

## Magic Doesn'T Work (Part 3)

The Work to Produce Fruit

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In my past two sermons, I have contrasted our humanly conceived idea of magic against the reality of Christian doctrine and practice. In the first sermon that I gave two weeks ago, I contrasted magic to God's act of grace. I showed that God did not just wave a wand and grant us mercy, but he and Christ did a great deal of work from eternity past to make it happen for us. There is a great deal of effort to God's grace. We do not see it, but God certainly put forth a lot of time and effort to put us into His plan, and to make our salvation possible.

In the second sermon, which I gave on the first Day of Unleavened Bread, I contrasted magic to our act of repentance and overcoming. I explained that it takes a great deal of cooperative effort with God to turn a person from sin. I mostly focused on our initial coming out of sin. God did a great deal in all that, but we had to supply some effort too. It was not just totally given to us. We had to cooperate with Him.

Then, as we started our Christian life, we found out how difficult it was to overcome sin. So again, it is not a matter of magic. You do not just say, "presto-change-o," and we are good. We are given forgiveness, which is an act of grace on God's part, but making it stick, and turning, changing our way of life, is very hard, and we have to really be dedicated to the process.

I have spoken about magic in terms of having super powers, of being able to do, or to have just about anything we desire by fiat. I have described it in terms of having powers like a god of myth, such as Zeus, who would be able to just point, or speak a word, and presto-change-o, it is done. That might be wonderful.

But then I asked, "Would it really be wonderful?" God does not work that way. God certainly has the power to create things that way; however He does not do that. Most often He goes through a process of bringing things to pass over time.

I have described magic in terms of unlimited, absolute powers—of having such energy and ability that things are done immediately. They come fully formed, such as Athena from the forehead of Zeus (should you remember your mythology).

However, that is just not how things are. In the stories, like these myths or other stories of fictions where magic appears, the magic workers have very little infinite ability. Few of

these magic workers can do this sort of thing like pointing, and something gets done. They are often limited by their age, or their knowledge, or their physical energy or health, or their inexperience, or some external limitation that holds them back from being able to fully use their powers, such as a contract, or a rival's intervention, or some balancing force in the universe, such as yin and yang. And so, they are not fully able to use their powers until something changes—whatever the author conjures up.

Usually the magic person, at the beginning of the story, is somehow being held back, but by the end of the story, he is able to use all his powers. But there is a period of time where the "hero"—usually a child or young adult—must experience a period of schooling or training (much like a Christian has to do) before he is able to meet his destiny. And of course, his destiny is to save the world, or the galaxy, or the whole universe!

This is true not only for Luke Skywalker, but also Harry Potter, or even Super Man. Super Man was able to do a lot while a teen-ager, but he had to go up to that ice palace way up in the north and learn all that his father had left him in those crystals. And when all that is finally figured out, he comes back in his tights, and he is ready to go. Now in the case of Harry Potter, or the X-Men, their stories take place in their schools. They are in this process of being trained in their various magical abilities.

The hero is not usually thrown to the wolves right away to see how he fares, but he has to go through a period of time to learn his craft, and honing his skills on lesser enemies, and classmates, and whatnot, until he finally meets the evil villain, in the big climax of the story, and saves the day.

Now, though most of these stories contain a measure of growth, the magic in them is little more than a cipher—a stand-in for some sort for a physical skill. I mean, if you want to take away all the magic altogether, his ability might as well be sword fighting, or singing, or brick laying, or folding origami. It does not matter, because magic is presented as a skill, like an ability he has to learn to be able to defeat the really bad guys. And, in the end, the "hero" is finally able to reach this level of skill, tapping his unlimited potential, and vanquishes the evil villain.

Now, depending upon the expertise of the author, there is seldom any character growth. All there is, really, is skill growth.

We realize right away when we open the book, or when the movie begins, that this "hero" was good all along. He was obviously the protagonist of the story. He cannot be bad. He is good. All he needed to do was to learn how to harness and direct all that

energy that is at his disposal that is there by birth, or right, or whatever.

What I am saying is that he was always a good character. And the magic did not help him to become better in character, but it only made him more powerful. Often (it is one of those clichés in these types of stories) it is the main character's natural, innocent, unsophisticated goodness that tips the balance of victory in his favor, because evil is evil and bad and needs to be erased. But this little kid, he is good. He has love in his heart. And so, he is going to win, and you know it from the very beginning. But, all that he has done throughout the hundreds of pages of the story is that he has gotten stronger, and maybe a little bit more knowledgeable, but he has not grown in character.

In most of these stories then, magic is simply another weapon. Once in a while an author might give the reader or viewer some glimpse of what magic can do in peacetime, but in the end, magic is always used as some sort of supernatural weapon.

In that sense, the magic is presented as morally neutral. Both sides of the conflict can use it at their discretion. Usually at the end, there are fireballs, or lightnings that go out from one side or the other. One is red, while the other is blue. You pick which is bad one or the good one. One guy wears the white hat, while the other wears the black one. But, they are both using the same power. The Force has its dark side. It is just the innate goodness of the one side, and the innate badness of the other side that tells which one they are. Which color light saber they get, I guess.

That is all there is. The force itself is morally ambiguous. It is neutral. It comes in handy in the fight against the enemy, but in peacetime or for beneficial use, that is left up to your imagination, because that is not exciting. It does not sell books or movies.

My point to all this is that magic does not work when it comes to character growth and producing spiritual fruit. Magic, to us, would be as helpful to our spiritual growth as a spear, or pistol, or nuclear bomb. Would any of these help us to become better people? It is a weapon. It is the old adage, "Guns do not kill people, but people kill people." It is the person behind the weapon who uses it properly or improperly.

Real righteous character, the fruit of God's Spirit, is produced through effort and experience over time. As Mr. Herbert Armstrong used to say, character is the one thing that God has chosen not to create by fiat. And He really cannot do that. I think the reason why is that instantaneous, effortless character would not be character at all. All it would be is a programmed response like a robot or animal instinct. It would not be the person's choice to do right. That is something that must be learned and grown into.

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So, God, the wisest Being in the entire universe, has chosen to create character by developing it. Whenever one uses the word "develop," it usually implies a period of time. So He has chosen to develop character in His children through a life-long process which we call "sanctification." It is a long period of growth in producing fruit.

Since this is the last Day of Unleavened Bread, turn to the book of Exodus. I do not want us to get removed from this time.

**Exodus 12:15-20** 'Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses. For whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel. On the first day there shall be a holy convocation, and on the seventh day there shall be a holy convocation for you. No manner of work shall be done on them; but that which everyone must eat—that only may be prepared by you. So you shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, for on this same day I will have brought your armies out of the land of Egypt. Therefore you shall observe this day throughout your generations as an everlasting ordinance. In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening [at day's end], you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening [at day's end]. For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses, since whoever eats what is leavened, that same person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is a stranger or a native of the land [that is twice He mentioned that in as many verses]. You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread.'

This Feast of Unleavened Bread commemorates God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt—from their leaving of Rameses to their crossing the Red Sea, and God's defeat of Pharaoh and the Egyptian army. It was not until they crossed the Red Sea that they were actually out of Egypt totally. They were out from under Pharaoh initially just by leaving Rameses because the Egyptians were in mourning. But they really did not leave the territory of Egypt until they crossed the Red Sea and entered the wilderness of the Sinai. So, for this whole week they were coming out of Egypt.

God did most of the work, as we heard last week in the afternoon sermon, but Israel's response had to be two-fold. The first was that they had to walk out. They had to follow the cloud. God did everything for them—He did the plagues, which caused them to be released, and He gave them the spoil of the Egyptians, and He gave them the Pillar of Cloud, and Pillar of Fire, and everything else that they needed. But, they had to walk.

They had to get out of there themselves. God did not come down in a fiery chariot and whisk them all away to the Promised Land. They had to walk.

The second thing they had to do, as we find here, is avoid leavened bread and eat unleavened bread for seven days each year. We saw that this was because they did not have time to let their bread become leavened. They went out in haste. They did not have the time to make any leavened bread because they had already packed everything away. They had to eat unleavened bread.

As we have understood the symbolism here, what Israel had to do, and what our Christian response is supposed to be, is we have to follow God (the walking part), we have to rid ourselves of sin (the putting out of old leaven), and we have to put on righteousness (the eating of the unleavened bread). Putting this into Christian terms, we follow God and Christ through putting off the old man—repentance and overcoming. And then, we must put on the new man—growing in grace and knowledge by putting on righteousness. This is the basic understanding of these spring holy days.

Now, as the church of God was beginning, the apostles had to show the members of the church how these things applied to them. Here is an example by Paul to the Corinthian church of how the Days of Unleavened Bread applied to them. Beginning in chapter 5, we learn that there was a man in the congregation who had begun consorting with his stepmother, his father's wife. Remember that the Corinthian church had been established about three or so years previous to this, so it was not a mature church. It is not like most of us who have been in the church 15, 30, or even 50 years or more. I consider most of us to be mature brethren because we have been around for a long time. But, the Corinthian church, although only 3 to 5 years old, was certainly not brand new either. They had a few years experience in the church of God.

Yet Paul was saying to them, "Come on guys! You should know better than this! Even new people in the church should figure this one out! It is not that difficult!" But regardless, Paul had to command them to disfellowship the man because they were coddling him. So Paul equates this sin, and their pride in coddling the man, with leaven. And he commands them to purge it out from among them.

**I Corinthians 5:6-8** Your glorying is not good [their pride is exposed with their feeling they were kind to this man]. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast [of unleavened bread], not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and

wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Paul equates this sin—consorting with his father's wife, and their pride in this matter—with leaven. And he orders them to purge it from them. And he tells them, by using the word "purge," that this should be a wholesale cleaning out. Get it all out. Remove it completely. Do not let any remain.

The time element here shows that this is not repentance for initial justification. It is not the repentance of them coming out of the world. This is repentance for sanctification, or repentance for producing holiness. This was not the initial one that we all do when we are baptized, but this was later on when we have been in the church a while, but we find that we still have sin that we must repent of also. We must clean it out, purge it, turn from it, and go on the right way.

Now Paul says very clearly that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ covers both of them. It covers our initial repentance, and it covers any other repentance down the line when it is made. Christ's blood is so efficacious that it covers all sin for all time (upon repentance). But there is an essential difference between the two—justification and sanctification. The initial repentance for justification cleans us up to begin the relationship with God. It covers our past sins and makes us clean so that we can come before God and have a relationship with Him. The other repentance for sanctification cleans us up to continue the relationship and to motivate us to more growth.

Now we do this, Paul says, so that we may be a new lump—totally new. This is not the old lump, but a new lump. So we rid ourselves of sin, as converted members of God's church, for the purpose of becoming new and better, which is different from what we were. In another place, it says that we do this to become more useful to God. And of course, another way of looking at it is that we do this to become more like Jesus Christ who is perfect and righteous.

Paul makes this clear in verse 8:

**I Corinthians 5:8** Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

This is Paul's way of saying, "Look. I am speaking beyond the Israelite practice of yeast and lumps of dough. Those things are important as types to learn from, but what I am

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getting at by using these types is your character and you. That is what needs to be cleaned up and made new. You need to clean out all those bad parts of your character and put on new, righteous, good character." So Paul says, "We need to observe these Days of Unleavened Bread by ditching all our evil traits, and clinging to all the good ones, and putting on new ones—living in righteousness."

Notice as he goes on, "Get rid of the evil. Get rid of the wickedness." He is talking in generalities. But then, he tells us to put on, or to eat, or keep the feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. He is still speaking in large generalities, as we will see here.

The Greek word for sincerity suggests "Godly purity." I do not know why they did not just translate it that way, but they did not. Purity means more to us than sincerity does. Really, this word speaks of the process of purifying metal. It means trying and testing metal to determine its purity. And what it comes down to mean is that it is tried, tested, and proven to contain no admixture. If it is copper, it is 100% copper. If it is silver, it is 100% silver. If it is gold, it is 100% gold. There is nothing else in it to diminish the purity of it. There is no admixture, no contamination. That is why using purity would be a better translation of that word.

Like sincerity, truth implies, "free from error, or falsehood, pure in knowledge and understanding." He is exhorting us to keep the Days of Unleavened Bread in purity of conduct (sincerity), and purity of mind (truth). The sincerity is something we do, and the truth is something we have in our minds. So, it is the conduct and the knowing. Of course, we are to be doing this all the time, not just during the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Paul is contrasting these two things: the malice and wickedness on the one hand, with the sincerity and truth on the other, purity in conduct and purity of mind. I wanted to show you there was not just the leavening, but the areas we need to be cleaning out, and the areas we need to be adding to.

In this next passage, Peter had just been talking about Paul, and all the things that he had written, and the fact that there were a lot of people who misunderstood Paul, and therefore twisted a lot of things that he had said. So he says to them, as he is finishing his letter,

**II Peter 3:17-18** You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; and grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord

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and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

As we see, Peter says something similar to what Paul said earlier in I Corinthians 5. And just as Paul warns the Corinthians, Peter tells the people he is writing to—a general letter to the whole church of God—us —watch out for erroneous ideas that are going to lead them astray. That is his statement above. Some people were twisting Paul's words because they did not understand them.

It is still lurking in the church of God today, all these various ideas that can lead us astray, and a lot of them go back to misunderstandings of the apostle Paul, just like back then. Peter's solution is that we must grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. That is how we avoid falling into error, falling from our steadfastness, and being lead away in the error of the wicked.

All right! This sounds great! We have used this as a memory scripture in the church of God for years. "Grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Many understand the "growing in knowledge" portion of it. We talk about that one a lot. What do we do? We pray. We study. We fast. We meditate. We learn. We grow. We go to church. We hear the minister tell us this, that, and the other thing. We read articles. We go on to the internet and research something. We can grow in knowledge.

But this growing in grace thing throws a lot of people. How do you grow in grace?

The misunderstanding is generally found in professing Christians—it should not be a misunderstanding to us in the church of God. Professing Christians misunderstood the concept of grace from the very beginning. They think of it merely as the initial, unmerited pardon from God, and that is only as far as they take grace. "God has saved me from my sin. And now, I am going to live eternally with Him in heaven," they say. That is what they seem to think of grace. God has apparently cleared the way for them to waltz right into eternity. And it was done once, and it is all finished.

Now, there was one act that was done for all time, which gives us forgiveness. But grace continues. Grace is something that is more than just a snap, and it is over. It is a wonderful thing! Do not think that I am denigrating the idea that God gave us grace when we were called and enabled us to have a relationship with Him. That is indeed a wonderful thing. And it is a true thing. We have salvation by grace. But it is not the only aspect of grace.

At its most basic, the Greek word, *charis*, means, "Joy brought about by freely given favor." That is the basic idea of grace in the Greek—joy brought about by freely given favor. It also means, "The granting of such favor." So, God gives us grace. God gives us favor—unmerited favor.

Here in II Peter 3:18, favor would be an excellent translation, and it would help us to understand what Peter is trying to tell us. "But grow in the favor and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Aha! Now we start having a better understanding of what Peter was getting at here. Just as a side-light, it is an interesting study to go through the life of Jesus Christ in the gospels, and find out how often, especially in the early chapters, how often it says He grew in favor with God and man.

So, we should grow in the favor of Jesus Christ. But how do we grow in Christ's favor? How is that accomplished? I mean, it is nice to have words on a page and be able to understand the concepts, but what does it really entail? In John 15, Jesus Christ is coming to about the middle part of His discussion with them on that last night, and He tells them:

**John 15:9-11** "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you . . ."

Remember that I said that grace is joy brought about by freely given favor?

**John 15:11-14** "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full. This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you."

The question at the beginning was, "How do we grow in Christ's favor?" He tells us in verse 14, if we do what Jesus Christ says to do, we will be His friends. In other words, if we do what He has commanded us to do, we are going to be in His inner circle, His favored group of people—if we do as He instructs.

If we do what He says that we should do, we will have His favor. And notice, we will have fullness of joy also! We will have that grace that we all want to have.

Peter, back in II Peter 3:17-18, echoes Paul. We are to grow in Christ's favor and understanding. Peter did not use sincerity and truth, but he used grace and knowledge—favor and understanding. He used the same basic two ideas. Remember we asked how do we grow in favor? By doing. It is our conduct. It is our obedience. It is our performance. And what is the other one? Knowledge and understanding having to do with the mind.

Peter essentially picks up on the same two things that Paul did. Paul talked about sincerity and truth—conduct and mind. Peter picks up favor or grace, and knowledge. They are echoing one another.

We could leave it right here if we wanted to and we would probably have learned something. But let us go on. I want to show you that this favor, this grace, is not a static thing. In Acts 13, Paul is in Antioch, and Luke writes:

**Acts 13:43** Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.

That is an interesting phraseology. He tells these people who were just coming to conversion, to continue in the grace of God. It is evident just by the way that it is phrased that they had a part in maintaining their favorable status under God. He would not have told them to continue in God's grace unless they had something they could do about it one way or the other. Either they could continue it, or they could discontinue it. So, there was some factor that would help them continue in God's grace.

Remember John 8:29 and Jesus' confrontation with the Jews? They were accusing Him of all types of things, and Jesus Christ concludes by saying this:

**John 8:29** "And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him."

If we want to maintain, or continue as Paul uses the word here in Acts 13, God's grace to remain in this favored relationship with God, then we, imitating Christ who is our Elder Brother and example, must do what pleases Him. That is how Jesus Christ stayed in the Father's good graces, and it is the same way with us. The key is doing whatever pleases God. That is what helps us to continue in God's grace. And what Paul expected

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of these Gentile proselytes and Jews was their continuance of keeping the commandments—doing what was right, learning, and growing. But, they had something to do; they could not just sit there. They had a work to do in order to continue in the grace.

And yet, it does not remain here, either. Turn to II Timothy 2 for some of Paul's final words to Timothy. He says:

**II Timothy 2:1** You therefore, my son, be[come] strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

I think that this ups the stakes. It is not just continuing in the grace of God, but it is now also becoming strong. The fact is that tradition states that Timothy was a timid person. He held back. He was not the dynamo that Paul was, and he needed encouragement like this. And so, Paul was helping him to see that he needed not just remain as he was, but he needed to become strong in the grace of God. He needed to grow.

Now I picture here, when I think of becoming strong, the Christian on his back pumping iron, sweating, and gasping with exertion, to build up His favor with God. How else do you become strong except by exertion and effort? Did you ever see anyone become strong just by sitting on their couch watching television? There is no strengthening in that.

This idea of a strengthening process and exertion is 180 degrees from the Protestant view of grace. Their common idea of grace is a one-time-good-forever-application of forgiveness and salvation. And that is all she wrote.

But Paul writes of grace as a dynamic condition. He uses words like "continue," "grow in," and "strengthen." He elsewhere also uses "despised" and "fallen from."

Grace is not a static thing. It is not just there. It is something that can ebb or flow. It is something that we can become weak in, or something we could become strong in. It is something that we can continue in, or something we could not continue in.

Notice in II Timothy 2:1 that Paul said to become strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. The *Amplified Bible* puts that last portion as, "the grace, or spiritual blessing that is to be found only in Christ Jesus." Let us put that in there. "You, therefore my son, become strong in the grace—the spiritual blessing—that is to be found only in Christ Jesus." This wording suggests not only that Christ is the source of this grace, but He is

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also the example of grace. Remember that when Jesus Christ came, "The Law was through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

Not only does grace come through Christ, but we can see Him as the perfect example of being strong in grace. He was strong in God's favor because He always did what pleased the Father.

Let us bring this back to balance. We need to understand that though grace is dynamic, our part in it is so overwhelmed by God's part in it. We need to understand how little we do.

**II Thessalonians 1:11-12** Therefore [Paul says] we also pray always for you that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfill all the good pleasure of His goodness and the work of faith with power [it is God fulfilling the work of faith with power], that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Like I said, this brings us back to some balance. Paul is very careful, here, to show that despite our work, our acts of faith, and our effort and exertion we put into it, God, through Jesus Christ, is the One who makes all of it possible from beginning to end; from the thought, the strength, the motivation, to the fulfillment—it is all because of Him. And if it were not because of Him, then there could be no glory given either to the Father or the Son.

And so we might expend ourselves, and give the last drop of our blood, but even that is not a worthy sacrifice unless it is motivated and fulfilled through the grace of God. That is what I mean—we have got to get the balance here. We have got to understand that though we give our body to be burned, as it were, it is still the grace of God that makes it all possible. It is God's blessing and help that makes our meager works and efforts have any good effects at all.

Now we are going to turn the sermon a bit toward producing fruit. In Mark the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter is the explanation of the Parable of the Sower and the Seed from Mark's point of view. I hope that this will give us the basic understanding of what our growth in grace and knowledge should produce.

**Mark 4:14-20** "The sower sows the word. And these are the ones by the wayside where the word is sown. When they hear, Satan comes immediately

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and takes away the word that was sown in their hearts. These likewise are the ones sown on stony ground who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness; but they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time. Afterward, when tribulation or persecution arises for the word's sake, immediately they stumble. Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

This is the basic process of calling, choosing, justification, and sanctification in a nutshell. It is very basic, but it is all there, all the way up unto glorification (which is not shown in this analogy). Christ shows that not all receive the word of God in the same way. Some do not have what it takes to receive the word at all. It is all a matter of God's calling and choosing—His election. So, the ones we are most interested in are the ones in verse 20. Only those who are called and chosen truly hear the message because the word goes out broadly. It is scattered all over the field. The field is the world, we find in another parable. The word goes out. There are a lot of churches of God putting the message out.

Now, on some people it falls, but Satan immediately squashes it. On some others, they find that it is really interesting, but they do not have any depth, so it just never really sticks. And some people do receive it, and after a while, though, all the cares of the world, as Jesus said, comes in and makes them unfruitful. They fall away.

But the ones that God has truly elected, chosen, and are working with, they hear the message, and it goes deep within them. They embrace it, and they use what is given to produce something good and useful for God. But, even what they produce is not the same. Some will only produce thirty-fold, some others might produce sixty-fold, and still some others might produce a hundred-fold. So depending on where we start and what we have had to overcome and various other limitations, we will produce, but at different rates of growth. We are not all going to be the same, so we are told it is not wise to compare ourselves among ourselves. We all have different aptitudes, skills, gifts, and such, so we all begin at different places.

But He does give us this idea in a farming metaphor, and it is very apt because it provides us, if we know anything about farming, or planting of a garden, or working in any form of agriculture at all, with a sense of process. And, in this process, we see a

great deal of time expended, a great deal of care that is put into it, and a great deal of raw effort. Everything you do takes effort.

So the seed is sown. It grows. It produces fruit. And it produces a different amount depending upon where we started, and all the different circumstances that makes us each unique. None of us will grow alike. Each of the plants is different. We are the same, and yet we are different; and God works with each of us differently.

But notice especially the first thing we read. It said that the sower sows the word. What is sown—the seed—is the Word of God. What I want you to get from this sermon today is that because the seed is the Word of God, and that is what we received, we should expect the fruit of that seed to bear a likeness to that seed. It is an old, old principle of the universe—the seed will bear true to its kind—like begets like.

If the seed is the Word of God, what should we expect the fruit to be? In Luke 6 is another of Jesus' agricultural analogies along the same line:

**Luke 6:43-45** "For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they gather grapes from a bramble bush. A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks."

A grape vine produces grapes. Should it produce anything else, we would kill it. We wanted grapes. Also, a fig tree produces figs. Good produces good. Evil produces evil. Thus, if the word that is sown in us is good (and it certainly is), then we should expect good fruit to be born, and it will resemble the original seed—the word. Like it said, it is a law of the universe. If the word is righteous, and we know that it certainly is, then the fruit should also be righteousness.

It is simple. There is nothing terribly hard to understand in that. The seed will bear true to its kind.

Let us move forward in the book to Luke 13. This is the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree, another of the same variety of illustrations that Jesus uses. Understand this—that if we had read the first five verses, we would know that twice Jesus says, "I tell you, that unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." This is what leads into this Parable of the Barren Fig Tree. We have to have this in mind.

**Luke 13:6-9** He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it but found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he (the keeper) answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'"

This is a very interesting parable, and it throws in another factor for our thinking. Now that we understand that his mind was on the thought that if you do not repent, you will perish. I get the impression that He gave this to His disciples. It is for us. It is for our admonition. We really are the only ones who can understand and apply these principles and parables. He said as much in Matthew 13. It has not been given to the others to understand these parables. But to us it has been given. So, this is to us. This is for us to understand. It is an important principle about bearing fruit.

What it is, is a stern warning that God does not just hope that we will bear our fruit, but that He demands fruit. He is not a really stern task master. He is very loving, kind, and gracious. But He does expect fruit to be born.

Jesus is the keeper of the vineyard. And He, as our Advocate before the Father, asks for time and space to get the fruit produced. But even so, if we continue in spiritual uselessness and non-productivity we invite spiritual disaster. I thought that it is very interesting that it says here at the end, that if it does not bear fruit, Jesus says to that Father that, "Then You can cut it down."

Do we want to face the wrath of the Father for not producing fruit? We all know what it means to be cut down and thrown into the fire, as Matthew 3:10 says. John the Baptist uses that illustration there. It was very similar to what John the Baptist was preaching at that time.

Notice also that Christ does not just give us some time and space, but He takes the extra action to root-prune, aerate, weed, and fertilize to spur us on, and motivate us to produce fruit for the Father. It is the image of Him caring enough, and doing enough within His power—and He is very powerful—to spur us to growth and productivity. So He tells the Father, "Give Me a little more time and I will give them all the right conditions, motivations, and blessings that this 'tree' needs."

And what is the tree's job? The tree's job is to respond to His ministrations and bear

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fruit. That is what is required. It is not hoped for, but it is required and expected because God is going through His vineyard and checking for figs on the fig trees, as it were.

We have got to add John 15 to this. This parable is a bit scary if you ask me. It should be excellent motivation. The cooperative effort that we have been talking about between us and Jesus and God the Father is more intimate than even the keeper of the vineyard and the tree.

**John 15:1-2** "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away;"

We are talking about a very similar situation here.

**John 15:2-8** ". . . and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean [or pruned] 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. 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 [the same stern warning]. 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.

This is bringing us back around to remaining in His grace, and that we will continue in the joy of His freely given favor if we bear much fruit. It cannot be much more intimate than us being in Christ, and Christ being in us, can it? That is very close. He uses the analogy of being grafted onto the vine, or into Him. He is the pure rootstock. And, we are the branches that have been taken from some other vine, and grafted onto Him. All our strength and energy, everything that we need, comes from Him. If we were not grafted to Him, we would be a dead branch—would we not? And if we were not stuck into Him, then all we are going to do is wither and be thrown into the fire.

Everything that we need for life comes from Him. Without Him, we could not do anything. Even though we are grafted into the vine, and even though we have all that strength and motivation and all those other graces that He can give us, God must prune us. We cannot just remain as we are—a wild branch off a wild vine. We have to be

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pruned so that we can bear fruit. Otherwise, we become an unproductive drain on the whole plant.

And it is verse 3 that tells us that it is God's Word that He prunes us by, and gives us the standard, and all the examples, and gives us the correction, and the encouragement also to help us to grow, and produce the results that God is looking for in us—fruit.

But nothing ever happens unless we are firmly attached to the vine and actively growing. Otherwise, we cannot make any progress whatsoever. And it says in verse 7 that if we are truly attached, we can ask for, and receive all the resources we need to produce the fruit. You can take that to the bank! If we are attached—if He is in us, and we are in Him—it is available. Ask, and He will gladly give it, because that is the purpose God is moving toward in us. Does not God want to get His own work done? So, He will supply us what we need in order to do that. All we need to do is to ask, and remain firmly attached to the vine, and work.

Now, as we get to the end of this passage, it says twice that our goal is not only to produce fruit. There is a qualifier there. We are to produce much fruit! Producing fruit is good, but producing much fruit, He says, will glorify God.

We all do produce some fruit at some point. We cannot help, being in the church of God, but to do some growing. Remember Jesus Christ and God the Father is working in us. They are going to get a result. But, it is when we produce much fruit that we really give honor and glory to the efforts of God and Christ in us.

He does not just want piddling amounts, like one fruit a year. He wants branches full of fruit all the time. And, anybody who would walk by that particular fruit tree or vine would say, "Wow! This must be a Master Vinter, or Master Gardener!" That is the glory that He wants. He wants people to notice and say, "Wow! Look what He produced! I wish I was attached to that vine and produced this fruit, because this is a Great Farmer and He will get the best out of me! Look at how many people I can help with the fruit that I can produce!" What we are saying here is the more, the better.

In the next passage, the analogy will change, but the result will be the same.

**Romans 6:17-18** But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

We have gone from speaking of trees and vines producing fruit, to slaves of sin becoming slaves of righteousness.

**Romans 6:19-20** I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

You did not have anything to do with it. You did not care.

**Romans 6:21** What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.

Our fruit before was all death and destruction and all those bad things of degeneracy and decline.

**Romans 6:22-23** But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When we served ourselves and our sinful nature, the only thing that we produced was bad. If we produced anything it was bad or corrupted. But now that God had made us His servants, only now can we produce good fruit. It was impossible before, but now that we are His slaves, we can produce good fruit if only we would.

What kind of fruit is God interested in? Paul calls it here, "Fruit unto holiness." That might be a bit unwieldy, or something a bit too religious sounding. So we might better phrase this as, "Growth in righteous character that results in holiness." This defines it much better. But notice also that in verse 23, Paul reiterates that despite our work of producing fruit unto holiness, eternal life is still a gift of God, coming all because of His grace.

Now, what sorts of things are we to produce growing into righteous character that results in holiness? You all know this next passage in Galatians 5.

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**Galatians 5:22-23** But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

This is no exhaustive list by any means of the attributes of God. But, it is the major ones. He wants them reproduced in us. These are the kind of fruits that He expects to see in us. He expects to see us growing in love, and in joy, and in peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. None of them are easy to do, much less to be. I mean, God is love. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. It says that He has fullness of joy! And we can go down through the line. God is all these things—He is faithful. Just name any one of these. God is good. God is kindness personified.

And these are the same fruits that He wants to see in us. They all take a great deal of effort to build and to put into practice. It is something that no flick of the wand, or any spoken word?abracadabra!?could ever accomplish, because these are traits of character that are God's own. For any human to even attempt to produce them is absolutely impossible without the grace of God, without the help that only He can give. But He still wants us to make the effort, and He will supply all our needs to get it done!

To conclude, turn to John 15 again where Jesus says to His disciples and, thus, to us:

**John 15:15-16** "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you [the knowledge part]. 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 the Father in My name He may give you."

We are in such an enviable position. We are friends of Christ and of God. We are living in the joy of their freely given favor. We have God's revelation of His purpose. We know how we fit in within that purpose. We know what He is doing because He has told us, and revealed it to us. But God has not chosen us to just sit there and accept it like some bump on a log. We have been called and chosen to participate in it all. Our commission, He says, is to go—to go forward—to move forward, and to bear fruit.

And not just any fruit. He wants us to produce the fruit that endures and lasts, and never spoils, that will go for all eternity, lasting forever. That fruit is the fruit that leads to holiness.

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We have been called and chosen to put on the character image of the Word of God. Remember what was sown is the word. And what we must produce is the word—the image of Jesus Christ. Such a thing cannot be done by magic, or any kind of fiat. It takes a lot of hard work and cooperation by both God and by us. So, let us be about our Father's business.