

Many of you will be familiar with the advert from a certain chain of international florists, that said: 'say it with flowers'. Well, right here in Galatians 5:22-23, we have a welcome variation on that theme. The preacher-man Paul wants us to 'say it with fruit'. Here, by faith, we walk through God's orchard to gather a basket brimming with fruit.

This is truly amazing, especially in the context of this chapter; in the previous few verses, Paul takes no prisoners when he outlines the foul characteristics of sinful man; take it from me, the list does not make for pleasant reading at all. This is sin's vocabulary in its monstrous reality. And it stinks. There is ample evidence of it all around us – just look at all the messed up lives in your community.

I'm so glad the inspired preacher didn't stop there! It's against that dark backcloth that this jewel of grace sparkles. There is another way, there is a royal route – Paul says, 'But ...' This man, who has seen it all in the course of his ministry, changes gear; he moves into the fast lane, he goes into overdrive as he talks about the incredible qualities of a life that is spiritually orientated. What a bold contrast to a carnal man; there is love and joy, kindness and goodness, etc. There's no doubt about it, his aspiration is for us to live our lives for God's exclusive pleasure; that's the gist of Romans 7:4, where Paul reminds us that we belong to the risen Lord 'in order that we might bear fruit to God.' Our God is the divine gardener, and the fruit is produced for his satisfaction. That means, when we step up to the plate and live our lives to the praise of his glory, that God is delirious with joy – he smiles upon us. We know his benediction. A similar thought is seen in John 15 where we read: 'I have told

you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.'

Now, this is not the kind of fruit you see growing on a tree in your back garden – we're not talking here about russet apples or conference pears; you won't even find it in a box in your local Tesco or Sainsbury's either, for these are not peaches or plums.

This kind of fruit is stunningly special. It's superbly unique. It's transformational. It's what you can expect to produce if you really love the Lord and are living your life in step with the Spirit, as Paul says further down the chapter in verse 25.

The fruit of the Spirit is not manufactured by machine. This is produced. Fruit is the result on the outside of the life lived on the inside. The same truth is expressed in John 15:5 – I like to think of it like this: apart from Christ, I can do nothing and I am nothing! Simply put, it's not so much about me; it is, however, all about him.

The picture that Paul is painting here on the canvas is of real Christian character. These are the rich qualities you'll find in a person who knows God intimately. There's nothing shallow or superficial about them. It's not skin deep. It has nothing to do with cosmetics or enhancing your appearance in a quickie makeover, but it has everything to do with the kind of person you are. He wants us to be Real McCoy believers. Integrity and authenticity are two words that spring to mind.

There are nine of them altogether in this beautiful cluster and they are all portrayed as the fruit of the Spirit. We hear a lot of people talking about the gift of the Holy Spirit, and that's fine, for he enables us to be what he wants us to be; other folks home in on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and that's ok, for he equips us

to do what he wants us to do; this list, however, is different, for it focuses on the graces of the Holy Spirit.

The gifts point to what we do, the graces point to who we are. Actually, the gifts and graces belong together – they complete the Christian. If we had graces without gifts, we would lack power. If we possessed gifts without graces, we would lack character. We can sum it up like this: we need the gifts of the Holy Spirit to serve the Lord effectively – and we need the graces of the Holy Spirit to live for the Lord effectively. It reminds me of the old saying that you'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day!

Because we speak of them as 'fruit' it indicates life; it suggests growth, and it certainly implies pruning.

When he takes the shears and snips a wee bit here and a wee bit there, that's what sanctification is all about – it's you and I becoming more and more like Jesus. When the Holy Spirit produces the nine fruit of the Spirit, he is reproducing Christ in us. The won't-go-away fact is, the one in charge knows a thing or two about fruit – he is the divine pomologist. (If you didn't know it, Pomona was the Roman goddess of fruit!)

I'm sure you see the link, for that is how God works in your life and mine – in his gracious providence, he takes the 'all things' of Romans 8:28 and gels them together for our good; he brings the best of times out of the worst of times. It seems to me, the Lord wants nothing more than for us to display every fragrance and flavour of the fruit of the Holy Spirit; that is, he wants us to be productive Christians.

We see echoes of that principle in Psalm 1:3, the man who is spiritually prosperous '... is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.' There's nothing as sad as a barren believer, someone who hasn't fulfilled

their potential in God; the Lord is looking for fruitful saints in this and every generation. He wants us to make a mark, he wants us to leave a legacy.

I think it's worth noting that fruit doesn't appear overnight; it takes time to grow and mature. It takes the icy winter rain, the spring air, and the summer sunshine all working in harmony to make it possible. In the natural world, the entire process is complex, it's intricate; germination and growth don't happen with a click of the fingers. The process is a gradual, growing one. Hey, we're in it for the long haul.

The best fruit ripens naturally; the Lord will use every season in our lives to cause us to bloom and blossom where he has planted us. This is true in our youth; but it's also true for those in senior years – we discover in Psalm 92:12-15 the timeless secret to a fruitful life.

The palm tree speaks of gracefulness and elegance; the cedar represents strength. We flourish and grow as we engage in sweet fellowship with our Lord – there's a lot to be said for you and I spending quality time in the house of God. We still have so much to offer – we can still 'bear fruit in old age' as evergreen saints. I think of Caleb, there he was in his 80s, he was on the up and up, when many another man was doting in the chair or riding into the sunset.

Those who are 'in the know' tell me there are sixteen elements necessary for the growth of real fruit – three come from water and air, the rest are absorbed from the soil. So it's all down to location, location, location. If we're going to bear fruit, we need to spend time in the presence of the SON; we need to see that our relationship with God is cultivated on a daily basis. I suppose that goes back to Psalm 92, but it's also at the heart of John 15 as well – it's all about us staying near to Jesus. Our job is then to bear the fruit that he produces in us. It's from the vine! For that to happen, we have to be connected.

There's a priceless nugget tucked away in Genesis 49 – it's a moving moment when we read of Jacob's last words to each of his sons. He said concerning Joseph in verse 22: 'Joseph is a fruitful vine, a fruitful vine near a spring, whose branches climb over a wall.'

There are three lessons we can learn: one, Joseph knew the source of his strength – his roots went to a spring. He could've said, 'All my fountains are in you' (Psalm 87:7). His roots were in God, as our roots may be, through our spiritual union with Jesus Christ. The testimony of the book of Genesis is that 'the Lord was with him' (39:2).

Two, Joseph's fruitfulness was a tremendous benefit to others. You see, his branches climbed over a wall. He brought help and refreshment to other people's lives, although he may have been unaware of it at times. We are blessed to bless ... we soak it all in, then we squeeze it all out!

Three, his fruitfulness came only after he had been pruned. He would not have been as fruitful as he was had he not passed through his tough times. His character was shaped by his many troubles. Nothing had been wasted. The take home lesson is that God is more interested in what I am, than he is in what I do. So, let's be a fruitful people, a people of grace!