

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: March 11, 2012

Avoiding Fruitlessness

by Dan Trygg

"But let our people also learn to-stand-ready-to-engage-in good deeds to meet pressing needs, in order that they may not be unfruitful." Titus 3:14

There are many times in the Scriptures where the idea of fruitfulness is presented. In the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-23), the scenario where the seed falls upon the good soil and produces much fruit is the example of success, after the three other scenarios of frustrated effort. Fruitfulness is the difference between tares and good wheat (Matt. 13:24-30,36-43). A tare is a weed that *looks very much like* wheat in its early stages of growth, but as the crop matures *it becomes quite evident* that they are *not* the same, for the seed-bearing head of the weed is smaller and shaped differently than that of the wheat. In another parable, an unfruitful tree is given one final chance to become productive (Lk. 13:6-9). If it cannot be coaxed into putting out fruit, even after special measures are taken to help it, *it will be removed*, and its place will be given to another. In the allegory of the Vine and the branches (Jn. 15:1-8), the heavenly Vinedresser will remove branches that are unfruitful, and will prune the healthy branches that show evidence of fruitfulness, so that they may become even *more* productive. Finally, when Jesus approached a fig tree that had the *appearance* of being fruitful, and found it void of figs, He cursed it, "May no one ever eat from you again." It began to wither, so that by the next day it was quite obviously dead, from the roots up (Mk. 11:12-14,20,21).

The message of these, and many other Bible passages, clearly teach us that

(1.) God desires His people to be fruitful;

(2.) Fruitfulness indicates the *quality* of our conversion,

the *health* of our spiritual walk,

and is a *successful completion* of the growth process;

(3.) Fruitfulness often requires the *nurturing, care and skill* of a caregiver, to maximize results;

(4.) Fruitlessness indicates either

(a.) a *tragic loss of potential*; or (b.) it reveals the inferior, utterly foreign nature of the plant;

(5.) God will not tolerate fruitlessness. The unfruitful will be removed (Jn. 15:2). *Opportunities and resources will be taken away and given to others who will be more responsive* (e.g., Est. 4:14; Matt. 21:33-43).

(6.) We are to always *guard, and endeavor to develop, our ability to be fruitful.* We should never abdicate the responsibility, or lose the vision, of our fruitfulness. There are many detracting influences to guard against that would hinder our productive capacity. In the Lord, the fruitfulness of His character in us can continue to mature and be productive even in our old age (Psa. 92:12-15). ***We are never to rest on past fruitfulness as a justification for present sloth*** (1 Cor. 9:24-27). **As long as we are alive, we can be fruitful here in this world.** If we lose that focus, we have fallen prey to some parasitic, or toxic, influence, and are being led astray into error and loss.

There is a difference between a "works-righteousness" orientation, and the healthy fruitfulness that comes from the initiative of God. In a works-righteousness approach there is the definite sense that the person is trying to "earn their way" by doing enough good deeds. ***There is a tendency for them to want to show off their good deeds***, to impress others, or to receive affirmation that, indeed, they are a good person. ***There is a tendency to compare themselves***, and their "performance", to other people, ...again for praise, or for self-satisfaction. ***Another indicator of works-righteousness is the "I've got to" mentality.*** In other words, at some point they are doing things, not because of some inner desire and readiness to do them, but because of some sense of obligation. Their heart is not in it, but in order to keep up an image, they continue to perform. ***Another sign is a feeling of being burdened down*** with a weight, of trying to carry more than you can or should. A person can lose sight of their own lives, and begin to take on way more responsibilities and activities than what they can manage well. They, and often other family members, begin to suffer as the result of their unhealthy overextensions of themselves. Getting "burnt out", developing depression, or having a mental/emotional/physical collapse can sometimes be the result of attempting to do too much. **To "love your neighbor as yourself" starts with taking care of you.**

Now, all of these heavy feelings *can* accompany, or be experienced in conjunction with, carrying out a Spirit-led initiative. **To have these feelings does not necessarily mean that you should quit doing what you were doing.** These emotions are indicators that we need to refocus and reevaluate, however. They could just be the result of momentary incursions of our fleshly mind into our present experience. Some of it is the "soreness" of stretching and growing, and is to be expected. **Ongoing feelings of this nature should be especially monitored, however, as possible indicators of spiritual dis-ease.**

Healthy fruitfulness should grow out of who we are. *The Holy Spirit's promptings will be appropriate to our level of growth and maturity, as well as our limitations of inner or physical health.* It is important to remember, however, that our heavenly Coach perceives our limits and abilities more accurately than we do. He sometimes will give us things that will challenge and stretch us, ...things we may not have chosen for ourselves. Growth and change imply that we will do things differently than in the past, so we will probably be moving beyond our comfort zone into new areas. Obviously, **the big difference between health and unhealth is whether or not we are being prompted by God, ...or coming up with things on our own.** Ephesians 2:10 says that He prepares ahead of time the works for us to do. It is up to us to "walk in them". Sometimes that means He "dumps them in our laps". Other times, it means He has prepared a new direction for us ahead of time, ...a *series* of opportunities, that may not be visible, tangible and present *now*, ...but will become evident as we follow this new pathway. **We are to step into doors of opportunity which He has made ready and open, not force or manipulate our way into people's lives** in ways that are disrespectful and unwelcome. **We do, however, need to learn to discern the prepared paths of God's leading, and take the initiative to start down them.**

I believe that this is the subject matter of our verse today. It is practical counsel to help us in the discerning and mobilizing process. It offers us a very down-to-earth pragmatic perspective for discovering and acting on God's leading for ministry opportunities. "But let our people also learn" -- **The word translated "learn" is a form of the Greek word, *manthanō*, which means "to discover, to learn by experience, to find out how".** It is the verbal form of the word translated as "disciple", an *active* follower, an *experiential* learner. As disciples **we are to discover how "to-stand-ready-to-engage-in good deeds".** This implies that **this quality is not a ready-made thing**, something we can take for granted. **There is a "how-to" skill, or an ability to be developed which would enable us to consistently and effectively serve others.**

If we look back, **there is a progression in the letter concerning what Paul teaches about this subject:**

(1.) Emotional Eagerness. In 2:14, he talked about us being "zealous" or "eager" for good deeds. That describes an *emotional desire*, an *interest in*, and *motivation for*, doing good works.

(2.) Proactive Preparation. In 3:1, he counseled Titus to "*remind them... to be (being) prepared for every good work*". **This describes some forethought and deliberate action taken in order to be capable of doing these benevolent acts.** This comment recognizes that good deeds will require time, energy, and often money, in order to carry them out. These are resources that must be set aside from my regular life, to make possible the expenditure of them for somebody else. Without proactive planning there will not be the capability to do anything for others.

(3.) Mental Mindset. In 3:8, Paul encouraged Titus to "give special emphasis in order that *they might think to-stand-ready-to-engage-in good deeds*". In other words, Titus was to help *keep this in front of their minds* so that they would begin to *be conscious* enough of it to begin to *recognize opportunities* to help, and *be mentally prepared* to get involved. *Creating a mindset of service* was what Titus was to be doing. Without this, people tend to just go on their merry way, being absorbed in their own affairs. They tend to be oblivious to others, so that if a need might come to their attention, they do not recognize its potential significance. They do not see it as an opportunity to help, an open door to get involved in another person's life. They either do not recognize it at all, and the opportunity blows by them unnoticed, or, if they do notice it, they are not mentally prepared to jump in and help. **We need to create a mindset of helpfulness.** I am to *see myself as a servant* of other people for the sake of Christ, so that when the opportunities come up, ...and they will..., we will *see ourselves as part of the solution*. We are to *be thinking about it* enough to "get used to the idea", to *get our imagination involved* so that we *see ourselves as helpers*. Then, when the opportunity arises, we will see it as an answer to prayer, as a gift from God *to us*, and we will get involved.

(4.) Developing Dexterity. In 3:14, Paul wrote, "let our people learn to-stand-ready-to-engage-in good deeds to meet pressing needs, so that we might not be unfruitful." The idea is that **we can experientially discover effective ways of doing good for people**, ways that will be *welcome* and *winsome*. **This is a skill development process, which means we will be awkward and sloppy to begin with.** Through repeated effort, observing and evaluating as we go, *we can learn how* to graciously offer assistance to people in ways that will open their hearts toward us and toward God. We can also learn how to be ready, willing and able to give help to others *without debilitating or destroying ourselves*. **These are life-skills, ...learned, strengthened, and finely-tuned over time.** We are not "there", yet. We are *learners*, disciples. The phrase, "let them learn" is an imperative in Greek, a *command*. It is *not* optional. It is a directive to leaders, which God expects all of us to learn. It is part of the curriculum for disciples. "Experientially-train them to ...engage in good deeds." **We are especially to meet "pressing needs".** The word for "pressing" means "necessary and urgent". **These arise in times of crisis.** That is why we need to "stand-ready-to-engage". Crises are *not* planned. **They are not convenient, and cannot be "scheduled".** Yet, **these are our greatest opportunities to shine.** Help offered as such times are especially visible and appreciated. **We must be prepared mentally and materially to rise to the challenge, or we will miss these opportunities to show the love of Jesus.**