

CHARACTER SPROUTS FROM THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

By John Gagliardi

This year – 2009 – remains a time of great testing and hardship for many people all over the world. But for Bible-believing Christians, who live in God's economy and not the world's economy, it is – or should be - a year of "progressive breakthrough" into great fruitfulness and empowerment.

Why "empowerment"? There are nine "power" gifts of the Spirit. And why "fruitfulness"? There are nine fruit of the Spirit. And I believe 2009 is the year to see both of these manifest themselves in the Body of Christ in a new and powerful way.

The gifts of the Spirit – wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues and interpretation (1 Corinthians 12: 8-10) are by definition "given" – as the Bible says, "given to each one for the profit of all" (2 Corinthians 12: 7). The spiritual gifts are all about empowering us to perform - they are God-given abilities for Christian service and support.

The gifts come from outside us, and not everyone has the same gifts, or necessarily all the gifts. There are "diversities of gifts" and "differences of ministries" and "diversities of activities", but all come from the one source – the "same Lord" (1 Corinthians 12: 4 -6).

The "fruit" of the Spirit, on the other hand – love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5: 22 and 23) – are all about character, both ours and God's. The fruit of the Spirit (as contrasted in the Scripture against the "works of the flesh") have to do with qualities within us, such as Godliness and holiness.

The gifts of the Spirit can come suddenly and do not depend on our efforts and are "without repentance" (Romans 11: 29). We all know people who operate in the gifts of the Spirit and yet live lives leaving much to be desired from a Christian perspective.

The fruit of the Spirit, on the other hand, are not implanted from the outside suddenly – we sow seeds and grow the internal plants that "bear fruit" often slowly and over time, as we are tested and refined, and move from "glory to glory" as we are progressively changed into the image of God "by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3: 18).

The first of the fruit of the Spirit is love – and indeed, some argue that all other eight "fruits" are outworkings of the basic fruit of love. Without love, the gifts – even mountain-moving faith - are pointless and "profit us nothing" (1 Corinthians 13: 3). Unlike the gifts, "love never fails" (1 Corinthians 13: 8). Prophecies fail, tongues fail, and knowledge will vanish away ... "and now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13: 8 and 13).

It is not by our gifts and abilities and talents that people will recognize whether or not we are blood-bought, Spirit-powered people, according to Jesus, but by our "fruit" (Matthew 7: 20). "By their fruit you will recognize them".

Gifts are partial and temporal, while our fruit is eternal and of infinite value. Like our talents and personality, gifts may take you to the top; but only the fruit – issues of character such as integrity and holiness – will keep you there.

The celebrity-obsessed world we live in today is all about the “quick-fix” and outward appearance. What God wants from us, however, is all about eternity and what is inside – our character. He wants us to be honest, work hard, be kind and generous, be diligent, and to operate in a way that shows His love to all we work with, live with and interact with. It is as Jesus Himself says – God wants us to be the “light” and the “salt” in our society (Matthew 5: 13 and 14).

God gives us authority as “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Corinthians 5: 20) and we can exercise that authority by “leading by example”, operating in our day-to-day lives as people whose characters shine out in a dark and corrupted and perverted world. In the home, in the workplace, anywhere at all – we are never “off-duty” as we shine our light “before men” (Matthew 5: 16).

Donald Gee in *Concerning Spiritual Gifts* makes an interesting point about keeping the “fruit” and the “gifts” in balance: “The large chapter about love (1 Corinthians 13) is planted between the two most important chapters about the spiritual gifts, and forms an essential part of the subject described therein.

“The first point teaches us that gifts and fruit should keep each other in balance. The second shows us that they are tightly knitted together. When the apostle writes, ‘But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet show I unto you a more excellent way’ (1 Corinthians 12: 31), he does not intend to indicate that we should neglect spiritual gifts.

“He admonishes us to create a balance ... ‘Fruit’ is the natural result of an inner principle of life brought forth through a process of constant growth ... ‘Gifts’ come through the liberal actions of a giver, and are usually found in a completed condition, even though their use can be made more perfect by the recipient in the course of time.

“The fruit of the Spirit, therefore, appears as an expression and result of a Godly life which was given to the believer when he was born again. The fruit may show almost instantly in some characteristics, but will generally only appear gradually through the process of ‘growing in grace’ ... a constant growth in holiness should be taking place during the entire period of a Christian life ... The greatest thing of all is the increasing resemblance to Christ.”

Coming back full circle now to where we started – the trying economic and political times in which we live – it becomes very clear that to succeed and prosper we need to submit ourselves to God so He can daily grow within us the fruit of the Spirit.

He will give us the gifts as and when He sees fit; but the fruit will only develop within us and in our essential character as we trust Him and obey Him in every aspect of our lives.

We need to be able to live our daily lives, in spite of the newspaper headlines of doom and gloom and crisis, in joy and peace. We need patience and self-control as people do things to us and around us with which we totally disagree. We need kindness and goodness and gentleness and faithfulness – and above, all, we need love!

The Bible says that perfect love – in some translations “perfected” or “completed” love – drives out fear. What is the main weapon the enemy uses against us in our daily lives in the

workplace and at home and even in the church? It is fear – often felt as worry or anxiety, but the root evil is fear, plain and simple and as ugly as sin.

Indeed, fear is a sin because we only have it if we stop trusting God – three times in Matthew 6 Jesus says in words as plain as the nose on your face: “**Do Not Worry**”. As he makes these eternal declarations, it is important for us to realize these are not hints or suggestions or “gentle reminders”. They are delivered declaratively and imperatively as strong commands – He proclaims: “**DO NOT WORRY!**” This is not the “still small voice” or the “gentle whisper” of 1 Kings 19: 12. This is the very voice of God thundering down from the heavens! We ignore it at our peril!

If we continue to worry after He has commanded us not to worry, we are in disobedience and rebellion – and rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft (1 Samuel 15: 23). This is serious stuff, not to be taken lightly. And at the end of the day, it is all about what is in our character: do we have peace and joy? Do we have faithfulness and self-control? And do we love God more than the world? Is God our security, or is money our security?

We cannot serve God and money (Matthew 6: 24). We have to make a decision. And if fear is your constant companion each time you check the stock market and look at the business news on TV, then it is an inescapable conclusion that you are putting your security in money, not God. You are putting money first, and God second.

If we put God as our highest priority, we can **trust** Him when he commands us to “be anxious for nothing” (Philippians 4: 6), and **obey** Him when He says in Luke 8: 50 – “Do not be afraid; only believe.”

Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow... (Matthew 6: 33 and 34).

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