

Christ's Last Words to His Church Series:

How Does Jesus Cultivate Fruitfulness in the Lives of Believers?

Revelation 2-3

God is a Farmer, in His Word calls us His field (I Cor. 3:9), and our lives are searched by Him for fruit, that He can harvest from our lives. That is what we will see as we open to Revelation 2 today.

Much like the farmers all around us, and the many gardeners among us: if you want a good crop this year, the field needs to be prepared and worked.

Jesus desires from each member of His Body, a life that is plowed, planted, and watered: so that we produce a harvest of fruit that pleases Him.

Jesus sent us a description in Revelation 1-3 of how He prepares and cultivates the lives of those in His Church. Since the days of John the Apostle, who wrote down Christ's words: ***this is what the Lord in focused upon in each succeeding generation of His Church.***

As we have been seeing these past two months, Christ's Last Words to His Church in Revelation 1-3, are dominated by His desire to see us fruitful. That desire is explained and described these three chapters He wrote to us.

To be fruitfully bringing glory to God from our lives we need to be healthy. The Lord measures our health in four areas. Why not pause to do a spiritual health diagnostic?

Four Diagnostics to Reveal Our Spiritual Health & Fruitfulness

This morning we each need to do a self-checkup of our spiritual health and fruitfulness. Remember, the healthier we are the more fruit God can produce through our lives. Here are some diagnostic questions:

1. **WORSHIP DIAGNOSTIC:** To you feel excited to be here at church and close to the Lord, with a heart tuned and already filled with Spirit-prompted worship: or are you distant these days from all that, and you even feel kind of far away from God this morning?

2. **FELLOWSHIP DIAGNOSTIC:** Do you love to meet with other believers and share what God is doing in each other's lives: or can you hardly remember the last time your life was fruitful? Do you feel far from joy and peace, victory and blessing? In fact, do you secretly hope that no one gets too close this morning and asks you personal questions while you are here?
3. **DEVOTIONAL DIAGNOSTIC:** Can you hardly wait to get started in our study of God's Word this morning, and feel the same way each day of the week in your personal devotions: or does your Bible feel as heavy as lead when you pick it up?
4. **MINISTRY DIAGNOSTIC:** Are you a conscious investor in ministry, looking for more ways to use your time and spiritual gifts to serve the Lord: or do challenges for you to jump in to serve and speak up for Christ bother you a bit, and even push you away? Do you sometimes wonder if you'll get any reward in Heaven, and you just hope that you'll get there? Has the zeal you once knew dried up, and become a far off memory?

If these, or a myriad of other telltale signs of spiritual listlessness and barrenness, have cast their shadows across your path, then Christ's invitation to His spiritual heart cultivation clinic is for you.

Jesus even applies these truths to churches just like ours, and as we look at Revelation 2-3, we see that:

5 of the 7 Churches Lacked Key Area of Fruitfulness

In Revelation 2-3, Jesus lists the areas that were keeping those believers and their local churches from being fruitful for Him in their daily lives.

Remember that by the time Jesus was writing to these churches they had already heard the messages of the Apostles, they had Paul's Epistles, they had the Gospels, and of course Christ's Bible, the Old Testament.

In other words, they had just about as much exposure to God's Word as we do, plus the fact that many of them had met and known the Apostles. So Jesus writes these seven letters, holding the churches responsible to live what He had sent them in His Word.

The clear message Christ gives is that: ***each believer has a personal responsibility to know and obey what's in God's Word.***

Fruitfulness for God is always tied to receiving and acting upon the Word.

If you are sporadic in the Word, you will be sporadic in fruit bearing for the Lord. The key is to live by a daily application time with the Lord through His Word.

The Word is a meeting point, it is the starting point. The Word is not the end, it is the start and the tool for closeness with the Lord.

So as we ask: **How does Jesus Cultivate Fruitfulness in the lives of believers?** We have focused upon our target this morning.

Jesus cultivates us by first clearly explaining His expectations for each of His churches. We can say that these chapters contain Christ's expectations both for them, and for us.

To please God and be fruitful, each of us need to decide we really want:

- To Love Jesus Most (Ephesus, Rev. 2:1-7);
- To Separate from Sin (Pergamos, Rev. 2:12-17);
- To Un-Friend Worldliness (Thyatira, Rev. 2:18-29);
- To Overflow with His Spirit (Sardis, Rev. 3:1-6);
- To Live Crucified (Laodicea, Rev. 3:14-22).

We already started looking at these expectations that Jesus expressed; and we covered the first two as we started in Rev. 2:4. Open there with me again and trace what we found out about Christ's first expectation of them and us.

Have you jotted this in your Bible or notes yet? **Jesus said, my first and greatest expectation** of you, is this:

To Please God and be Fruitful: (1) Love Jesus Most

The saints in Ephesus were not being obedient to the central truth of the Scriptures Old and New Testament: Love the Lord Your God MOST. That is what had been taught them from God's Word by their faithful pastors over the years—listen to what Christ said:

*Revelation 2:4-5 (NKJV) **Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.***

The Problem: Their lives were clogged with so many other things, so Jesus was no longer first in their hearts, in their schedules, or their concentration; and all that signaled that He was no longer the supreme ruler of their lives. They were not being obedient to the clear commands Christ had already given them, thus they were not pleasing Him.

What had Jesus already asked for them to do, and taught them through Paul, Timothy, and John's ministry of the Word to them?

Matthew 6:33 (NKJV) But **seek first** the kingdom of God and His righteousness,

and all these things shall be added to you.

Matthew 22:37 (NKJV) Jesus said to him, " 'You **shall love the LORD your God** with **all your heart**, with **all your soul**, and with **all your mind**.'

Action Needed: Jesus said: stop everything else from pushing me out, Go back to your original settings; and Love the Lord Your God with all you are.

Then we went to Rev. 2:12 and found **Christ's second expectation of His Church**. Jesus says:

To Please God and be Fruitful: (2) Separate From Sin

The saints in Pergamos were not being obedient to what had been taught them from God's Word by their faithful pastors over the years—listen to what Christ said:

*Revelation 2:14-16 (NKJV) **But I have a few things against you**, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality. 15 Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. 16 **Repent, or else** I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth.*

The Problem: They were not being obedient to the clear commands Christ had already given them to stay away from sin, thus they were not pleasing Him. What had Jesus already asked for them to do, and taught them through their pastor's ministry of the Word to them?

2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1 (NKJV) And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "**I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.**" 17 Therefore "**Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you.**" 18 " I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the LORD Almighty." 7:1 Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us **cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.**

Action Needed: Jesus reports that what is needed is for them to repent of contamination by the world; and draw near to God. The only way to be fruitful in our lives is to please God by separating from personal sins that defile our hearts, minds, and spirits.

Now, as we move on to Revelation 2:18 we find **Christ's third expectation:**

To Please God and be Fruitful: (3) Un-Friend Worldliness

The saints in Thyatira needed to stop their friendship with the world that led them to be displeasing to God—**please stand** with me.

As I read these words, listen like you are hearing Jesus talking to us, and as we hear that, we can all open our hearts and lives to what Christ said:

Revelation 2:18-29 (NKJV) "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, 'These things says the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet like fine brass: 19 "I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as for your works, the last are more than the first. 20 Nevertheless I have a few things against you, because you allow that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, to teach and seduce My servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. 21 And I gave her time to repent of her sexual immorality, and she did not repent. 22 Indeed I will cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. 23 I will kill her children with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works. 24 "Now to you I say, and to the rest in Thyatira, as many as do not have this doctrine, who have not known the depths of Satan, as they say, I will put on you no other burden. 25 But hold fast what you have till I come. 26 And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations—27 ' He shall rule them with a rod of iron; They shall be dashed to pieces like the potter's vessels'—as I also have received from My Father; 28 and I will give him the morning star. 29 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

The Problem: What had gotten into the field where God had them planted, that was choking their fruitfulness? The saints at Thyatira were tolerating sinful teachers and false teachings, and had allowed the infectious disease of false doctrines to spring up, grow, and slowly permeate Christ's Body the Church.

What Was the First NT Book the Early Churches Read?

Most likely, the very first Epistle that circulated the early churches was written by James.

They were not being obedient to the clear commands Christ had already given them, thus they were not pleasing Him. What had Jesus already asked for them to do, and taught them through their pastor's ministry of the Word to them?

Look at James 4, probably from the first book of the New Testament written and

circulated among the churches.

James 4:4-10 (NKJV) 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.** 5 Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"? 6 But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "**God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.**" v. 7 **Therefore (1) submit to God. (2) Resist the devil and he will flee from you. 8 (3) Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. (4) Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and (5) purify your hearts, you double-minded.** 9 (6) Lament and (7) mourn and (8) weep! Let your laughter be (9) turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. v. 10 (10) Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

Remember that the Book of James was written by Christ's earthly brother, one of the children of Joseph and Mary. James became a strong believer after the Resurrection, and went on to be the pastor of the First Church of Jerusalem.

There are only 108 verses in the small epistle of James, but in those 108 verses there are 54 imperatives. In just verses 7, 8, 9, & 10 there are TEN commands from the Lord. Just let me list them for you as a direct request from Jesus to each of us this morning.

What James taught his congregation, and all others since was that authentic Christians separate from sin unto God (James 4:1-10). These authentic saints recognize that they have a choice to either pursue worldliness or godliness, so they choose to avoid "reptilian desires."

Many reptiles grow a little bigger every year of their life if fed and left unhindered. So too will our lustful desires grow: if we feed them and protect them from the Spirit of God mortifying and killing them. Left unhindered, our lustful desires can grow bigger than we could ever imagine that they could. So, here is what James prescribed to those authentic, first generation believers:

Step 1 to Un-Friend Worldliness: Avoid Pleasure Dominated Living

Maturing saints avoid the consequences of a pleasure dominated life. If you are only living for pleasure, and pleasure dominates your decisions, then you are feeding the lusts of your flesh. Our world is constantly bombarding us with the desire for a pleasure dominated life.

In order to prepare himself for going to China, Hudson Taylor used to sleep on the floor with one sheet over him so that he would not always have a soft, pleasure seeking life.

Maturing saints know how to avoid infidelity to God. God equates friendship with this world with spiritual adultery.

Friendship with the world is anything that distracts us from worship, ministry, and devotion! Whatever is pulling us away from devotion to God causes us to be God's enemy.

MY PRIDE PREVENTS MY SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Remember James said in v. 6a But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, NKJV . The word "opposes," or "resists," is **antitassetai**, a military term meaning "to battle against."

To be a friend of God is to seek: **His** pleasures, **His** friendship, and **His** humility. These areas of our lives will be in line with God.

What does a lifestyle look like that "Un-Friends" worldliness? James says it is made up of ten conscious choices in chapter 4 verses 7-10.

Note these ten imperatives crowded into such a short space. This is the character of the preaching, nurture, and discipleship that grew such Spirit-empowered servants of the Lord as we see in the Book of Acts.

- (1) **Submit to God** v. 7a = a constant daily choice to hear and submit to what God wants from His Word.
- (2) **Resist the Devil** v. 7b = a daily choice to say no to the world, my sin, my flesh, and the Devil who stirs them all up.
- (3) **Draw near to God** v. 8a = a personal choice to chase after God in prayer, thoughts, meditation and through His Word.
- (4) **Cleanse your hands** v. 8b = a conscious changing of our mind about any known sin, which leads to a change of behavior (this is repenting);
- (5) **Purify your hearts** v. 8c = as we seek the constant cleansing of Christ's blood;
- (6) **Lament** v. 9a = we begin to practice (**talaiporein**) is a word for an army without food and shelter exposed to the ravages of stormy weather. James uses it as a call for voluntary abstinence from the luxuries of life. Much like the concentration of study that makes a scholar; the rigorous training that produces the athlete; and **this is the chosen way of life under the Holy Spirit's fruit of self-discipline that produces the spiritual giants to live for Christ in a wicked world.**
- (7) **Mourn** v. 9b = John Wesley saw the white streaks formed as tears coursed down the blackened faces of Kingswoods miners in the 18th century, so James says to his 1st century luxury living, unconcerned and unmoved church goers – let God rend your hearts until you mourn over your sins.
- (8) **Weep** v. 9c = These are the tears of sympathy that move us to action welling up from a compassion filled heart. No longer unmoved and uncaring, the heart mourning before a Holy God soon becomes filled with the compassion of Christ.

- (9) **Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.** v. 9d = James tells them to sorrow as often over the gravity of their sinfulness as they were able to rejoice over the greatness of their pleasures and happiness.
- (10) **Humble yourselves** v. 10 = an internal awareness that all that matters is God, not me. Choosing to put on a humble mind about life.

Avoiding a pleasure dominated life style is avoiding anything that distracts us from worship, ministry, and devotion! Whatever is pulling us away from devotion to God causes us to be God's enemy.

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