

Growing in Christ

Lesson 4: Fruit

Notes for the leader: This is the fourth in a series of lessons about "Growing in Christ." This lesson focuses on the blessings God wants every Christian to experience in his or her life -- love, joy, peace, patience, and more ... and some things we need to do to allow this "Fruit of the Spirit" to grow.

Introduction

The first lesson in this series focused on the important step of faith that you must take to become a follower of Jesus Christ and a member of his Church and his Kingdom. The second lesson focused on dealing with temptation -- a reality that all of us have to deal with every day, even after we make a commitment to follow Jesus! We studied God's promise that He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear, but when we are tempted, he will always provide a way out. (1 Cor 10:13) The third lesson addressed the importance of avoiding any deliberate sin – and, when we **slip** or **fall** into sin, how important it is to **admit** it quickly, to **confess** our sin to God and to those we have hurt by our sin, to **ask for forgiveness**, and to **seek God's help** to change what we're doing to make sure the same thing doesn't happen again.

In that same lesson, we learned that our goal should be to "walk as Jesus walked" – in all our relationships, to try to act as Jesus would: with our families, with our friends, with those in authority over us, and even with our enemies. This lesson focuses on another way to measure whether we are living a life that's pleasing to God: whether we are producing the "fruit of the spirit."

Paul writes

Galatians 5:19-23

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

But **how** does this "fruit of the spirit" grow in us? We all know believers who are not experiencing this fruit. **What can we do to make these things a reality** in our lives?

Let's look again at a passage we studied as part of the Kingdom of God series of lessons – the parable of the sower.

Matthew 13:3-8

"A farmer went out to sow his seed.

As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.

But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.

Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop —a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Jesus goes on to quote a prophecy from Isaiah, which says that most people won't understand his parables because they don't want to understand them. Then Jesus explains the parable:

Matthew 13:18-23

"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means:

When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy.

But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.

But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

In the other lesson, we focused on what this parable tells us about **the initial step of commitment** each of us must make to have a real relationship with God -- **accepting Christ as Savior and Lord**, and following Him. But this step of commitment isn't the **end** of the story – it's really only the **beginning**. The farmer's job isn't finished when he sows the seed – his work has just begun! He will be out in his fields every day until the harvest, making sure the plants are watered and fertilized, chasing away the rabbits, and making sure weeds don't take over the field, until finally, when the time is right, he can harvest his crop.

In the same way, we need to pay attention every day to our spiritual lives. We need to allow the Word of God take root in our souls. We need to feed it by reading the Scriptures God has given us. We need to water it through prayer, asking God to give us the "living water" Jesus promised to everyone who comes to him. And, we need to weed our spiritual lives by getting rid of everything that is not pleasing to him.

Jesus told other parables involving seeds and weeds, a couple of which are in this same chapter. If you have extra time in the small group session, you can read and discuss these other parables.

***Notes for the leader:** Hand out copies of the Small-Group Discussion Questions to each person. Depending on the size of the group, have them break into small groups of four to ten. Make sure that each group has a capable leader, who can keep the discussion moving and well-focused. Make sure the groups understand how much time they have. 15 minutes should be a minimum. 20 minutes is better. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion.*

Follow-up Discussion

***Notes for the leader:** The main purpose of the follow-up discussion is to make sure that each small group has grasped the main ideas of the study. You can skim quickly through the answers if it seems clear that everybody understands them. If not, pick a group that "got it" and have them explain the answers.*

If circumstances permit, it's a good idea to walk around and listen to each group discussion so that you know who "got it" and who didn't.

1. Look at this list of "fruit of the spirit," and compare it with the list of "worldly values." Do you think this is a good picture of the tensions a Christian faces while in prison?

Of course ... and not just in prison, either! Most of the people in the world don't experience this fruit -- at least not very often!

- 1a. Do you think it is possible for someone to really experience the fruit of the spirit in his or her life while in prison?

It sure **is** possible -- there are tens of thousands of men and women who are **locked up** today, but who are **spiritually free** for the first time in their lives.

Experiencing the fruit of the spirit is not a "**natural**" thing. It can happen in the lives of those who have made a commitment to follow Christ -- but only because of the **supernatural power** of God, and the **work of His Holy Spirit**.

2. What are some ways we can "water" and "fertilize" the fruit of the spirit to help them to grow?

Prayer and meditation.

Listening to what the Holy Spirit tells you, and allowing Him to work in your life.

Studying the Scriptures and learning about what Jesus taught and did.

Memorizing the Scriptures so the words are always in your mind and heart.

Talking and praying with spiritually mature brothers in Christ.

3. What are some of the "weeds" that can grow in our lives and choke off the growth of the fruit of the spirit? What can we do to control these weeds?

Some are obvious: lust for power, lust for sex, lust for things, greed -- always wanting more, envying other people, etc.

Let's try to summarize this discussion:

When you become a Christian, God places His Holy Spirit inside you to help you to "walk as Jesus walked." The Holy Spirit will cause this fruit to grow in your life, if you allow him to. But you need to provide the "good soil" that Jesus talked about in the parable – you need to be willing to listen, and willing to do what God tells you. And you need to be willing to provide daily fertilizer and water through your study of the Bible and by seeking God's will through prayer. Finally, you need to be careful of the weeds that grow in your life, and be willing to get rid of anything that keeps you from growing in your relationship with God.

Notes for the leader: Before the group leaves, make sure everyone has a copy of the "Take-Home Thoughts" handout. This will help them remember the things discussed in the lesson. Some of them may also use these handouts to explain the lesson to a cellmate or in a letter they write to their families. You never know how far the lesson materials may travel, or whose life may be affected by them!

Small-Group Discussion Questions

Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22)

Fruit	Qualities	Opposites
Love	Self-sacrifice; seeking the best for others even if they wouldn't do so for you	Hostility, indifference
Joy	Trust and confidence and in God, even during difficult circumstances	Worry, hopelessness
Peace	Spiritual quietness and tranquility	Stress, strife
Patience	Persistence; waiting for God's time; bearing with people, even if they are difficult	Taking matters into your own hands; striking back at others
Kindness	Being willing to help others; showing mercy	Harshness, seeking retribution
Goodness	Virtuousness; doing the right thing, even if you could get away with doing wrong	Corruption; taking advantage of people
Faithfulness	Trustworthiness; keeping your promises, even when it is difficult to do so	Unreliability; looking for "loopholes" to escape your commitments
Gentleness	Being considerate; not taking advantage of others, even when you have the power to do so	Insisting on your own way; bullying people
Self-control	Resisting temptation; controlling your desires; controlling your anger; controlling your tongue	Letting your desires and emotions control you

1. Briefly consider these "fruits of the spirit". Think of some examples of each one.
2. What can we do (with God's help) to provide "good soil" for these fruits to grow in our lives?
3. What are some "spiritual weeds" in our lives that can choke the growth of these fruits? What can we do to try to control these weeds?

Take-home Thoughts About ...

Fruit of the Spirit

When you became a Christian, God gave you a **special spiritual gift**, which he wants you to use to serve him and to help other people in their spiritual growth. This gift might be **showing mercy** to those who need help, or **encouraging** those who are in distress, or **teaching** people about God's Word, or **leadership** in the church.

But God wants **every** Christian to have all of the "**fruit of the Spirit**": **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control**. (*Galatians 5:19*)

How does this happen? What do you and I need to do to experience these things?

Remember the parable of the sower (*Matthew 13*). Remember that a farmer's job isn't finished when he sows the seed – it's really just started! From then on, he needs to **work every day** to make sure his plants are watered and fertilized, to protect them from animals, and to make sure weeds don't take over the field.

In the same way, we need to pay attention to our spiritual lives. We need to **feed** our spirits by **reading the Word** God has given us. We need to **water** them through **prayer**. We need to **weed out everything** in our lives that is **not pleasing to God**.

Some weeds are obvious: lust for money, lust for things, lust for sex, lust for power. **The more dangerous weeds are trusting in ourselves** rather than trusting in God, **spiritual pride** that makes it hard for us to admit that we're wrong, and looking for security in our money or possessions rather than in our relationship with Him.

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