

Chapter 11

FRUIT

“Faith without works is dead.” James 2:17

THE book of James in the Bible is quite explicit regarding the “fruit” of our ministry, and perhaps we should begin with his counsel.

“Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.” ⁽¹⁾

This is really a revolutionary thought, and is perhaps why in the past there has been some controversy as to whether this entire book should be included in the Bible. This thought appears at first glance to be a direct contradiction to the other books of the New Testament. And if you think of works in one sense it is a bad thing—we can’t work our way into heaven. Right?

What James is writing about in this verse should be thought of as “fruit” and not as “works” is the best way I can describe it.

The term “works” can be reserved for those people who want to purchase their way into heaven and eternal life. People in the middle ages would typically give most of their wealth to the church in an attempt to purchase prayers and a guaranty of salvation. The Emperor Charlemagne, for example, bequeathed

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two-thirds of his entire estate to the church.

The Pharisees were more interested in their appearance, and their works in an attempt to earn salvation.

Jesus met this problem head-on. He articulated the importance of the conversion of the heart and the fruit of a good tree that beareth only good fruit. He redefined the way we look at the product of our relationship with God.

Rev. 2:23 tells us “...and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.” meaning that the judgment of our works follows the reading of our hearts.

The same thought is found in Jeremiah 17:10 which uses the key words we use today: “I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.”

These two texts clarify the need for our works to be the fruit of our hearts and our relationship with our Lord.

So, when we look at our works as fruit, it’s not a leading motivator but a product of participation with divine nature.

Follow these words; “Nothing will give greater spiritual strength and a greater increase of earnestness and depth of feeling than visiting and ministering to the sick and the desponding, helping them to see the light and to fasten their faith upon Jesus.” (2)

This is interesting because it forms a circle of events. We set aside time each and every day to meditate and have much secret prayer. This time with God compels us to desire to use our energy—maybe even newfound energy—to the glory of God and

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to help someone in need. This activity of working to help someone else in need then provides us with greater spiritual strength and a new depth of feeling. This is a description of a perpetual motion machine, where the saint gets stronger and more spiritual over time. Now that's what I call a good religious experience.

Did you notice the emotive component in the above quote? This is a different emotion than many preachers today are encouraging as they shout and ask their listeners to repeat phrases and hold up their hands; this is a different emotion than the person gets when he repeats a mantra over and over. This is a spiritual emotion that the Holy Spirit delivers as we bear fruit.

If you think that thought was good, then you'll really be impressed with this next one: "Faithful work is more acceptable to God than the most zealous and thought-to-be holiest worship. It is working together with Christ that is true worship. Prayers, exhortation, and talk are cheap fruits, which are frequently tied on; but fruits that are manifested in good works, in caring for the needy, the fatherless, and widows, are genuine fruits, and grow naturally upon a good tree." ⁽³⁾

I must admit how surprised I was at this quote. How can my fruit, the things I do for others, be "more acceptable to God than the most zealous and thought-to-be holiest worship?" This is radical! This is off the charts.

We all are aware of the tension between the "Mary's" and "Martha's" of the church. Remember how Martha, the sister of Lazarus, complained to Jesus how her sister, Mary, wasn't pulling her weight in preparing the meal? She didn't like the fact that Mary was spending all her time with the men, while she was stuck doing all the work. We are aware that it is good to be a "Martha," but we need first to be a "Mary;" don't we? Jesus

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helped us understand how to keep this in perspective.

But this quote from the *Testimonies for the Church*, redefines the fruit of my labor. It helps me understand how sacred is this work.

As a child, a teenager, and as a young adult, no one ever shared this quote with me, and I wish they had. I would have looked upon my labor much differently. As the son of a pastor, I was recruited often to help my father perform physical duties. I wasn't a strong lad and tired easily, and didn't like physical work. But if I had known the importance that God places upon this, then I would have better understood its value.

I've heard some adults struggle with the whole concept of worship. I've heard them say that they don't get much out of the church service. They don't feel fulfilled with formal church worship, and maybe this can provide them with some comfort. This gives them the freedom to spend more time visiting those who need comfort and encouragement on Sabbath. This allows them to attend church, and then they have the remainder of the day to do the work of the Lord. If they are good at teaching, then they might skip church and bring it to someone else. They can preach to a person who can't be in the sanctuary with the fellowship of believers. They can bring the church to the person who can't be there.

The possibilities are endless! Here we have a new understanding of the value of our fruits.

When I was a preschooler, my dad would take me with him as he visited church members throughout the week. And as a youngster I was well aware of how well these people appreciated these visits from their pastor. Now as an adult, I see the same response when my wife and I visit members who are una-

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ble to attend church. They miss the fellowship, and are encouraged when we reach out to them.

Yes, “Fruit” is a wonderful thing to behold. It’s not always visible, and Jesus made a point to tell us that our “works” should be very visible when He said, “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.”

It’s an interesting phenomenon that when a person is spiritual, then those around them are looking for mistakes; they’re always looking to see failure and hypocrisy, and if they see it they criticize it harshly. The only antidote for this is for us to first be very humble, and second to have visible good works.

Spiritual people are held to a higher standard. People who claim to take the “high road” are held to a higher standard, even in politics. Ever wonder how some politicians can get away with all kinds of bad behavior, while others are required to resign? This is why. Each person actually defines the standards to which he is to be judged, and the Christian is one of those. So our works, our fruits; must be visible to speak for us. The headline of the day might be one of our failures, but the lasting message will be our works—the fruit of our spirituality.

Here’s another new idea: “In view of what Christ has done for us, and what He has suffered for sinners, we should, out of pure, disinterested love for souls, imitate His example by sacrificing our own pleasure and convenience for their good.”⁽⁴⁾

Self-sacrifice is another fruit of our relationship with God. As we partake of the divine nature, we’ll change and our desires will be less self-centered and will become more sacrificial. Instead of acquiring more and more stuff, we will be satisfied with the simpler life and use our resources to support the work of the

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great commission. We'll donate more to the missionary work of the church; we'll donate more to support our church schools.

When I look back at the early years of the work of our church, I see much sacrifice. Ellen White once wrote a letter to some men in Michigan, telling them to stop giving so much money to certain ministries because it was encouraging these ministries to be too extravagant; they were becoming reckless with their spending. When the need for a building for the Review and Herald Publishing Company was fully understood, several men mortgaged their farms, and gathered together the necessary funds to purchase the land and construct the building. This involved sacrifice.

Over the years, some of us have lost that spirit, and it's because we've lost the necessary foundation of spirituality. It is of no use to appeal for more money when the heart of the problem is with my relationship with God. If I would just become more spiritual, if I would partake of the divine nature and perform my daily spiritual exercises, then I will begin to behave differently and I'll become sacrificial and more generous with my disposable income.

Our church can transform into the church that God wants us to be.

We are given one word of caution regarding the continued assistance to the same individual who is not responding in a spiritual manner. Mrs. White wrote: "I saw that the stewards of the Lord have no duty to help those persons who persist in using tobacco, tea, and coffee." ⁽⁵⁾ So if a person is growing spiritually and bears fruit, we continue to work with them, but if they are just taking advantage of our spiritual fruit, then we have a responsibility to make them aware of what they must do. If they

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perform their spiritual exercises with our guidance, then they should begin growing.

We can bear fruit; we can do this. All it takes is spending time with God in prayer and meditation, and then all else will follow and there will be *good* fruit. I know we've read this paragraph before, but this last sentence is so important.

“There are people "who are in the habit of praying, and who delight in religious exercises; yet there is a lack...their prayers are not answered...The difficulty is with the people. While professing godliness, they do not bear fruit to the glory of God; their works are not what they should be.”⁽⁶⁾

So, we can bear good fruit only if we have the power of God helping us, only if we are imbued with the Holy Spirit, only if the light of God shines forth from us.

I mentioned earlier how we can use our disposable income to serve others, but let me warn you that as you become more spiritual you will also get more radical, and as you get more radical you will become more spiritual. Here's a quote that will forewarn you of what will happen:

“Our spiritual strength and blessing will be proportionate to the labor of love and good works which we perform.”⁽⁷⁾

Therefore, we will begin to dig into our own personal lifestyle, our desires will change and we will forego eating out at restaurants, for example, or taking a vacation. We will find ways to save money that lowers our standard of living in order to serve others. And that will add to our spirituality.

We will want to take a vow of poverty and live more like Jesus.

Here's another quote along the same line of thought:

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“Those whose faith is daily confirmed and strengthened by their works, will become acquainted with self-denial in restricting appetite, controlling ambitious desires, bringing every thought and feeling into harmony with the divine will.”⁽⁸⁾

Imagine this? Spiritual Exercise leads to weight-loss! The benefits never end! We’ll be able to resist the temptations of diet and overeating. We can look at food and decide if we need to eat or not.

This will be a life changing event.

Praise God for that.

Jesus, Himself, said, “And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me.” Matthew 10:38. He made a similar statement in Matthew 16:24.

Before we leave this subject, let’s make sure we understand how powerful this fruit can be. Please understand that “Those who are partakers of Christ’s love have no right to think that there is a limit to their influence and work in trying to benefit humanity.”⁽⁹⁾ So, we might not be aware of our influence. Our sphere of influence can expand without our knowledge.

We need not be concerned with this, but we should remain aware that, although the work before us seems overwhelming, the Lord can use us in ways far beyond our imagination.

We are cautioned to use our energies to counter any desire for glory as we become vessels for the Lord for “There will come times when the church will be stirred by divine power, and earnest activity will be the result; for the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit will inspire its members to go forth and bring souls to Christ. But when this activity is manifested, the most earnest workers will be safe only as they depend upon God

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through constant, earnest prayer. They will need to make earnest supplication that through the grace of Christ they may be saved from taking pride in their work, or of making a saviour of their activity.”⁽¹⁰⁾

Imagine making a ‘saviour’ of your activity! But that’s what a small amount of pride can do. We must be aware of this possibility at all times and pray for humility and meditate upon Calvary to prevent such occurrences.

As we partake of the divine nature and bear fruit, the Lord will use us to finish the work that is before us, and the 3rd Angel’s message can be spread to the entire world as we work together.

REFERENCES

- 1 James 1:27.
- 2 *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 4, pages 75-76.
- 3 *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2, page 24.
- 4 *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2, page 115.
- 5 *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1, page 225.
- 6 *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 2, page 147.
- 7 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 13, 1886.
- 8 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, Nov. 11, 1881.
- 9 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 11, 1907.
- 10 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 4, 1893.