

The Fruit of the Spirit: The Essence of Christian Character



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 6:33, John 15:8, Rom. 3:20–26, 14:17, 1 Tim. 6:11, 1 John 2:15.*

Memory Text: “To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (*Colossians 1:27, NKJV*).

When Moses asked God to show him His glory, it was then that the Lord revealed to him His character as merciful, gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth (*Exod. 34:6*). And so when “we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, [we] are changed into the same image from glory [character] to glory [character], even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (*2 Cor. 3:18*).

“By believing in Christ, the fallen race he has redeemed may obtain that faith which works by love and purifies the soul from all defilement. Then Christlike attributes appear: for by beholding Christ men become changed into the same image from glory to glory, from character to character. Good fruit is produced. The character is fashioned after the divine similitude, and integrity, uprightness, and true benevolence are manifested.”—Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 54.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 27.*

Seek First the Kingdom of God

So often our prayers are more about what we can get as opposed to what we should become. Think about your own prayers, or about the prayers that you hear others pray. No matter how legitimate the concerns are, what category do most of them fall under: What can I get, or what can I become? How do we understand this tendency in light of what Jesus says to us below?

“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (*Matt. 6:33, NKJV*). **What does Jesus mean when He tells us to seek “first” the kingdom of God? Why seek that first?** *See Matt. 16:26.*

How does Romans 14:17 help us understand what the kingdom of God is?

Notice that righteousness, peace, and joy are the fruit of the Spirit. Therefore, we should seek first the fruit of the Spirit before anything else. In the end, we can have everything the world offers, but what does that mean if we don't have righteousness, peace, and joy?

If someone were to ask, “But does this mean that Jesus isn't interested in my physical or financial well-being?” How would you answer in the light of Christ's command to put the fruit of the Spirit before physical or material needs?

A concerned mother said, “Pastor, please pray for my boy. He is out of the faith, and he has lost his job. Pray that he will find work.” Was this concerned mother seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness for her son? Keeping in mind that the priority of the Christian life is not to get but to become, what should her request for her boy have been?

What are your main concerns as revealed not just by your prayers but by your life in general: getting what you want for yourself or becoming what God wants you to become? What does your answer tell you about your priorities?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 14:17*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Contemplate the benefits of salvation.

Feel: Experience joy and peace.

Do: Grow up in righteousness through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: Salvation's Benefits

A Righteousness in Jesus is the essence of salvation. What does righteousness consist of?

B Life in Christ should not be joyless. Why might following Christ be described as difficult?

C The Holy Spirit majors in the central truths of salvation: righteousness, joy, and peace. Our key text cautions against giving food and drink a role they do not have. What is the purpose of this caution?

II. Feel: Peace and Joy

A There are people who seem afraid, unable, or unwilling to express joy and peace in Christ. What might be the cause of this gloomy attitude?

III. Do: The Deepening of Fellowship

A How is salvation to be enjoyed rather than endured?

B How does obedience in an ever-deepening fellowship with Jesus develop our Christian lives?

C The fruit of the Spirit is never found apart from the Holy Spirit. In what ways can we cooperate in order to bear fruit?

D A study of this quarter's Bible study guide shows us the possibilities available to us for Spirit-filled lives. What are the most likely things that limit and block God's power in our lives?

► **Summary:** The fruits of salvation are enjoyed in the Holy Spirit. They bring freedom from a negative life. They are cultivated through the Holy Spirit's guidance and deepen our fellowship with Christ.

Other Fruit of the Spirit

Galatians 5:22, 23 and Ephesians 5:9 are not the only texts that list the fruit that constitute the essence of Christian character. Many of the fruit are repeated in 1 Timothy 6:11, 2 Timothy 3:10, and 2 Peter 1:5–7, where qualities are added, such as godliness, virtue, and knowledge. It is interesting to note that 1 Corinthians 13:4–8 echoes the qualities of love and states many of them using the negative word *not*: “does not envy; . . . does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity” (*NKJV*).

It should be clear by now that there is not one official checklist when it comes to the fruit of the Spirit. There are many different aspects and nuances of Christian character. What the apostles do in each case is to list those that are especially applicable to their readers. What led Paul to the enumeration in Galatians was doubtless his pastoral knowledge of the particular needs of the congregation to which he was writing.

The fruit of “godliness” is mentioned in 1 Timothy 6:11. In the original language, the word *godliness* means “reverence, respect, and piety toward God.” Romans 5:4, 5 mentions the quality of “hope.” What role does hope play in the Christian character? When all is said and done, our Christian faith offers us nothing if not hope.

Second Peter 1:5–7 is a list of qualities, among them “virtue,” which is not mentioned in the list in Galatians 5:22, 23. Virtue is associated with moral goodness, as are modesty and purity. Why is this quality indispensable in the Christian life? How does this quality relate to the seventh commandment?

Second Peter 1:5, 6 adds “knowledge” to the list. Though the word that is used, *gnosis*, signifies general knowledge and understanding as fruit of the Spirit-filled life, what role would knowledge play? How would knowledge relate to, for instance, the gift of discernment?

Peter did not call his list in 2 Peter 1:5–7 the fruit of the Spirit, but essentially that’s what the qualities listed are, because they reveal what kind of people we should be as followers of Jesus.

How well are these characteristics manifested in your own life? If you are discouraged by what you see, what’s your one hope? What’s the only place you can flee to, and what can you find there?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: When we bear the fruit of the Spirit, the Spirit takes over our entire being. Such a connection makes it possible to reflect the character of Christ through our actions, a result of total submission to God.

Just for Teachers: Before ascending to heaven, Jesus gave His disciples one last commission—to go and spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Paul reiterates this in 2 Corinthians 5:20: “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (*NIV*). What a powerful statement—Christ’s ambassadors, instruments of God. Emphasize to class members that it is our sacred responsibility, as Christians, to bear the fruit of the Spirit.

Opening Activity: In Matthew 7:15–23, Jesus is warning the people of the false prophets soon to come. He says they will be disguised, but there will be one way to distinguish them—by their fruit. “‘A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. . . . So then, you will know them by their fruits.’” (*vss. 18–20, NASB*).

We also are known by our fruit. Our words, our actions, our lives all speak to our character. This week’s lesson calls love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control the essence of Christian character. How do you grow such fruit in your life?

Consider This: List other ways you can identify Christians. What constitutes Christian behavior, personality, perspective, and lifestyle? How can you bear more fruit? What would be the ideal characteristics of a Christian ambassador?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Jesus: Our Best Example (*Review John 3:34 with your class.*)

Jesus’ ministry began with a special anointing in which the Father gave Him the

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Perseverance in Faith

Yesterday's discussion question brought up the question of how well we are doing in cultivating the fruit that is our privilege to bear for the honor and glory of God. No doubt, as one looks at all these qualities of character and then compares oneself to them, it would be easy to get discouraged. After all, shouldn't we be bearing more fruit than we are?

That's a fair question, one that we should all seriously think about. "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith" (*2 Cor. 13:5*). We need to take stock of ourselves, of how we are living and of what kind of witness we present to the world.

At the same time, too, we can face a danger. As Christians, we have the example of Jesus, the only sinless human being who ever lived. As we compare ourselves to Him, how easy it could be to get discouraged. How easy to see His sinlessness and perfection in contrast to our sinfulness and weaknesses. We do have a perfect standard to follow, a perfect law to obey, and a perfect Savior to emulate. As we all know, we often fall far short of that standard, of that law, and of that Savior. How easy it can be, too, after falling and falling, after not seeing the kind of growth we would like, to get discouraged, even to the point of giving up, thinking, "Why bother? I just can't do it."

Here, though, is where we need to understand fully what salvation by faith is about. Here is where we need to understand where our salvation lies, and here is where we need to understand what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross.

Read Romans 3:20–26. What message is there for us about salvation? Why is this truth so important to cling to, especially when we feel discouraged about the state of our own fruit?

No matter how earnestly we seek to live the Christian life and fight the battle against sin and self, as long as we keep before us, every day, every moment, the reality that our acceptance with God is found in Jesus and His righteousness, which He worked out for us and which He credits to us by faith, we will never give up. Why should we? Our salvation remains secure, not in ourselves but in Jesus.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Holy Spirit and His gifts without measure. It was this constant presence of the Holy Spirit and His fruit that empowered and enabled Jesus to overcome sin.

Jesus is our best Example of how to live a Spirit-led life. His close communion with the Father shone through all aspects of His life. Tempted by Satan himself, Jesus showed self-control and remained strong (*Matt. 4:1–11*). Falsely accused and beaten, He was calm and gentle (*John 18:1–11*). Pleading with God in despair, He remained faithful (*Mark 14:35, 36*). Put to death by His own people, He forgave (*Luke 23:33, 34*).

Jesus manifested what it means to bear the fruit of the Spirit. He was so in tune with God that all these things became a natural part of His character.

Consider This: Who else embodied the fruit of the Spirit in the Bible? What similarities do they share with Jesus? What struggles did they face, and what was their response?

II. Growing in the Spirit (*Review 2 Timothy 3:16, 17 with your class.*)

Second Timothy 3:16, 17 tells us that Scripture completes a man. Time spent daily in prayer and study is the food we need to develop the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Jesus was well versed in Scripture. He taught regularly in the synagogue. And when tempted in the wilderness, He was quick to quote Moses (*Deut. 8:3, Matt. 4:4*). He consciously took time away from life's distractions to commune with God. In His most desperate times, He sought the Father. And when things were good, He thanked Him. It was this deep connection with God that enabled Him to reflect the Spirit so fully.

Just as Jesus made a conscious effort to take time away to be with His Father, our spiritual growth is proportionate to how much work we put into it. The joy of living the Christian life is to know that you never are done being used by the Lord. With the changing seasons of life and time and skills and needs, God has a purpose for each of us.

Consider This: It is a struggle to remain in constant communion with God as Jesus did. There are so many distractions that seem to get in the way of maintaining that connection. What are some ways in which you can make time for prayer and communion with God? How can you strive to be more aware of God's will in your life?

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The Challenge of the World

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15, NKJV). What is this text saying? Does it mean that God doesn’t love those who love the world, or that those who love the world don’t love God? Explain.

“At times the longings of the soul go out for holiness and heaven; but there is no time to turn aside from the din of the world to listen to the majestic and authoritative utterances of the Spirit of God. The things of eternity are made subordinate, the things of the world supreme. It is impossible for the seed of the word to bring forth fruit; for the life of the soul is given to nourish the thorns of worldliness.”
—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 51.

While we must be aware of the dangers of legalism, ancient Israel always backslid when it tried to contemporize itself and become like the nations around it. First John 2:15 warns that love of the world makes impossible a heartfelt love for God. How careful we need to be as a church in making sure that, in our attempts to reach the world, we don’t become enamored by it and swept into it, all in the name of the Lord!

How can a person know when his or her love for the world has superseded his or her love for God? What signs should we look for?

The danger of loving the world more than God takes on new meaning in James 4:4: “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (NKJV). Why would James use the metaphor of adultery for church members who are swept up with the world? Notice, too, how in 1 John 2:15 John leaves no room for compromise. It’s either God, or it’s the world.

What aspects of the world do you struggle with the most? What things do you find alluring? How can you learn to fight the fight of faith and not get swept up in something that, in the end, cannot satisfy and will destroy you?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**III. Submitting to the Spirit** (*Review John 3:6 with your class.*)

The most basic, and vital, way to cultivate spiritual growth is complete submission to God. Paul says, “Having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (*Rom. 6:18, NKJV*). It is this kind of absolute submission that is essential to spiritual growth.

Sin is in our nature. Galatians 5:17 says that our “sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit,” that “they are in conflict with each other” (*NIV*). If we are to truly bear the fruit of the Spirit, we must submit ourselves fully to God. We cannot persevere through life’s trials alone; without God we will fail. We bear the fruit of the Spirit when we are fully surrendered to God and the Holy Spirit is allowed to work in us. “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (*John 3:6*).

Consider This: Oftentimes our human nature gets in the way of total submission to God. How can we overcome our natural tendency to do things ourselves? Jesus tells us, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God . . . and all these things shall be added unto you” (*Matt. 6:33*). How does this counsel apply to the fruit of the Spirit?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Jesus’ life on earth exemplified the marriage of the law and love. When He left, the Holy Spirit filled this void. The presence of the Spirit in our life amplifies the message that the congruence of law and love is vital to Christian living. The fruit of the Spirit enables us to live in such a manner.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Bible study and prayer are good ways to strengthen your relationship with God and to practice submission. But what are some other tangible ways you can learn to submit to God?
- ❷ Second Corinthians 13:5 tells us to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith. But like Paul, we often find ourselves falling short the closer we get to Christ. How can you keep from being discouraged by slow growth?
- ❸ Jesus was tested at all points during His ministry. Satan tempted Him. The Pharisees despised Him. His closest friends failed to understand Him.

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How to Grow the Fruit of the Spirit

(John 15:8)

Although we cannot make a seed grow, there are definitely things we can do that will facilitate growth until it bears fruit. So it is in the Spirit-filled life. While the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer is a part of the great mystery of life itself, Scripture has given us definite instruction on how to encourage that growth so that we may fulfill Jesus' desire that we bring forth much fruit to the glory of the Father (*John 15:8*).

What follows below are some ways to encourage the growth of the fruit of the Spirit:

Through study of the Word of God. What does 2 Timothy 3:16 declare that the Scripture is profitable for? As a result, what will be accomplished in our lives? (*See vs. 17; see also Ps. 119:105.*)

Through prayer. "Prayer is the breath of the soul. It is the secret of spiritual power. No other means of grace can be substituted, and the health of the soul be preserved. Prayer brings the heart into immediate contact with the Well-spring of life, and strengthens the sinew and muscle of the religious experience. Neglect the exercise of prayer, or engage in prayer spasmodically, now and then, as seems convenient, and you lose your hold on God. The spiritual faculties lose their vitality, the religious experience lacks health and vigor."—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, pp. 254, 255.

Through the right kind of thoughts. "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things" (*Phil. 4:8*). How can we learn to keep our minds on elevated thoughts?

Through our Christian witness. The man that Jesus healed of demons requested to go with Him. Jesus denied his request and instead asked him to return to where he lived and tell what the Lord had done for him (*Mark 5:18–20*). How does sharing our faith contribute to the growth of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?

The fruit of the Spirit aren't going to happen on their own. Your own choices will determine your destiny. What changes do you need to make in your lifestyle, in your associations, in anything and everything you do that can better allow for your spiritual growth?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Yet, whatever the circumstance, He always responded in a loving manner. How do you deal with situations that test your Christian character?

4 Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness in communion with God. Disappearing for a month is not practical in today’s world. What are some ways you can make time for personal communion with God?

5 There are many who have never heard of Jesus but who are moral, patient, and kind. Discuss whether or not these people are driven by the Spirit. Do they bear the fruit of the Spirit? Why or why not? In the context of Galatians 5:17, how does the motivation behind actions make a difference?

6 Galatians 5:18 says, “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (*NKJV*). What does this verse mean to you? Does it free us from the consequences of sin? What law is Paul referring to?

7 When Jesus ascended to heaven, He looked at His troubled disciples and said He would send them the Great Comforter, the Holy Spirit. In what ways does the Holy Spirit bring comfort to your life? What role, if any, does the fruit of the Spirit within you bring comfort to your everyday life?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Challenge the class to come up with action plans that cultivate spiritual growth in different settings.

Closing Activity: Divide the class into groups. Give each group one of the following scenarios: home, work, peers, and church community. Instruct them to come up with at least two practical action plans that encourage growth of the fruit of the Spirit. These plans easily should be carried out within their respective settings. To help guide their planning, have students answer the following questions:

1. What are the unique needs of this setting?
2. To whom are you ministering?
3. What are some things that would promote bearing fruit of the Spirit within this setting? What would discourage it?
4. What can you specifically do to foster an environment better suited to spiritual growth?
5. How would Jesus minister in this situation?

To conclude, have the groups share their action plans.

Further Study: “God bids us fill the mind with great thoughts, pure thoughts. He desires us to meditate upon His love and mercy, to study His wonderful work in the great plan of redemption. Then clearer and still clearer will be our perception of truth, higher, holier, our desire for purity of heart and clearness of thought. The soul dwelling in the pure atmosphere of holy thought will be transformed by communion with God through the study of the Scriptures.

“ ‘And bring forth fruit.’ Those who, having heard the word, keep it, will bring forth fruit in obedience. The word of God, received into the soul, will be manifest in good works. Its results will be seen in a Christlike character and life. Christ said of Himself, ‘I delight to do Thy will, O My God; yea, Thy law is within My heart.’ Ps. 40:8. ‘I seek not Mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent Me.’ John 5:30. And the Scripture says, ‘He that saith he abideth in Him ought himself also so to walk, even as He walked.’ 1 John 2:6.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 60.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ As a church, with a mission to spread the three angels’ messages to the world, we often struggle to find ways to make ourselves and our message relevant to the culture around us. What inherent dangers do we face when we do that? History shows that more often than not, the church through the centuries ends up getting converted to the ways of the world, as opposed to the world getting converted to the ways of the church. What about us, as Adventists? Do we fool ourselves into thinking that this isn’t happening to us, or that it can’t happen to us? Do we see evidence of this already happening? And, if so, what can we do?
- ❷ In the twenty-first century, in your own culture, what are some of the greatest challenges to growing the fruit of the Spirit? What specific aspects of the culture must you unflinchingly fight against?
- ❸ Why is the Cross so central to the whole question of the fruit of the Spirit and character development? What does the Cross offer us that’s indispensable in character development? After all, without the Cross, what would even be the purpose of bearing this fruit?
- ❹ Why do our character development and good works bring glory to God? What’s that all about?