

fruits of the Spirit in our lives is a process. We do not reach our end goal until God calls us home to heaven where we will spend eternity worshipping our Creator. During the process of developing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, we are going to make mistakes and fall short of these fruits. We are not always going to show love or patience with one another. We do not always act with kindness or gentleness or even self-control. We fall way short of these ideals. Therefore, we need to depend on God's love and grace to overlook our faults and still see us as holy and blameless. We must persevere through the times we fail and continue to strive forward in our Christian faith journey, straining toward maturity. James 1:4 reminds us, "Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."

At the Tokyo Olympics Games in 1964, these words were used as the creed: "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part; just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle. The essential thing is ... to have fought well."⁶

We will all miss the mark and fail to display the fruits of the Spirit at all times. That is why we must persevere and depend on God's love and grace to be able to say what Paul said at the end of his life, "I have fought the good fight and I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." (2 Tim. 4:7-8)

Snickers may temporarily satisfy our hunger as it advertises, but we should always hunger for more in our spiritual lives. We must not be satisfied with our current state, but always hunger for more in our spiritual journey. Our lives should bear the fruits of having the Spirit of God in our lives every moment of every day. We must continually desire for God to take hold more areas of our lives and turn them into holy fruits. As we submit to God's will, have confidence in God's wisdom and depend on God's love and grace, we will hunger to desire God and the things of God more and more in our lives.

¹Weber, S. K. (2000). *Vol. 1: Matthew*. Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (342). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

²Weber, S. K. (2000). *Vol. 1: Matthew*. Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (343). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

³Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message : The Bible in contemporary language* (Ga 5:22–26). Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress.

⁴Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 illustrations : A treasury of illustrations, anecdotes, facts and quotations for pastors, teachers and Christian workers*. Garland TX: Bible Communications.

⁵J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 80.

⁶Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 illustrations : A treasury of illustrations, anecdotes, facts and quotations for pastors, teachers and Christian workers*. Garland TX: Bible Communications.



The Trinity Pulpit

Summer Short Stories

Hungering for More Than Figs Matthew 21:18-22

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With the advent of digital video recorders (DVR), I watch much less commercials than TV networks would desire. I DVR all of my favorite shows and watch the hour program in just 45 minutes by fast forwarding through the commercial breaks. However, we all know good commercials help to brand a product to the general public in order for it to be easily recognizable and highly desirable. If it didn't work, companies would not spend over 412 billion dollars (2008) on advertising and marketing.

One of the better advertising campaigns is for Snicker's candy bar. Its slogan is "You're not you when you're hungry. Snickers satisfies." Snicker's manufacturer would like for you to eat a Snicker's when you are hungry and it will satisfy that hunger. It will not leave you wanting more, other than more Snickers. It will help you not become a diva on a long car ride and help you play backyard football to the best of your abilities.

Hungering for more has become an obsession for our culture. We live in a culture where we have to have an excess of everything. Excess of money. Excess of food. Excess of material things. Excess of entertainment. We live in a world of excessive desires. Sadly,

most of us do not hunger for more and desire excessively the ways of God. We do not hunger enough for the character of Christ and the fruits of his Spirit.

In today's text from Matthew 21:18-22, we find a story that is somewhat strange and difficult to understand. Jesus had just turned a local temple upside down, calling out the money changers for using the house of the Lord for their own selfish gains. His holy anger was on display for all to see. After driving out the money changers, Jesus remained at the temple and healed the lame and the blind. The children sang praises to him while the chief priests and the Pharisees stewed in their anger. Then Matthew tells us that Jesus left the city of Jerusalem and went to Bethany, where he spent the night.

On his way back into town the next morning, Jesus was hungry. He noticed a fig tree nearby and went to pick a few figs for breakfast. When Jesus noticed the fig tree was not bearing any figs, he cursed the tree and the tree withered. On the surface, the story could be misconstrued as Jesus taking out his frustration on the tree for not having figs to satisfy his hunger. However, the meaning goes much deeper than that. In Mark's account of the story, he makes a point to say that it was not the season for the fig tree to bear its fruit. Jesus knew that he would not find any figs on the tree. Thus, Jesus' actions had deeper meaning.



The driving out of the money changers from the temple and this account of Jesus' encounter with the fig tree goes hand in hand. One commentary writer writes, "With the fig tree, Jesus acted out a parable or "mini-drama" to illustrate the reality of Israel's fruitlessness and its doom. Just as the leaves of the fig tree advertised fruit, so the Jewish leaders claimed to be fulfilling God's purpose. However, the advertising was a lie. Under the "leaves" of their showy religion (6:1–18; 15:8–9) their hearts were barren and unbelieving. They had missed their opportunity to repent and to bear true fruit, and so the king pronounced their judgment. There would be no more opportunities for these hypocrites—they would never bear fruit but would die through the judgment of God."¹

The disciples were amazed. The tree withered at the command of Jesus. Some scholars believe that it happened immediately while others believe that it happened over a day's time. Either way, it showcased the power of Jesus. Jesus capitalized on the teachable moment that presented itself. Any believer with true faith can do great things by drawing on the power of God. With faith, anything is possible. (Matthew 21:21-22)

However, anything-is-possible type of faith is not found outside of God's will. It isn't faith itself that causes miracles to occur but rather the power of God in response to the expression of faith on the part of believers. It is through our child-like faith that God moves in miraculous ways. "True faith is always in keeping with God's will and is based on intimacy with God and an understanding of his heart and will."²

As followers of Jesus, we are to bear fruit. If our lives do not bear the fruit of the Spirit within us, we will stand in judgment just as the money changers in the temple and the barren fig tree. In Galatians 5, Paul told the church in Galatia to live by the Spirit. Don't do the things that nonbelievers do. Don't live as if you do not

have the Spirit of God within you. Live bearing the fruit of the Spirit which are love, joy, peace, patience kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:23-25)

Eugene Peterson, the author of *The Message*, paraphrased this text in this way:

"But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good—crucified.

Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives. That means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original."³

Bearing fruit doesn't happen without effort on our part. It takes faithful discipleship that requires discipline and sacrifice. If it was easy, everyone would be bearing the fruits of the Spirit, but we know that is not the case. In addition, bearing fruit is not an optional part of following Christ. It is a mandate given by Christ. We can't just pick and choose which of the fruits we would like to bear. We need to bear all of them! So what's it going to take? Let me

make three suggestions: Bearing fruit requires submission to God's will, confidence in God's wisdom and dependence on God's love and grace.

Submission isn't a word many of us like to use. It has the connotation of being weak. However, submission to God's will not only have positive results, but it is also a sign of Christian maturity. It is the realization that God is God and we are not. When we pray, it exemplifies our submission to God's will. We recognize that we cannot live life on our own so we submit to the power and authority of God. The idea of putting our faith in God is wrapped up in the theological understanding that we cannot save ourselves from our sinful lives so we needed a Savior in Christ who provided a way for us to share in God's glory for eternity.

George Mueller, a great evangelist and a champion of the orphans in Bristol, England, once told a reporter from the *British Weekly* who had asked him the secret of his long service, "There was a day when I died, utterly died;" and, as he spoke, he bent lower and lower until he almost touched the floor—"died to George Muller, his opinions, preferences, tastes, and will—died to the world, its approval or censure—died to the approval or blame even of my brethren and friends—and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God."⁴ We are to die to ourselves and work toward the approval of our Lord. Bearing the fruits of the Spirit requires our submission to God and his will for our lives.

Bearing the fruits of the Spirit requires confidence in God's wisdom. Wisdom cannot exist without knowledge of all the facts pertinent to any purpose or plan. However, wisdom is not just knowledge, but "know *how*." Wisdom entails the skillfulness to formulate a plan and to carry it out in

the best and most effective manner. Some of you have this type of wisdom in business. You have the knowledge and the "know how." You formulate a plan and carry it out in the best and most effective manner. You maximize the opportunity. Others of you are gifted with wisdom in cooking. You can see the final product and take the steps necessary to produce the product. All of you have wisdom in different areas of life. However, most of us struggle to trust in the godly wisdom in our own lives. It is only God who has the wisdom to see the final product and has the "know how" to get us there. We need to place out complete faith in him!

J.I. Packer, in his book, *Knowing God*, writes, "Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it. Wisdom is, in fact, the practical side of moral goodness. As such, it is found in its fullness only in God. He alone is naturally and entirely and invariable wise."⁵

Our nature is to try to make it ourselves. Even as little children, our defiant nature reveals itself in statements like, "I can do it myself!" and "I don't need your help!" However, with Christian maturity comes our dependence on God's wisdom rather than our own.

What kind of sense does it really make for us to try to live life on our own? Why do we have to try it ourselves? Think about it. As believers, we have access to a living God who desires the very best for us! God is omniscient and omnipotent. Why do we believe that we know more than God? Most of us would never verbalize that our wisdom is greater than God's wisdom, but most of us live as if we do. In order for our lives to bear fruit, it must reflect our dependence on God's wisdom!

Finally, bearing fruits of the Spirit requires dependence on God's love and grace. Developing the