philippians 4:19 And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Think of it this way. God the Father and Jesus Christ are the wealthiest Beings in the world. They have no lack of any good thing. And he says here, You ask the Father to supply some of those riches of His grace to you and to your conversion, all the work that you need to do to put on the mind of Christ, and He is going to give it. He has an unending supply of these things, and He is willing to funnel it down to you so that you can make strides and have a harvest of good fruit. So 1) God will finish what He started. And 2) He will provide everything we need along the way. Those are givens. I do not think we believe it half the time. We look at ourselves and say, "I'm so bad. I can't do anything." But we have the bottomless supply from Jesus Christ and God the Father to give us what we need. We just have to have confidence, have faith that if we ask, He is going to give it to us and He is going to give those things at the right time in the right proportion, as long as we keep working, we keep moving forward. That is how our God is. He is a giver. He wants to supply everything that we need.

Well, as you know, we are not like God. We may have a few things in our lives that reflect Him. But our work is at best uneven in this task. Sometimes we are, "Hey! We're going to do all this and it's going to be great!" And other times it is like, "I just can't go on anymore. It's just so hard." And we slack off. We get discouraged. We ebb and flow in our growth and zeal. We slack off and procrastinate. We at times find ourselves easily distracted. There is our families. That is a good thing. Or a job. That is another good thing usually. But even good things can be distracting and take our minds off of Christ and the job He has given us to do to grow and to overcome. A lot of times our physical health takes all of our attention, and we are distracted by that.

Unfortunately the world out there is like a neon sign with a trumpet, and those things that happen out there distract us. We, you know, get led by the nose into something and it takes all our time and we forget to do the things that are going to be best for conversion. And, let us just face it, we are human. There are a lot of things out there that do not really matter, that distract us a lot, whatever they happen to be. Doom scrolling on Instagram, or the YouTube shorts, or reading endlessly things that do not matter. Conspiracy theories. These things are terrible distractions to us, when the Word of God is what is important and the working in our field is important.

So we have to be prodded, once a year at least, at Pentecost, that we need to get back to work. Because, frankly—I am looking at myself here. I am not trying to be critical—there is much still to be accomplished in our field. We may have started, we may have planted, but there are weeds growing everywhere. We need to tend our fields. We need to keep at it all the time.

Now, staying here in Philippians 2, let us go back to verse 12.

Philippians 2:12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Obviously in the next verse he said God works with you. That is obvious. He always does those things that are good for us. But we have to get on the stick. We cannot let our ground grow fallow. That is not the way. God wants to see plants growing in our fields and producing.

Let us go to Matthew 7, verse 15.

Matthew 7:15-20 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them."

Now, Jesus approaches this section from the negative, because He is speaking about false prophets. But He makes it clear through the whole paragraph here that the opposite is also true. You can know a good prophet by the fruit that he bears himself. Hopefully, good fruit. And you could say that this comes on down the line; you can tell who is a good Christian by the good fruit that he bears. A good tree bears good fruit. And the same goes, a bad tree bears bad fruit. And a good tree should not bear any bad fruit. He says actually, the good tree *cannot* bear bad fruit, otherwise he would not be a good tree. And a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Otherwise, the bad tree would be a good tree.

He is saying, "Look, what defines our identity here is the fruit that we bear." It is not that we are naturally good or even naturally bad, if you want to go to that extreme. It is what we do with our lives. So if we bear good fruit, well, we must be a good tree. And if we bear bad fruit, we must be a bad tree.

So there is no ambiguity here in what Jesus says. A good tree *must* bear good fruit, and if it fails to do so, He tells us what happens. If a good tree does not bear good fruit, it is cut down and thrown into the fire. That is pretty dire! That tree who had so much promise failed of its purpose. It failed of its duty to produce good fruit. And the result was destruction. Like I said, that is pretty dire. Jesus is not pussyfooting around here. He wants to see fruit. He wants to see specifically good fruit.

Now, the takeaway is as obvious as this passage is sobering. *We must bear fruit*. It is a given. A Christian *must* bear good fruit. We cannot depend solely on our calling. God does what He does. And we cannot just say, "Well, I'm a called person of God. I'm one of the firstfruits!" and do nothing. That is just not how it works. We cannot assume that God will allow us to slide by without judgment when we do nothing, when we sit down and dig a hole and put our talent in there and do nothing with it. I mean, His reaction there in that parable is pretty absolute. We cannot rest on our laurels, you know, any of our past accomplishments. I am sure God will take them into consideration, but He is going to say, "Why did you stop? Why'd you put it into neutral and coast?"

Hebrews 2:1 says, "Beware. . . lest you drift away." That is the coasting idea. That we get to a certain point and say, "I've done enough. We don't need to row against the tide here anymore. It's too hard. Let's just coast for a while." Because as the author there in Hebrews says we just get farther and farther and farther away from the goal.

There must be growth. There must be fruit or we fail to complete our sanctification. Because the fruit that we are producing are the things that God uses to help us to grow into the image of His Son. He does not just, you know, from above, using His great magic wand, just throw out all the fruit on us. That is not how it works. He gives us a great deal of help, but we are the ones that are in the field working to make use of those gifts to put on the character of Jesus Christ. It is Him *and* us. We are working together. As I have said before, He probably does 99% of the work. And gives us 100% of the good things that we need. But we have to do something. We have to be there in the trenches, working. Doing good works, producing fruit.

Let us go to where Hunter [Swanson] was. Luke 8, verses 11 through 15. This is the Parable of the Sower and the Seed. Actually, it says Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Sower and the Seed. We have to understand that the parable deals with a person's reaction or response to receiving God's Word. The seed, as we find here, represents the Word of God, and when we read these, we will see that each group is categorized by how they respond to it.

Luke 8:11-15 "Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear [that is a good thing]; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear [also good], receive the word with joy [that is very good. They are happy to have God's word]; and these [unfortunately] have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. [So they start out great with the right attitude, but they do not have any endurance.] Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard [also good], go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. [They got a little farther than the

other groups, but they did not finish the course because they were distracted.] But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it [observe it], and bear fruit with patience [or *hupomone* or endurance]."

The first three categories of people who hear God's Word all fail. Even though they may have received the Word, even like the one in verse 13, they hear it with joy. It is so wonderful and great. The third group, that distracted one, are specifically said to have not made the cut. Because they "bring no fruit to maturity," echoing then what Jesus said in Matthew 7 about the good tree. If they do not bear good fruit, they get cut down and thrown into the fire.

But the fourth group, ah. These are a special people. And I am not saying that facetiously. They are a special people. They are God's special people because they get with the program. They are out in the fields working and producing fruit. They are the good ground. They are the receptive ones. They hear the word with a noble and good heart, like the Bereans in Acts 17. They were more noble than those in Thessalonica, and they checked the Scriptures to see whether these things were so. These ones keep the word. They observe it. They obey it. They follow its teachings. And because of that, they bear fruit. And not only do they bear fruit, they bear this fruit with patience, with endurance.

If we would go to Matthew or Mark, we would find them describing this group as those who hear the word, understand, or accept it, and bear fruit. Like I said, they are with the program. They follow all the steps. And because of that and because of their hard work, their application of what they have learned, they bear fruit. They get better, they grow, they become more like Christ.

Now Luke here in Luke 8, uses two Greek words, *kalos* and *agathos*. He uses these two words to describe the hearts of these people in the fourth group. They have a *kalos* or noble heart. This word means honorable. I like this one. They have a beautiful heart. It is excellent. It is good quality. Well disposed. That is why they receive things so well, their heart is excellent and

wants excellent things and wants to accept excellent things and improve on these excellent things. And God's Word is excellent, it is beautiful. And so these people take it in, take God's Word in, and want to use it.

And then he calls them, describes them as having an *agathos* heart. And this is necessary too, because *agathos* means upright or virtuous. They want to do what is right. And so they accept the word because they understand that it is *the* right way to go. And further, Luke says, they stick with it. It is just not a passing thing where they say, "Hey, this is great, the gospel of the week," and then they forget about it. No, not at all. They accept it and it becomes permanent, and they begin producing fruit over the long haul. Do you know how long it takes for a seed to grow into fruit from first planting it in the ground? Now, if you take like barley, it grows fairly rapidly. Wheat, we saw, takes a little longer. But it might take a tree 12-15 years from the time you put the seed in the ground to the time it produces its first fruit. That is especially true of like nut trees. They take a long time to really get established and start producing their fruit. That is why you have to have patience, because fruit does not just happen immediately when you put the thing in the ground. It takes a long time. And James tells us about this in James the 5th chapter. We will get to that in a minute.

Now Matthew's account of this in Matthew 13:23. I will go ahead and read that here. This is the last verse of the explanation of the Parable of the Sower and the Seed.

Matthew 13:23 "But he who receives seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."

So even among what we would call the best group among the four, they do not all produce the same thing. Same as the Parable of the Talents. Not everybody has the same ability to produce the greatest amount of fruit. But Christ is very happy with those who do produce fruit and He is not necessarily grading us on how much we produce. He is just telling us the fact here that some of us, you know, produce 30-fold, some twice that, 60-fold, some three times that-plus, 100-fold. And knowing, of course, that not all of us have the same gifting. So it is not all that necessary that we are all in this 100-fold category among the fourth group. I mean, even in the Parable of

Talents, He does not give them all the same amount. So they produce differing returns.

But Luke's version emphasized that they bear fruit with endurance, or perseverance, throughout their lives.

In Matthew 24:13, most of us know that Jesus says, that those who endure to the end shall be saved. And James 5, verses 7 through 11 speaks a lot about how patience must be a part of producing the fruit. The thing is, remember, Exodus 23:16 tells us that the focus on Pentecost is seeing His people out in the field laboring. He wants to see them out in the field all the time producing. It does not necessarily matter how much you produce. The fact is you are out there producing what you can.

So here we got have James 5, starting in verse 7. Notice this. Notice how many times he uses what I call a patience word.

James 5:7-11 Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

Did you count them? James 5:7-11 contains seven occurrences of patience and its synonyms, whether it is endurance or perseverance or waiting. He is showing here just how important patience is to establishing our hearts for the return of Christ. It is not all going to happen in one go. We are not going to be ready, most likely, at the end of the first week after we are baptized. It just does not work that way. It takes a long time for the fruit of righteousness to be produced, and we have to be patient because it comes in shifts and stages,

and you learn one thing, maybe how to be content. Oh, that would be great, wouldn't it? But then you have to learn all the other things. How many fruit of the Spirit are there? Let us go look.

Galatians 5:22-25 But the fruit of the Spirit is love [How are you doing?], joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness [merciful], faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. [How are you doing on that point?] If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

You know what Paul is telling us here. These are not just virtues that live in our head. "They're, you know, just real spiritual things. 'I just love everyone in my heart.'" No, he says in verse 25, if we are living in the spirit of these fruits they are going to show up in our walk. And he gives us an example:

Galatians 5:26 Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

He could have put, you know, 250 examples here of ways we can *maybe* have these fruit of the Spirit in our heads but they do not come out as actual good works toward others in part of our walk. So this is why we need to have endurance. Because we may get it. We may get it that we need to walk in love toward one another, but it takes a long time to *actually walk in love toward one another*. We just cannot do it without practice, without being there in the field working on each one of these and different facets of each one of these fruit of the Spirit. We can be kind to the people we like. No problem. "Here's 50 bucks."

But what about those people we do not like? Can we be kind to them? "You can't have any of my money. You're a crook." Or you talk too loud or you get on my nerves. We have to learn to iron those things out. And it takes a long time. That is why we have to endure and persevere in learning how to apply these fruits of the Spirit, so we reflect the character of Jesus Christ.

So we have to be cultivating spiritual fruit every day and oftentimes under adverse conditions, which could be as bad as persecution. Or suffering in times of tribulation where our lives are on the line. We still need to have that attitude of producing fruit out in the field.

Let us go to John 15. We all know this. You probably thought I would land here at some point. We will start in verse 1 and we will go through verse 8 and then we will go to verse 16. Jesus says to His disciples; we are among this group.

John 15:1-8 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in Me. [Unless you are out in the field. Let us just change the metaphor a little bit.] I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. [Jesus is pretty consistent, is He not?] If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples."

As I mentioned earlier, we do not do this bearing of fruit or working out in the field by ourselves. In fact, Jesus says here very clearly that we cannot bear fruit apart from our connection to Christ. He has all the supply of everything that we need. So we better be connected to Christ and be doing our work under His watchful observation.

But notice here Christ's emphasis. It is not on bearing some fruit. Did you notice that coming through here? Christ said, "Okay, bear a little fruit. That's all right." No. He says bearing *more fruit* or *much fruit*. It is three times in this eight verses where He says more or much. You check it out in verse 2, verse 5, and verse 8. We glorify the Father when we bear *much fruit*.

Because remember, I just said the fruit is very complex and there is a lot of fruit to produce. We cannot be a one trick pony. I mean, that is fine if that is all we can bear, but do not limit yourself to just being forbearing or something like that. I mean, that is a good fruit to have, but you need to add all the others. Including self-control. Including gentleness. Including mercy. Including faith or kindness. Or patience. Or any of those other ones. And more. So the Father wants to see us producing fruit of many kinds and multiplied as much as possible.

And then He gives us the kicker. In verse 8 Jesus says, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit." Hey, wonderful. So if you bear much fruit—*much* fruit—you will be My disciples. What does that say about the person who bears only one bit of fruit? Is he really showing that he is Christ's disciple?

John 15:16 "You did not choose Me, but I chose you [specifically you] and appointed you [I gave you some instruction here, set you apart] that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you."

It is telling us here that He chose us for the express reason of producing fruit. And not just fruit for one season, but lasting fruit, fruit that remains. Fruits that are so etched on your character that they will be there forever. Then you will be My disciples.

What are we talking about here? Let us go to Colossians 1 as we begin to wrap up here. The apostle Paul here gives us an outline of what this growth, what this producing fruit entails.

Colossians 1:9-12 For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may have a walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to

His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy;
giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of
the inheritance of the saints in the light.

I said this is kind of an outline of what the growth, what the producing of fruit entails. We could say also that this is an outline of the project of God or the process of sanctification that He expects of us, or as Paul expected of those brethren in Colossae. And they were to engage in this now that they had been called, they had been redeemed and set on the road to God's Kingdom. And so, he couches this in terms of a prayer to God of what he would like to see in their growth, in what they could do standing out in the field and laboring for the good fruit that the Father wanted to see.

So what we have here are five things that Paul would like to see from them and thus also from us.

1. He says, "I'd love to see you filled with the knowledge of God's will in wisdom and understanding. He is talking about, here, reading, studying, meditating on God's Word so that they have the information they need in their heads so that they could do God's will. So, they needed to hit the books. They needed to listen to sermons. They needed to think deeply about what God had revealed.
2. He said, "I want you to walk worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in the things that you do." So, what he is asking here is that with all this information and knowledge you have about what God wants you to do, I now want you to transform that knowledge into action. Walk in God's way. Make it real out there in what you do. So walk worthy of the Lord.
3. He says, "be fruitful, be productive in every good work and increase in the knowledge of God." That is very interesting. Just hold on to that for a minute.
4. He says, "become strong in God, able to endure, and suffer with joy." Now this has to do with continuing your walk in faith and conviction. You have done walking God's way in the past and you are continuing to walk in God's way, and you are strengthening yourself in God's way and becoming more convicted about God's way.

5. Obviously, at this point, this should be happening all throughout, but especially now that you see things coming together and God's way is fully fixed in your mind, you "give thanks unceasingly to God the Father for His grace and His manifold gifts." This would be, like I said, something you would do all along, but it especially should get stronger and stronger in our later years where we, in our prayers, in our singing, in however we tend to do it, can give thanks and praise to God for His glorious gifts and all that He does for us.

Let us go back to number 3. Be fruitful in every good work and increase in the knowledge of God. My interpretation of this piece of instruction covers things like service, service to brethren, to do your good works, to become a leader in the church of God and help others. Showing outgoing love toward others in the way that you speak to them, in the way that you give them aid. And I see it as a consequence of the first two instructions about being filled in the knowledge and then putting it to work. Once we do this, filled with knowledge, putting it to work, it should come out in acts of service, good works toward others, toward the church. But what does this result in? When we start doing these good works, we become leaders. We start helping everybody. Paul says it gives us growth in knowledge. We become stronger.

Now twice he talks about knowledge. He says having the knowledge of God's will, that was the first one. And in this one, he says we increase in the knowledge of God when we start doing these good works. What he shows here that there is a kind of cycle that happens, a process that occurs. Putting God's way into practice by serving others gains a person new knowledge. And it is different from the book knowledge that we learned in step one. This is experiential knowledge that we learn when we try to help others. We learn what works and what does not work. We learn how much people want from us. And maybe actually how little they need from us. We learn little nuances of how to apply God's Word in specific circumstances. We learn approaches to people. We know that you cannot go up to this guy and actually do something for him because he is going to resent you because he thinks that he could do it himself. So you have to figure out a way to help him. Maybe a little bit on the sly. It is not a bad thing. You are still helping him and you are trying to work with that person's attitude or the way he does things.

So we refine things as we go, adding new knowledge to how to work with people from God's perspective. So we increase in knowledge after the book learning by experiencing serving others. This is how we endure and persevere in producing fruit. We cannot do it all at once. We have to learn how it goes, so we have to practice. We have to grow, and we have to practice again, and we have to grow, and we have to practice again and refine and understand how to serve one another with joy and with love through the years.

And it leads then to the next step. We become strong in God. Our long experience of doing good for others increases our faith and solidifies our character so that we will never turn from God's way. And of course, thanksgiving and praise is going to come from all that because this ends in glory. Not just for God, but for us too.

So my question today is, Are you productive? Are you *still* productive? No matter what stage of life you are in, whether you are a youth or an adult or in middle age or old age, we need to be actively pursuing growth in godly character and serving each other, cultivating righteousness to produce the fruit that pleases God and witnesses to the fact that we are Christ's disciples.

We have been in Philippians and I want to end there. Chapter 1, verse 9. This is my prayer for you as it was Paul's.

Philippians 1:9-11 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and in discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.