

Sermon: Good Fruit

Scriptures: Daniel 4:23; Matthew 3:9-10

"And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Introduction: In certain parts of the country, people will plant trees in their back yard to help with the food supply. They will nourish and care for these trees, patiently, for some time but nevertheless expect that, when the time is right, those trees will bear fruit, such as apples. The image of bearing fruit has long been applied to the character, prayers and actions of people. In both Testaments people are compared to fruit-bearing trees, and in this passage, the Cousin of Jesus, John the Baptist insists that fruit is mandatory. So, what does "fruit" look like on a human being?

Set the stage: Looking back at the passage, John the Baptist preaches and demonstrates to the religious leaders and to the congregation in general that he is not always diplomatic. He warns them that the "axe lies at the root of the trees" and that any tree not bearing fruit will be cut down. I suspect that the people catch the import of the symbolism, because they know the use of the same in the Old Testament.

Here's a couple of examples. Gideon was a great hero in the Old Testament, following God and leading the nation of Israel to victory and freedom. But things did not go so well with his many children. One of them, a fellow named Abimelech, conspired to murder all of his siblings and half-siblings in order to get the throne for himself without any competition. Jotham, the only surviving sibling, spoke out against him, comparing him to a bad tree. Abimelech was a bad tree with bad fruit, and his reign was brief. (Judges 9)

Centuries later, the great Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had a dream about a great tree that was cut down by an angel. Daniel warned him that he was that tree, and later the king went insane and lived as an animal for years before recovering his sanity. (Daniel 4:23) Fruit, that part of our lives that impacts other people, matters.

This begs the question; what is good fruit?

To some extent, your fruit is what you do for other people. In Luke (3:7-14), people asked John what should they do? His response? Share your food and clothing, do not defraud, intimidate or falsely accuse people. It could be argued that one's fruit is the results of a good prayer life, or the character traits of someone who is spiritually mature. Like the tree, we should not have to obsess about being "fruitful", it should arise naturally out of a life cared for by the Holy Spirit. This brings us to a couple of applications.

Applications

One application is how we can assess ourselves and gauge what our "fruitfulness" is. One way is to reflect on our thoughts, behavior and especially our words, particularly in casual situations. The Lord Jesus said that every bad tree bears bad fruit, and every good tree bears good fruit, and that people are known by their fruit. (Matthew 7:17-18) In other words, what is inside of you will be revealed one way or another. In our actions, demeanor or conversation, what is inside of us will come out one way or another.

Another application is to meditate, not on our need to be fruitful, but on the attentiveness of God. Jesus, in John 15, said that he was the vine, and we are branches. The Father tends the vine and prunes fruitful branches that they may bear more fruit. In other words, God is watching, He pays attention, and He is active in our lives. Careful reflection on that can be a fruitful venture.

Conclusion

The Bible commands that we be fruitful, and John the Baptist even proclaimed it a matter of judgment. The fruit consists of our impact on other people, our character and our prayer life. Consider carefully how you speak and act, particularly in casual situations. Remember that God tends us like a vinedresser tends a vine, He is always watching, and is always near.

Fruit trees are expected to bear fruit -- so are we.

Object: An Apple

Scripture: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' " 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' " Luke 13:6-9 (NIV)

- Apples not only taste good, they are good for you. Apples are fat-free, salt-free, cholesterol-free, and a good source of vitamins to help you grow.
- There are over 7500 different types of apples in the world.
- The top five apple-producing countries in the world are China, the United States, Turkey, Italy and France.

There are a lot of different ways to enjoy apples. For example, you might enjoy some apple juice or apple cider. Some children like to take applesauce in their school lunches. Have you ever had some tasty apple butter on your toast in the morning? Apple slices dipped in caramel are a delicious treat. My all-time favorite, of course, is apple pie!

I am sure that all of you know where we get apples. They come from apple trees. Well, what would you do if you planted an apple tree in your garden, watered it, and took care of it and it never produced any apples? It wouldn't be much good as an apple tree, would it?

Jesus told a story about a man who had a fig tree in his vineyard that didn't produce any figs. For three years he waited for the tree to produce fruit -- but still no figs. He went to the man who took care of the tree and told him to cut it down. The caretaker asked the owner to give him one more year to dig around the tree and fertilize it to see if the tree would produce some figs. The owner agreed to give the tree another chance.

In telling this story about the fruit tree, Jesus was really talking about us - and about God. God has "planted" us on this earth and he expects us to produce good fruit in our life. What kind of fruit does God expect? Things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and gentleness. When He doesn't see these things in our life, He is very disappointed -- but He is willing to give us another chance.

Jesus wants to care for us and help us to be the kind of fruit-bearing children that God wants us to be. If we will trust in him, read his Word, and pray -- he will help us to produce a lot of good fruit.

Dear Jesus, help us to have the kind of fruit in our lives that would be pleasing to our Heavenly Father. Amen.