

Bearing Fruit and Growing

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[0 : 0 0] Well, I would like to look with you at the passage that we read from Colossians chapter 1. So if you have a Bible, then perhaps you can look at that.

If not, I will try and make sure that you can follow from what I say. Perhaps as you heard the Bible passage being read and you were listening to that opening section of Paul's letter to the Colossians, you heard this distinctive phrase, which I picked up when I spoke to the children, bearing fruit and growing.

When Paul writes his letters, he typically begins with an opening, an introduction to his letter.

And then he has a section of thanksgiving in which he gives thanks to God for characteristics that he sees in the life of the Christian community he's writing to.

And then he has a section of prayer in which he prays for the Christians who are meeting in a particular place.

[1 : 1 6] So what we read together were the introductory greetings, the thanksgiving section and the prayer section.

And perhaps you noticed that that language of bearing fruit and growing was found both in the section of thanksgiving and in the section of prayer in slightly different forms and with slightly different impact.

But we find here a distinctive phrase that Paul repeats in a short space of writing. And that should immediately make us think this is something very significant.

This is something that Paul was dwelling on. It was something that he regarded as significant. And it's something that we should therefore take serious notice of.

Paul's language suggests life. As I said to the young people earlier on, it is language that speaks of organic life, the life of the plants that we see around us, bearing fruit and growing.

[2 : 3 5] That ties in closely with what we find in Jesus' teaching about the nature of the kingdom of God. At the heart of Jesus' teaching was the declaration that God's kingdom was at hand, was present indeed in his own person, and that was going to come to its fullness in the future.

And in order to speak about the kingdom, Jesus often used language related to organic growth. And famously, he used the parable of the sower, sowing seed, and the seed landing in different kinds of soil.

And he says, this is what the kingdom of God is like. Similarly, he used language of seeds planted, the mustard seed, that grows into a great bush in which the birds of the air can find refuge.

And so we find he doesn't only use organic images, but he often speaks of the kingdom in terms of seeds that grow, that flourish, that produce fruit.

And so Paul picks up that same kind of language, and he uses it to speak about growth and fruitfulness in the lives of Christians, in the lives of Christian communities.

- [4 : 08] Now, surely that is something that we would also long to see in our experience as individuals, as Christian communities, that there should be growth and that there should be bearing of fruit.
- So Paul's emphasis here provides us with something that is worth thinking seriously about. And where Paul sees this growth and bearing fruit coming from is where we should be focusing our attention to.
- So what I want to say today is easily divided really into two parts. And they are fairly simply connected to Paul's use of those words in the passage that we read.
- First of all, I want to note that the gospel bears fruit and grows. And then secondly, that followers of Jesus are called to bear fruit and grow.
- And so we'll look at these two aspects of this theme together. So first of all, the gospel bears fruit and grows.
- [5 : 23] We see this in verse 6 of Colossians chapter 1. We, in verse 5, hear Paul speak about the faith and love that he sees within the community in Colossae.
- A faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel.
- So there we have that key term, the gospel, being used at the end of verse 5. And then he speaks further about the gospel. The gospel that has come to you.
- In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.
- So the gospel bears fruit and grows. What is the gospel? Paul doesn't actually explain the term at this point in his letter.
- [6 : 34] And it's a term which he uses in a number of places in his writings, which he doesn't always feel the need to explain in detail.
- But there are one or two places where he does speak about the gospel. And one of the most striking of those is in 1 Corinthians chapter 15.
- 1 Corinthians chapter 15. And at the beginning of his section on the resurrection, Paul writes in 15.1, Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preach to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.
- By this gospel you are saved if you hold firmly to the word I preach to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.
- And then he explains the word that he preached to them. For what I received, I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve.
- [7 : 55] So what we see there is that Paul associates the gospel or the good news with the declaration of what has been accomplished in the person of Jesus in his particularly death and resurrection, and the death being understood as a death interpreted by and proclaimed by the scriptures of Israel, the Old Testament, relating to the way in which that will deal with our sins.
- So that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. So we're dealing with historical realities, but we're also dealing with the realities that are spoken of by the Old Testament and which have a life-changing impact on those who believe them.
- So we have Christ's death and his resurrection, a resurrection which is bodily, a resurrection which is attested by witnesses. And so we again have the sense of historical reality, but also of confirmation by the scriptures and by those who saw what was happening.

So the gospel focuses on the declaration of what God has accomplished in the person of Jesus by his life, death and resurrection.

It's a proclamation. Of that, by means of the death and resurrection of Jesus, that the true king has achieved.

[9 : 49] He's achieved forgiveness, freedom and fullness of life for those who acknowledge their sinful rebellion and receive his gift.

The gospel is something that finds its early expression in terms of the language in Isaiah and which is the focus of Jesus' own teaching.

He says, believe the good news. And so Paul is building on that line from Isaiah and through the teaching of Jesus to say the gospel, this declaration of what God has accomplished in and through Jesus.

That in itself bears fruit and grows. That's why we gather together on Sunday as Christians, whether we do it in person now or whether we connect via technology.

We gather regularly, consistently to listen to the scriptures, the Old and New Testament, because in the scriptures, there is the declaration of the good news of what God has accomplished.

[11 : 06] The focus of our listening, the focus of our attention is on what God has done. It's on his gracious and sovereign act.

And so what we find is that the emphasis here that Paul places on what the gospel accomplishes recognizes that God is sovereign in what he did in Jesus and what he continues to do among Christians, among people who perhaps had no interest in Jesus, who had no concern for Jesus, who had no notion that they were in rebellion against God, who had no notion of sin or of their distance from God as father.

But the gospel, the declaration that Jesus Christ has died for our sins, according to the scriptures and has risen from the dead, according to the scriptures and according to the testimony of those who saw him, that message has life-giving power.

Paul can speak in both Romans and 1 Corinthians about the gospel or the word of the cross being the power of God.

So the remarkable thing about this message is it is not simply a persuasive appeal to people's rational thought. It is not simply an opportunity to recalibrate your philosophical position.

[12 : 44] It is the power of God. As we expose ourselves to the written text of scripture, to the proclamation of the scriptures, to the gospel, we are confronted with a life-giving, powerful force.

And that gospel, because it's God's action, bears fruit and grows. That's a remarkable thing.

It means that our gathering together is not something that depends on the skill of the preacher.

It is not something that depends on the readiness of the people to listen. It is dependent on God's grace, on God's power.

And that can overcome the deficiencies of a preacher. And it can overcome the resistance of a hearer because it is life-giving power.

[13 : 53] So the gospel bears fruit and grows. We see something of how that works out in the passage around Paul's words in Colossians chapter 1 and verse 6.

We see that the gospel, according to Paul, is bearing fruit globally. It's one of the marvelous aspects of this passage, that even at this early stage within the development of the Christian church, the gospel is understood to be something that has a global impact.

You'll notice that Paul says, in the same way the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace.

So the gospel is something that has relevance for you, wherever you are, wherever you are listening from today, in your location, the gospel will bear fruit and grow.

The gospel is something that will transform you and your family and your community as it is allowed to permeate your life and the lives of those around you.

[15 : 17] It will have its effect because it's God's power. And it's in God's way that it will have that impact. But it also has relevance far beyond your immediate context.

And that's what we've seen happen as the gospel has spread throughout the world from its earliest days. The church today is a global church.

The church today has many people in the so-called global south, in the majority world, people in Africa and Asia and Latin America, who are declaring that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And of course, still many people in Western Europe and in North America and in Australia and so on. But what we're seeing is that the gospel has relevance in different cultures.

It can be transformed into idioms, languages that are very different from the original Hebrew and Greek. And right from the start, that was happening.

[16 : 26] Right from the start, Paul could say that the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world. Now, how much of that world Paul was immediately aware of, we don't know.

We don't know what he conceived of as the whole world. Certainly, he would have been aware of the spread of the Roman Empire and its impact in the Mediterranean world.

But he would also have been aware, I'm sure, of the people like the Ethiopian who came from Africa to worship at Jerusalem and who encountered Philip on his way back home, who came to grasp that the person he'd been reading about in Isaiah was the person Jesus who had given his life for someone like him.

And no doubt, as he was transformed by the gospel, he took that message to his own people and to those that he lived with in the region known as Ethiopia at that time.

So what we see is a global and a local emphasis in Paul's interest. He's interested in how the gospel is changing lives right on his doorstep.

[17 : 46] He's also interested in how the gospel is changing lives in other nations, in other cultures, in other languages. And that is a real model for us to be those who have both a local concern that the gospel would shape our lives and the lives of those whom we know and love, but would also shape and would also bear fruit and grow in the lives of those far from us, those we may never meet in this experience of life in this world, but who are becoming our brothers and sisters as they encounter the same Jesus, as they come to grasp what the gospel means for them.

This message is proclaimed by regular people. It's an astonishing thing because this powerful life-giving message is made known by regular people such as we are.

So Paul can say in verse 7, you learned this gospel from Epaphras. Now, we don't know all that much about Epaphras. What we can tell from this is that Paul himself was not responsible.

For the planting of this church in Colossae, but rather Epaphras had brought the message of Jesus to that particular community. And through his witness, through his proclamation of who Jesus was, people had come to believe in this Jesus and had come to form a Christian community.

And so immediately Paul can say, see, see, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing because there is now a community. There is now a gathering of the people that he calls the saints, the holy ones, the ones who are set apart for God, those he calls brothers and sisters, those who have been brought into a new family relationship with each other, people who were socially extremely different, people who would have included slave owners and slaves, socially in different worlds, in terms of the power, in terms of their social capital, exceptionally different.

[20 : 08] And yet, Paul can address that whole community, men and women, young and old, slave and free, as brothers and sisters in Christ, because of what this gospel accomplishes.

So the bearing fruit and growing of the gospel is seen in a community. It's also seen in faith and life, which spring from hope, sorry, faith and love that spring from hope.

We see that particularly in verse five. Paul is thanking God for what he sees among these Colossian Christians. And what he sees is faith and love, faith in Jesus, trusting that what is said about Jesus is true, trusting that this Jesus is alive and is able to engage in the lives of these believers as the Lord.

He is king over their lives. He speaks words with authority. He also speaks words of peace and comfort. And so there's a trust in Jesus and what he says and in his message and in his promises.

But there's also a love that extends to others who likewise share faith in Jesus. So that love involves a kindness, a care for those around.

[21 : 37] Again, people who not, who would not necessarily be part of the natural social grouping of individuals. Yet the love that Jesus calls for, the love that the gospel stimulates and brings about, is a love that crosses natural social boundaries, that crosses the typical divisions that we create as human beings within our society.

So the gospel bears fruit and grows. This message about Jesus is God's powerful tool to bring about what human action, what human persuasion cannot do by itself.

And it does that in terms of creating Christian communities. And it does so by creating faith and love based on a hope that is confident that Jesus himself has accomplished all that is necessary to make us this new family.

And it is doing this locally and abroad. So the gospel bears fruit and grows. But also, Paul can apply that same language in his prayer section to Christian believers.

And I want to look at that for just a few minutes now. So in verse nine, Paul moves from thanksgiving, which has been his primary focus from verse three to verse eight, to prayer.

[23 : 11] For this reason, he says, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. Paul has a delightful approach to prayer because he thanks God in the first few verses for all that he sees of God's actions.

And yet he is not satisfied, despite all that is good that he sees, with what God has yet done for these believers, because he says there is more.

And he says there is more because he understands the character of God. He understands that God is a God who has infinite riches to give. And so he is confident to pray for more as he prays for these believers.

So what's he praying for them? Well, he prays that these believers would be filled with the knowledge of God's will and with wisdom and understanding that the spirit gives in verse nine.

Knowledge and wisdom, these are great characteristics. And part of the reason that we teach and we focus on the scriptures in our time together as Christians in church is that knowledge of God found in the scriptures is so essential to being able to love God, to serve God, to follow him.

[24 : 38] And wisdom, which is to know how that knowledge is to be applied in a way that honors God and is gracious towards those around us. That is something, again, that God calls us to ask for and to look to him for because he is the source of wisdom.

But all of that is not there simply so that we might be thought knowledgeable and wise, but rather so that we might be able to live a life, in verse 10, worthy of the Lord and to please him in every way.

So whatever our particular calling in life, whatever responsibilities God places in our path, whatever role in society we have, whether that is in formal church ministry or whether it is involved in some form of service to wider society, perhaps in the medical profession, perhaps working in a shop, providing people with food and what they need for day-to-day life, perhaps working as a mechanic, ensuring that people's vehicles are working, perhaps looking after a family and raising a family in a home, whatever your particular calling in life, whether to be a married person, whether to be single, whether to be somebody who is paid for their work or whether they do it in a voluntary and in a just a kind and simple way in their own particular context.

That calling is fundamentally to live a life worthy of the Lord and to please him in every way.

And that is what bearing fruit and growing will look like for Christian believers. What we are looking for is the kind of fruit that the gospel creates.

[26 : 39] But Paul now prays specifically that Christian believers would demonstrate that bearing fruit and growing. So I don't think that there's any accident that he calls on the same language that has been used earlier on.

I don't think that that is accidental. Rather, he is drawing on the realities that he's confident in, that the gospel does bear fruit and grow. And he's saying, now, as you are steeped in that gospel, as you are soaked in its truth, let your lives bear fruit and grow.

So he calls for the bearing fruit in verse 10 to be in every good work. So there's a greatly practical aspect to bearing fruit.

What will it look like to bear fruit as a Christian? Well, it will mean that you do what is good. You speak what is good. You act in a way that is good.

You act in a way that reflects the character of Jesus. You speak in a way that brings the life that Jesus brings. And so bearing fruit in every good work.

[27 : 58] Paul can use similar language in Philippians chapter one and verse 27, where he says, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

And whatever we do, however we live, whatever our context, whether we're in school or in the workplace or in the home, our calling is to reflect the character of Jesus, to reflect the truth of the gospel.

We're also to be growing. We're bearing fruit, Paul prays in every good work, but we're also to be growing in the knowledge of God. So you'll see that he took those two words, phrases from his first expression, and he split them up in a way to say, growing in one aspect, bearing fruit in another aspect.

So bearing fruit in every good work, very practical aspect, growing in the knowledge of God. So as we steep ourselves in the scriptures, as we think about what it means to be a Christian, as we think about what it means to apply Christian teaching, Jesus teaching to the realities of the world we live in, we are to grow in our knowledge of who God is, of his character, of his love, of his grace, of his faithfulness, and how that speaks to the way in which we are to live, how that speaks to the way in which we are to communicate who God is to other people.

The more we understand God, the more that we have grasped him intellectually and experientially in our own lives, the more we will be able to communicate that to others.

[29 : 43] And so what we find is that that should lead to a joyful thankfulness. In verse 12, we find that the way in which this will work itself out in people's lives is that there will be joyful thankfulness to the Father.

Is that something that's characteristic of our lives? Is it something that is characteristic of our experience that people would say, these people are joyfully thankful.

These people love God and love to speak about him. And what it's rooted in is a grasping of the amazing thing that God has done for his people.

We find that coming through in verses 12 and 13, where Paul says that this life of bearing fruit and growing is rooted in an understanding of what the Father has done.

He has qualified you, in verse 12, to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. And then in verse 13 and 14, what that looks like, this great rescue mission.

[30 : 58] For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

So what does it mean to bear fruit and grow in Paul's thought? Well, first of all, it's rooted in God's acts. God's acts described in the gospel, but also this message which God empowers to create new life and to shape people into Christian communities and to turn them into those who will themselves bear fruit and grow something he prays for them and something that we too should be praying for each other, that we also may bear fruit and grow.

So let us focus on that gospel. Let us reflect on it often because in that gospel, we find God's powerful word that by its very nature brings fruit and growth.

But also let us pray for each other that we will more and more reflect the impact of that gospel in our lives, bearing fruit and growing, thinking about what God has done and living that out in the way that we act, the way that we speak, and the way that we consider who God is and make him known to others.

We can be thankful to God that the gospel has been bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world and in local communities. Let us continue to pray and to long for that bearing fruit and growing to be characteristic of our lives, of our communities, as churches, and within the whole of the world.

[32 : 58] Let us pray for a moment before we praise God together. Our God, we give you thanks for your word of truth and we pray that it will speak into our lives today.

In Jesus' name, amen.