

MacLaren Expositions Of Holy Scripture

[Galatians 5:22](#)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

Galatians

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

[Galatians 5:22-23](#) 'The fruit of the Spirit,' says Paul, not the fruits, as we might more naturally have expected, and as the phrase is most often quoted; all this rich variety of graces, of conduct and character, is thought of as one. The individual members are not isolated graces, but all connected, springing from one root and constituting an organic whole. There is further to be noted that the Apostle designates the results of the Spirit as fruit, in strong and intentional contrast with the results of the flesh, the grim catalogue of which precedes the radiant list in our text. The works of the flesh have no such unity, and are not worthy of being called fruit. They are not what a man ought to bring forth, and when the great Husbandman comes, He finds no fruit there, however full of activity the life has been. We have then here an ideal of the noblest Christian character, and a distinct and profound teaching as to how to attain it. I venture to take the whole of this list for my text, because the very beauty of each element in it depends on its being but part of a whole, and because there are important lessons to be gathered from the grouping.

I. The threefold elements of character here.

It is perhaps not too artificial to point out that we have here three triads of which the first describes the life of the Spirit in its deepest secret; the second, the same life in its manifestations to men; and the third, that life in relation to the difficulties of the world, and of ourselves.

The first of these three triads includes love, joy, and peace, and it is not putting too great a strain on the words to point out that the source of all three lies in the Christian relation to God. They regard nothing but God and our relation to Him; they would be all the same if there were no other men in the world, or if there were no world. We cannot call them duties or virtues; they are simply the results of communion with God--the certain manifestations of the better life of the Spirit. Love, of course, heads the list, as the foundation and moving principle of all the

rest. It is the instinctive act of the higher life and is shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit. It is the life sap which rises through the tree and given form to all the clusters. The remaining two members of this triad are plainly consequences of the first. Joy is not so much an act or a grace of character as an emotion poured into men's lives, because in their hearts abides love to God. Jesus Christ pledged Himself to impart His joy to remain in us, with the issue that our joy should be full. There is only one source of permanent joy which takes possession of and fills all the corners and crannies of the heart, and that is a love towards God equally abiding and all-pervasive. We have all known joys so perturbed, fragmentary and fleeting, that it is hard to distinguish them from sorrows, but there is no need that joys should be like green fruits hard and savourless and ready to drop from the tree. If God is 'the gladness of our joy,' and all our delights come from communion with Him, our joy will never pass and will fill the whole round of our spirits as the sea laves every shore.

Peace will be built upon love and joy, if our hearts are ever turning to God and ever blessed with the inter-communion of love between Him and us. What can be strong enough to disturb the tranquillity that fills the soul independent of all externals? However long and close may be the siege, the well in the castle courtyard will be full. True peace comes not from the absence of trouble but from the presence of God, and will be deep and passing all understanding in the exact measure in which we live in, and partake of, the love of God.

The second triad is long-suffering, kindness, goodness. All these three obviously refer to the spiritual life in its manifestations to men. The first of them--long-suffering--describes the attitude of patient endurance towards inflictors of injury or enemies, if we come forth from the blessed fellowship with God, where love, joy, and peace reign unbroken, and are met with a cold gust of indifference or with an icy wind of hate. The reality of our happy communion and the depth of our love will be tested by the patience of our long-suffering. Love suffereth long, is not easily provoked, is not soon angry. He has little reason to suppose that the love of God is shed abroad in his heart, or that the Spirit of God is bringing forth fruit in him, who has not got beyond the stage of repaying hate with hate, and scorn with scorn. Any fool can answer a fool according to his folly, but it takes a wise and a good man to overcome evil with good, and to love them that hate; and yet how certainly the fires of mutual antagonism would go out if there were only one to pile on the fuel! It takes two to make a quarrel, and no man living under the influence of the Spirit of God can be one of such a pair.

The second and third members of this triad--kindness, goodness, slide very

naturally into one another. They do not only require the negative virtue of not retaliating, but express the Christian attitude towards all of meeting them, whatever their attitude, with good. It is possible that kindness here expresses the inward disposition and goodness, the habitual actions in which that disposition shows itself. If that be the distinction between them, the former would answer to benevolence and the latter to beneficence. These three graces include all that Paul presents as Christian duty to our fellows. The results of the life of the Spirit are to pass beyond ourselves and to influence our whole conduct. We are not to live only as mainly for the spiritual enjoyments of fellowship with God. The true field of religion is in moving amongst men, and the true basis of all service of men is love and fellowship with God.

The third triad--faithfulness, meekness, temperance--seems to point to the world in which the Christian life is to be lived as a scene of difficulties and oppositions. The rendering of the Revised Version is to be preferred to that of the Authorised in the first of the three, for it is not faith in its theological sense to which the Apostle is here referring. Possibly, however, the meaning may be trustfulness just as in 1 Corinthians xiii. it is given as a characteristic of love that it 'believeth all things.' More probably, however, the meaning is faithfulness, and Paul's thought is that the Christian life is to manifest itself in the faithful discharge of all duties and the honest handling of all things committed to it. Meekness even more distinctly contemplates a condition of things which is contrary to the Christian life, and points to a submissiveness of spirit which does not lift itself up against oppositions, but bends like a reed before the storm. Paul preached meekness and practised it, but Paul could flash into strong opposition and with a resonant ring in his voice could say 'To whom we gave place by subjection, No! not for an hour.' The last member of the triad--temperance--points to the difficulties which the spiritual life is apt to meet with in the natural passions and desires, and insists upon the fact that conflict and rigid and habitual self-control are sure to be marks of that life.

II. The unity of the fruit.

We have already pointed out the Apostles remarkable use of the word 'fruit' here, by which he indicates that all the results of the life of the Spirit in the human spirit are to be regarded as a whole that has a natural growth. The foundation of all is of course that love which is the fulfilling of the law. It scarcely needs to be pointed out how love brings forth both the other elements of the first triad, but it is no less important to note that it and its two companions naturally lead on to the relations to men which make up the second triad. It is,

however, worth while to dwell on that fact because there are many temptations for Christian people to separate between them. The two tables of the law are not seldom written so far apart that their unity ceases to be noted. There are many good people whose notions of religious duties are shut up in churches or chapels and limited to singing and praying, reading the Bible and listening to sermons, and who, even while they are doing good service in common life, do not feel that it is as much a religious duty to suppress the wish to retaliate as it is to sit in the sunshine of God's love and to feel Christ's joy and peace filling the heart. On the other hand many loud voices, some of them with great force of words and influence on the popular mind, are never wearied of preaching that Christianity is worn out as a social impulse, and that the service of man has nothing to do with the love of God. As plainly Paul's first triad naturally leads to his third. When the spiritual life has realised its deepest secret it will be strong to manifest itself as vigorous in reference to the difficulties of life. When that heart is blessed in its own settled love, abounding joy and untroubled peace, faithfulness and submission will both be possible and self-control will not be hard.

III. The culture of the tree which secures the fruit.

Can we suppose that the Apostle here is going back in thought to our Lord's profound teaching that every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but the corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit? The obvious felicity of that metaphor often conceals for us the drastic force of its teaching, it regards all a man's conduct as but the outcome of his character, and brushes aside as trifling all attempts at altering products, whilst the producer remains unaltered. Whether Paul was here alluding to a known saying of Jesus or no, he was insisting upon the very centre of Christian ethics, that a man must first be good in order to do good. Our Lord's words seemed to make an impossible demand--'Make the tree good'--as the only way of securing good fruit, and it was in accordance with the whole cast of the Sermon on the Mount that the means of realising that demand was left unexpressed. But Paul stood on this side of Pentecost, and what was necessarily veiled in Christ's earlier utterances stood forth a revealed and blessed certainty to him. He had not to say 'Make the tree good' and be silent as to how that process was to be effected; to him the message had been committed, 'The Spirit also helpeth our infirmity.' There is but one way by which a corrupt tree can be made good, and that is by grafting into the wild briar stock a 'layer' from the rose. The Apostle had a double message to proclaim, and the one part was built upon the other. He had first to preach--and this day has first to believe that God has sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin--and then he had to proclaim that, through that mission, it became possible that

the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us who 'walk not after the flesh but after the spirit.' The beginning, then, of all true goodness is to be sought in receiving into our corrupt natures the uncorrupted germs of the higher life, and it is only in the measure in which that Spirit of God moves in our spirits and, like the sap in the vine, permeates every branch and tendril, that fruit to eternal life will grow. Christian graces are the products of the indwelling divine life, and nothing else will succeed in producing them. All the preachings of moralists and all the struggles after self-improvement are reduced to impotence and vanity by the stern, curt sentence--'a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit.' Surely it should come to us all as a true gospel when we feel ourselves foiled by our own evil nature in our attempts to be better, that the first thing we have to do is not to labour at either of the two impossible tasks of the making our bad selves good, or of the getting good fruits from bad selves, but to open our spirits through faith in Jesus for the entrance into us of His Spirit which will change our corruption into incorruption, and cleanse us from all filthiness of flesh and spirit. Shall we not seek to become recipient of that new life, and having received it, should we not give diligence that it may in us produce all its natural effects?

These fruits, though they are the direct results of the indwelling Spirit and will never be produced without its presence, are none the less truly dependent upon our manner of receiving that Spirit and on our faithfulness and diligence in the use of its gifts. It is, alas! sadly too true, and matter of tragically common experience that instead of 'trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord' heavy with ruddy clusters, there are but dwarfed and scrubby bushes which have scarcely life enough to keep up a little show of green leaves and 'bring no fruit to perfection'. Would that so-called Christian people would more earnestly and searchingly ask themselves why it is that, with such possibilities offered to them, their actual attainments should be so small. They have a power which is able to do for them exceeding abundantly above all that they can ask or think, and its actual effects on them are well on this side of both their petitions and their conceptions. There need be no difficulty in answering the question why our Christian lives do not correspond more closely to the Spirit that inspires them. The plain answer is that we have not cultivated, used, and obeyed Him. The Lord of the vineyard would less often have to ask 'Wherefore when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?' if we listened more obediently to the pathetic command which surely should touch a grateful heart--'Grieve not the holy Spirit of God whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.'

IV. How this is the only worthy fruit.

We have already pointed out that the Apostle in the preceding context varies his terms, and catalogues the actions that come from the godless self as works, whilst those which are the outcome of the Spirit are fruit. The distinction thus drawn is twofold. Multiplicity is contrasted with unity and fruit with works. The deeds of the flesh have no consistency except that of evil; they are at variance with themselves--a huddled mob without regularity or order; and they are works indeed, but so disproportionate to the nature of the doer and his obligations that they do not deserve to be called fruit. It is not to attach too much importance to an accidental form of speech to insist upon this distinction as intended to be drawn, and as suggesting to us very solemn thoughts about many apparently very active lives. The man who lives to God truly lives; the busiest life which is not rooted in Him and directed towards Him has so far missed its aim as to have brought forth no good fruit, and therefore to have incurred the sentence that it is cut down and cast into the fire. There is a very remarkable expression in Scripture, 'The unfruitful works of darkness,' which admits the busy occupation and energy of the doers and denies that all that struggling and striving comes to anything. Done in the dark, they seemed to have some significance, when the light comes in they vanish. It is for us to determine whether our lives shall be works of the flesh, full, perhaps, of a time of 'sound and fury,' but 'signifying nothing,' or whether they shall be fruits of the Spirit, which we 'who have gathered shall eat in the courts of His holiness.' They will be so if, living in the Spirit, we walk in the Spirit, but if we 'sow to the flesh' we shall have a harder husbandry and a bitterer harvest when 'of the flesh we reap corruption,' and hear the awful and unanswerable question, 'What fruit had ye then of those things whereof ye are now ashamed?'

Expositions Of Holy Scripture, Alexander MacLaren

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