

Fruit Off the Same Vine
(Take hold of real life: Fruitfulness)

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Lesson: **John 15**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%2015>

The author of the Gospel of John presents us with a metaphor. He pictures Jesus saying he is the vine and his followers are the branches. The branches are naturally expected to produce the appropriate fruit. Clearly, the fruit will be of the same variety and quality as the vine. Bad vines - bad fruit; Good vines - good fruit. That sounds simple enough, but we know that the care and conditions have much to do with the fruit which is harvested.

We certainly know that the fruit of our Christian lives is not always top quality. Sometimes what we produce would be only good for making raisins. Every now and then our fruit might be sufficiently good for making chardonnay or Martinelli's, or even Welch's 100% grape juice.

To maintain the quality life (that is fruit) Jesus expected of his followers we need to stay attached to the vine which produced us in the first place. If we are to emulate Jesus we have to know him, listen to him, contemplate him, revere him and put faith in him.

Extending the metaphor, we also appreciate we are branches among branches, the . Think of our local church as the foliage of which we are apart. We add to its number and body; it surrounds us with spiritual support and loving relationships.

Jedediah Smith as you know was a mountain man. He and his party were the first to cross the desert into southern California, the first to cross the Sierra from west to the east, the first to traverse the length of California. He was called Bible Tot'in Jed and may have introduced it to the Indians of Oregon who themselves traveled east to Missouri to get copies of the White man's book of God, as they called it. Jedediah was admired and looked up to by his men who were of the roughest breed. He himself was clean-shaven. He was also referred to as "Old Jed" even though he was only in his twenties during his adventures. He had been a friend to the Indians, but while drinking at an oasis hostile Indians shot him in the back. One year he and his trapper/explorers wintered in the Sierra waiting for the spring rendezvous. He wrote a letter to his parents which he gave to some passing trappers making their way back to the Midwest. In the letter he said, "I am comfortable in this beautiful place, with my loyal, but most unsavory cast of men. What I need most of all is the watch and care of a Christian Church." The church is the cluster on the branch connected to the vine. Isn't that a comforting, affirming thought - the "watch and care" of a Christian church.

Well, I think we have squeezed all of the juice out of the metaphor, so let's consider more directly what it means to be a fruit of the Jesus vine.

He is talking about demonstrating our relationship to him by the way we live... actually by the way we love.

If I Corinthians 13 is the "love chapter" Paul's writings, the Sermon on the Mount is the love chapter of the Gospels. You recall it opens with the Beatitudes: blessed are those who recognize their spiritual need, who are able to grieve, who are merciful, humble... And then comes the passage about his disciples being the salt of the earth, and then the subject of light. Some get the idea that our faith which makes us "shine, shine, shine" with the spirit. But there is more to it than that. Let's hear that "light" passage once again: "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp or a candle or LED and puts it under a table, but it is put on a stand so it may give light to the whole room. (Now comes the punch line which is generally rushed over and not even noticed.) Let your light so shine before people so they will see (what?) your good works (not just hear our words, or see the cross dangling from our necks or pinned to our lapel).. .see your good works which will prompt them to give thanks and glory to God." That's the fruit...loving, caring, self-giving service, selfless good works... .the fruit of the vine.

Let me share six simple truism and illustrate them with personal experiences. My illustrations not be the kind of mission most of us will embark upon, although the opportunities are there. But they may be duplicated where we live and any day of our lives.

First, practicing good works, producing the fruit, giving to others with love, are as natural to the Christian, as shinning is to the sun. Without such generous giving of ourselves, an essential ingredient is missing. Last summer team of youth and counselors from Morgan Hill went up to our camp near Mt. Shasta where we are building a retreat center. They joined us in nailing up paneling, trail building, investing the day in hard volunteer work. Mediating in worship in the evenings. One of the men counselors, a realtor, called me aside. I could read emotion on his face. He said, "Dave, I just called home on my cell phone. I told my wife things are going to be different. I have spent my life getting, getting, getting. I knew something was missing. I told her this experience is teaching me the need to give...and its great."

Second, something like the first, as St. Francis said, "it is in giving that we receive..." Our local church as been involved in building homes in Mexico as you heard. We build one or two at a time - 29 so far. We asked one of the volunteers to report on the experience in church. I knew what she would say. I have heard it so many times. She said, "I went with the idea of giving for those needy people....! return having received far more from them than I gave." Another man who had been on several projects, stopped me and said, "I can't put my finger on it.. .but giving a hand to others simply makes you less greedy."

Third, when we let our little lights shine through good works we give hope. (If you have ever felt hopeless, you know the value of hope.) Whether it is the check we put in the offering plate, or playing with children in Bosnia, or working with Habitat or Hospice, we give hope; we add a little hope to the lives of others and to the world.

Last October I took a team to Pascagoula, Mississippi to help with the recovery after Hurricane Katrina. I was told that mold is as common as mosquitoes down on the gulf. But the flood waters and the rain which poured into homes where roofs had blown away or been damaged compounded the mold problem. We tore off sheet rock about four foot high and sprayed the wood with Clorox to kill the mold. . One evening a woman came by while we were having dinner and told of a neighbor

whose baby was seriously ill. One of our people went over to see the family with the sick baby. It was like a doll house, painted with pink trim. It was a mess inside and everything would have to be moved out and the wall board torn off.. The mother said the doctor insisted they move out because the baby had acute respiratory problems because of the mold. She had no where to go. Our dispatcher said, I'll send some of the Californians over to take care of it. Team members invaded the place taking up carpets, removing walls, replacing electrical outlets, working with enthusiastic determination, visiting the baby outside in her crib. We watched hope grow in the mother's face, replacing the hopelessness which earlier distorted her lovely face. The baby was recovering, and so was her home.

Fourth, acts of caring service bonds people in friendship. I mentioned the children of Colonel and their families feeling that we were their compadres. Three years ago a team went to Anadyr... a small community, on the eastern edge of Russia a few degrees south of the Arctic Circle, isolated, forgotten by Moscow, winters hitting 60 below zero. Two years earlier, people had been starving in the little surrounding villages. We sent food, fish gear, outboard motors, clothing. A new governor who actually cared about the people had been elected. He knew of the supplies we had sent and invited us to come over. Things were better when we arrived, but still life was rough. We worked on a woman's clinic, went to their native dances, saw the schools, orphanages, Alcohol abuse clinics we helped support. Children would congregate around us any time we went shopping, which required going to a half dozen different stores.. one for milk, another for meat, another for bread. The children were our happy, enthusiastic guides.. taking us by the hand and leading us to the right stores. One the last evening there, we took our host family to dinner at a small, very nice little restaurant. The wife, Varia, is out-going, courageous, bright, and had set up numerous programs for children, the natives, civil and was U.N. representative for human rights in the Chukotka Region of Russia. The husband, Gaganni, is a marine biologist, very much the scientist, with the beard and countenance of a red-haired Norwegian seaman., but he was Russian. He asked if he could give a toast. (Russians will toast to anything you can name.) But he said, "You have come and you have brought us what we needed most." We thought of the painted rooms, the wall paper, the telephone we purchased for the clinic. He continued, "you brought us a sense of community between you and us." Following 9/11, one of the first e-mail I received was from Gaganni, saying, 'We hurt for you. We want you to know we are your friends." Such community and friendship come with our, your and my good works.

Fifth, our good works spiritual heart of life. Something of the Spirit of God is within... love is of God.. and good works are an extension of that love. One fellow said, "Volunteers In Mission is a spiritual experience disguised as work." The last evening we were in Kosovo, was one of the most beautiful, memorable moments of my life. The

Serbs had killed all the life-stock in that beautiful valley outside Metrovica. Now there were cows in the fields, sheep were grazing in flocks of twenty. Our Untied Methodist Committee on Relief had given the animals. While we were there, a huge, beautiful, brown heifer was delivered to the family with whom we ate our evening meal. Like all of the homes in that lovely valley, the Serbs had broken into the home and placed the furniture in the middle of the house and lighted it. The fire reached to the roof burning the rafters causing the roof to fall in. We saw new red tile roofs against the green of the mountain sides and valley. But the roof was not

finished where we ate, so we ate with the family on the dirt floor of the basement. The father had been killed, the mother left to live in Metrovica. The 15 year old son was the head of the family; his two older sisters prepared the food we bought. We ate together. He last night the school principal, and area mayor, and others joined us. But most important was the elder of the family and uncle, a shepherd, a wise and witty honored man. After dinner, the floor was swept, tea served and conversation took place. The Elder did nearly all of the talking, while the others held back respectfully. I was the spokesperson for our group. He and I asked and answered questions, we joked together. Then he looked me in the eye motioning for the translator to recite his words... Religion is of no value. The translator hesitated, then said his line. There was a pause, he wanted the words to sink in. Then he smiled and continued, "unless it is lived out." (fruits from the branch.) I responded quoting our John Wesley, things like "if hearing sermons, reading the Bible, prayer groups interfere with good works, postpone them or set them aside in favor of loving service." (Let your light shine.. .grow the grapes.) The old Muslim shepherd reflected on those comments, nodded his head, put his hand over his heart and said, we are of two different faiths, but of one heart." God's spirit as love pervaded that a candle lit basement. In spite of language, cultural, religious orientations, we were one in the Spirit that night.. .and none of us will ever forget it.

6) Loving service, good acts, generosity motivated by the vine are a sign of who and whose we are. After all, we are the branches of the One who gave his all - in Love. Aren't we?