
NO FRUIT, WAX FRUIT, OR JUICY FRUIT

It's amazing what can be done with apparently worthless objects if they're placed in the right hands.

- Once, while visiting my parent's home, I saw some small sticks that looked like they had been cut from the sour cherry tree in our front yard.
 - My father told me, however, that they were branches from a sweet plum tree that he was going to graft to the sour cherry tree.
 - Sure enough, when we returned to their home sometime later, those sticks were living parts of the cherry trees producing beautiful, juicy plums.
- To be productive, those barren and lifeless sticks just needed to be properly connected to a life-given source.

This is certainly true with human beings.

- We need to be rightly connected—grafted, so to speak—in order to receive that which leads to productive lives.
 - Now, certainly, we can look at our lives and the many tasks we perform each day, whether at home, on the job, at school, or elsewhere, and say that we are living truly productive lives.
- Yet, some possibilities can never be realized for us unless we are connected to a life-giving source that makes all these additional possibilities, well, possible.
 - We cannot make it happen on our own.
 - Of course, we do have some abilities that we can control and some talents that we can develop,
 - but to become genuinely fruitful of SPIRIT is beyond our ability on our own.
- For that to happen, we must depend upon JESUS CHRIST, the true vine to which we as branches must be grafted.

This is one of my favorite passages of Scripture to preach on.

- There are so many texts which speak mainly to those who are absent from worship each week.
- But this text speaks specifically to those who have made the commitment to be here each week—the branches who remain or who are abiding in the vine.

JESUS tells us, "I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in ME—abide in ME—and I in you, you will bear much fruit."

- And there are three variations of this branch and its fruit to consider.

First, there are those branches who abide in the vine, but who produce NO FRUIT.

- These are the people who come to church, yet never seem to have any desire to become an active part of the faith community and its work.

Some are the C&E Christians who only come on Christmas and Easter.

Some are far more regular, but never become a part of the missional activities of the congregation.

- Their attendance is done more out of a sense of obligation to a parent or someone else, or because of a tradition to which they have become tied.
- They come and abide for a short time, yet they never tap into that life-giving flow from the vine.
 - As a result, they never bring forth the fruits of which JESUS speaks.

Now, at one point, the Church can take some responsibility for this.

- There are ways in which we, the Church, have failed to help these folks become a growing part of the vine.
 - The opportunities, encouragement, and invitations needed for them to become fruit-bearing Christians have not been extended.
- Ultimately, though, many will blame the Church for what it has not done so that they do not have to admit that they have chosen not to tap in, not to grow, not to produce the wonderful fruits of the SPIRIT.
 - It's not hard to find lots of reasons or excuses, for choosing to avoid fully abiding in CHRIST.
 - The truth is that it is each person's decision and not the fault of others if you choose not to grow in CHRIST.

When an alcoholic comes to the end of her/his rope, the confession must be made, "I am powerless in overcoming my weakness. I admit I need help. I have lost control over my life. I need a power beyond myself."

- When a non-fruit-bearing Christian realizes that s/he is not allowing CHRIST to abide, the confession must also be made, "I need a power beyond myself."
 - And the assurance from JESUS is there, "If you remain in ME and MY words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my FATHER's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be MY disciples."

The second type of branch is the one that produces WAX FRUIT.

- Wax fruit is very realistic on the outside, but if you take a bite from it, you will quickly find that it is tasteless and phony.
- There are those Christians who put on big shows of promising to volunteer whenever others are around to hear or see,
 - but when it comes right down to making good on their offers, they always seem to come up as phony as wax.
 - Their offers and pledges to the Church look very good on the outside, but when the time comes to harvest the fruit, their fruit is waxy and worthless.

I like to raise the question among Christians, "If Christianity was a crime and you came up for trial, would there be enough evidence in your life to convict you?"

- Too frequently, it is the case that those who know us well, when learning that we have a church connection, simply cannot see us as a Christian, a branch on the vine of CHRIST.
 - How sad a witness it is to our GOD!
 - How sad a comment on the kind of fruit we are producing.

Years ago, I came to know a man called Otis Woodard, a black man from St. Louis.

- Otis (and he insists that you call him that) runs a home for pregnant teenage girls in connection with LSS of Missouri.

Otis is also the father of seven children of his own:

- two daughters, Bridget and Rochelle, and five sons, Otis, Otis, Otis, Otis, and Otis. Oh, and the dog, a male, is called Otis.

It is a tradition in Otis' family to name all the men Otis going back to slave times when the only way you could keep track of family identity when being sold off to different plantations was to give all the boys the same name.

- Otis went to a family funeral once where there were more than 300 Otis Woodards.
 - Otis says it's sometimes confusing to have seven in the household with the name Otis, but his wife likes it because when she calls for Otis, she gets him and all the boys...and the dog.
- When each of Otis' sons starts high school, he sits them down and says, "You have my name, and I expect you to take good care of it. Anything you do reflects on me, because you're doing it with my name, and it reflects on your brothers, too."
- How true that is for us who claim the name "Christian" for ourselves.
 - If we take the name of CHRIST for our identity, as we do in baptism, anything we do reflects back on CHRIST, and on all those who also share that name.

Hopefully, that leads us to the third type of branch—the branch that produces JUICY FRUIT.

- Those who truly abide in the vine that is CHRIST and who seek to allow CHRIST to abide in them, are the ones who produce the juicy fruits of the HOLY SPIRIT.

Abiding in CHRIST and CHRIST in you means opening your heart to CHRIST in prayer,

- not just now and then, but regularly and often.
- That's why we offer the "CHRIST in Our Home" booklets so that prayer and devotion can be a daily part of your life.

Abiding in CHRIST and CHRIST in you means hungering and thirsting for a closer, more intimate relationship with the LORD that comes through study and sharing with others who also hunger and thirst.

- Our weekly classes on Sundays and Wednesdays, and other groups help provide those opportunities.

Abiding in CHRIST and CHRIST in you means seeking to be with CHRIST regularly where you can express your love to CHRIST in worship.

Abiding in CHRIST and CHRIST in you is not always easy, though.

- It will result in change, and no one really likes change.
- The juicy fruits of abiding will include changes in attitudes toward people and situations.
- The juicy fruits of abiding will mean more acts of loving service offered toward others.
- The juicy fruits of abiding will bring a sense of wholeness to your life and an increased appreciation for GOD's direction and blessing.

And, two special blessings will result from increased fruit-bearing:

- first, your own life will be enriched;
- second, you will bring glory to GOD.
 - Your example will cause others to sit up and take notice and ask, "What do you have that I lack?" which opens the door to witness to the power of the gospel in your life.

Take a moment to examine your own life and the fruit of it.

- Is there no fruit growing on the branch?
- Is there only fake waxy fruit there?
- If you find yourself answering "yes," then seek to open your heart, pray to GOD, and ask that you might become one of those wonderful branches that produce GOD's juicy fruit.