

FRUITFULNESS ON THE FRONTLINE

MODELLING GODLY CHARACTER

Somebody once said this to me: “Ian, the people in your church won’t remember what you say, but they will remember who you are!”

Perhaps you could discuss how true that is – not just in ministry – but in life in general! I think there’s a lot of truth in that statement, and I think the truth is something to do with character.

Louise worked for an ogre. She was PA to probably the most unreasonable boss in Buckinghamshire. He was bad tempered, temperamental, indifferent to others, changeable. And she worked for the ogre for three years, prayed for strength, prayed that he would change, and prayed that he would become a follower of Jesus. But he didn’t. And she felt like an abject failure. In the end, she decided that she couldn’t take it anymore and she left, feeling like she’d let God down.

A few weeks later, she got a phone call from the woman who had replaced her: “He is impossible. I’ve been here three weeks and I’m already thinking of leaving. So I talked to a couple of people and they told me to give you a call. They said you’d done a fantastic job, that you’d always been gracious and upbeat, despite his impossible ways. How did you do it?”¹

Perhaps a mistake many of us make is that we think we cannot or are not being fruitful for God. Perhaps part of the problem is that we think we are not in the right place to be fruitful for God. So... we don’t work in or for the church; we’re not a missionary; we don’t go to work or we’re not in the right kind of job; we don’t spend lots of time with homeless people or drug addicts, or victims of abuse.....so we don’t think we go to places where fruitfulness matters.

Perhaps too, we mistake what fruitfulness is. We think that to be fruitful we have to be an evangelist – or certainly talk to people about what we believe. Perhaps though, we need to take a step back and begin to think about

¹ Fruitfulness on the Frontline page 65/66

fruitfulness slightly differently. What is really important for us is that we always hold the bigger picture of God's redemptive story right in front of us. By that I simply mean that we must always hold before us the deep, profound and magnificent truth that life is better with God! That is very important friends.

Life is better with God because we are greatly loved by God.

Life is better with God because God longs that we would live in the best way.

Life is better with God because nothing, absolutely nothing can separate you from this deep and majestic and powerful love.

Many things will make it difficult, but nothing can separate you from His love. That means there is nowhere you can go where God's love cannot reach you, and life is better with God because God will simply not stop loving you. When we, any person, chooses to live in the light of this bigger picture, when we become committed followers of Christ then we open ourselves to live in God's best.

You remember the parable of the sower in Mathew 13? A farmer goes out to sow seed and the seed falls on different kinds of soil. Some of the seed grows and some of it doesn't. When we look at this story we tend to think about the seed and why it does or doesn't grow. Sometimes we focus on the different types of soil and how that affects the growth of the seed, and then we tend to try to apply these things to our own lives and ask what happens to the seed in our lives and the lives of others. We ask ourselves what kind of soil we are. And I'm sure that Jesus himself would say those are good questions to ask and think about and wrestle with.

But for a moment think about the farmer who goes out to sow seed. What is he desperately hoping will happen with the seed he sows? He desperately hopes that the seed will grow; he wants and longs for a bountiful crop – seed that reaches its full potential. God is the master gardener, and the master gardener longs that his people will reach their full potential. He longs, desperately for his children, his loved ones to grow. He longs desperately that his children will grow and bear fruit. The farmer wants, simply, the best for his

seed. The master gardener wants the best for his people. Psalm 1 might help us begin to see how this might happen:

Psalm 1

¹ Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers. (Psalm 1 v 1-3)

Psalm 1 says that a person is blessed when they live in the light of the truth that life is better with God. Psalm 1 says that a person is blessed when they know what God says and they walk in his ways. Psalm 1 says that a person who follows God and trusts in Him will grow and bear fruit.

I love this story:

A Jewish couple had a son after many years of trying and he was a great joy for them! They named him Mordecai – but he became quite a challenge for them. They were pious Jews, yet Mordecai was a rambunctious, zestful boy who had a love of life. When he was old enough, his parents sent him to the synagogue to learn the word of God. They stressed to him how important it was to learn God’s word and that without knowledge of it his life would be less.

He listened but the next day he never arrived at the synagogue instead he found himself in the woods, swimming in the lake, and climbing the trees. By the time he got home, news of his antics had spread all through the village, everyone knew of his shame. His parents were at a loss as to what to do. They called in an expert to modify Mordecai’s behaviour. But the next day he found himself in the woods, swimming in the lake and climbing trees.

His parents grieved for their son and felt there was simply no hope for him. As it happened the Great Rabbi was visiting the village and the parents of Mordecai went to him in desperation. They told him the story and the Rabi

invited them to leave Mordecai with him. He said: "Leave him with me and I will have a talk with him." Unsure and ashamed, they left him with the Rabbi. Mordecai faced the great Rabbi trembling! He beckoned the boy to come to him, and then simply and gently picked him up and held him silently to his heart. The next day Mordecai went to the synagogue, and when he had finished, went to the woods, swam in the lake and climbed the trees. Only this time as he walked in the woods, the word of God became one with the words of the woods, which became one with the words of Mordecai. And as he swam in the lake, the words of God became one with the words of the lake which became one with the words of Mordecai. And as he climbed the trees, the words of God became one with the words of the trees, which became one with the words of Mordecai. And Mordecai grew to become a great man.

People who were seized with panic came to him and found peace. People who were without anybody came to him and found communion. People who had no exits came to him and found a way out. And when people came to him he said, "I first learned the words of God when the Great Rabbi held me silently against his heart."²

And what's the point I think I'm trying to make? Simply this: The best way to understand fruitfulness is in the context of the truth that life is better with God and lived in the light of His great love. He is the master gardener who longs to see you grow and bear fruit, and that happens at its best when you are planted by the streams of water he provides. When you are held to the heart of God then:

His words become your words
His thoughts become your thoughts
His ways become your ways
The things he hears will become the things you hear
The things he sees will become the things you see
The things he seeks will become the things you seek
The things he loves will become the things you love
His life will become your life
His heart will become your heart

² Adapted from: Manning, Brennan, "Abba's Child," NavPress 2002 ed. Pages 119-120

When we allow ourselves to be held silently to the heart of God...When we trust the master gardener to do his work in us...When we are planted by streams of living water...then we will grow and bear fruit and reach our full redemptive potential.

Fruitfulness is from the inside out. Fruitfulness is not something you do, it's something you become. And fruitfulness becomes part of who we are.

When Paul writes to the followers of Christ in Galatians, he is concerned that they don't get pulled away from living in God's best. He wants them to live in the freedom of the truth about God. He wants them to know that God's best is found in Jesus, and Jesus is all they need. Paul says you can live in one of two ways: One way is to live for ourselves; the other is to live in God's best.

13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." 15 If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

19 The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. (Galatians 5 v 13-26)

The things Paul describes in verses 19-21 all come from a desire to live as the centre of the universe. The alternative way is to live a life shaped by God's

Holy Spirit at work in us causing us to grow, as the master gardener intended. Living one way means we take good things and use them for our own ends. Living the other means a life shaped by the Spirit, the fruit of which is seen by the way others benefit from our transformation.

What Paul writes about here, the fruit we know so well, was a radical vision and a radically different set of values to those in the culture to which he wrote. Where the strongest survive, where it's everyone for themselves, love, patience, humility, self-control will never be valued. But when we are held to the father's heart, when we allow the master gardener to do his work, when we are planted by streams of water, when the spirit is at work in us... this is what we become. And this is the kind of life we take with us into all the places that we go. And when we live like this we live with Godly character.

Living with Godly character makes a difference! It makes a difference because it is God's best, and it makes a difference because it is a radically different life to the one that our culture values and applauds and often encourages.

The fruit of the spirit is not the only way we become fruitful, but it might help us to see how modelling Godly character makes a difference. Remember Louise and her ogre boss? How did she do it? She did it because of who she was becoming. She thought she was nothing remarkable, she thought she'd failed, but she was held to the father's heart. She was allowing the master gardener to do his work. She was planted by streams of living water and she was growing. The life of the father was becoming her life. She was growing in her redemptive potential. She was becoming more loving, more joyful, more peaceful. She was becoming more patient, kinder, and more good. She was becoming more faithful, gentler and more self-controlled.

She didn't notice, but how it made a difference! She probably didn't grow in all of those things all of the time, in exactly the same way. But she lived out the fabulous truth we found in Psalm 1, that a tree planted by streams of water bears fruit in season. Working with a boss like an ogre was a place where her growth in the fruit of patience could shine and others noticed!

Friends, when you model Godly character, when you live out the life that the master gardener is growing within you....others will notice. And here's a challenging thought: could it be true that the only place I will ever be able to grow in patience, is in the very situation I am least likely to be patient? So for other parts of the fruit of the spirit Paul lists:

To whom do you need to be more loving?
Where do you need to express your joy?
Where can you bring about peace?
In what situation do you need to exercise most patience?
Where can you perform a simple act of kindness?
How can you bring a little happiness by an act of goodness?
Where can you show selflessness for the sake of someone else and show your faithfulness?
Who could you choose to build up rather than crush with your gentleness?
In what circumstance you currently face, can your life honour God, when you would find it easier to ignore him?

Friends, who are you becoming? When we live in the truth of God's bigger story and we are held to the Father's heart... we will grow in Godly character and Godly character makes a difference. They might not remember what you say, but they will remember who you are!

So:

When you have your next appraisal; when you find yourself in an argument at home; when your friends frustrate you; when your boss is unbearably difficult; when you hear that gossip in the playground; when there are challenges in the family; when you need to confront someone or something; when life is tedious; when it is easy and when it is hard...

Perhaps there are opportunities for the life that is growing in us, by the help of the master gardener, to shine brightly! As we grow and reach more fully our true redemptive potential, perhaps we make more of a difference than we will ever know or imagine, and through our growing Godly character there really is transformation at the frontline.

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 22nd May 2015, by Rev. Ian Phillips.