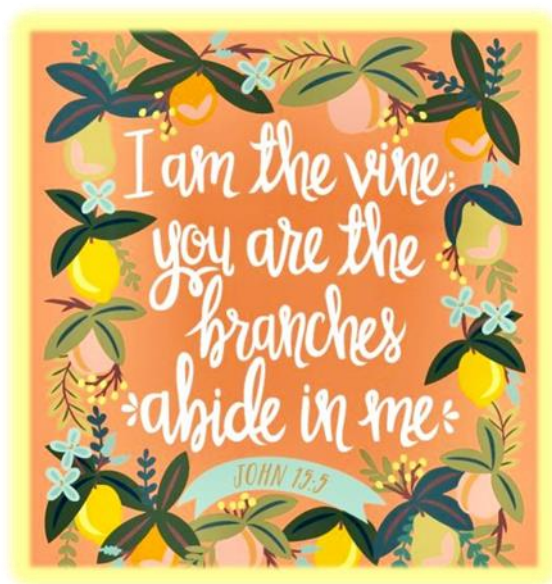


MUCH FRUIT



***I am the vine, you are the branches.
He who abides in me, and I in him,
he it is that bears much fruit,
for apart from me you can do nothing.
If a man does not abide in me,
he is cast forth as a branch and withers;
and the branches are gathered,
thrown into the fire and burned.
If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,
ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you.
By this my Father is glorified,
that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.
John 15:5-8***

Second only to the desire to know God more perfectly, is the desire in every one of our hearts to bear much fruit.

We want our time in this world to count for something.

We see how staggering is the harvest and how few the laborers, and we want to be of use.

There is probably no area of our lives which frustrates us more than this tension between the longing in our hearts to bear much fruit and the obvious evidence that not much seems to be happening out there on the end of our branch.

- We pick up books that tell of the exploits of men and women who are really bearing fruit ... of saints of God who did mighty things in days gone by.

- We hear of fellowships that are expanding so rapidly they can't enlarge their buildings fast enough.

- We read of communities of believers involved in impressive ministries in Washington, Boston, New York, Nairobi, and Rio.

Then we look down at our own feeble effort, the meager results, how little we have to show for years of labor!

Jesus promised that if we abide in Him and His words abide in us we will bear much fruit. But, He never promised that this much fruit, which we absolutely will bear, would bring us any glory. He said the fruit will glorify the Father. There will be much fruit and it will prove our discipleship to Jesus.

But the glory - all of it - will go to the Father

- The grain of wheat falls into the ground
and dies and bears much fruit.
- The Lamb of God goes to the cross
and dies and bears much fruit.
- The followers of the Lamb bear much fruit
...exactly as He did.

Our frustration is not because there is no fruit, our frustration is that we have allowed our hearts to *be deceived into confusing fruit with glory*. We don't seem to think there's any fruit coming unless we hear the bands playing and the crowds roar as we make our spiritual touchdowns. But the fruit that abides never comes that way.

- Fruit that abides is mysteriously stripped of all human glory.

If the same standards had been applied to Jesus as are used to evaluate people's worth in most present-day Christian literature, Jesus would have been a dismal failure. What do you think Jesus looked like when they dragged Him before the chief priests and the elders of Israel? Thirty-three years of obedience to God and what is there to show for it? - Absolutely nothing!

They march Him in front of Pilate. "Are you the King of the Jews? Who are you? Why are these people so hell-bent on killing you? ...What's the matter? Can't you talk? Don't you realize I have the power to have you crucified or to release you?" They drag Him on to Herod the real Jewish king. "At long last we meet! I've heard about you. Well, let's see what you can do. Ha, just as I thought, you're a loser. You can't even talk!"

There isn't a TV preacher in the country who would have had Jesus on his show that night. What kind of testimony could He have given? Where was His fruit?

His fruit, which will one day cover the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, was hidden in that bruised bleeding body which was soon to die and would only begin to come forth when He did die. Note well, Jesus never worried about how much fruit He was bearing because He was absolutely confident that fruit would come, and that nothing could prevent it. Jesus concerned Himself with two things as far as His ministry to men was concerned:

- 1. Touching human lives with the mercy of God.**
- 2. Getting to His cross... that's all.**

Jesus didn't waste time building an organization, writing books, revolutionizing the Roman government, or reforming Israel's stagnant institutions. Jesus never sought publicity as a means of bearing fruit. He avoided it like the plague. Jesus never begged for money as a means of "expanding His outreach." He stuck to two things:

1. Touching lives with the mercy of God.
2. Getting to His Cross.

At that very hour some Pharisees came, and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." And he said to them, "go and tell that fox,

***'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.
Nevertheless, I must go on my way***

***today and tomorrow and the day following;
for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem."***
Luke 13:31-33

There it is clearly stated.

***"Go tell that fox what I'm doing.
He'll never stop me.
Today and tomorrow I cast out demons and perform cures. The third day I go to
Jerusalem
to lay down my life."***

You want to bear fruit?... This is all you have to do:

- Abide in Jesus and let Him abide in you
... as you touch lives with the mercy of God.
- Abide in Jesus and let Him abide in you
... as you go to your cross.

***"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself,
take up his cross, daily, and follow me."***

Many of us seem to think that to deny ourselves is some morbid negative thing, like giving up cherry pie.
To deny ourselves is positive.

It's doing what Jesus did --- denying ourselves in favor of

the oppressed,
the hungry,
the poor.

Yes, and our own neglected families ... to deny ourselves in order that we may touch their lives with *the mercy of God*.

And to take up our cross and follow Jesus means that we start heading with Jesus to a Calvary of our own.

- Touch other lives with the mercy of God.
- Head for a Calvary of our own.

If we will settle for these two things and forget all the fancy stuff, we will bear much fruit.

1. Touching lives with the mercy of God.

***Is not this the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of
wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;
your righteousness shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.***

**Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am.
If you take away from the midst of you the yoke,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
And the Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.
And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.
Isaiah 58:6-12**

Stop trying to count how many souls you think you've saved.
Stop worrying about how much you're getting done.
Forget about what your ministry looks like

- to Herod,
- or Pilate,
- or John the Baptist,
- or your best friend,
- or your worst enemy,

and concentrate on what the Spirit singles out here in Isaiah.

The oppressed,
the hungry,
the poor,
your own neglected flesh--meaning your own family.

How different from the currently popular theories about fruit bearing ... where they would have us learning how to reach executives for Christ, how to find and win the leaders (then everyone else will follow). Nowhere in scriptures are we told to go after the big fish and let the little fish follow. Always we are told to concentrate on the little fish -- the very ones whom this world counts as nothing.

"Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Good brothers and sisters will accuse you of wasting time when you take this route, just as John the Baptist questioned Jesus, "Is that all you're ever going to do? Mess around with the nobodies?"

"Are you the one who is to come or do we look for another?"

But if we are going to abide in Jesus --- really abide --- and have Him abiding in us, we have no choice but to be about His business among the poor and the maimed and the halt and the blind.

Perhaps a reader is worried about the executives. The executives, my friend, have good noses. They can always smell when there is something good around. And they have mobility - they know how to get to the good stuff. Jesus didn't chase Nicodemus all over Jerusalem trying to reach an executive for Christ. Nicodemus came to Jesus while Jesus sought the lost sheep ... and those executives who are for real will gladly forsake all to follow Jesus just like every other disciple.

2. If we are going to bear much fruit we are going to daily move toward **our own Calvary.**

And when we get there, like Jesus we are going to disappear from the eyes of the world totally. We are not heading toward fame, we are heading toward oblivion in God.

And he said to all, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, daily, and follow me."

We may not fully understand what our Calvary is. We may have to wait until we get closer to it to see clearly how it will be. But this much we now know:

- Our goal is not "success"
- Our goal is a cross!

And every day we take up our cross by laying down our life in one hundred little ways -- thus moving one day closer to the moment when we shall finally lay down our life. *What freedom this gives us!*

- We don't have to be anything,
- We don't have to prove anything,
- We don't have to out-do anybody,

all we have to do is keep following Jesus toward Jerusalem. We don't even have to be afraid anymore, *for when our goal is a cross, who can intimidate us?* If Herod threatens to kill us we too can say,

"Go tell that fox, 'Behold we cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow and the third day we finish our course.'"

And when we finish our course you can be *absolutely sure* there will be much fruit, fruit that will glorify the Father and rejoice the heart of the Son.

***Truly, truly, I say to you,
unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
It remains alone;
but if it dies, it bears much fruit.***



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