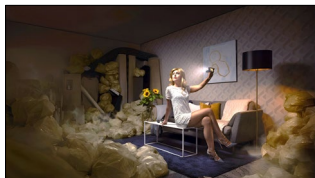


Spoiler Alert

Spotting Sin's Forbidden Fruit

December 29, 2024

Today we're learning to recognize how sin can subtly *spoil* our spiritual growth – cuz we need to practice being *proactive* if we want to *protect* our spiritual *produce*. So, as we approach a new year and ponder all the positive *changes* we want to *make*, it's equally important to prepare for all the potential *errors* we want to *avoid*. And one of the most *important* parts of spiritual *quality* control is learning to identify *imposters*; aka *fake fruit*. Cuz if one *bad apple* can ruin the whole *bunch*, we should be *constantly* questioning: **Does your fruit taste as good as it looks?**



Cuz God doesn't care about *appearances* – He's all about *substance*, since, as we all know, **looks can be deceiving**. I mean, just consider the manchineel. By all accounts, the *appearance* is that of a juicy *apple* – and in fact, the first bite *is* delightfully sweet – however, within minutes of *eating*, the manchineel causes intense *throat* swelling, mouth *blistering*, and *severe* digestive issues. And just *touching* its *leaves* or *sap* can cause skin *lesions*, while *burning* them creates a *smoke* that can cause temporary *blindness*. Which is why local populations simply refer to it as the “Death Apple.”

Because, *everything* about it screams “apple” – except for the whole “*might kill you*” thing. Which just goes to show, **it's deadly important to discern the real deal!** And to separate these *fatal* fruits from the *valuable* variety – we need to *discern* the subtle differences *below* the surface to *catch* the counterfeit *before* it does *damage*. And that *same* quality control applies to our spiritual fruit because the *fatal fakes* are only *found out* when we look *inside*, since, as we all know, **being superficial is super easy!** And even if it isn't entirely *intentional*, we can wind up living a life that *looks sweet* but *leads to death!* Like Paul says:

My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. – 1 Corinthians 4:4 NIV

[So,] Be very careful, then, *how* you live – *not* as *unwise* but as *wise* [aka]... be filled with the Spirit, [since *that's* the seed we need to produce *good fruit!*]- Ephesians 5:15, 18 NIV

[Cuz,] Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. ... [Which means] A good man brings good things out of the good stored up *in his heart*, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in *his heart*. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. – Luke 6:43-45 NIV

[So if *it's* full of the *Spirit* you'll see] The fruit of the *Spirit* is [a mouth full of] love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – Galatians 5:22-23 ESV

However, **there's another whole crop called the fruit of the flesh** – pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and laziness; and although *they* may *appear* identical, *these* bad apples can *kill* as they *fill!*

So, before aiming for the “*new you*” you want to *produce* in the new year, we’re gonna take a *closer* look at the subtle differences between the *juicy* fruit of the Spirit and the *fatal* fruit of the flesh so we can spot the rotten stuff before it affects the heart of our whole tree, cuz:

There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to *death*. – Proverbs 14:12 NIV

[Since] The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. – Jeremiah 17:9 NIV

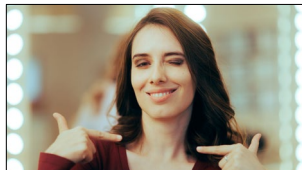
[So,] Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it. – Proverbs 4:23 NIV



So, let’s take a look: **how’s the crop of faithfulness and Self-control you’ve been cultivating?** Cuz if they’re not pointed in the right *direction*, you might be mistakenly growing poisonous Pride! And detecting the difference can hurt like the rich young ruler who asked:



"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" ... [cuz] Jesus answered ... "You know the commandments" ... "All these I have kept since I was a boy..." [Well, there’s] "One thing you lack," [Jesus] said. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor ...Then come, follow Me." – Mark 10:17-21 NIV



Jesus exposes the *root of this fruit* by asking the *convicting* question: “**Are you focused on rules or relationships?**” Cuz only *relationships* can reveal if you have the real seeds in your heart since **real faithfulness is focused on others not ourselves**.

In fact, **many people use rules to fake the personal appearance** of both *self-control* and *faithfulness* to *hide* the *self-serving* and *poisonous* pride just *beneath* the surface! Cuz using *self-control* to serve, trust, and follow *others is faithfulness* but aiming the same serving, trusting, and following at *ourselves* is called *pride*! So keep your faith pride-free by focusing on the *other* side of relationships,

[Cuz] The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. – Galatians 5:6 NIV

Now how about your goodness? Are you sure *that’s* what you got growing? Well, let’s check: when does good *stop* being good? When it *overwhelms* cuz we *overdo* it. As the expression goes, **too much of a good thing can be a bad thing!** Just ask anyone who, *like me*, has an *addictive* personality and they’ll tell you **the best stuff in their life is the most dangerous** – cuz each taste of *good* may *actually* be a seed of greed! It’s why I have to be super careful around *video games*, *fantasy football*, and playing the *stock market* – if a little is *good*, then my *flesh* says “**All of it, all the time must be great!**” And even the *godliest* pursuits can become *poisonous fruits* if we focus on *accumulating* over *appreciating*. Like we’re warned in Proverbs:

If you find *honey*, eat just enough— too much of it, and you will vomit. – Proverbs 25:16 NIV

So, if you want to keep your *goodness* growing without the threat of greed’s *false* fruit, **our heart must be set on professing good over possessing good**. And that means praying this *tough* prayer:

Give me neither poverty *nor riches*, but give me *only* my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown You and say, 'Who is the LORD?' – Proverbs 30:9 NIV



And in the same vein, **we need to take a real close look at the spiritual fruit of love** to make sure it's not the *fleshly* fruit of lust in disguise. After all, on the *surface*, they're both just *words* for our feelings of *desire* – but the **deadly difference can be seen by the appetite each fruit tries to satisfy**. And since lust is a *worldly desire* it can only satisfy *worldly appetites* – which always *come back* to keep us in a *cycle of insatiable* hungers. Whereas love feeds a *higher, spiritual desire* to satisfy our spiritual *appetite* for the perfection that puts an *end* to *all* earthly appetites! That is, **lust offers temporary gratification but love provides permanent edification**. And *true love* comes from *God*

For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the *world*. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. [And His will is our love] – 1 John 2:16-17 NIV

Because the *Spirit* intercedes for God's people in *accordance with the will of God*. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him – Romans 8:27-28 NIV

And then there's the fruit of kindness that grows close to sincere love – because it's aim is to build up all brothers and sisters with *encouragement* and *compassion*. Like Paul says:

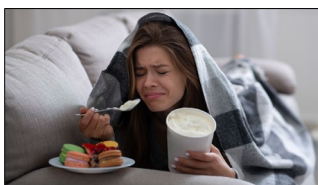


Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit ... Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but ... the interests of the *others*. – Philippians 2:2-4 NIV



And although *kindness* is expressed in *humility*, the more we *elevate* others, the more we may *accidentally* produce the *fleshly* fruit of envy! Cuz **there's a thin line between building up and putting on a pedestal**; and every *kind* word can *become* an act of *envy* if we forget that all humans are *imperfect* and our only *real value* comes as kids of the King!

[So,] Be *kind* and *compassionate* to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave *you*. – Ephesians 4:32 NIV



Cuz *that's* the *unified equality* that leads to the *spiritual joy* that Paul references. **But is that the kind of joy your life is producing?** Cuz joy is meant to *strengthen* and *uplift* believers as we encounter *moments* that *echo* the *perfect life yet to come* – but joy is *not* meant to advertise what *this* life has to offer – cuz *that thought* grows into *gluttony*.

For the [perfect] kingdom of God is *not* a matter of *eating* and *drinking*, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit – Romans 14:17 NIV

You ever notice how hard everyone works to *find* joy and how *seldom* they *get it*? That's cuz **true joy is a spiritual import from the spiritual realm** – and when we try to equate it with an *earthly* experience, we perceive it as *pleasure* and reduce it to a commodity. And excessive pursuit of *earthly pleasure* is the poison we call *gluttony*. And as much as we try to *deny* it, all of human history has proven **earthly indulgence only leads to ruin**.

True joy is just a taste of true life and until we learn to enjoy the encouragement of anticipation, gluttony grows as an obsessive pursuit of earthly pleasure.

And then there's the spiritual fruit peace. Which is frequently confused with the flesh's fatal fruit anger. Which seems weird cuz they feel like polar opposites – but, like the ol "death apple" – we can't see the difference on the surface. Which is embarrassing since our world calls this a peacemaker. Cuz **down here, we think peace means identifying and eliminating opposition.**

[But] Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires. – James 1:19-20 NIV



Angry acts of opposition only produce true peace when they promote God's perfect plan – but since we don't have that perfect perspective, **our anger usually causes more harm than harmony.** So if you find yourself frequently raising your voice in an effort to produce spiritual peace – stop and ask yourself if your approach really brought understanding, reconciliation, and unity to everyone involved. Cuz that's the only way we can be sure we followed our command to

Be completely humble and gentle; **[and to]** be patient, bearing with one another in love. **[Cuz that's how we]** Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. – Ephesians 4:2-3 NIV

And human anger may not be a spiritual fruit that grows with the peace we want to produce, but **both human gentleness and patience are!**

Yet, even these easy-going fruits are easy to confuse with the flesh's sinful fruit called laziness! Cuz like we just read, **gentleness and patience are meant to foster unity, not excuse us from getting involved.** Both fruits are aimed at being actively engaging but focused on recognizing God's timing to have the maximum impact He intended. It's only the fleshly fruit of laziness that avoids responsibility by projecting patience over its complacency and gentleness over its lethargy.

So, if you want to make sure you're growing real gentleness and patience this year, take a look at the people in your life and **ask yourself how often you're involved.** Because **all spiritual fruits require relationships to grow.** And only fruits of the flesh can grow alone. So get out there –

For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline. – 2 Timothy 1:7 NIV

Use it or lose it! Cuz if that Spirit is growing in your heart, you should experience an abundance of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control – and if not you'll live a life with more and more pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, anger, and laziness.

Just remember, **sinful fruit survives by disguising itself as spiritual** – but counterfeits are easily exposed when we take the time to **look beneath the surface by examining the true impact of our actions.** And I don't know about you – but I'd sure like to know what I got growing in my heart before it's time for the big taste test that reveals whether we've grown a tree of life – or death!

Father God, thank You for loving me in spite of my sin; forgive me and cleanse me by the sacrifice of Your Son, my Savior; and free me and lead me by Your Spirit and Word, as I seek to trust and follow Jesus Christ, as the Lord of my life. Amen.