

Fruit that will last

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I was a kid when I first memorized [John 15](#). I had a thing about memorizing. My life felt a little fragile, it seemed that people and places I cared about had a way of vanishing, and when I came across words that resonated, I committed them to memory so I could keep them with me. That was true for songs, poems, whole chapters of the Bible.

*“Abide in me, and I in you,” Jesus said. “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.”*

Yes—King James Version, with its early modern English. I copied the whole chapter out on index cards, taped it to mirrors, reviewed it while I brushed my teeth.

As a kid abandoned by my father, and soon to be made homeless by my grandfather, I liked the idea of remaining in the Father’s love.

And as a gangly, geeky girl who never quite fit, I loved the idea of being Jesus’ friend.

And there was something in the promise of fruit that energized me, and gave me hope. All that is still true, almost 50 years later.

I know more now: about vines, vineyards. About pruning: how harsh it can look to inexperienced gardeners. I know more about fruit: how most fruit is hard to store, rots easily, rarely lasts.

I’ve been trying to grow fruit in my yard for years: berries, grapes, peaches, apples. I’m just now starting to understand how to prune. I spent two weeks in Greece last spring, and was stunned to see how far back grapes were cut, how severe the pruning went on vines, trees, bushes.

I’ve written before that [ideas have consequences](#). Ideas have consequences and faith bears fruit. All forms of faith. Even those unexamined beliefs we breathe in

without thinking, those vines that seem to seed themselves and strangle everything in their way.

One current faith is economic materialism: what matters most is money, and our meaning, as humans, is to earn, spend, and consume. That particular faith has bitter fruit: disastrous economic inequality, deep disregard for the poor, disabled, or unborn, accompanying fear, anxiety, depression. Endless competition.

Another faith is [the one I described](#) this way: that we are all heroes of our own stories. That meaning is found in pursuing our own interests. That all religious traditions are versions of each other, so meaning and morality are simply matters of choice. I go my way you go yours. Isolated. Unmoored. Constantly pitting our own rights against those of others.

Yet another faith: one that sometimes seems like a cancer in the Christian body, growing so fast the healthy cells are surrounded. It's faith in being right, having all the answers, putting others in their place. Loud, harsh, self-righteous, mean. The fruit is hard to swallow: anger, dissension, disrespect, hate.

Turning to Galatians to read the list of fruit of the spirit, I find myself pausing on the opposite fruit, fruit that could easily be divided among the faiths I described above.

If economic materialism is the foundational faith, then an obvious result will be jealousy, envy, selfish ambition, with plenty of idolatry—if idolatry is understood as worship of material things.

If all religions are the same and morality is purely personal, then who can object to sexual license, promiscuous behavior, prostitution, lewd humor, or forays into witchcraft and magic? Idolatry fits here as well; in this case, worship of the self.

And if faith is instead idolatry to our own dogma and opinions, proud dismissal of all who don't agree on every point, then expect hatred, discord, fits of rage, dissension and factions at every turn. We'd be happy to prune each others' vines, but unwilling to accept any challenge to our own. So the fruit we yield offers little of value, and sets our children's teeth on edge.

I read with longing the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Most of those words are so foreign we can hardly imagine what they

mean. Forbearance? Kindness? Faithfulness? Self-control?

It's easy to explain our way around these words, to rationalize our current lack of love, our difficulty feeling joy, the fact that peace is not, for now, a high priority. We are skilled at self-justification: if you understood the situation, you'd know kindness would be the wrong response. If you knew what happened, you'd know forbearance would be foolish.

We are busy, with important things to do, better things to think about. Gentleness???? In THIS world? Please.

And yet, that's what we're called to. [Peter wrote](#),

*Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.*

I like that wording: make every effort. [Other translations](#) put it "giving all diligence" or "employing all care." Nothing half-hearted about it: prioritize this.

I have a friend who prays the fruit of the Spirit, out loud, for her small son every night at bedtime. I love that: he knows those words are of importance, something to live into. She told me that one night she forgot joy, and he, tiny child that he is, said, almost in tears: "Pray joy, Mommy! Pray joy!"

In our youth ministry, we created a prayer space in a back staircase and stenciled the fruit of the Spirit on the stairs, one for each step, so we could stand on a step and pray and consider: what would that attribute look like? How could it become part of our daily stance?

Sometimes we'd invite youth to sit on a step and pray for God to fill them with that one trait, to make it visible through them. At several parent events, we invited parents to that prayer space, and asked them to stand on the stairs their children were most in need of, and pray for God to use them to help that fruit grow in their children.

John 15 reminds me that I'm not the one producing fruit: if Christ is the vine, and God the gardener, my role is to be open to their work in me. Yet, there's that call to

“make every effort.” How do I become both available and active? I find it helpful to look back on my day, and note where my self-control has been lacking, where I’ve failed in kindness, where I’ve demonstrated love. And at the start of my day, I find it helpful to think through what’s ahead, to consider where I might be tempted to impatience, or anxiety, and ask that the fruit of the Spirit fill me in those points throughout the day.

And I need to be open to pruning, to examining the faiths I’ve absorbed and asking God to free me of those that bear bitter fruit, or those that shade out and choke a potential harvest. For that I need one more passage I memorized years ago, [James 3:17-18](#):

*But the wisdom that comes from above is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peace-makers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.*

That’s where I start and end the day: asking for wisdom, praying for mercy, looking for avenues most likely to bear harvests of righteousness, waiting for good fruit that will last.

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