
Ministry Meeting

Leviticus 19 -- Fruit for the Lord -- James 1 -- 2 Samuel 23

December 31, 2016

Opening Reading -- Leviticus 19:23-25

Leviticus 19:23-25

And when ye come into the land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food, then ye shall count the fruit thereof as uncircumcised: three years shall it be as uncircumcised unto you; it shall not be eaten of. But in the fourth year all the fruit thereof shall be holy to praise Jehovah withal. And in the fifth year shall ye eat of the fruit thereof, that it may yield unto you the increase thereof: I am Jehovah your God.

Planting a Tree: Decisions That Grow

Here is God in His word taking the time to tell the people of Israel what to do when they plant a fruit tree. The instructions are not what one might expect: no mention of digging a hole, adding mulch, or watering. God is interested in somewhat different things, and there are moral lessons here worth drawing out.

A fruit tree is a picture of any decision in life that is not merely for today but will grow. Choosing an area of study, starting a new kind of work, adopting a new habit, going in a new direction -- these are things that start out small and, as time goes on, grow into something that may produce fruit. The question is: what kind of fruit? And for whom?

When Ye Come into the Land: Unbelief Delays the Planting

The very first phrase -- 'when ye come into the land' -- is a condition. And for the generation that left Egypt, that condition was never fulfilled. Unbelief kept them in the wilderness for forty years, and they all died there except for Caleb and Joshua, who wholly followed the Lord. Deuteronomy begins by noting that the journey from Egypt to Canaan is eleven days -- and it took them forty years.

Unbelief does the same for believers. When we wonder why there is so little fruit in our lives, why the refreshment we look for just does not seem to come, the place to look is our own hearts for roots of unbelief. Unbelief keeps us wandering in the wilderness when the land is within reach.

All Manner of Trees: Galatians 5 and the Fruit of the Spirit

The text says: 'all manner of trees for food.' All manner -- apple, peach, pear, plum, fig, and more. One man could plant an orchard of different kinds of fruits. And for us, the New Testament counterpart is the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23:

Galatians 5:22-23

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, self-control: against such there is no law.

Count them: nine fruits. Not ten commandments for fruit -- nine fruits. There is no law about these things. Fruit is not obtained by obedience to law. 'The law was given by Moses; but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.' By contrast, the works of the flesh in verses 19-21 are more than sixteen -- the list ends 'and things like these,' because it is not exhaustive. And they are called works, not fruits: they cost sweat. Fruit is different. Fruit is produced by abiding in the vine.

Uncircumcised Fruit: The Knife Must Come First

Verse 23 says that for three years the fruit of the newly planted tree shall be uncircumcised -- it shall not be eaten. Uncircumcised fruit means the knife has never been applied to it, the flesh has not been cut off. In the forty years in the wilderness, the children of Israel never circumcised their children. When they crossed into Canaan under Joshua, the first thing was circumcision (Joshua 5), and then the rolling away of the reproach of Egypt.

Sometimes we imagine that life is just going to be wonderful and everything will produce fruit without any difficulty, without any reckoning with the flesh within us. Paul said: 'Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God.' That is the recipe -- the application of the knife, death applied to the old nature. It is the starting point for a life full of all manner of fruit.

Gilgal: Rolling, Not Hacking

Joshua 5:9 records the Lord's word after the circumcision at Gilgal: 'This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you.' The name Gilgal means rolling. Israel went back to Gilgal again and again throughout the book of Joshua -- always the place of reminding themselves of circumcision, of the rolling away of the reproach of Egypt. The world has a grip on all of us from our youth. However sheltered or Christian our upbringing, the world affects us because we are in it. Gilgal is where that grip is loosened.

And the Lord's description of how He does it is instructive. He did not say He hacked off the reproach of Egypt with an axe. He said He rolled it away. The Lord Jesus said: 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest... my yoke is easy and my burden is light.' The process of being separated from this present world, of having the flesh dealt with -- it is like rolling. Smooth, complete, gentle. No axes. No half measures. Just rolling.

The Fourth Year: For the Lord First

In the fourth year, all the fruit is holy -- for praise to Jehovah. The fifth year is when the one who planted the tree may eat of it himself. The order is plain: the Lord first. If after three years of growth there is nothing there for the Lord -- if all that appears is something that would not bring praise to Him -- then the first three years have revealed what kind of tree it is. Cut it down.

Psalm 148 brings fruit trees and praise together in a single verse: 'Fruit trees and all cedars: let them praise the name of Jehovah.' It is possible. A fruit tree can be connected with praise to the Lord. And that is the point: what grows in my life, what I pursue and invest in and give myself to -- does it produce anything for the Lord's praise? If not after three years, cut it down and plant something else.

The Fig Tree: Luke 13

Luke 13:6-9

A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.

The Lord Jesus labored for three years among Israel and looked for fruit. What He found was rejection. When He looked on the cross for comforters, there were none. But the vine dresser interceded for one more year, and after His death the gospel was preached in Jerusalem by the apostles, and the claims of a risen and ascended Lord were set before the nation -- until Stephen's testimony closed that year of grace and they sent back their final answer: we will not have this man to reign over us. Then the tree was cut down. The same principle applies to our

lives: how is it going after three years? What fruit is there for the Lord? If there is none, something needs to change.

Abiding in the Vine: John 15

John 15:4

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

The fruit is not produced by our effort. The branch does nothing except stay connected. It abides. And the vine produces the fruit through the branch. How do we know it is fruit? If it results in praise to the Lord -- if there is something there for Him in it. That is the test.

The Simplicity That Is in Christ: 2 Corinthians 11

2 Corinthians 11:2-3

For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

The simplicity here is not about avoiding deep doctrine -- quite the opposite. Darby's translation reads: 'corrupted from the simplicity that is in the Christ.' This simplicity has to do with that truth especially given to the Apostle Paul: the heavenly calling, the Lord Jesus glorified in heaven, the union of the assembly with its head. That is what Satan wants to beguile us from -- occupation with Christ in the glory. As one hymn writer expressed it: 'Lord, we conceive in Thee a prospect bright and failing, where God shall shine in light divine and glory never fading.'

This simplicity connects directly with what Revelation 2 calls first love. The Lord said to Ephesus: 'Thou hast left thy first love.' First love is not only our love for the Lord -- it is His love for us, and the Father's love for us. That is what Satan wants to corrupt us from. It is that occupation with Christ and His love -- a heavenly object, a heavenly calling -- that is the simplicity the serpent works to beguile away.

Take Heed How Ye Hear: James 1 and the Useful Mirror

Luke 8:18 contains a striking expression: 'Take heed therefore how ye hear.' Not what you hear, but how. There is more than one way to hear the word of God. When the Lord spoke to the crowds in Galilee, those who heard Him in Matthew 13 heard in the sense that the sound reached their ears -- but heard they did not, and understood they did not, because the word had no effect in them. Hearing they did not hear.

James 1:22-25

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if any one be a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a mirror: for he beholdeth himself, and hath gone away, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But he that looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and so continueth, he being not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his doing.

James presents this with striking sharpness. A man who looks into a mirror and walks away and cannot remember what he saw is a man who has made the mirror entirely useless. He looked, but it produced nothing. That is what a hearer of the word who is not a doer is like. The law of liberty is not freedom to do as one pleases; it is like a train that stays on its rails and is free to go wherever it likes. The new nature, the life of Christ in me, only knows how to please Him. If I give

that nature full scope, that is the law of liberty. And when I hear with a view to doing, the mirror does its work.

Revelation 3:20 -- The Lord Knocking

Revelation 3:20

Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.

This verse, often used as a gospel verse, is in fact addressed to the church at Laodicea -- to those within the sphere of profession. The lost cannot open the door to Christ; Romans 8 says they that are in the flesh cannot please God. This is the Lord standing at the heart's door of a professing Christian and knocking. Is that knocking? Perhaps I am too occupied to notice. Or I can get up and open the door -- and the result is communion: 'I will sup with him and he with me.' That is the answer to bearing fruit: communion with the Lord. Hearing that leads to doing, and doing that leads to communion.

The Last Words of David: 2 Samuel 23

2 Samuel 23:1-5

Now these are the last words of David... The Spirit of Jehovah spoke by me, and his word was upon my tongue. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake to me: He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God. And he shall be as the light of the morning, when the sun riseth, even a morning without clouds; as the tender grass springing out of the earth by clear shining after rain. Although my house be not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire.

At the very end of his life, what is before David's heart? Not his own exploits. Not his victories or his kingdom. The first thing he gives us is a vision of the one who will reign in perfect righteousness as the Son of David -- the Lord Jesus, of whom David and Solomon were only types. A morning without clouds, the tender grass springing up after rain -- that is the character of the Lord's millennial reign. The glory of the Lord was before David first.

Then: 'Although my house be not so with God.' That is confession. David knew his failures; he did not pretend otherwise. And then: the everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure -- that is present grace. Not a resolution to perform better going forward, but the grace of God covering all his past and assuring him in the present. Jacob at the end of his life, after all his cleverness and self-reliance, worshipped leaning on his staff -- the dependence had come in at last. David too: glory of the Lord, confession, and present grace.

What Hath God Wrought: Numbers 23:23

Numbers 23:23

Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel: according to this time it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, What hath God wrought!

Balak hired Balaam to curse Israel, and the Lord overruled his mouth so that blessing came out instead. 'What hath God wrought?' -- that is the right response to a life of fruit borne for the Lord. Nothing of David himself, nothing of my own plans or programmes or crafted strategies: just the recognition of what the Lord has done. At the end of any life lived in communion with the Lord, attached to the vine, abiding in Him -- the only fitting expression is that one: what hath God wrought?

We do not write new plans for success. We do not enter the next phase of life with a crafted programme of activity. What we do is hear -- hear with a view to

doing; abide in the vine; let the Lord produce His fruit through us. And when we see what comes of it, in the fourth year and the fifth year and beyond, the praise belongs to Him -- the Lord of the harvest whose fruit it always was.

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Lord willing.