



**“FINDING FRUIT”**  
**1 KINGS 19:15-16, 19-21; GALATIANS 5:1, 13-25**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**June 30, 2019**

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**1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21**

19:15 Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram.

19:16 Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.

19:19 So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him.

19:20 He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Then Elijah said to him, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?"

19:21 He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

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**Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

5:13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

5:14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

5:15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

5:16 Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. (Walk with the Spirit, and you will not follow the desires of the flesh)

5:17 For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.

5:18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.

5:19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness,

5:20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions,

5:21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

5:22 By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,

5:23 gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

5:24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

5:25 If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

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So much has to happen for fruit to grow.

It really is a team effort. Many fruit trees (especially most kinds of apple trees) need a partner tree nearby of the same species but a different variety for pollination. And the pollinator has to move the pollen from one place to the exact right other place on the plant.

There have to be a few good days of the right temperatures. There have to be the right kind of pollinators around to get the job done—bees or birds or even the wind. Some species of fruit require a certain kind of pollinator. It's an intricate process with a lot of variables. And the amazing thing is that so much of the time somehow it works!

Fruit tells us an important story about life and growth. Isolation and too much sameness do not cultivate the conditions things need to grow. A healthy ecosystem is full of diversity and opportunity for connection and collaboration.

God truly is an optimist to have so much riding on how living things connect with each other.

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The prophet Elijah was looking for a way to disconnect. He was not thriving in community. In fact, he was languishing. So much so that in the passage that led up to the one we read today, he was pretty much ready to quit—even to die. He went out into the wilderness and said to God—I'm tired; I don't care about anything anymore. I don't want to eat. Please just end my life now, he asked God.

Prophet burn out must have been a problem back then—I mean the conditions were ripe for people like Elijah to run out of gas. Telling people what they don't want to hear over and over again can really take it out of you. It's hard to find nourishment and community when nobody really wants you around.

In our passage today, Elijah gets his answer from God and it isn't that he can quit—instead he needs to share power, to build partnerships, and to let others help him shoulder the load.

God makes it clear that Elijah's weariness is not a reason to give up; it is a reason to reach out.

The strange story then ensues of Elijah throwing his cloak or whatever a mantle is over Elisha while he's plowing the fields. Elisha, interestingly enough, seems to get the drift that this mantle throwing thing is a pretty momentous gesture, and that this exchange means everything is going to change for both Elijah and Elisha.

Elisha seemed ripe for this new role—ready to leave a lucrative family business, ready to learn how to be a prophet in a troubled world.

God used Elijah's despair to persuade him to expand his circle. It is faith that takes Elijah to a place where he finds a way to connect, as awkward and strange as his manner of reaching out was. The conditions were ripe and Elijah found fruit.

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Paul's letter to the churches in the Galatian region was written from a place of irritation, annoyance, perhaps even exasperation. Paul had visited these churches—maybe even founded them, depending on which Galatian region this letter was addressing. Either way, these people knew Paul and Paul knew them.

And in true Pauline fashion, he is staying in touch with these communities because he cares about what is happening there.

The churches in Galatia were fractured because of competing interpretations of scripture. Sound familiar?

There was really never a time in the history of people following Jesus when there was not diversity of interpretation. God doesn't seem to encourage sameness for any kind of system to be healthy—variety, difference can create fruitful conditions, except when those differences become weapons for breaking community instead of tools for building community.

Paul was frustrated that a group of missionaries had come through Galatia and convinced some people that they were required to engage in a strict observance of law to be in right relationship with God.

Paul had taught them about grace—and about the freedom that Christ gives us. Jesus followers do not abandon the law, Paul taught them, but believers take on a new relationship with the law.

The freedom that Christ brings to us means that the law is not our pathway to right relationship, but the fruit of right relationship with God. The law is fulfilled when the community truly walks with the Spirit.

Paul's use of the Greek concept of *sarx*, translated as flesh, is so important to us as Jesus followers, but has been misunderstood and weaponized. Many misguided theologies and teachings have unfolded from here.

Paul's use of *sarx* points to a condition that can exist within the human being, rather than to our physical body. But "flesh" has been easily misunderstood to mean our literal flesh—our bodies. For Paul *sarx* is really about a disposition that human beings are prone to that kindles in us a tendency to defy God. It's not that flesh is bad; it is our susceptibility to mistaking ourselves for God that is the problem.

It is this tendency for human beings to forget God, to distort God, to play God, that signals our need for God to be in proximity to us—ready to pollinate, with the Spirit as our pollinator, with Christ's transforming love. Human beings need connection to God to live fruitful lives.

Paul is most upset about community being broken, about connections that are supposed to be life-giving becoming connections that demean, estrange, oppress, and incarcerate.

And Paul is upset about the ways Jesus followers were distorting things to enslave people—to enslave them either to a legalistic observance of rules and regulations or to enslave them to self-indulgence and connections that break community.

Paul's list of things that emerge when our defiance of God leads the way is about community being broken in Paul's social/historical context.

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What would our list of community breakers be in our time, in our context? So often we point to division as the cause of brokenness, but division is really just a symptom of our brokenness, not a cause. Why do we so often avoid addressing the deeper problem, the causes and conditions that create brokenness and disease? Why do we prefer just making the symptoms disappear?

What are the community breakers of our time?

Greed, oppression, abuse of power, white supremacy culture, living in communities with too much sameness, commodification of people/animals/natural resources, violence.

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Paul reminds the churches that it is walking with the Spirit that will lead them to the fruits of life in Christ. "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

The most popular English translations from the Greek say "live by the Spirit" and then issue an imperative: "don't gratify the desires of the flesh." In the Greek the verb is more accurately translated as "walk with" the Spirit (not live with), and the second part of the sentence is not an imperative but a future prediction. That is, it is not a command, but a description of how walking with the Spirit will manifest in these behaviors, in these fruits.

This is an important distinction because Paul is not giving people a to do list with his list of fruits, he is telling them that when they walk with the Spirit—these fruits will be the result. So where you see these fruits: there you know the Holy Spirit is leading the way.

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So much has to happen for fruit to grow—the causes and conditions must be present for pollination, for life-giving connection, to take hold. When you find fruit, you know those conditions are there.

We don't make these things show up in our midst, the Spirit does. God really is an optimist about us human beings—no matter how much we seem to want to prove God wrong about us, God just keeps pollinating and it is breathtaking when you stop and notice that it actually works!

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Tomorrow marks three years for our relationship—July 1, 2016 was my first day on the job as Pastor/Head of Staff at Grace Covenant. The Spirit definitely connected us—there is no other way to explain it. I am grateful for the mystery of that connection that brought us together. It was a team effort to be sure!

Being a part of this community of faith gives me a new appreciation for God's optimism—because, honestly, there was a time when I was ready to give up on the whole church thing—too much hypocrisy, too much hurt, too many experiences of people being hostile to hearing Jesus' gospel of liberation and justice. My weariness with the church was personal and it was collective—the more my relationships expanded beyond people just like me, the more I saw and felt the church's harm.

But every day around here, the Spirit's presence is undeniable. Moments of gentleness, moments of grace in pastoral conversations and in creative collaborations about our ministries.

Eruptions of joy and generosity in unexpected gifts that inspire new possibilities—a record making stewardship campaign, people saying yes to someone else's stated need, people opening their homes and opening their hearts, an anonymous gift to fund our solar panels.

I am excited to share that the church has received another generous monetary gift that invites us into the practice of sharing our resources as an act of reparation and justice. You will be hearing more about this amazing gift in the coming weeks and months—but it is fruit of the Spirit, to be sure. This gift is designated for the church to use for reparations for stolen land, stolen labor, and the cost of racism that impacted people still carry. We can only begin to imagine what healing opportunities this gift may bring.

I find fruits of the Spirit in spaces of peace in the midst of the tumult—a quiet sanctuary with shared silence on Wednesday evenings, a moment of reflection in the Memorial Garden or in the meditation area, a candle lit and quietly shared with your staff when we begin our day here every Sunday.

Where do you find fruit in our life together? Take the time to notice, to savor, and to be nourished by it all.

Because fruit does not grow for its own sake, but for the sake of nourishment, for the sake of growth, for the sake of life and vitality and right relationship.

Thank you for three years of growth, of healing, of collaboration and connection. Thank you for three years of finding fruit together.

Here's to a fruitful future—and to God's optimism about the likes of us.

Thanks be to God.