

How to Be an Excellent Disciple, Fecundity, Part 1

Luke 6:43-45

We are coming to the end of the Sermon on the Mount. So as we like to do, let's start by reading the section before us this morning. We'll start in Luke 6:39. "He," Jesus, "also told them a parable: 'Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.

"'Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye," when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.

“For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”

So the passage before us, verses 43 to 45, it's on bearing fruit. It's not difficult to interpret, to understand, but it does seem for many people today, and even Christian people, that these verses are very difficult to apply. People seem very reluctant to look at the fruit hanging on the trees around them and then to come to a judgment about the kind of tree they're looking at.

Some people simply refuse to do so. In light of verse 39 and in light of verses 41 to 42, or I should say in light of verse 37, “Judge not, you'll not be judged. Condemn not, you'll not be condemned.” In light of that verse, in light of verses 41 to 42 about beams and motes, I can understand the desire that some people have to be slow about making judgments. But to

refuse to look at fruit, or to refuse to make judgment about the nature of the tree. That's unbiblical. That's unfaithful.

As we've seen in verse 37, Jesus warns us not to be judgmental. Verses 41, 42, he warns us about being hypocritical in our judgments. But being discerning, and making judgments, this is healthy. It's commanded. It's good for our spiritual well-being and the spiritual good of other people.

We must look at trees and their fruit. We must look at the fruit around us and come to proper right understanding about the nature of the tree. We're going to look at that. But before we get into our outline, I want to point out one important interpretive issue just as we get started. You'll notice in verse 43 that it begins with the word, for. For. And that shows a connection between the section on clear sighted judgment, and then trees and their fruit.

The word, for, it shows that these two sections are joined together, linked together. They are both of them developing Jesus' continuing argument, in verse 39, that is, be careful who

you follow. Be careful what voice you're listening to. Be careful who is influencing you. Whether that's a teacher, whether that's the people that you're with, the flock that you're a part of, friends you have, acquaintances, all of the rest.

Be careful who you follow, what voice you listen you to, and who is influencing you. The question is, do you have to be more clever? No, you do not. Do you have to catch them in a scandal before you can know their nature and coming to a right judgment about their intentions and motives? No. Jesus says, "You will know them by their fruits."

Same thing here. Make sure you're not following a blind guide, verse 39. Because if you are, you will become just like your teacher, verse 40. And both of you will share in the same judgment, the same fate of falling into a pit. Or the more dramatic imagery is over in Matthew 7:19, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Very important to make sure you're not following the wrong voice, that you turn away from their error. But again, it's not just simply about you watching out, who you follow as a teacher, it's about examining yourself, too. Remember, Jesus speaks directly to his disciples here. We all need to check our own lives for significant sin, for the blinding nature of pride, for spiritual hypocrisy. We all need to grow in genuine humility.

Jesus warns us about our own lives. He warns us to look out for that beam in our eye because we are going to influence other people, as well. As Jesus' true disciples, we need to be on guard about any log-sized sin in our lives, any instance of hypocrisy, any evidence of it. We need to get rid of that blinding self-righteousness because it's such a serious issue with such serious dramatic, even damning consequences. We need to remove logs from our eyes. Why? For, verses 43 to 45, for when we do, it'll give us very clear vision about the trees and their fruits. Only good trees produce good fruit.

So that's the connection between those two sections. Helps us see a little bit more clearly the subject of our passage this morning. And it's simply this: The fruit you bear reveals the

kind of tree that you are. The fruit that anyone bears is going to reveal the kind of tree he or she is. This is called the principle of fecundity, fruit bearing.

So armed with the clear vision provided by the humility that Jesus promotes in verses 41 to 42, Jesus here commands us to be fruit inspectors. To be looking at our own lives first and then look at the lives of others, particularly those who teach us the Word because their influence is so consequential. And this is why, beloved, that God intends our lives to be lived openly with one another. We need to let people in, bring people close, live lives of transparency and intimacy. We're not to go home and shut everybody out. We're to live in the light and bring people into our lives.

Well, just to get into our outline, the subject this morning is this discipleship principle of fecundity, of fruit bearing and we're going to see the principle stated, illustrated, demonstrated, and then actuated. So first point for this morning, the principle stated. We see that in verse 43 going into that first part of verse 44. Look again at the text.

Jesus says, "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its fruit." There's the principle stated clearly, plainly, this principle of fecundity. That kind of a statement would be really nothing new to Jesus' audience. They live in an agrarian society. People lived their entire lives surrounded by fields and vineyards. They saw things grow, things harvested, things planted all the time.

And this statement, also, as an analogy illustrating a deeper spiritual truth, that wouldn't be unfamiliar to them either. Especially to those who were raised in the culture so thoroughly informed by Jewish history and teaching. You want to turn back to the beginning of your Bible to the first chapter of Genesis. We find the origin of this principle in Genesis chapter 1. So it's as old as the earth, this principle of fecundity.

Genesis 1 is, as you know, creation week. On day three, God created the earth's vegetation. He separated the water from the dry ground. And then he filled that dry ground with plant life,

with vegetation, with produce, fruits, grains, vegetables. Look at Genesis 1, verse 11 and following. "And God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their kinds," their own kinds, "and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the third day."

So God created vegetation. The grass, the seed-bearing plants, the fruit trees, he created all that on the third day. Three classes of plant life, which comprehend the entire kingdom of vegetation, plant life. The grass, the *deše'*, the flowerless plants. They don't fructify one another. Secondly, there's the seed-bearing plants, the *ēšēb*, the vegetables and grains. And then third, the *ēš p^{er}rî*, the fruit trees that bear fruit containing seeds.

God prescribed boundaries to that plant kingdom. Each plant contains the future of its own kind. Each one always and only according to its own kind bearing that kind of fruit. Vegetation

grows reproduces within prescribed boundaries. So God, thus, created categories. Categories that we can observe empirically that we can see. So God has set up the ability for us to do science, to make classification. This ability to classify, this provides the necessary preconditions of conducting all science. Here in specific, the field of botany so we can study the plant kingdom. This telltale sign of life, which began with the plant kingdom and continued with the animal kingdom is this principle of fecundity, of bearing fruit.

Water doesn't reproduce. The rocks of the earth don't reproduce. Sand on the beach, it doesn't reproduce. The granite in our Rocky Mountains doesn't reproduce. Fruit bearing is a sign of life. Now this principle of fecundity found first in the plant kingdom, it's a uniform principle. That is to say, it is a law-like principle. It's a law of nature. One that's universal. One that's uniform. One that's invariable.

And that is the basis of science. Without it, we cannot do science. Science relies upon, even assumes as a starting point, this uniformity of this principle of fecundity in the plant kingdom. So take a botanist, for example, when he comes to study

any individual plant, he has to assume that this plant can be categorized according to the parent plant and that plant kind. He assumes that the specimen in front of him, on his table, shares all the same properties and qualities of the parent classification.

Not only that, but he assumes that whatever he studies in this individual specimen, whatever he learns from that individual piece of fruit or vegetable or whatever that that can be applied universally throughout the entire classification of that plant. So if one individual plant reacts a certain way to a disease or a pesticide, all the plants are going to react that way. They can extrapolate from the one to the many.

So from the particular to the general, from the general to the particular, the botanist can move from one to the other because of this God-designed uniformity in the laws of nature. Otherwise, all scientific study, the law of inference would be absolutely impossible. And that's the botanist.

Think for a moment, for us non-scientists, how chaotic it would be for us as consumers of foods. Imagine what it would mean if we could not rely on the uniformity of this principle of fecundity in the plant kingdom. What if we couldn't rely, count on an apple tree, to produce fruit after its own kind? Or an orange tree or wheat and barley or potatoes, and carrots, and onions?

What if one season you went out to pick an apple from a tree in your orchard, the next season you go out there and the tree is budding cattails. Very unhelpful. You just spent a lot of money on that orchard. Now it's gone. Or the weeds that you have been working so hard to poison for several seasons and all of a sudden, they start bearing luscious strawberries. Now you got to reverse course. You couldn't count on it from one season to another.

We realize that that's ridiculous because we've been born into a world that God made. We assume it's orderly. We assume the reliability, the uniformity, the invariability of nature. God intended from the very beginning to sustain the world that

he created, making it reliable, invariant within its categories and classes and kinds. We count on that.

Creation mandate that he gave us to cultivate the earth and care for it, we couldn't do that if God had not created the world with this uniform invariable principle of fecundity, the principle of life bearing, fruit bearing. So let's turn back to Luke 6:43. Jesus simply states a principle that you and I take for granted every day of our lives. "No good tree bears bad fruit nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit for each tree is known by its fruit." Simple.

We find this principle instructs us and it gives us an analogy for a more profound spiritual truth. Notice in verse 43 there's a contrast there between the good and the bad trees and the good and the bad fruit. We see that there. The adjective, good, it means something that's healthy or sound or fit. The adjective, bad, refers to something that's of, poor quality, something that's useless, something that's inedible, something you don't want to put in your mouth.

So the contrast here between good and bad is qualitative, it's not moral. The moral judgment comes in the next verses. But here, it's just the contrast between the good and useful, and the bad and useless, between the edible and the inedible. And so as every farmer knows, good quality trees don't produce bad quality fruit. Conversely, bad quality trees don't bear good quality fruit. And you sometimes have to wait until the fruit comes out to know the nature and the quality of your tree.

Principle of fecundity, then, amounts here to what we might call an agrarian tautology. It's a universal truth. It's a principle that's so undeniably true because it's so patently obvious. When God plants, it always grows and always bears fruit. When cultivated, these plants yield a plentiful crop to feed multitudes.

Secondly, second point: The principle illustrated. Jesus uses here a short illustration in the second half of verse 43 and he's just showing us with this little illustration how we assume this principle of fecundity in everyday life. We know it instinctively. We know it intuitively. We all know that a tree is known by the fruit it produces, because after all, verse 43,

“Figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.” Simple. Obvious.

The principle of fecundity that is just stated is so obvious we might wonder why Jesus decided to illustrate it with this practice of everyday life. What he’s just stated in verse 43 is so obvious. Trees are known by their fruit. Got it. So why illustrate it? By drawing attention to the common assumed practice of how everybody lives every day, Jesus is pointing out our own ability to see this connection. A connection we make all the time between the principle of fecundity, and we assume that, and we live by it.

We see between the external visible fruit and the internal invisible nature of a thing; we see that connection. We all know the hidden nature by looking at the visible evidence. Listen, no one gathers fruit from thorns and thickets of thistles. Even insane people don’t do that. No matter how crazy somebody is, they know where to go looking for food. They don’t wander around among thornbushes and thickets of weeds to find grapes or figs or anything edible.

So why is Jesus pointing this out? Because he's making a case. He's leading us all along. He's informing our consciences so that we will apply this principle of fecundity beyond the plant kingdom, beyond our edible food, and take it down into our spiritual life. He wants us to see, he wants us to understand, and know how our understanding of the physical world informs our understanding of the spiritual realm. He uses the obvious common practice of all humanity to inform the consciences of his hearers, including you and me.

He wants us to see that we need to put this principle of fecundity into practical use. Not just in picking good food, but spiritually in picking good truth, good teachers. What you put into your mouth, where you go looking for it, same thing in the spiritual realm, right? What you put into your heart, where you go looking for it, same principle. Instinctively, intuitively, we all know that which cannot produce fruit does not produce fruit. So if we know the nature of a plant by the fruit it produces, we know the nature of a person by the works he produces.

The context, as we've said, has to do with discerning the difference between good and bad teachers. So just like knowing where our physical food comes from, we have to apply the same principle when it comes to spiritual food. You don't look for spiritual help from unspiritual people. You look to godly people, growing people, mature spiritual people for spiritual help. You will know them by their fruits, won't you?

So it's based on the principle of fecundity that God used to design the very world we live in. Just as plants that can't produce fruit, won't produce fruit, so also teachers who don't produce fruit can't produce fruit. So when you come across teachers like that, just keep moving along. Walk away. In fact, run. Look for godly, spiritual mature people who are producing good fruit, practicing good works. Look at their life. Look for the fruit. Follow them, learn from them.

Let's pause for a moment, consider the contrast. We've got figs and grapes, edible things on the one hand and we've got thornbushes and bramble bushes on the other hand. A little reflection here is just going to simply strengthen Jesus' point and inform our own consciences about this issue. The word

translated here as thornbushes is *akantha*. It refers to the prickly weeds that grow up in neglected fields. Farming involves removing these troublesome weeds. *Akantha*, these thorn-producing weeds, because they're harmful to the crops.

You may remember the principle, the parable of the sower, Matthew 13, that some of the seed that the sower sowed fell among thorns, right? Same word. What did those thorns do? Choked out the Word, didn't it? Choked out the plant, took the life out of them, prevented a fruitful harvest. The word translated bramble bushes, that's the word *batos*, which is also translated thornbush. It's one that's larger than the common prickly weed, spiny thorny, shrub that was common to the area, grows up in the desert, symbolic all through Scripture of fruitlessness, a wasteland.

It's the word that identifies, actually, the burning bush that Moses saw in the desert when God first appeared to him in Exodus 3:2. This is that word. So used together, *akantha* and *batos* provide an image of the fruitlessness that all through Scripture God saw in Israel. He saw this fruitlessness, this *akantha* and *batos* repeatedly in them over a long period of time.

Israel's fruitlessness often brought about his judgment, even their expulsion from the land into exile. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews, reminding his readers of that, pulls his readers back and warns them in Hebrews 6:7 to 8. "For the land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless, near to being cursed, its end is to be burned."

Fruitfulness receives blessing from God. Thorns and thistles, fruitlessness brings about the cursing of God, the judgment of God by burning, that's the warning. For everyone who listened to Jesus that day, with a Jewish cultural background or familiar with Jewish history, which was most if not everybody here in his presence on this day, this image of thorns and thistles, thornbushes and bramble bushes set in contrast to figs and grapes, Jesus' point is strikingly clear: Stay away from those teachers who produce thorns and thistles, who are not producing figs and grapes because they lead you to judgment.