

## Bear Fruit....Be Blessed

### Anthony Smith

The children were lined up in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school for lunch. At the head of the table was a large pile of apples. The nun had posted a note on the apple tray: "Take only one. God is watching." Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate chip cookies. One of the kids had written a note, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples." Today, I'm going to talk about fruit... "Fruits of the Spirit"...bearing fruit...the harvest of fruit as the harvest of souls. Fruit is a consistent theme in the Bible. The Old and New Testaments including the patriarchs, Jesus and in this instance the Apostle Paul talked a lot about farming to explain to people how the Kingdom of God works. The themes included things like planting seeds, bearing fruit, good vines and bad vines, good fruit and bad fruit, harvesting and burning the chaff. Jesus asked us to bear good fruit and not something else. He didn't say bear a good prime rib or some tasty zucchini. He went for the sweet tooth. But I suspect it was also because society in that day knew a lot about making wine and growing grapes. Good vineyards and vines bore good fruit and bad ones the opposite. In the early years, people learned that almonds from certain trees would kill them. Almonds contained cyanide or bitter almond. But people loved those almonds so they learned which trees were not poisonous and cultivated those but I suspect it was a painful learning experience.

Fruits of the Holy Spirit as the gifts of love, joy, peace patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control evidence our belief. We find God through Jesus in grace or what I refer to as God revealed. All grace is God revealing himself to us. The entire Bible is God revealing himself to us. Jesus was God revealed on earth. Jesus was and is grace and in that grace we are given wonderful gifts. We are gifted with the fruits of the spirit and God's eternal wisdom as the Word or "Bread of Life" which we consume. This scripture tells us that in belief we display Jesus to the world by dying to the works of the flesh and instead living to display these works of the Spirit to others. In the Gospel of John, Jesus declared his divinity as the great "I AM" seven times. He tells us, "I AM the way the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father except through me." We have a choice. We can either find God in this life through Jesus in grace as "God revealed" or in judgment in the next.

But we humans have a way of missing those moments where God reveals himself to us or we see them but quickly forget. Bubba and Billy went out with Bubba's old dog Blue to shoot some ducks. They shot a duck and it fell in the middle of the pond. Bubba said, "Go get it Blue." Blue took off and walked right on top of the water over and back and then set the duck down at Bubba's feet. Bubba looked at Billy who was staring in amazement. Bubba said, "Pretty unbelievable huh?" Billy said, "Yeah, I can't believe that dog can't swim." Even the Apostle Paul had trouble. In **Roman's 7** Paul tells us, "<sup>19</sup> For the good which I desire, I don't do; but the evil which I don't desire, that I practice. <sup>20</sup> But if what I don't desire, that I do, it is no more I that do it, but sin which dwells in me." We are imperfect beings. Paul struggled to bear the very fruit he was talking about. But he also realized that "sin" is a property of the flesh and that in knowing

Jesus, he could say that despite his deficiencies, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Jesus Christ, who don’t walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.” (**Romans 8**)

Our first goal in order to receive “Fruits of the Spirit” or to bear “fruit” for the Kingdom of God is to know Jesus and be sure that he knows us. Jesus tells us, “The work of God is this, to believe in the one he sent.” (**John 6:29**) So we seek him with our whole heart. **Hebrews 11:1** tells us that “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Our goal in this life should be to move as far as we can from “assurance” toward that certainty or “conviction” of belief which may finally culminate in that “aha” or “born again” moment. At some point that “living water” which flows into us in belief carrying those “fruits of the Spirit” and the timeless wisdom that only God can give us, begins to flow out of us the same way as we engage others in the world.

I see the “fruits of the Spirit” and particularly the gifts of “love, joy, and peace” as one big gift from God because that is how I came to know them. I decided to show this wedding photo of Sheila and me because it captured for me many of the things I want to say about “Fruits of the Spirit”. On the left is our original wedding photo. I was a young surgical resident and Sheila was an ICU nurse. On the right is an artificial intelligence redo my son sent me for my recent 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. It brought tears to my eyes. As this picture shows, our marriage began with great love and it will end the same way but with so many blessings in between. We began life together with a wonderful seven years. We had two little boys and had just moved to Albuquerque and into a new home. We had many dreams. And then one day, in the blink of an eye, Sheila suffered a severe brain injury. Sheila was near death in a coma and I had lost all hope. In the depths of suffering, I prayed a simple prayer and asked God for help and God answered that prayer. I woke up the next morning and I felt like I was surrounded by eternal sea of love. It was love like I had never felt before. I knew it was God. I knew it was Jesus. I knew the Holy Spirit was in the room. Eventually, I came to understand that it was the Kingdom of God that drew near in what we call the “peace that passes all understanding.” It contained a “peace” that told me, “Don’t worry, I am here.” That “peace” did not say what the outcome would be but just that I didn’t need to worry. It took away all fear including even the fear of death. In that peace, Jesus revealed himself to me unequivocally and from that moment on my life was changed and I knew it. I experienced the inexpressible joy of knowing that heaven is real. It was that “aha” or “born again” moment but it still took me ten years to figure it all out. I was not yet ready for the “solid food” that **Hebrews 5** speaks of. Since that day, Jesus has been the focus of my life. Sheila eventually opened her eyes and the slow difficult but relentless recovery began. Jesus’ grace was sufficient for both of us. Ten years later, Sheila casually told me one day how she had walked to a peaceful light in her coma and had no doubt that Jesus was in that light. In those very difficult years that followed, God gave me other blessings which this new picture captured. He gave me gifts of playing music and hiking. He blessed me as I cared for people in need. Those blessings sustained me through some very dark times and taught me great lessons. I was grateful for those long hikes where God would explain scripture to me and give me that wisdom I craved. Playing music further lifted my soul during troubled times. Together Sheila and I have weathered many trials since those days and for each one, Jesus has had something to teach us

about the fruits of the spirit. This picture is a metaphor for how our lives have been blessed in so many ways. The colors and clarity of life and God's purpose have become so much more vivid for us. The animals in the picture all dwell in peace just as they will in heaven. I see my old dog "Blue" there who lived for his hikes and his pat on the head as he modeled agape love for me. And there in distance is that Sandia mountain with the light of heaven shining much more clearly through. We have been so blessed in the midst of that suffering to receive those "fruits of the spirit."

Others in the Bible and in modern times have talked about this same "peace that passes all understanding" I believe it was the "peace that passes all understanding" that Jesus gave to the Apostles in the Upper Room when he appeared to them in his resurrected state and said, "Peace be with you". In knowing that peace and especially when Jesus breathed the Spirit into them, the disciples became hardened believers and no longer feared things of the world. It was that peace that Edgar Harrell experienced. He wrote a book called *Out of the Depths*. He was about to jump into the fiery oil filled shark laden ocean following the sinking of the Indianapolis ship during World War II. He prayed and received an immediate answer to that prayer. He talks about the peace he felt which calmed all his fears and told him that God was there with him and he just knew after that he would be ok. The Apostle Paul was struck blind on the road to Damascus. In that moment, the Kingdom of God drew near and Paul experienced a great light and heard Jesus talking to him. Paul felt the Kingdom of God surround him and in that experience, he was changed forever.

In that eternal peace we experience great joy. After that moment, we know that Jesus really was who he proclaimed to be. We can see that light of heaven there before us and we know he has forgiven us before God. (**John 16:33**) But men in the Smith family like me tend to grow an upside down mouth as we get older. It makes us look like we are always frowning or deep in thought. I thought a mustache might help but it didn't. When I was working, I might come out of a surgical case feeling extremely happy and joyful but someone would walk by me in the hall and say, "Why so grumpy?" or "Having a bad day, huh?" But I realized that is precisely the reason we need a savior and redeemer who judges us not by our outward appearance but by our inside appearance. Jesus told us, "In this world you will have troubles but take heart for I have overcome the world". We can carry the joy of knowing on the inside no matter what is happening on the outside. Our joy is not in the world but it is in being able to see the light of heaven.

For gentleness and patience...I like to think that I am gentle and patient but Sheila often reminds me otherwise. But God really has blessed me with many lessons about patience. I have learned many things about patience watching Sheila struggle after her accident to overcome an obstacle of one kind or another. There are times when I am sure I would not have the patience to do what she does. The word "patient" derives from the Latin word for "suffering". God blessed me through my patients with many lessons as they endured some of the darkest moments of their lives. They taught me how that the hospital gown gaping open at the back humbles everyone no matter whether rich or poor and no matter what race color or creed. I came to understand the meaning of Jesus' words to "love one another as we love ourselves." Interacting

with thousands of patients helped me understand why Jesus wept in empathy as he rode into Jerusalem on the donkey and said, "If you, even you, had known today the things which belong to your peace! But now, they are hidden from your eyes." But I also remember a time when I spoke to a 95 year old man and asked him to give me the secret to living so long. He said to me, "Doctor, every day all my life I have prayed for God to give me wisdom. I think that is why I have lived so long. It takes a long time for God to give people wisdom." I realized in that moment that all my life I had been praying for God to give me patience and my reward had been trial after trial. So these days, I pray a lot for wisdom. The lesson is be careful what you pray for!

Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes that we are blessed in our suffering. If we suffer for Him we store treasure in heaven. Jesus said, " <sup>3</sup> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. <sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. <sup>5</sup> Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. <sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. <sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. <sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. <sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." (**Matthew 5: 3-10**) The Beatitudes tell us we are closest to heaven or the Kingdom of God when we are at our lowest ebb or "poor in spirit". When Paul complained to God about his kidney stone pain, God told Paul, "My power is made perfect in weakness." (**2Cor 12:9**) But if we turn in that moment and ask God for help, we may be rewarded with that "peace that passes all understanding" ....those "fruits of the Spirit" as eternal love, peace and that joy of knowing. Those "fruits of the Spirit" are part of the gift of salvation. At some point, just as Jesus told us, that "living water" of "fruits" and wisdom that God reveals to us in our quest begins to flow from us as we engage others in their suffering. We find ourselves blessed when we are mourning for others...praying for loss or praying for recovery. We are blessed when we are meek or "gentle" and willing to help anyone who we realize needs our help. **Philippians 2:3** tells us to do "nothing through rivalry or through conceit, but in humility, each counting others better than himself; <sup>4</sup> each of you not just looking to his own things, but each of you also to the things of others." (**Matthew 23:12**) We are told that if we seek "righteousness" through Jesus as the Word, the Logos or the wisdom of the ages, we will be fed. We are fed in our study of scripture and in answers to prayers. If our heart is focused on Jesus and it is pure and not contaminated by things of the world and we have that childhood innocence, the Beatitudes tell us that God will reveal himself to us and in fact we will "see God". Our eyes and ears will be opened. We defeat the idea that Jesus put forward found in **John 12: 40** and the ancient prophet **Isaiah 6:1-10** which says, <sup>40</sup> "He has blinded their eyes and he hardened their heart, lest they should see with their eyes, and perceive with their heart, and would turn, and I would heal them." And if we suffer persecution for our faith, we will be blessed and store treasure in heaven.

We engage in works of service to bear fruit as an outward sign that we have found Jesus and want to serve him in the world. In order to bear fruit for the Kingdom of God, Jesus tells us not to be showy but to work behind the scenes if we want to see those rewards to be stored in heaven. (**Matthew 6**) Jesus talked about service to others, especially the least among us, also as evidence of works and evidence of bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God. He talked about the

consequences of ignoring the least among us which can be severe. James tells us “Faith without works is dead.” (**James 2:26**) We bear fruit by being the “salt” or the “light” and letting that living water flow from us to draw people to Jesus by proclaiming our reason for belief to the world and for fulfilling the great commission in service to the world. (**Matthew 28**) Anytime we serve the least of this world in mercy, we are bearing fruit especially if they are drawn to Jesus and find God through him. We may do that for a lifetime. We may do that in that Jesus moment where we sacrifice ourselves on behalf of another who needs our help. In serving others, we become like Simon of Cyrene who helped carry Jesus’ cross as he suffered. We pick up part of another person’s cross and bear their burden with them. We lighten their load. But in that suffering if we remain true to the those “fruits” of patience and faithfulness we find ourselves blessed. The greatest blessing I received serving as a physician was to lighten that burden for someone else. All of us at one time or another will be required to drink that wine or fruit of the vine as the cup of suffering. When that happens, we continue to display those fruits of the Spirit in our lives, however imperfectly, as evidence of the Spirit working in us on behalf of Jesus and continue to do what we can to bear fruit on behalf of the Kingdom of God.

As fruit in God’s vine of salvation we are called to remain in the vine in order to bear fruit. God speaks about his vineyard in **Isaiah 5**, written some six hundred years before Jesus. The vineyard is the nation of Israel as his children who have turned their backs on God despite all the miracles he had done for them. In the end, the vineyard is destroyed in judgment. The Babylonians conquered the promised land and Jerusalem and God’s vine was exiled to Babylon and other parts of the world. This teaches us that the judgment for turning away from God, leaving the vine, and failing to bear fruit can be severe as it will again be in end times. We are called to remain in the vine and in Jesus’ love no matter what happens in the rest of the secular world. (**Matthew 12:30-31**)

The harvest of souls in the moment salvation is also spoken of in the Bible as bearing fruit. The “fruit” ripens on the vine of salvation and at some point there is a harvest where the good fruit is taken and the bad fruit is burned or destroyed. We sow seeds of faith to help Jesus achieve his harvest. Some of those seeds grow and bear fruit when Jesus reveals himself and people come to belief. (**John 4**) In another of the seven great “I AM” statements, Jesus says, “<sup>1</sup> I am the true vine, and my Father is the farmer. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit, he takes away. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You are already pruned clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, and I in you. As the branch can't bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you, unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine. You are the branches. He who remains in me, and I in him, the same bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If a man doesn't remain in me, he is thrown out as a branch, and is withered; and they gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned.” It is clear from Jesus’ own words that we must keep our faith and remain attached to the vine of salvation. Focused on Jesus as our vine, we are surrounded by Jesus’ love. We Christians are part of the “firstfruits” heavenly tithe that Jesus began as the very first fruit to returned to heaven. Believers he has gathered as his flock are part of the tithe and will follow. There are many “vines” in the vineyard but only one that has Jesus as its root. God told Abraham that vine of salvation would flow through the hereditary lineage of Isaac. (**Genesis**

**17:19)** Jacob blessed Judah and said, “<sup>11</sup> Binding his foal to the vine, his donkey's colt to the choice vine; he has washed his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes.” Jesus would ride into Jerusalem on that colt as the choice vine. Jesus as the prophesied descendant of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah and David, Jesus rode in to be the “way the truth and the life” as God revealing Himself and dwelling among us here on earth. Believers know that we have been given the greatest gift of our lifetimes. We have received those fruits of the Spirit and our eyes have been opened. Our “peace” is knowing Jesus was and is who he proclaimed to be.

Jesus calls us to bear fruit and to project those fruits of the Spirit into the world. When we encounter condemnation, judgment, sanctimony, labeling, hatred, violence and the things that Paul spoke about at the beginning of the scripture we read today, we can be sure that those things are not of God. Jesus tells us, “<sup>16</sup> You didn't choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain.” Believers are blessed to be part of the harvest and to have received those “fruits of the Spirit” as a witness to that truth. The good fruit from the vine of salvation is saved. The rest is discarded. We do our best to bring new fruit into the light and to lighten the load of the least. And if we persevere in faith, on that glorious day when we meet Jesus in heaven, we will not hear, “<sup>23</sup>... 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you who work iniquity.'” Instead Jesus will look at us and say, “Welcome home good and faithful servant.” In this life, We may suffer persecution for our faith but in knowing Jesus, our faith can bear all things because we have found that “fruit” and we see the light of heaven. So go bear fruit and be blessed.

Amen.