

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Barely Fruitful or Bearing Fruits?</b>
<b>Reference</b>	John 15:1-8
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Almost 40 years ago in the early 1980s, I was staying in a foreign student's dormitory in Osaka, Japan while pursuing my tertiary education in Japan. In that dormitory with me there were six other Malaysian students, whose company I greatly enjoyed. When you are far away from home in a strange land for a number of years, it is nice to be among your own people. There were hundreds of other foreign students living in that dormitory. At that time, China was undergoing rapid reforms under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping and they began to send students overseas to study and a number of them started to appear in our dormitory and they were mostly above the age of 40 and they came to pursue mostly postgraduate programs. At first the Chinese government wasn't confident about sending young people for studies overseas, for fear that they might get brainwashed. So they only send the older ones whose minds were not so malleable.

One evening, like any other evening, I was having dinner with my Malaysian friends in the cafeteria downstairs and a student from China was sitting nearby eating quietly and he was the gentleman in his 50s who had arrived recently. Unknowing to us, he was listening in to our conversation and when he finished his meal, he turned to us and in a friendly tone he asked in Mandarin, are you all from Malaysia and we said yes and he says, you know actually I was from Ipoh. We were stunned.

Some 25 years after I left Japan I was back in Osaka for a meeting but I took sometime to visit the place where I use to live and it was in a suburb to the north of the city. To my surprise, the dormitory was still there and I was overwhelmed by a sense of nostalgia as I looked at this building. My room, room 408, was on the fourth floor to the right of the building and all those sweet memories came back to me and this was where this story took place.

Anyway, we were surprised that this student from China was from Ipoh and who is this Chinese national who was born and bred in Ipoh and it turned out that he had something with do with Chairman Mao Zedong, who took power in 1949 and that event in 1949 triggered a nationalistic fever that swept overseas Chinese communities from Singapore to San Francisco. There was an urgent call to

come and help rebuild the motherland and many young idealistic Chinese from Singapore to San Francisco responded to that call, including some from Malaysia. They left their homes and went to China to help build a socialistic utopia but sadly that turned out to be utterly disastrous and even deadly because during Mao's great leap forward from 1958 to 1962, millions of Chinese died of starvation and China remained very poor and backward until perhaps the later half of 1980s.

By the mid 60s, many of these overseas Chinese had become disillusioned but they couldn't go home either, because they might have got married and have families in China or they were not allowed to come home, the Malaysian government didn't want them back. In our chat with this Chinese national continue in the cafeteria and he was very curious to know what life was like in Malaysia, whether we are living comfortable lives back home. Some of our friends were very mischievous and we told him, on average we own two cars for family and a TV in every room. Of course, we exaggerated. China was very backward and poor at that time.

What has this got to do with our topic today? It is actually my long-winded way of telling you something, which is Malaysians in general have a common identity. There is something about Malaysians that set us apart from other nationalities. In the case of this gentleman from China, who sat near to us at the cafeteria. He heard what we talk about and how we said it. He observed our body language, our mannerism and he could tell that we were Malaysians because our behavior and our language resonated strongly in his heart because he was one of us. **I will come back to this and relate it to our discussion.**

We shall take a quick look at our text for today. A quick scan of the text shows us that the word fruitful or fruit is all over the place and it appears seven times in eight verses. It is obvious that the need to be fruitful is a dominant theme in the text. Now to put this in the context, these were words spoken by Jesus on the night when he had his last supper with the disciples and the night before he was arrested, trialed and crucified. This text is part of the so called Upper Room Discourse, because it took place in this upper room in Jerusalem.

The Upper Room Discourse stretches over five chapters from John chapter 13 to chapter 17 and it constitute the last teachings of Jesus to his disciples. As part of this teaching, Jesus emphasized the need for Christians to bear fruits. He used the metaphor of a gardener working in a vineyard and he described a vine or the main trunk with its many branches and whether these branches are fruitful or not. We see that some branches are fruitful and some are not. Right at the

beginning in verse 1, he explained the symbolism behind the metaphor. Jesus identified God, the father as the gardener and he himself is the vine.

Now what about the branches, who are the branches?

Although not explicitly mentioned here, the branches are people who profess to believe in Jesus Christ, who claim to be followers of Christ.

What do the fruits represent? If the branches bear fruits, what are believers supposed to produce?

Now although not mentioned here, the fruits are the outer evidence of our inner faith. This is our main topic today.

Coming back to our text, it says that the gardener does two things. Firstly, from verse 2

*2 He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.*

So using a pair of pruning scissors, the gardener trims each fruitful branch, cutting off unwanted bits and pieces of the branch and leaves, so that it will produce more fruits, because the gardener wants more fruitfulness. The branches are supposed to produce fruits in greater and greater quantities. The second thing, the gardener does also from verse 2 is that he cuts off every branch that bears no fruits.

*6 If you do not remain in Me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.*

This time the gardener uses a saw or an axe to chop off those unfruitful branches, they are cut away completely from the vine and then destroyed. This is certainly a scary metaphor and many Christians are rather unsettled by these verses because it raises a troubling question. If I am a Christian but if don't bear fruits will I lose my salvation. Some will point out, doesn't the Bible teach once saved, always saved. Now I hesitate to get entangled in this controversial subject because it will take a full sermon for me to address this adequately. Furthermore, this is in part of our main topic, but I offer you later some thoughts so that you can go home and think and ponder over this.

In the rest of the text, Jesus told his disciples how to be a fruitful branch and that is by remaining in him or remaining in the vine and he said this repeatedly in our

text. Seven times Jesus talked about bearing fruits and seven times he implored his disciples to remain in him.

What does it mean to remain in Jesus?

Briefly, it means to be committed to him, to be true to him, to be faithful to him and to stay on course.

Can I lose my salvation? Is my salvation secure? Does the Bible teach once saved always saved?

I am sorry to tell you that there is no straightforward answer. This is not a question to which a simple answer can be given, but nevertheless let me frame it in a way that might prompt you to study this further on your own. For those who are unsure of their salvation, for those who harbor doubts whether they are really saved, scripture offers plenty of assurances. There are many verses that comfort us with the hope and certainty that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. If you are a true believer, nothing will ever separate you from the love of God.

### **John 1:12**

*Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God—*

This is a beautiful verse guaranteeing that our salvation is secure if we will receive Jesus and believe in his name, but for those who take their salvation for granted, but for those who don't take their faith seriously, the Bible at the same time carries plenty of warnings for these Christians. Both the Old and New Testament cautions those who take God and His commands lightly or carelessly. Our text today from John 15 is one such passage, warning us to be careful in the conduct of our faith. A similar verse says,

### **Matthew 7:21**

*"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.*

A serious warning verse, not to make a mockery of our salvation. So in summary, if you are unsure of your salvation after receiving Jesus as your Lord and Savior, the Bible assures you that your salvation is secure and solid, but if you make light of your salvation, if you don't bear fruit, the Bible at the same time contains plenty of warnings directed at you, so that it will make you think very carefully.

Let's move on to our topic. It is clear from the text that followers of Jesus must bear fruits. The consequence of not doing so is clear and severe as we saw just now. The whole text may be summarized by verse 5

*If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit*

This implies that if a believer remains in Christ and vice versa, bearing fruits will come naturally. This means that a true believer who is committed to Jesus, not only must he bear fruits, he will bear fruits in due course. This also means that the gospel is not only just about salvation, it is not just a matter of getting your passport to heaven and that's it, you can go back to your old way of living. Salvation must be followed by transformation as the Holy Spirit works in us in our lives molding us and shaping us and as the spirit does so, the fruits will come out over time and in growing quantities. That's why, it is called the fruit of the spirit. What the text doesn't do is to describe this fruit. Since it is a vineyard, Jesus was using the metaphor of grapes. What do the grapes represent?

Now as mentioned earlier, the fruits symbolize the outer evidence of our inner faith. The visible signs of our transformation inside and it will be very useful for us to take a closer look at this. What kind of evidence or signs? From various parts of the New Testament I picked up four different manifestations or expressions of this fruit of the spirit, which all believers must and will produce.

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| 1. The Fruit of <b>Character</b>      | Galatians 5:22~23 |
| 2. The Fruit of <b>Good Work</b>      | Colossians 1:9~10 |
| 3. The Fruit of <b>Communal Love</b>  | John 15:16        |
| 4. The Fruit of <b>Lips (Worship)</b> | Hebrews 13:15     |

Now I am not talking about four different fruits, but one fruit manifested or expressed in four ways. Let me start by asking an important question.

How can we tell if a person is a Christian or not?

From once speech or action, is it possible to determine if he is a follower of Christ, the answer is yes. How? Look at the fruit he produces, look for these four things because Jesus says in Matthew 7,

*By their fruit you will recognize them.*

The logic is simple. If you tell me this is a mango tree, then let me see some mangoes on that. If I see Durians on it then it cannot be a mango tree. Similarly,

if you say this person is a Christian then let's see the fruit of the spirit. If we see a different fruit then he cannot be a Christian. At the end of our text, Jesus said,

*8 This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples.*

Meaning, the fruit is visible for all to see. That's why I started to sermon by talking about what happened in the dormitory in Osaka. You see, each group of students from a different country was unique, each with its own set of characteristics. It was like a big field planted with different types of fruit trees and the fruits could be seen. We had our own unique characteristics in the way we talk and in the way we behaved. Now the student from China watched our speech and our actions and he could recognize us, because he used to be a branch in the Malaysian tree. He knew the fruits from this tree, but as a young man he chose to graft his branch on the China tree.

Each of us here, we are a branch attached to the true vine who is Jesus. We are not branches of other trees. There are many trees of the worldly kind but we don't belong to them and therefore we have to and we will bear the fruits that we are supposed to bear, namely the fruit of the spirit but if your branch isn't bearing this fruit or still bearing a wrong type of fruit then we need pruning so that we will become fruitful again.

Lets examine each of these four expressions of the fruit of the spirit. The first is the fruit of character

## THE FRUIT OF CHARACTER

### **Galatians 5:22~23**

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

The word fruit is singular, it is one fruit, not nine different fruits. We have here nine different attributes of the same fruit and they are all related to character and that's why I term it as the fruit of character. It is a description of the Christian character which should be a reflection of the character of Jesus himself. Now character comes from deep within, that defines what we are. The dictionary describes character as the set of mental and moral qualities, distinctive to each individual. So what Paul is doing here is to prescribe a set of inner qualities that defines what a Christian ought to be like, qualities that are shaped by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This godly character intern drives our behavior. Behavior is the way we conduct ourselves before others.

Our behavior largely springs from our character and partly also moderate by our circumstances, but character goes deeper and that's why I use the term, fruit of character.

Now as we look at this set of nine attributes that defines the Christian character, a question may arise. Can I have some of these but not some of the rest. Is it possible that a Christian is a loving person, also joyful and peaceful but he totally lacks self-control? Sorry, these nine attributes come as a set, you cannot pick and choose, you are going to have some and at the same time not have others. When the spirit works within us, all of them will eventually be evident in our lives.

In Romans 2:4 Paul depicts God as being tolerant and patient and hence patience is a godly quality of virtue. What is patience? Patience is the capacity to tolerate delays and problems without becoming annoyed, meaning very hard to get irritated, but generally we are impatient people. We react with impatience when the bank teller takes a long time to attend to us or if the car in front is too slow. We show impatience in our daily lives a lot of times. We show impatience when things are not done in a manner that we demand or according to the timing that we expect, is what we want is what we demand and what we expect and hence impatience is a very self-centered thing. It doesn't take consideration the circumstance of others. Patience can also cause tensions in our midst also, it can result in strains in our relationships. In a godly community, patience is such a desirable quality among the believers. All of us have to be patient. Proverbs 15-18 has this advice,

*Hot tempers cause arguments but patience brings peace.*

The Bible also teaches us in James 1

*James 1:19~20*

*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.*

## THE FRUIT OF GOOD WORK

*Colossians 1:9~10*

*We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of His will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work,...*

Good work here includes extending love and care and help to those who are in need, to those who are less fortunate and the basis of this isn't hard to understand. We see in Jesus's earthly ministry how he reached out to the poor, to the sick and to the oppressed. He showed much compassion to these categories of people. So, every Bible believing church would want to emulate the way Jesus ministered. The church of Jesus Christ must be actively involved in social work. Of course, this kind of work can be done by an individual. When we come together as a church, we can do much more and we can do it more effectively. When the spirit work in our lives, it will motivate us to do such good works.

### *Galatians 6:9*

*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

In other words, our good work must start from within this community of believers. When we help others outside of the church, we must not forget to render assistance to our own people.

## THE FRUIT OF COMMUNAL LOVE

### **John 15:16**

*You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit...*

Although the exact nature of the fruit mentioned here isn't described but we can easily deduce this from the immediate context of what Jesus is saying, because four verses before this verse, in verse 12 Jesus instructed his disciples

### *John 15:12, 14, 17*

*12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*

*14 You are My friends if you do what I command.*

*17 This is My command: Love each other.*

So the clear context here is to love another. This command to love another is a crucial theme in the Upper Room Discourse. When the Last Supper was in progress, Jesus started to wash his disciples feet and surely after that he proclaimed in John 13,

### **John 13:34~35**



*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.*

This command is repeated in John 15 as we just saw where Jesus told them to go and bear fruit, the fruit of loving one another. If we show this fruit of loving one another, this fruit of communal love, people around us will see the fruit and they will know that we are followers of Christ. If we all can lend a hand to extend care and help to those in need within us, in our midst then this fruit of communal love will be very evident in our community.

## THE FRUIT OF LIPS

### Hebrews 13:15

*Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess His name.*

This is the inclination in us to praise and worship God for what He is and for what He has done for us. When the spirit works in us, it will propel us to want to praise and worship God. There will be an urge from within us to worship him. The fruits of lip can include private worship when you are alone with God, at the same time corporate worship is something you shouldn't miss on Sundays. There is something special about corporate worship, God loves to hear voices singing in unison and apostle John saw plenty of this type of worship in his vision in the Book of Revelation. Let us be a community of believers.

As the spirit works in our lives, we will start bearing the fruit of the spirit and all these expressions of the fruits will be visible.

The question is are Christians alike. The answer is yes, because they all bear the same fruit, the fruit of the spirit. In my days in the dormitory, I met few Christians also. Even though we were from various corners of the world, even those our cultures were different, we shared so many similarities in our values and outlook and qualities. How can this be so? Because the same spirit is at work in all of us and we bore the same spirit. Same spirit, so has to be same fruit.

We are all different and yet at the same time we are the same, because we bear the same fruit in our character, in our inclination to do good work in our duty to love and care for one another and in our desire to worship God. Having been touched by the gospel, let us therefore strive to be a community of God's people that bears more and more fruit of the spirit.