

Do You Recognize This Man? (Part 4)

Producing Fruit

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Many of you know that I enjoy growing peaches. I have planted about a half dozen of them here on the church's property in Fort Mill, SC. They are beginning to produce nice crops of juicy peaches starting in late spring and going on into mid-summer. They are producing quite a lot, and I am looking forward to this year's crop. I have been able to buy several varieties, with each tree being different, so that we can have ripening peaches from late May until early August, which will make me happy for the whole summer. I know that my family is looking forward to that—me being happy throughout the whole summer.

But a good peach crop does not just appear every summer without any effort. A good deal of time and work has to be invested—not just one time, but each year—to ensure that we get bushels of large, ripe, juicy peaches from each tree. In addition, there is a fair amount of work that had to be done at planting time to make sure that the trees got a good start. And even before all that, the tree nursery down in Georgia had to do a large amount of work just to get them to the point where they could ship them to me.

When you break it down, it is amazing how much effort goes into a good crop of anything. To get an idea of this, the process is started by planting a field of peach seeds of a certain variety. When the saplings get to a certain diameter, they are cut off in order to graft a superior crop variety to the top of the tree—sometimes they are budded like roses, but it has the same effect. They grow these seeds just for their roots, and then graft better varieties on top of them. This ensures that the trees you buy at the nursery have good roots that are less prone to root troubles giving better support to the superior tops. Once this graft grows together, typically a season or two, they are ready to ship.

When you receive the trees, and are ready to plant them, they should be put into good soil. Around here, any organic matter that you can add to the clay will improve it. So now, you have put in some good amendments, maybe a little starter fertilizer (certainly you should lime the soil the season before you plant your trees, and then top dress them each fall thereafter), all to help them get a good start.

Let us not forget they need careful watering the first season to help them get established. Hopefully, we have put them in the best place possible for your conditions. You do not want to water them too much, which I did out here in the back. I saw the sidewalk leading to the shed out back and thought that it might be the perfect spot to put

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my peach trees. So, I put all six of them right there leading down toward the shed. And what I failed to understand was the way that the water flows through this area. It comes out of the parking lot, across the road, and down the hill into the back area. The way that it is set up here is that all of the water collects in that rock pile back there, and then flows out over the piece of the road, and once it gets over the road, it floods that little hill. I thought that the trees would be safe from all that water. Most trees do not like to sit in water. Their roots need air too. Well, the first tree is now gone, because it was always wet. The tree rotted and died. You must put things in their proper place.

You are not done by just planting them, and admiring your work. It has only begun. They should be trained. There are some things to training a peach tree. Here in the southeast United States, you can go down many roads and see lots of peach trees planted out in orchards across the fields. If you slow down and take a look, you can see that they have been trained for commercial production. It is exactly the same that they tell you how to do it in the books at home.

With peaches, you do not want a central trunk up through the whole tree. You actually will not get as many peaches that way. The center gets shaded and will not develop very many fruit buds (flower buds) for the next season. Also, the air cannot circulate very well either, and so what fruit that forms in this portion of the tree is more susceptible to rots. So, when you plant a new peach tree, you cut the trunk off at 24 inches from the soil line. This causes the buds at the top of this stem to break out, and from these you will eventually choose your scaffold branches. You hope for a lot of branches to break forth so you can choose the three or four for best position around the tree. They will grow out and up forming a “bowl” or “vase” shaped tree by this procedure, giving you an open center. These scaffold branches eventually branch themselves and this becomes the fruiting wood.

Of course, this leads to more pruning to do each season. You remove dead branches, and then crossing branches that are pointed in the wrong direction, especially the ones going back into your bowl. You want to keep the bowl open for sunlight and air circulation. You must cut off any suckers sprouting from the trunk below your scaffolds, or originating below ground from the roots. You do all these things in the winter before the flowers come. Peaches bloom at the first hint of the warmth of springtime. That is also why they occasionally get trashed by frost, because in some locations, they bloom well before the last frost date.

Then there is the frequent feeding with the various kinds of nutrients that the trees need. What I do here is use the fruit tree fertilizer spikes. This seems to give them the boost that they need each year.

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Of course, there are the bugs. I use an organic pesticide that seems to keep the bugs off the fruit fairly well.

But that is not all! There is still more to this than that. If you really want to have a good crop of peaches, you have to thin them out once the fruit has set on. This year I did not thin them out well enough on a couple of the trees, especially the plum tree back there. For the plum, I did not do it at all, and I lost two branches that broke under the weight of the fruit. And I found out later that peaches benefit from two thinning's. I might get around to it next week.

But, if you want big juicy peaches, these are the things you have to do to get them. Leaving too many little peaches leads to small fruit with less sugar. If you were to visit the peach orchards nearby, you will notice that they are kept at about 12 feet high. They are all flat on top. This is partly to keep them from bearing too much fruit, but also to keep everything in reach for harvesting and maintenance.

This is most all that you need to do if you want nice peaches. I cannot say that I do all this very well, but I try my best with the time that I have. And hopefully the crop will be good this year.

The point is that I hope that you see that from this introduction that there is a lot of work in producing fruit. And this is the whole point of this long introduction. Nothing good is ever produced without a commensurate amount of time and detailed effort in the project.

The same can be said about our responsibilities to produce the fruit of God's Spirit in our lives. We cannot expect the fruit to be there without a great deal of diligent effort, time, and patience. That is one thing I did not mention in my introduction—the patience of waiting for the peaches to ripen. You want it to happen right away because you have put in the work and you are seeing the progress that begins to appear. Yet, seeing those little things, and knowing that they are going to be so good, God makes you wait a month or two until the harvest is truly ready. There is a scripture about this in James 5—being patient like the farmer. This is all part of the process. We must be patient.

This sermon today will continue my series, "Do You Recognize this Man?" Since this is the Day of Pentecost, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of Firstfruits, we will concentrate on Christ's teaching regarding producing fruit. In Exodus 23, we will get a look at the Day of Pentecost, and get our bearings on this day.

Exodus 23:14-16 "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

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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 labors which you have sown in the field.

The Feast of Harvest takes place at the end of the wheat harvest, the firstfruits of their labors from the fields that they have sown themselves.

Leviticus 23:15-17 And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD. You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven. They are the firstfruits to the LORD.

Leviticus 23:20-21 The priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before the LORD, with the two lambs. They shall be holy to the LORD for the priest. And you shall proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you. You shall do no customary work on it. It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations.

We are to keep this forever. Here, again, we have the Harvest Festival, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Harvest, touching on the firstfruits of the yearly harvest.

Numbers 28 is where the offerings for the various holy days are mentioned. There the Feast of Weeks is called the Day of Firstfruits.

Numbers 28:26 Also on the day of the firstfruits, when you bring a new grain offering to the LORD at your Feast of Weeks, you shall have a holy convocation. You shall do no customary work.

And then it goes on to describe the remainder of the offerings to be given on this day.

Pentecost is a Greek term in the New Testament for Feast of Weeks, which is also called the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of one's labors. One of the distinctions of this

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day is that on this day only two wave loaves of bread baked with leaven were offered to God, and they are specifically called in the passage in Leviticus 23 firstfruits to the Lord. These are the firstfruits to the Lord. We understand these loaves to represent the church of God, which is made up of redeemed sinners.

This is important to know and understand because these wave loaves were made with leaven. Normally, any bread made with leaven was not acceptable to God on the altar. None of these sacrifices were to be offered with leaven alongside. But, this particular one is given the exception, because of what it represents—people who have or have had sin in them. And specifically, it represents the firstfruits of God's people who have been called out of this world and redeemed, their sins being taken away by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

David Grabbe has covered this subject in the recent Church of the Great God weekly commentaries. These wave loaves were offered after the sin offering was given. They could not be acceptable without the sin offering first. And that sin offering for us is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This covers the leaven that is still in us.

Because of what Christ did, because God has called us out of this world and given us the understanding that we have, and because we have believed it and accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, committing ourselves to the New Covenant, to learning, and growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, becoming more and more like Him, then God accepts us before Him, through Jesus Christ. The blood that He shed covers us—covers our sins—so that God can then allow us to approach His Throne, and have a relationship with Him. Without Jesus Christ, we would not be able to do this. In the same way, without the sin offering that was given, the wave loaves would not have been acceptable, because they had been made with leaven. But the sin offering makes that possible.

What we have here in these two wave loaves is a symbol of us—the firstfruits—the church of God—the 144,000 who are going to be before God and with the Lamb forever.

Turn to James 1 to begin to nail this down. This passage is right after that portion that talks about God is the One who gives perfect gifts, and He never changes. And then James says,

James 1:18 Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His (creation) creatures.

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Just tuck in the back of your head this idea of “the word of truth.” We will get back to it shortly. Here it talks about the word of truth in terms of bringing us forth. This comes into play shortly. But James wants to make sure that we understand that we are the firstfruits. And if we know this, God who never changes, the God who gives good and perfect gifts, He is going to bring those firstfruits to their ripe condition. He is going to harvest them at the right time. And so we have to be ready for that. Revelation 14 speaks about the 144,000.

Revelation 14:1 Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads.

Revelation 14:4 These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. [Were these not leavened? Yes, but now they are not considered that way anymore. Why?] These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb.

The important point here is that they have been redeemed. God no longer considers them leavened. At this point, they have been raised from the dead and made immortal and incorruptible, as mentioned by Paul in I Corinthians 15. The scourge of sin that had been in them has been totally wiped away. They have been purified.

As the firstfruits of God in this final state (not as we saw them in James, but as we see them here in Revelation 14, glorified with Jesus Christ and with the Father), they are seen as virgins—pure as snow without any corruption whatsoever in them. In verse 5, it says that they also have no guile in their mouths. That is really rare among people. At this time, they are (verse 5) without fault before God. They have been totally cleaned up. They have gone from corruptible and full of leaven to being covered by the blood of Jesus Christ, and then, through the process of sanctification, perfected until the time of harvest. Then God harvests them and makes them perfect in themselves—purified so that they are the perfect Bride of Christ who wears the clean and bright linen, showing their perfected state. She is righteous.

I wanted to go through this to show you what we are aiming for, and that producing fruit has much to do with this. We are the firstfruits. You should understand that.

The New Testament confirms our understanding from the Old Testament that the two

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wave loaves are the firstfruits of God—the church of God—the ones who rise in the resurrection to be the Bride of Christ.

The church began on the Day of Pentecost which is another proof regarding the meaning of this day—that it focuses on these firstfruits and what God is doing with them to bring them to harvest. Let us concentrate on firstfruits for a moment.

In nature, the firstfruits are not just what ripen first—first fruits—we think of the time element, that those would be the ones that ripen first. And that is true. But they are also the fruit of the highest quality that the plant will produce for that year or growing cycle. So not only are they the first, but they are also the best—the most superior of all the fruit that will be produced on that plant. The strength of the plant goes into producing these first products.

It is a great compliment that God is putting all of His efforts into producing us as His firstfruits. He expects out of it that not only will we be the first, but that we will also be the best.

What does this say about Jesus Christ who is called the First of the Firstfruits? He is at a rung higher still, right? He is not only before us, as we all know as we all follow Him, but He is that much better than we are too—of a higher quality than we are, or will be. He is the First of the Firstfruits.

The *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* says this: In the New Testament, firstfruits are emblematic of abundance, and excellence; a sample of full harvest. This is interesting. God's firstfruits—we are special in that we are original (first), we are of the highest quality, and we are representative or examples of the fullness of the harvest to come, which is why there is a Feast of Tabernacles toward the end of the growing year. This harvest of the firstfruits is only the beginning! There is more to come! And, they might be of a lesser quality, because they are going to come in the general resurrection. There are going to be billions coming to fruition in a very short time. But for us, there are only a 144,000 over six thousand years of history, which shows you the care that God is taking to produce those firstfruits as an example of the greater and to the greater harvest to come later in the general resurrection.

The firstfruits, as we saw in a couple of the verses we went through a moment ago, are specifically dedicated to God. Remember that it said there that the wave loaves were dedicated to God for the priest—who is the priest? Jesus Christ. In another place we saw that it said that the firstfruits bring honor and glory to God. That is our purpose. We are dedicated to God and to His Priest—Jesus Christ—and it says exactly that in

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Revelation 14:4: “They are firstfruits to God, and to the Lamb.” This is exactly the same thing it says in Leviticus 23:20-21, that we are dedicated to God and to His Priest.

With all of the Pentecost harvest imagery it is easy to see that this holy day has the production of fruit as its central theme. This central theme has two facets, and these are very important. The first is that our sanctification by God to be prepared to be harvested as His firstfruits. The second is our responsibility as individuals to produce spiritual fruit as a sign of growth.

One part God does—He prepares us by sanctifying us. Then the other part we do as individuals to produce fruit as a sign or a proof of growth. These are very important. God does one part, while we do the other. Think of it in terms of the peach tree. There is the one who plants and does all the work on the exterior of the plant to make sure that it grows properly. And then the plant itself has to do things to produce its own fruit. It is a cooperative effort. And so, that is the two parts here of this central theme of producing fruit. God does something to bring us to harvest—the sanctification process. We do something as well, and that is, we produce spiritual fruit in our lives.

In other words, we are being prepared as fruit, while we are expected to produce fruit. That is about as simple as I can put it. We are being prepared as fruit, and we are expected to produce spiritual fruit of our own. In fact, we can even put it this way: God’s sanctifying work in us by His Spirit is the catalyst and the means of our personal production of spiritual fruit. You just cannot take them apart. They are linked together. The two facets are really one with two sides.

Now we begin the teachings of Jesus Christ on this subject. Fruit is a major theme in His teachings. You might not have realized that, but if you go into the gospels and you count the number of times He mentions fruit, it comes up to be quite often. He speaks about it at other times without even mentioning the term fruit. But it comes up 44 times in the Gospels, which is approximately 11 times per book. All but 6 of them are spoken by Jesus Himself. Even in the descriptions of things, it is only 6 times that they are not spoken by Jesus Himself. And 4 of those 6 are by John the Baptist, whose teaching was very similar to Jesus’. Each one of those times was about bearing fruits of repentance.

As many of you know the chapters of various books, you will remember that John 15 is the True Vine Chapter, where He speaks a great deal about producing fruit. For right now, we will concentrate on verse 16. Please notice how much a central theme it is to our lives in Christ.

John 15:16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that

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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.

This is astounding. Jesus Christ called us, chose us, and appointed us for the specific cause of our bearing spiritual fruit. That is what He wants us to do—go and bear fruit! That is it. That is our marching orders. Go, and bear fruit! But, not just any ol' fruit; He says that He wants fruit that remains—lasts—endures. He wants spiritual fruit that lasts. He wants fruit that endures. He wants fruit that “stays ripe.” Physical fruit only lasts a short time before it is overripe, and then rotten. What good is it then? Only for fertilizing the soil from which it came.

But what Christ wants is for us to produce fruit that is eternal in nature; fruit that never rots, and that is always ready to be used. He wants permanent fruit. And the only type of fruit that is permanent is spiritual fruit. He desires fruit that will benefit God, and us, and others besides for all eternity. He is not talking just your average peach. He wants fruit that is going to be eternal—permanent—lasting forever.

Despite talking about fruit all this time, we have not defined fruit very well yet. What is fruit? Well, to put it most simply, fruit is a product of growth. It is a neutral concept because, as Christ says, your fruit can be either good or evil. It depends on what kind of growth generated it. A product by definition is the result of a process. You have a process that yields a product. And in our case, it is our fruit, the product of our growth.

The spiritual fruit that God wants us to produce comes as a result of knowing, and doing certain things. This is part of the process. In my introduction today we saw that fruit is produced by a combination of knowing about peaches—knowing how they grow—and then the pruning, shaping, thinning, fertilizing, pest management—the work involved. You have knowledge along with work. And then we also must be patient for the fruit to ripen. This is time.

We have three ingredients as part of our process of growth: knowledge, work, and patience. All three of these tend to be difficult for us—getting the right information, putting the effort to make it work, and waiting. They are all things that we do not do very well sometimes.

Then, there are some other factors that go into this, namely you must have adequate light, and water. These are things sent by God. He sends out His light—His truth. He also gives us His Holy Spirit—which is often symbolized by water.

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All of these things together help to produce the fruit that God expects of us. Let me repeat them—knowledge, work, patience, plus truth with the Holy Spirit.

What we see is that producing fruit that will please God should be the stock and trade of a mature Christian. I may have made a leap there, but we all know that these things—gathering knowledge, putting it to work, being patient while it manifests itself, along with all that God supplies, are what Christians do all the time. What I am saying is that the production of fruit at the end should be the stock and trade of what a Christian does. And a growing Christian should have the knowledge, and the experience, and the judgment to display good spiritual fruit on a regular basis. That is why I went to John 15 because that is what Jesus is saying: “I have called you, and appointed you to go and produce fruit.” This is what Christians do.

God has planted us in His field to produce fruit. That is what He expects from us. It should happen naturally by now, well almost naturally. Colossians 1 is a prayer of sorts that Paul gives on behalf of the Colossian church. Notice the things he prays about, and asks for them.

Colossians 1:9-11 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 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.

Then he mentions giving thanks for what God supplies. This is what Christians do. We gain knowledge, we use that understanding, and we put it to work, and we have to with longsuffering and patience endure and wait for the fruit to mature; God supplies what we lack.

We should be producing fruit. We have no excuse. We certainly have been given the knowledge. We certainly have been given the leeway to work. We are free in Christ to do those works. We should have the patience by now, I would think, I would hope. And God certainly has not been slack in giving us what we need.

Why have we not been producing fruit? Maybe we have been producing fruit. But, maybe we should be producing more fruit! Turn to Luke 6.

Luke 6:43-45 For a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree

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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.

This is what it says in Matthew too. Christ's teaching is plain. The nature of our heart determines what kind of fruit we produce. That which is inside of us is what is going to come out of us. If our heart is good, we produce good fruit. If our heart is bad, we produce evil fruit. There is no other way that it can happen. What is in you is what is going to come out of you.

Jesus covers the two ends of the spectrum, the good fruit and the bad fruit. Where is your heart along that spectrum? Wherever it is, you are going to produce that kind of fruit.

What does it say about us, or about anybody, when he fails to produce any fruit at all? I am not sure that this is even a possibility to produce no fruit whatsoever. But let us assume that it is possible for right now. Just thinking about it, if you do not produce any fruit it is a bad thing. And so you are producing fruit. That is like if you are asked to answer a question and you do not answer it at all, you are actually answering the question. You are making a decision. You are making a choice.

What if a person does not produce any fruit? It is certainly possible in nature for a tree that is supposed to produce fruit not to do so at all. We had an apple tree in our yard that my wife planted. It was not her fault. I told her where to put it because I thought it would be a great place for an apple tree. But it turned out to be this swale where all the water in the yard went through. (I guess I have this problem of planting trees where an excess of water is a periodic problem.) This tree grew and did okay, but it did not flower much and we never got any fruit. We decided that since it has not grown really large yet, to move it. Actually, we only moved it maybe ten feet or so up the slope. Now that tree is producing like gang-busters. It needed to be in the right place. But for a long time it was a non-productive tree.

I guess I could have cursed it to see what would happen. Did you know that there is an eastern agricultural tradition where if there is a tree that is not producing, you get two orchardists, one who walks up to the tree with an ax, who begins cursing the tree saying, "If you do not produce in the next growing season, I am going to cut you down!" And then the second orchardist walks up in the tree's 'hearing' and says, "No, why not

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hold off and see if it will produce in the next season?" And these Asian farmers claim that it works, that it scares the tree into production. We will get to that in a moment. I never tried it, but I probably should have because there seems to be biblical precedent for it. But in my case, moving the tree is what was needed.

It is certainly possible for a tree out in nature to not produce fruit. Does that mean that it is possible for a Christian not to produce fruit at all? This is how I see the Laodicean. He fails to produce any fruit. Thus he is really producing fruit by slipping backwards—drifting away, just as Hebrews 2:1 says. It is not that he is not a worker; it is not that he is not active; but he is not producing the right kind of fruit. He is getting further and further away from God.

In Revelation 3:15, you remember that Jesus says that their works are neither cold nor hot. It seems to be like either ends of the spectrum—cold, nor hot—and they are not so either. They are lukewarm. And what if what they produce (if anything) is good for nothing? It is useless. God cannot make any use out of it.

In the metaphor in Revelation 3, He likens their works to lukewarm water. It is not cold—what does cold water do? On a hot day, you come inside from your garden, and you drink a glass of cold water, and you are refreshed. That is a good fruit of water. Or, you are having some troubles, and your arthritis is getting to you while you are working in your garden, and you soak in a hot water bath, and you are refreshed. That is a good fruit of hot water. People go to spas with hot springs and such to help their ailments. So hot water and cold water are both useful in their own way.

But what the Laodiceans were producing was lukewarm. What good is lukewarm water? Christ tells you right in the letter, He says that it is an emetic. It is good for inducing vomiting. That is what it produced in Him. Their works are coming up to Him, and He just wants to throw up. Very vivid language, is it not? And He also says, "It not only making Me throw up, I am ready to throw you up, and spew you right out of my mouth, unless you repent."

You see? They were not producing any fruit. They were not producing anything good, or anything that Christ wanted. Their works—their fruits—produced no benefit to anyone; not even to themselves.

He says that if they do not turn up their zeal for Him, and repent of their insipid attitudes and works, that is what is going to happen to them—He is going to get rid of them, and it is not going to be pretty.

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This is quite a threat. Perhaps this highlights how important it is to be producing fruit for God. If we fail to produce fruit, He threatens to condemn us to eternal death. It is that important. He does not want it to come to that. He wants us all to succeed, and to be part of the Kingdom, and be part of the firstfruits. But that is the warning in His letter to Laodicea. Shape up, or spew out.

That is why He counsels them to buy white garments. White garments are a symbol for righteousness. He wants them to cover their nakedness. That is how bad they have become. They are not wearing any cloths, spiritually. They do not even have filthy rags. They are naked. They need the white garments of righteousness to cover them up. And righteousness as we have always taught is doing what is right—it is right wisdom—being wise to do what is right. This is the fruit God seeks in all of us—doing what is right.

This is hardly the “gentle Jesus meek and mild” of the old Protestant hymn. Our Lord and Master is kind and merciful, and He has great longsuffering and patience. But He does demand certain things of us. He would not be a Lord and Master if He did not make demands of us. He would be some wishy-washy underling. A Lord and Master is one who gives commands, one who runs things, and one who is trying to get something done. He wants production out of those who have been committed to His cause. He demands certain things of us, and these certain things are not negotiable—they are part of the contract. He demands belief, obedience, faith, loyalty, love, honor, praise, and the fruits of righteousness. Is that not what we saw in John 15:16? “I called you, and appointed you to go and produce fruit.” This is one of the big ones He wants to see.

He certainly expects to see these fruits in those of us who have been in the church for ten, twenty, thirty or more years. I just passed my 26th year as a baptized member of the Church of God. I am certain that He expects it of me. Twenty-six years of having His Spirit. And what have I produced? That is something for me to figure out, and pray about.

He also expects it as much from you, as He does from me. I was born in the church. I really just cannot go just 26 years back. I have got 44 years or so of knowledge. I had better produce because this warning to the Laodiceans is just as much for me as it is for them, and just as much for you as for me. He expects us to serve Him. He expects us to get along with one another. He expects us to show a clear difference between ourselves and the unconverted people of this world. All of those things are fruits of righteousness—things He expects from us. He expects us to make a witness in this world and among ourselves of His truth, His way, and His character. Are we doing that? Are we producing fruit that He is willing to accept?

Please turn to Luke 13 because we have just spoken about the threat in Revelation 3. Here is the threat repeated:

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 and 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 [wasting space]?' "But he 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.'"

End of parable. The way it ends is very interesting. This is similar to what He says in Revelation 3. The symbols should be obvious to us, although many commentators see the fig tree as Israel, and not as the members of the Church of God. But we have to take this personally. We have to take it, not as Israel as something that happened in the past, present and now, because God the Father is the One who has planted us in His vineyard, and Jesus Christ is the keeper of His vineyard, and He is responsible for bringing us into the Kingdom of God. He is responsible for us bearing fruit.

He gives us a warning here. While God forbears with us, there will come a time (we will not know when) after our baptism and conversion that He expects to see some fruit in our Christian lives. Like I said, I do not know what the timeframe is. Maybe three years? Maybe it is not. Maybe it is different with each person. But there comes a time when He comes by and judges us. He examines and evaluates what we have done. And then He says, "Son, this one looks like it needs to go. There is no production on this tree." And the Son says, "Give me one more year." This could be one more trial, or maybe one more blessing—whatever we happen to need. "Give me one more chance to motivate this person to produce fruit." And God says, "Okay, you are the Keeper, and you know how this goes, you have been a tree before, as it were, and have been a man, you know how this works, carry on."

But notice also what Jesus says. "Okay, good. We will give it one more year. But after that, you can cut it down."

This is very scary. The parable ends with the threat of being cut down, which we all know is the second death. This is a possible ending of this story. Even though Christ intercedes for us, we must respond. There is going to come a time when God's forbearance will end. It is very interesting that in John 15 Jesus talks to His disciples about producing fruit and He repeats the threat. Again, it is not all goodness and light.

John 15:1-6 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. 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.

That is an explicit threat.

John 15:7-8 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.

There is quite a blend of gifts, and positions, and responsibilities, and blessings, as well as terrible, terrible curses all wrapped up in eight verses.

We have to abide in Christ the Vine. We have to be in an intimate relationship with Him in order to bear fruit. Otherwise, it cannot be done. It is in the strength of this relationship and the understanding and use of God's word—did you notice that in verse 3? “You are already clean because of the Word which I have spoken to you.” And also in verse 7, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you...” It is in the strength of that relationship and the understanding and use of God's word that we have the ability to bear fruit. This is the only way. We have to remain in this intimate connection with Jesus Christ, and we have to employ His words.

And then, He prunes us, it says, so that we can bear even more fruit. He is not satisfied with just a piddly amount, but rather He will go through and prune us through trial or whatever, to help us to produce more good fruit. We should not think of this pruning as just putting us through a trial, but rather as a cleansing process. Notice again from verse 3 that you are already clean. So what He is doing is He is taking out of us, removing from us, everything that is useless, diseased, distracting, and worthless. He is paring all of that away little by little. This is because once He does this, we are more able to produce the fruit He wants. That is His goal. He wants us to produce fruit. That is His job

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to get us to produce fruit.

Now notice this pruning is done primarily through God's word. That is how God would prefer to do it. He would prefer us to open our bibles during our study time and see something in the Bible that applies to our lives, and maybe corrects us in a certain way from the way that we have been doing things lately. And we say, "Ah ha! I did not realize I was doing this wrong!" That is how He wants us to do it; that we will be on the ball enough to take what is taught to us from His word, and make the changes.

Sometimes that is not enough, though. We usually express our stubbornness from time to time, just like the Israelites—stiff-necked, hard-headed. And so He often has to correct us more strongly. But He would like to do it just through His word. That would be the best way to help make us clean.

Scripture teaches us what we need to know, and need to do. The two big ones—the knowledge and the work—scripture provides us with instruction on both of those. It shows us the way that is right, and corrects us in areas where we are wrong. He goes to great lengths in the Bible to present us with everything we need to know to live in a godly manner in this world. It shows us the right way, and it shows us the rewards as mentioned in this morning's offertory, and it shows us the punishments as well. God hits us from every side to make sure that we get it so that we can produce fruit.

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

I get the impression of something almost like a scalpel of someone dissecting a person. But He has a sharp two-edged scalpel and he goes in there, cutting and cutting some more, getting down to the very nitty-gritty of our being so that even the thoughts and intentions of our heart are exposed by God's word; so that our motivations and wicked thoughts are laid bare.

Hebrews 4:13 And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.

There is enough in the word of God to straighten us out. But, sometimes God finds it necessary to intervene and designs other motivations to get our attention, and to get us thinking along His lines so that we will begin to again produce the fruit He wants to see.

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Trials tend to come when we know that God's word says something that we are to do, but we are resisting putting it into practice. That is when the tug-of-war begins—the tug-of-war between our carnal nature and the Spirit of God urging us to do what is right. And suddenly, we are faced with something where we have to make a choice. And it is the making of the choice that is so difficult.

But it is God working in us to get us to the point where we can produce fruit. That is why James tells us to have joy in our trials, because it is working something out in us to increase our faith, to get us to the point where we can produce good things toward the Kingdom of God.

Hebrews 12:11 says, “No chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but grievous. But nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness in those who have been trained by it.”

God is willing to chasten, just any good father is willing to do to his son who is going astray. But, his motives are not to beat him down into the ground so that he cannot get up, but rather to correct the way so that he can be a productive person. This is just like God. He is trying to correct us so that we can produce the fruit that He wants to see in us.

In Galatians 5:16, Paul gives some of his overall advice.

Galatians 5:16 I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

He says to make the determination that you are going to walk the way that you have learned of God through the word of God, with the guidance, direction, motivation, and gifts of God's Holy Spirit. That is what you are going to do. You intend to do that, and you are committed to do that. And if you do that, there will not be time, you will not make any provision for, and you will not want to do anything here listed as the works of the flesh. You will be too busy following God's word, and responding to the urgings of His Spirit to do those things. In other words, if you seek the good, and do the good, you will not have the time to do the evil.

Then he lists in verse 22, the fruit of the Spirit. Do not think that these listed here are the only ones. These are the ones perhaps that Paul thought were the most important. But there are more. These are not the only godly attributes. But, these are very important ones listed here.

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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.

You are free to do these at any time without any punishment, without restriction. “Go for it,” Paul says, “walk in the spirit, and you will be producing these fruits.” It is automatic. You cannot help it. If you are living by the word of God and you are allowing yourself to be directed by the Holy Spirit, then you have got to be producing these things, because they both come from the same source. Both are based on the same holy righteous character—the word of God, and the Spirit of God. This is the way to produce spiritual fruit.

In a nutshell, if I can bring it all down, the fruit that God wants us to produce is godly character.

What is our goal? It is to be made into the image of Jesus Christ. That is the greatest fruit you could ever produce—to reflect the very nature of our Savior, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And then, in the resurrection we will fulfill the meaning of Pentecost by being accepted like the wave loaves by the Father as His fruitful, spiritual children.