

A Vine-Ripened Life

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Spiritual Fruitfulness through
Abiding in Christ

Stanley D. Gale



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A Vine-Ripened Life
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This book is dedicated to the latest additions
to my quiver of grandchildren:

Gryphon and Penelope



*But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
On those who fear Him,
And His righteousness to children's children,
To such as keep His covenant,
And to those who remember His commandments to do them.*

—PSALM 103:17–18

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Preface

Choosing a title for a book is always tricky business. While it's true that judging a book by its cover is frowned upon as imprudent, a cover presents that split-second first impression that prompts a reader to peer within. While the cover appeals to the eye, the title spread across it speaks more to the ear. It grabs our attention—or it doesn't. As part of that initial impression, the potential reader decides if a book is worth his or her time.

I'm well pleased with the title of the volume you hold. You've made it this far likely because it spoke something that intrigued you, prompting you to pick it up. But the idea for the book did not set sail under the title *A Vine-Ripened Life*. Rather, the prospective title was *A Grace-Grown Life*. That title was demoted and abbreviated for the final chapter.

A Grace-Grown Life does sound catchy—and relevant. As you'll see when you arrive at the final chapter, grace plays an integral role in Christian growth and fruitfulness. The grace that inaugurates the Christian life is the grace that stimulates fruit and maturity. But I rejected that initial title as inadequate. The grace in view, the grace that impacts our lives, comes to us through a person—Jesus Christ. It is by abiding

in Him that we bear much fruit, fruit that will endure. He is the Vine; we are the branches. Apart from Christ we can do nothing. Through Christ who strengthens us, we can do all things.

To speak of a “vine-ripened” life points us to Jesus. Jesus describes Himself as the Vine of life (see John 15) through whom we live and grow and bear the fruit of a grace-grown life. We ripen on the Vine, where we grow to bear the expected fruit of new life. Having begun in Christ we remain in Christ, continuing to draw our life from Him and maturing in grace.

“Vine-ripened” holds the prospect of not learning merely *about* the fruit of Christian character but learning *how* to cultivate that fruit. We bear fruit through abiding in Christ. But what does that mean? How do we go about it? That’s all part of the package we examine as we undertake the study before us.

Basically, this book explores the fruit of the Spirit. The classic passage of the Bible that explicitly inventories the fruit is found in Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law” (5:22–23). This list is the most extensive, but it is not exclusive. For example, we find an abridged version in Paul’s charge to Timothy: “Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness” (1 Tim. 6:11).

For the most part, however, we will limit our study to the nine traits of Galatians 5, opting to include humility as a bonus feature for reasons that will become apparent. Each and every fruit in the bounty of the Spirit, though, germinates in us through union with Christ as the Vine of life and grows

lush through abiding in Christ. It is that note which escorts us to the first stop of our study in chapter 1, “Fruit of the Vine.”

This book is undergirded with encouragers and influencers. I am deeply grateful to them and to God for raising them up in my life. My wife, Linda, comprises the vanguard of that group. I can always count on her for honest observation, tempered with loving support. Alexandra, Gretchen, Audra, and Stephen are, along with me, part of a writers’ group. Their insights have made this book more cohesive and readable. I have greatly benefited from the practical prodding of a friend and fellow author, Leslie Montgomery. She gave me moral support, reassurance in the project, and help in guiding it to publication. I am indebted to John Sanderson and Jerry Bridges, who have also written on the subject. They have both stimulated my thinking and enriched my understanding. I want to acknowledge Dwight Dunn, a fellow pastor and time-tested friend. This book is owed in large part to his faithfulness in prayer for me. I would be remiss were I to neglect offering special thanks to Jay Collier and Reformation Heritage Books for their willingness to bring the book to fruition and their encouragement in its value, and to Annette Gysen, with whom it was a pleasure to work in the editing process.

—SDG

Chapter 1

Fruit of the Vine



*I am the vine, you are the branches.
He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit;
for without Me you can do nothing.*

—JOHN 15:5

My wife and I are officially empty nesters. After thirty-three years of having at least one child at home, we are now left with just our dog. We recently deposited our last born, Nathan, in western Pennsylvania to begin his studies at Grove City College. It seems it wasn't that long ago that Nathan emerged from the womb to enter our home. Now he's leaving to enter college. I remember watching him jump his highest in an effort to touch the top of the doorway to our living room. Now his head almost brushes against it.

Nathan has entered the next phase of his life. That's a good thing (I keep reminding myself). He has grown in every way: physically, spiritually, intellectually, and relationally. His mother and I take some credit for that growth. We fed and clothed him, supervised his studies, and cultivated friendships.

We also raised him in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, living out the gospel before him through our instruction and example. Nathan also had a role, though. He ate the food we provided. As he grew into a teenager, he ate more than we provided. His going to college halved our food bill.

But what caused Nathan to grow? What spurred on his physical development into the strapping young man that he is? I would suggest that it was not just the food. It was the way his body worked to assimilate that food to his physical growth and nourishment. God designed his body to act upon that intake.

That's how sanctification works. We, as believers, take in the nourishment of God's Word. That Word enters the open mouth of our minds. We chew on it through study and meditation. Prayer aids in its digestion to our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines *sanctification*: "Sanctification is the work of God's grace, wherein we are renewed in the whole man, after the image of God; and are enabled to die more and more unto sin; and live more and more unto righteousness" (Q&A 35). This definition offers a comprehensive explanation. It describes the breadth of the sanctifying process (the whole man); the goal (the renewed image of God); and the process itself (die to sin and live to righteousness).

Another way we can look at the spiritual growth process of sanctification is by way of fruit. In His Upper Room Discourse in John 13 to 17, Jesus talks about fruit: "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing” (15:4–5). Among the fruit to which Jesus refers is that of a changed life, which flows out of being partakers of the new life bound up in Christ. Abiding in Christ produces “much fruit,” fruit that will last (15:5, 16).

In this metaphor Jesus indicates that abiding is accomplished in large part through utter dependence on Him. The grace of sanctification flows from experiential union with Christ. We must abide in Christ so that the fruit of character change in our lives is not the product of self-will or best effort. Such efforts at love or joy or patience will be meager and short lived.

We want the fruit of a changed life to grow organically and not artificially. Organic spiritual fruit grows from the good soil of a well-tended heart. Artificial fruit is akin to religious hypocrisy that is different in public than it is in private. Such fruit is as removable as an article of clothing, detachable as false eyelashes.

But artificial fruit is not merely the product of pretense. It can flow from good intentions as well. We try our best to be patient, loving, or self-controlled. We know that’s what our Father wants of us. We want it for ourselves. But our best efforts will produce only imitation fruit. It may look great in our eyes and others’, but it is not the fruit of abiding in the Vine. We want the fruit of a changed life to grow from the inside out by the hand of our God—a Vine-ripened life. Let’s enter this vineyard of life and explore God’s design for our spiritual development and growth in grace.

Fruit of the Vine

Complete the following: Red, white, and _____. Most people, especially if they are Americans, would reflexively write *blue* in the blank. Let's try another: Peanut butter and _____. There are those who might fill in *banana* or *marshmallow*, but I suspect 90 percent of respondents would write *jelly*. One more: Fruit of the _____. My guess is those reading this book would automatically respond *Spirit* (if they had not been tipped off by the chapter title).

Normally when we think of fruit related to Christian character, we think of fruit of the Spirit. Fruit of the Vine, on the other hand, brings to mind Jesus' words at the institution of the Lord's Supper, not character qualities. But actually, fruit of the Vine gives us a better orientation to what our heavenly Father has in mind for us.

How do we grow as Christians? Does the Holy Spirit just come to us on His own, like one of those independent contractors who knocks on our door asking if we want a free estimate on home repair? Does He just show up to start a spiritual makeover of us? No, He brings Christ to us and us to Christ.

Jesus made it clear in John 15 that fruitfulness in the Christian life comes from abiding in Him as the Vine. Both before and after His teaching on fruitfulness in John 15, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit in John 14 and 16. The production of "much fruit" in John 15:5 is framed by the work of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus would send upon His ascension. Like a power cord to a wall outlet, the Holy Spirit conveys the life, power, and fruitfulness of Christ to us for our growth in grace.

Rather than calling the fruit of the Christian life "the fruit of the Spirit," we might call it the "fruit of abiding in

Christ through the Holy Spirit who unites us to Him.” “Fruit of the Spirit” is shorthand for God’s handiwork of grace to conform us to Christ. The fruit the Spirit works in us is not apart from Christ, but is bound up in Christ. We abound in that fruit through abiding in Christ. The fruit of new life comes about through union with Christ that flows from the inside out. It grows from the good soil of a changed heart that is transformed by God’s Spirit.

I was laid up following surgery. Turning the tables on pastoral visitation, a woman from my church and a friend visited me at my home. They thoughtfully brought me one of those edible arrangements, fresh fruit cut to look like flowers. It had pineapple blossoms, cantaloupe and honeydew leaves, strawberry buds, and grape sprigs. It was pleasing to the eye and to the taste.

As beautiful as that fruit was, it would not last. It would not multiply. No matter how well tended, it would spoil. But the fruit God wants of us will grow heartily by virtue of being united to Jesus Christ as the Vine of life. It will display the grace and vigor of God’s workmanship as the Vinedresser. It will be Christlike, Christ drawn—like a flower draws life-giving nutrients from the soil in which it is rooted.

This fruit will not be produced by sheer willpower or determination to be more loving or patient or kind. Those of us who have attempted to produce fruit by our own efforts have learned how fruitless that is. Rather, bountiful and enduring Christlike character will grow organically by abiding in Christ, through the operation of the Holy Spirit.

As we explore the fruit of the Spirit, our approach will not be self-reformation: no “get your act together” or

kick-in-the-pants “try harder.” If we come away from this study without a deeper knowledge of Christ and more profound dependence upon Him, we have missed the point.

The Fruit of the Spirit Is...

A crisis in the English language exists today. People don't know how to use proper grammar any longer. On top of that, it seems that errors are so commonplace that they are being accepted as proper. For example, it is common to hear, “He gave some fruit to Betty and I.” But *I* is a subject pronoun. It doesn't belong as an object of the preposition *to*. Proper grammar would dictate “He gave some fruit to Betty and me.”

What are we to think, then, when we turn to Galatians 5 and find Paul saying in verse 22 that “the *fruit* of the Spirit is love, joy, peace,” and so forth. Wouldn't subject-verb agreement dictate “fruits...are” since multiple fruits are mentioned?

No, when a writer uses grammar in a way that seems improper, we should examine his or her reason rather than assume a mistake. What is Paul telling us? Some say that the verb is singular because Paul is just speaking singularly about love. All the other fruits flow from love, just like we see patience (or longsuffering) and kindness in the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Love is a blossom layered in the petals of joy, peace, patience, and the rest, fragrant with the scent of grace.

That image is certainly lovely and poetic. But there is another possible reason for Paul's sentence structure. In the New Testament, we are taught of the *gifts* of the Spirit and the *fruit* of the Spirit. When Paul speaks of the gifts of the Spirit, he refers to many gifts: some in speaking, some in

erving, and some in giving. Not every believer has every gift. For example, I believe my gift involves teaching. I don't have the gift of singing, or any musical ability for that matter. At the counsel of others, I turn my microphone off before I join in singing a hymn from the pulpit.

However, when it comes to the fruit of the Spirit, *all* believers are to manifest *every* fruit of Christlikeness, every character quality of godliness that belongs to new life in Christ. We don't have the option of picking six of nine or even eight of nine from the list in Galatians 5:22–23. We can't say, "Oh, I'm just not a patient person" and so excuse ourselves from that fruit in our lives. We have no ground to rationalize our lack of self-control by saying, "I'm only human." Just as there is one Christ, so the fruit of the Spirit that flows from our union with Him is expressive of one character. In fact, the list in Galatians 5 is itself not exhaustive in describing Christian character. The Bible talks about other fruit, like righteousness and humility, both exhibited in Christ and in which we are to grow.

Moreover, we can never fall into the trap of believing our natural strengths and abilities substitute for the redemptive characteristics of life in Christ. We can't think, "Hey, I'm already gentle," or, "I have self-control. I don't need to abide in Christ for those." We need to find our capability in *both* our weaknesses and our strengths through abiding in Christ.

Fruit Formation

A pastor friend wrote an article on the subject of discipleship. He stressed that a threefold response to the call of Christ is required: repentance, faith, and following. None of these

contribute to our salvation, but all of them are the fruit of God's work of grace in our lives. Discipleship involves more than development of Christian character, but it does involve such character as a matter of first importance. In the Bible, a disciple is not just a student, but one who becomes like his teacher.

We are to grow in the character of Christ our Lord. While that growth is by grace at the hand of God, we are actively involved in the cultivation of the fruit of a godly life. We'll see this in practical terms as we explore various fruit of the Vine in the chapters ahead. But we can note this now: every fruit of a Christlike life is presented to us as both a noun and a verb. For each of the nouns listed in Galatians 5:22–23, we can find corresponding verbs and commands elsewhere: to love, to rejoice, to exercise peace, to be patient, and to be kind and forgiving.

Yet this fruit is formed by reliance on the Holy Spirit. Paul brackets the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 with this emphasis and strategy: "I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). Though we are called to purpose and to do, we are completely dependent on the Spirit to act and to achieve anything genuine and lasting.

Notice also that we are not simply to stop indulging in sexual impurity or deal with our anger issues by biting our tongues. Galatians 5:16 instructs us that as we "walk in the Spirit," we "shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." Like some oak trees produce new leaves by pushing out the old ones, so we grow out of the old character we had before our conversion by pursuing the new character in Christ.

This is no trivial endeavor. At its heart is a battle. When we diet, we fight the battle of the waistline. Our cravings for food wage war with our desire for a smaller us. Spiritual growth involves spiritual warfare, confronting the desires of the flesh and refusing to be ruled by them (Gal. 5:17). We cannot live as though we are still in bondage to the kingdom of Satan (Gal. 5:21). We have been emancipated from servitude to sin and empowered for the new life.

Freedom from bondage to sin for development of the fruit of the Spirit is forged by union with Christ (Gal. 5:24). Growth in the spiritual formation of the fruit of the Spirit will involve learning to abide in Christ. The question is, How do we go about abiding?

Abide to Abound

Abiding is Christ's strategy for spiritual fruitfulness. We can capture the essence of abiding through three phrases we find in Scripture.

"Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love" (1 Peter 1:7–8). Abiding begins and continues with a focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ, in whom we have life and through whom we experience growth (cf. Gal. 2:20). In view is not just the person of Christ, but the personal Christ. The heart of an abiding Christian life is a love relationship with Him who loved us and gave His life for us. Peter sets the tone: "Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory" (1 Peter 1:7–8).

Abiding lives out our newfound fellowship with the Father and the Son. When Jesus says in John 15:5 that we are

to abide in Him, He characterizes the nature of that abiding. It is not mechanical, but relational. Jesus says: “As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love” (John 15:9).

“*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly*” (Col. 3:16). In Colossians 3, Paul informs us that our “life is hidden with Christ in God” and that Christ is our life (vv. 3–4). From that point of reference, we are to “put off” the old man and “put on” the new, including character traits like “kindness, humility, meekness” (vv. 9, 12). In this context Paul directs us to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly.

Colossians and Ephesians are sister epistles, paralleling each other in content and order of presentation. In parallel to letting the word of Christ dwell in them richly, as he puts it to the Colossians, Paul writes to the Ephesians that they should not get drunk with wine but “be filled with the Spirit” (5:18). These statements in sister epistles are exegetical, helping to explain one another, tying together Word and Spirit.

We abide in Christ by letting His Word dwell in us richly—not just those words in red letters in some of our Bibles, but the whole Word of God. Jesus highlights this as a means for abiding when He says, “You abide in Me, and My words abide in you” (John 15:7). In Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer that comes late in the Upper Room Discourse, He ties the word into our sanctification: “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:17).

“*Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit*” (Eph. 6:18). Prayer is indispensable to abiding. Through it we express complete and continual dependence on Christ, as well as communion with Him. Jesus ties our spiritual fruitfulness into our prayers: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you

and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you" (John 15:16). Abiding fruit comes by way of abiding prayer.

As competent as the apostle Paul was, he saw the need for prayer for any enduring fruit in his ministry. In light of the goal of fruitfulness and in light of our enemy the devil, who opposes fruitfulness, Paul urges us on, "praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints" (Eph. 6:18).

We need to consider one last thing about abiding. Certainly, abiding is an individual matter, something to which we must each give attention. Yet each of these aforementioned aspects of abiding is cultivated in community as well. We pray with and for one another. We teach and admonish one another in application of the Word. We love one another and stimulate a love for Christ. Christ's church is a greenhouse for growth.

Conclusion

In Numbers 13, after the people of Israel had been brought out of slavery in Egypt but before they had settled in the Promised Land, a group of twelve men was assembled to do some reconnaissance in their future home. What were the people like there? What were the cities like? Moses instructed them to bring back this intelligence as well as some fruit of the land.

When the twelve returned, they carried a single cluster of grapes they had cut down from the Valley of Eschol. That single cluster was so bountiful and so burgeoning with fruit it took two men to carry it on a pole between them.

That is a picture of what God has for us in the Promised Land of our life in Christ. God's design for us is not withered, meager fruit. He doesn't want wax fruit we have fashioned ourselves as decoration for our lives. Jesus says that if we abide in Him we will bear *much* fruit—the fruit of an authentically changed life, the fruit of impact and influence for Christ. Jesus also says this: “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (John 15:8).

So the question is, Is the fruit of God's grace, the fruit that flows from saving faith, growing in your life? Is it defining you? Do others see it and so give glory to your Father in heaven? As we embark on our study, let us pray even now for God's workmanship of grace in our lives and the lives of our brothers and sisters in Christ—to the glory of His name.

Cultivating Growth



1. What is sanctification?
2. How does sanctification parallel physical maturation?
3. What is our involvement in our sanctification? What is God's? How is this mutual involvement seen in Philippians 2:12–13?
4. How does the metaphor of abiding in the Vine from John 15 help us in pursuing spiritual growth?
5. What does it mean for the fruit of the Spirit to grow organically? With what is organic contrasted?
6. What is the difference between the gifts of the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit?
7. In practical terms, how do we go about abiding in Christ?