

A Summer for the SOUL: Seeking Others, Uniting in Love

In Step with the Spirit: Spiritual development in the Christian community

Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 1)¹

Introduction: Being Known by our Fruit

The climax of the Sermon on the Mount as recorded by Matthew focuses on the nature of true religion (Matthew 7). The chapter includes such diverse themes as judging, prayer, the Golden Rule, the Two Ways, and the Two Builders. At the center of the chapter is Jesus' teaching about false teachers, who are identified by the type and quality of the fruit they produce. "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit" (Matt. 7:18). Jesus explains that one can identify a tree or person is by the kind of fruit that is produced (Matt. 7:20).

Life on the Vine by Kenneson begins with this passage from Matthew. Kenneson ties Jesus' words to Paul's discussion of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25). To see the parallel themes in these two texts is natural, and many others have noted the same connection. Kenneson contends that many churches, even growing churches, are not healthy and are in fact seriously ill. The cause of the illness is that the people of God have allowed the dominant culture of the world around them to choke out the Spirit and its fruits. The cure for the illness, according to Kenneson, is that "God might breathe new life into us so that we might bear good fruit before the world. The same thought appears in Jesus' initial teaching in the Sermon on the Mount—that his followers should be light, salt, and leaven. The idea that we are to bear good fruit is not new to Christians. The fresh challenges are (1) that the fruit is to be borne "before the world"; (2) that the fruit must be different from the fruit of the world; and (3) that the fruit is cultivated and nurtured in the context of the Christian community. The fruit we bear is the fruit of the Spirit, virtues produced by the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The fruit we bear in God's grace is "lasting fruit" (John 15:16). The fruit we bear is to be consumed by the world. God's intent is that they will "eat it up"!

How can we bear such fruit in the world if the culture creeps into our attitudes and actions to such an extent that our lives look more like the world than like Christ? Does the world know the church by the fruits of the Spirit, or does the world see the church as producing mostly secular fruits—hatred, division, intolerance, impatience, joylessness, immorality, faithlessness? If the fruits produced by the church are not so extremely secular, what of these—selfishness, self-centeredness, egotism, me-ism, satisfaction, good feelings? Are these not secular also?

Kneson calls for a process of cultivating and fruit bearing driven by the Spirit. His fear is that the church has not honestly assessed the dominant culture in the U.S., and in too many instances has mimicked the dominant culture. The result of this mimicry is a ministry and a church that "looks suspiciously like the dominant culture rather than being an alternative to it." Such churches, he contends, bear little resemblance to the kingdom reign that God is bringing into the world. The world desperately needs God's fruit, but how can the world feed on God's fruit if the church is not bearing good, spiritual fruit?

¹ Adapted and edited from "Life on the Vine", notes by William Mitchell, South MacArthur Church of Christ, Irving Texas.

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Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 2)²

Cultivating Love in a World Driven by “Value Exchange” Marketing

“If you love those that love you, what credit is that to you?” (Luke 6:32a).

Our culture generally understands love through the eyes of an exchange system. We expect both to give and to take—in about equal portions. Value exchanges drive our marketplace. Before we take care of others, we first take care of ourselves. Our own needs are primary. Loving others is worthwhile because of what one receives, but one must first calculate the risk. The costs of relationships must balance with the benefits received. Such does not describe the biblical concept of agape love. Value exchanges may drive friendship—but they don’t drive love. Christ’s followers see love differently than the world. When love is understood as a fruit of the Spirit, different forces than the world understands come into play.

God’s love for us is quite different—totally unlike the value exchange framework. He gave to us when we could not give back. Central to his relationship with human beings—from the Garden, to the Cross, and beyond—is a love that is different than typical understandings of love. We have nothing of value to exchange for God’s love. We cannot repay his love. We cannot earn his love. He overwhelms us with his love. God loves people steadfastly, even to the point of letting them reject the relationship. This kind of love reflects a “suffering love”—based on Jeremiah’s concept of the suffering servant. God participates in our lives through the life of Jesus. He wants his followers to imitate Jesus, to act as Jesus did—loving others more than self, giving without the hope of receiving, and participating in relationships without conditions. Our culture has eroded the understanding and value of love in the church, and we must put it back!

Love, perhaps more than any of the other fruits of the Spirit, begins in the context of the Christian community. We learn about love by observing others, and through the relationships we share. We exhibit unselfishness, do not push for our own “druthers”, and are willing to go the second mile to maintain relationships. Where will the world see the love of Christ? One place this love should be obvious is down at the church house in the relationships members of the Christian community share.

Shared Time

[Note: this series allows us to discuss questions each week, and then to engage in activities during the week which will reinforce the teaching, the class/small group discussions, the Scriptures, and the directions we discern in walking in the Spirit.]

Ice-Breakers

What did you find out about what area churches are known for?

In what areas do you think local churches (including us) are most like the culture around us?

Tell about a relationship in your life that works by “benefit exchange”. How does it feel?

² Adapted and edited from “Life on the Vine”, notes by David Vest, South MacArthur Church of Christ, Irving Texas.

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Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 3)³

Cultivating Joy in a World Driven by “Manufactured Desires”

“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

From our earliest years, our culture surrounds us with enticing images that promise happiness. We learn very early that happiness is in the things around us. The more toys we have—the happier we are. This is supposedly true even for adults. We are encouraged to seek our own pleasure, to put our own needs first, and to look out for number one. It is easy to fall for the promised joy of something bigger, better, and newer. This culturally defined concept of joy reflects the value exchange mechanism of capitalism. We not only need to make a shift in our thinking so that we escape the temptation to define joy by things or the world outside us, we need to define the healthy God-given desires that contribute to genuine joy. We must take care lest our definitions and expectations of joy down at the church house are the result of “manufactured desires” more than the will of God.

The advertising mindset can enter our spiritual life and our relationship with God and rob us of true joy. In the secular view, joy is always outside us; a function of what is outside us rather than what is inside us. In parallel, down at the church, we focus more on what God can do for us, and what we want or need, and often ignore who God is. By keeping our focus on the majestic faithfulness of our Almighty God, we can maintain lives filled with joy. God calls us to his greater joy, not the fleeting happiness of the world (Ps. 4:7). We find this greater joy only when we focus on God—the creator of all (Rev. 4:11), our redeemer (Romans 8:23), and the one constantly faithful (Ps. 36:5; 2 Thess. 3:3). When we come face to face with the bounty and goodness of God, we cannot help but respond as David when he expressed his joy by dancing with all his might before the Lord (2 Sam. 6:14).

Let us long for the presence of the Almighty Eternal God in our lives and let his joy be our strength.

Shared Time

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Ice-Breakers

Were you able to give love without any expectation of a return gesture? Describe what happened. How did you feel this past week when you expressed love to family or acquaintance? What was the response?

How do you define joy?

Tell about a time you found joy even though your outward circumstances were not happy.

³ Adapted and edited from “Life on the Vine”, notes by Susan Vaughn, South MacArthur Church of Christ, Irving Texas.

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Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 4)⁴

Cultivating Peace in a Fragmented World

“May God, the one who puts all things together and makes all things whole, the one who made a lasting mark through the sacrifice of Jesus by the sacrifice of blood that sealed the eternal covenant, the one who led Jesus our great Shepherd up and alive from the dead, now put you together, provide you with everything you need to please him, and make us into what gives him most pleasure, by means of the sacrifice of Jesus, the Messiah” (Heb. 13:20 *Message*).

The human creature excels at adaptation. We can change our stripes to fit in at work, in worship, and in recreational environments. We learn to succeed by adapting to the norms, habits and customs of those environments. We learn to succeed by separating our public lives from the private. One of the great challenges religion faces in the contemporary world is the exclusion of religion from the public arena. Over time, such adaptation leads to fragmentation, separating our spiritual life from public view lest we offend. We become so many different people that we are no longer whole, and we trust no one. We are so many different people that we have lost integrity (wholeness and consistency).

Peace is not merely the absence of conflict or war. Peace is wholeness. Peace is the absence of fragmentation. Peace is unity. Jesus holds all things together (Col. 1:17). When Jesus came to bring peace, he broke down dividing walls, eliminated enmity, and provided the foundation for unity (Eph. 2:15ff).

Only God can provide the wholeness and salvation so desperately needed to overcome fragmentation. Jesus did that by restoring God’s shalom (peace) to all, through his sacrifice on the cross. With God’s peace, one can be a true individual, integrated into the body of Christ, the dwelling place of God through the Spirit (Eph. 2:21). With God’s peace, one can engage in radical living—consistently the same in all environments. Armed with God’s peace, one can influence others; building up the body of Christ instead of tearing it apart. One can admonish another, not out of self-righteousness, but out of the fruits of the Spirit, the first of which is love. Filled with the wholeness provide by Christ, one can receive forgiveness and then forgive others, unconditionally. Such is the foundation of genuinely wholesome living.

Shared Time

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Ice-Breakers

What did you see as you observed advertising this past week? Be specific in some of the ways you saw various products or activities connected to happiness.

⁴ Adapted and edited from “Life on the Vine”, notes by David Vest, South MacArthur Church of Christ, Irving Texas.

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Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 5)⁵

Cultivating Patience in a World Focused on Productivity

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near" (James 5:7-8).

Ever since Benedictine monks began to build water clocks to help them regulate their daily prayers and work, humans have had a tendency to become slaves to the clock. Time is valuable. Time is money. We save time, steal time, and spend time. Yet, we do not wish to waste time. If we put time into a venture, but end up with nothing to show for it, that venture is worthless. If other people take up our valuable time, and the result is not obvious productivity, we are impatient and may treat them as having less value.

What should be a gift instead creates frustration and impatience. When time and productivity are more important than people are, we lose both peace and patience. God is a model of patience in how longsuffering he is with his people. God is patient, not willing that any should perish (2 Pet. 3:9). Would we persevere more often if we used the patience of God as our model? Maybe we should remember how patient God is when we are tempted to lose our patience.

Better yet, if we see time as the gift of God, we can patiently produce joy by "wasting" our time on worship and other people.

Shared Time

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Ice-Breakers

Where did you observe fragmentation in your world this past week?

What could you do to feel more integrated and whole? What would help the church find greater integration and wholeness as a witnessing Christian community? What special challenges should we pray about?

In which kinds of situations do you struggle the most with impatience?

Discussion

[Suggestion: write on these sheets or in a notebook or journal your reactions to the discussions shared in this series.]

How many different things did you have planned for today besides worship and church activities?

⁵ Adapted and edited from "Life on the Vine", notes by David Vest, South MacArthur Church of Christ, Irving Texas.

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Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 6)⁶

Cultivating Kindness in a World of Self-Sufficiency

“I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us—yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses” (Isa. 63:7).

Our culture extols self-sufficiency, independence and autonomy. We want to be our own bosses, make our own decisions, and have our own way. We wish to be indebted to no one. Many avoid letting others be kind to them in order not to appear dependent. Instead, we turn kindness into an exchange, just as we often do with love. I can receive kindness, but only if I pay it back quickly so that I will not be in debt to another. However, kindness, when cultivated as a fruit of the Spirit in imitation of God, demands connectedness and interdependence with others.

Notwithstanding the well-intentioned bumper stickers about practicing random acts of kindness, the Bible teaches that there is nothing random about kindness. In fact, the Greek word for kindness (*chrestos*) is so similar to the word for Christ (*christos*) that people in the first century often called Christians “the kind ones”. Kindness is a God-fostered fruit of our life in his Spirit. Kenneson says that kindness is a “particular manifestation of love’s other-directedness”. In short, kindness has little to do with us, but much to do with others. Moreover, the aim of kindness is not our personal fanfare and recognition, but a reflection of the kindness of God. God is kind to us so that we in turn will be kind to others (Rom. 11:22). The fruit of the kindness of God is repentance (Rom. 2:4).

Shared Time

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Ice-Breakers

What did you observe about time wasters and interruptions over the course of the past week?

How do kindness and self-sufficiency work against one another?

In your life story, how has the kindness of others (parents, siblings, friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, other Christians) shaped our life? Be as specific as you can in describing the specific act of kindness and the impact it had in your life.

Discussion

[Suggestion: write on these sheets or in a notebook or journal your reactions to the discussions shared in this series.]

In light of what we just shared about kindness and its impact in our lives, consider and honestly assess how autonomous we are as individuals, and how autonomous we should seek to be.

Consider how kindness as the oil of life can effectively bind together a community of believers.

⁶ Adapted and edited from “Life on the Vine”, South MacArthur Church of Christ, Irving Texas.

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Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 7)⁷

Cultivating Goodness in a Self-Help World

“I decide to do good, but I don’t really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don’t result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.... I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn’t that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different” (Romans 7:18-20, 24-25, *Message*).

We like to think of ourselves as good people. We realize we have weaknesses or issues, but our culture tells us that people have within themselves all the tools they need to attain “the good life”. We ought not to have to lean on anyone else to become good. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, called upon his readers to develop their inner resources and become more self-reliant. How does this relate to the life God calls us to live? It is tempting in our world to believe that we can pull ourselves up “by our own bootstraps”. God, on the other hand, calls us to acknowledge our weakness and rely on him. We are not good by ourselves; we are good because God is good (Psalm 100).

The Bible tells that God alone is good (Jesus speaking to the rich young ruler). By ourselves, we lack both the ability to determine what is good and the power to live this goodness. It is only in our connection to God that goodness becomes part of our lives. When we view our life against God’s perfection, we realize once again the depth of our sin and the joy of forgiveness. When truly convicted of our merciful redemption, this awareness tempers our daily life and draws us to give the good of our lives wholly to God’s service.

May God help us yearn, not just for the good life, but also for a life that reflects God’s goodness.

Shared Time

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Ice-Breakers

After thinking and praying about kindness for a week, what is your definition of kindness?
Did you decide that you are kind like God is kind or kind as the world is kind?
Is the kindness you demonstrate different depending upon the sphere in which you are at the moment?

⁷ Adapted and edited from “Life on the Vine”, notes by Susan Vaughan, South MacArthur Church of Christ, Irving Texas.

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Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 8)⁸

Cultivating Faithfulness in a Temporary World of Impermanence

“But as for that [seed] in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” (Luke 8:15).

We live in a culture characterized by instability, impermanence, and faithlessness. Our culture seeks escapes and avoids commitments. People choose to live together rather than to marry; too many who marry are not faithful and see marriage as temporary and changeable. A mobile (impermanent) culture has resulted from the willingness to change jobs and relocate households for short-term gains. Our society places a high value on disposable products. We expect the things we use to wear out and become obsolete. If things become obsolete—why not people? Thus, the wisdom of old age is not respected.

Both the Old and New Testaments describe God as faithful (Gen. 3:9; 2 Sam. 2:6; Ps. 100:5; 2 Tim. 2:11-13; 1 John 1:9). In Scripture, that God keeps his promises shows that he is faithful. His consistency in his word is an evidence of his faithfulness. In his covenant with Israel, God binds himself to his people and through this bond reveals the mysterious depths of his love. The purpose of God’s promises and his faithfulness is to draw his people closer to him. In the same way, when members of the Christian community share commitments and challenges, the Spirit is present and lives are changed. If we are faithful to God and to others, we will draw closer to him and our interpersonal relationships will be deeper.

To cultivate faithfulness, Christians must focus on the resources God provides. We must celebrate God’s abiding presence through worship. We must make and keep promises that align with God’s will, and we must speak the truth in love with one another.

Shared Time

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Ice-Breakers

Report on your “goodness experiment”. What did people say defines a person as good? Did the people to whom you talked think goodness was sufficient for obtaining heaven? What did you do to be “good” to others? What was the result?

Discussion

[Suggestion: write on these sheets or in a notebook or journal your reactions to the discussions shared in this series.]

How is impermanence an opposite of faithfulness?

⁸ Adapted and edited from “Life on the Vine”, South MacArthur Church of Christ, Irving Texas.

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Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 9)⁹

Cultivating Gentleness in a World of Aggression

“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (James 1:19-21).

The American desire for power and influence in our community leads us to be aggressive in many of our relationships—at home, work and play. Aggression is taken for granted, even applauded. We watch TV shows that remind us to brag on our accomplishments because no one else will toot our horn for us. If you are an average TV viewer, you will see about 18,000 violent interactions each year. This kind of saturation of our minds leads the U.S. to have 75% of the murders committed by children in the entire world. How many times has someone cut in front of you? Do their actions offend? Is it possible that at least some of these have an emergency or personal crisis that causes them to hurry?

Gentleness is sometimes translated meekness or humility. In our society, people frequently equate it with weakness, which is not an accurate description of what it means to be gentle. Gentleness is a character strength that we should use as a foundation for our relationships. Gentleness is not a relative or pride and power! In the Old Testament, the meek and humble understand that God will be their advocate, especially when the proud oppress them (Ps. 37:11). God knows that the proud will have their day of loss and dismay. In the New Testament, people who will humble themselves before the Lord will be exalted (1 Pet. 5:6). One of the best things about gentleness is the freedom from having to retaliate. If we believe the statement of Rom. 12:19, “*Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,*” then a tremendous burden is lifted from our shoulders.

Shared Time

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Ice-Breakers

Report on your “faithfulness exercise”.

What distinctions do you see or make between gentleness, humility, and meekness?

Give an example of a gentle person—either from history, or from your own experience.

When was a time you say someone yield to another person in gentleness? How did they do it?

⁹ Adapted and edited from “Life on the Vine”, notes by Carol Ritchie, South MacArthur Church of Christ, Irving Texas.

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Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit (Lesson 10)¹⁰

Cultivating Self-Control in an Addictive World

“For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus. 3:3-5).

We live in a society characterized by excess and addiction. Pornography is running rampant, binge drinking is a serious problem on college campuses, and cigarette smoking is increasing among the young. To get an idea of the extent of America’s addictive nature, consider the enormous resources we dedicate to the treatment of addictions. There are now national organizations that offer 12-step programs for people addicted to alcohol, drugs, overeating, self-starvation, sex work, debt, and nicotine.

However, Christ would change our lives by having us live by the Spirit. In the biblical model of self-control (really God-control), we do not see self-mastery, but rather we allow the Holy Spirit to guide as Jesus is our Master. God provides resources in the battle against addictions. Worship shapes and reorients our desires so that we can recognize and guard against our tendency to pursue pleasure to gratify ourselves. Fasting can help remind the Christian of the proper place of pleasure in our lives. Prayer will draw us closer to God and empower God’s Spirit within us.

Shared Time

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Ice-Breakers

Report on your “gentleness exercises”. What happened?

Discussion

[Suggestion: write on these sheets or in a notebook or journal your reactions to the discussions shared in this series.]

How has the culture around us encouraged us to surrender ourselves to the pursuit of pleasure? Is self-control (yielding to the control of the Holy Spirit) the same as “moderation in all things”? What role does Bible study play in yielding to God’s Spirit? Have you found that time in God’s word strengthens your ability to control life? Give specific examples of how this has worked out in your life.

¹⁰ Adapted and edited from “Life on the Vine”, South MacArthur Church of Christ, Irving Texas.

