The Great Deception: Leaves Instead of Fruit Brought to Perfection

The Lord Jesus often spoke about seed, trees and fruit to reveal to us the true condition of the heart. The seed of God's Word is not sown merely to bring about the beginning of a spiritual life, but to reach maturity and to bear fruit. In God's eyes, the value of a tree does not lie in the beauty of its leaves, but in the fruit it bears. In the same way, the value of our spiritual life is not measured by how much we know, how much we talk or how religious we appear, but by the extent to which the life of Christ is being formed in us.

Today many people look on the new birth as the final destination, when in reality it is only the beginning of the journey. Just as a seed is not sown to stay a seed forever, but to grow and bear fruit, so God has given us new life so that it may develop all the way to spiritual maturity.

When fruit is mentioned, many think almost exclusively of souls brought to faith. But this is one of Satan's subtle deceptions, because it shifts our attention away from the real fruit God is looking for in the believer's life. Fruit is not first of all what we do for God, but what the Holy Spirit produces in us: the character of Christ, obedience to His will, love, humility, holiness and inward transformation. A person can be very active in ministry and can even have visible achievements in the sight of others, but if his life does not reflect the image of Christ, he remains like the fig tree that had leaves but no fruit.

Let us open God's Word to Luke chapter 13, verses 6 to 9, where we find a parable spoken by the Lord Jesus. He said:

"A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down." (Luke 13:6-9)

The fig tree, planted in the vineyard, had grown without bearing fruit. Yet the owner was not looking for leaves, nor for shade, but for fruit. This parable leads us to an essential question: **what does God expect from us? Just leaves, or fruit?**

Let us turn our attention to Luke chapter 8, verses 5 to 8: *"A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold."* When He had said these things, Jesus cried, *"He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."* (Luke 8:5-8).

The sower sows the seed, and the seed is the Word of God, just as the Lord Jesus tells us: "Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God." (Luke 8:11). The Word of God is not sown without a purpose. Just as a farmer does not sow simply to watch the plants sprout, but to gather a harvest that has reached maturity, so God sows His Word in people's hearts with the clear purpose of producing fruit.

Verses 14 and 15 show us very clearly the standard by which God looks at this work: "And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection. But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience." (Luke 8:14-15)

It is important to notice that in this parable the problem is not only the absence of fruit, but also fruit that never comes to perfection. God does not look only at the beginning of His work in a person, but at its completion. He is pursuing the growth of divine life all the way to maturity.

In the first group, the seed falls by the wayside. The Word is heard, but it is not received into the heart. The devil comes and takes the seed away before it can produce life. There is no sprouting, no growth and no harvest.

In the second group, the seed falls on rock. It springs up quickly and life appears. There is enthusiasm, there is joy. But the root does not go deep. When trials and troubles come, the plant withers. The life that began does not last long.

The third group is especially important, because here too there is life and even the beginning of fruit. The plant does not die like the one on the rock. It keeps growing, but its growth is choked by other concerns. The cares of this life, the chase after prosperity, the desire for comfort, the pleasures of the world and earthly preoccupations smother the plant's normal development. The result is not a total lack of fruit, but fruit that never reaches maturity.

The Lord Jesus does not say that these people had no life, nor that they had no fruit at all. The problem is that the fruit did not ripen. The character of Christ did not develop fully. Love, peace, gentleness, faithfulness and longsuffering did not reach the maturity God was seeking.

In contrast to all this, the good ground is not defined by greater intelligence or more knowledge, but by a heart that keeps the Word and perseveres. The Lord says they "bring forth fruit with patience." Fruit does not appear instantly. It grows gradually; it passes through seasons, through rain and drought, through trials and God's discipline, until it ripens.

So we see that the whole parable is aimed at a single goal: fruit that has reached maturity. The seed is sown for fruit, and the fruit is left to grow until it ripens. God is not satisfied merely with the beginning of spiritual life; He is pursuing its perfection. He is looking for people in whom His Word has finally produced the character of Christ.

That is why the question is not only whether the seed was sown, nor even whether it sprang up. The question this parable asks is: **has the fruit ripened?** This is the goal for which God sowed

His Word in us, and the purpose toward which the Holy Spirit works unceasingly in the life of every believer.

In John 15, the Lord Jesus teaches us about the importance of spiritual fruitfulness. He says: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit." (John 15:1-2). Here we see that God takes care of us so that we will bear fruit, and our responsibility is to abide in Christ and work together with Him in His work of growth.

To take an illustration from everyday life: no mother in her right mind gives birth to a child only to refuse to feed it, neglect it and let it die. On the contrary, her whole concern is for that child to grow, develop and reach maturity.

If this is the natural attitude of an earthly mother, how much more is it the heart of God toward His children! Life is in His hand, for He says, "I kill, and I make alive." God does not give life in order to destroy it in infancy, but to bring it to the fulfilment of the purpose for which it was given.

Today many people look on the new birth as the final destination. It is often said that if someone is born again today and dies that same night, without going through any process of growth and maturing, God's purpose has already been completely fulfilled. But the question we must ask is a different one: if God has determined that the seed should produce fruit and that the fruit should ripen, how can we be so naive as to believe that the beginning is God's final goal?

Those who hold this view usually point to the example of the thief on the cross. They see in him a man who was saved without having time to grow, without having time to bear fruit, and without going through any process of maturing. So the thief's case is treated as a loophole through which they too might reach the same destination without their fruit ever ripening.

But this view ignores precisely the extraordinary power of God. It assumes that God's work in the thief either never began or was left unfinished. Yet the reality shows exactly the opposite. In just a few hours on the cross, under the weight of extreme suffering, God worked in that man a transformation that many never experience in a whole lifetime of religion.

He went from mocking Christ to acknowledging his own guilt. He went from justifying himself to condemning himself. He went from unbelief to faith. He acknowledged God's justice, Christ's innocence and His coming kingdom, and he placed all his hope in Him. The character that began to show itself in those last hours, in the presence of Christ and under His gaze, proved the deep work of God.

In fact, the thief is one of the clearest proofs of the truth of Philippians 1:6: "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." God began the good work in him, and God brought it to completion. Though the time was extremely short, the work was not incomplete.

The issue is not how much time God needs to perfect His work, but His power to do it. A hundred years ago, if someone had claimed that a car factory would be able to produce two thousand cars in a single day, such a claim would have sounded absurd. People in those days could not conceive of the capabilities that would come later.

In the same way, we tend to judge God's work through the lens of human experience and to assume that if one believer needs decades to reach maturity, then that is the time required in every situation. But God does not work within the limits and pace of human processes; He works according to His perfect power and wisdom.

Scripture gives us an even more powerful illustration in Aaron's rod. Normally an almond tree needs years to grow. First comes the seed, then the sprouting, the growth of the tree, the blossoming and finally the fruit. But God compressed all these stages into a single night. Aaron's rod was not a living tree but a dry stick, cut and severed from its root, with no natural possibility of producing life. And yet we read: "the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds" (Numbers 17:8).

Notice the order: buds, blossoms and fruit. God did not produce just the beginning of life, but the whole process right through to fruit. What in nature would take whole years, He accomplished in one night. If God can make a dead stick pass from dryness to fruitfulness in so short a time, why should it seem impossible to us that He could bring a soul to spiritual maturity in a few hours?

This is exactly where the argument breaks down for those who claim that God cannot perfect a believer within his lifetime and that some further process after death would be needed to bring him to the stature of Christ. Such a view, though it may seem humble, underestimates God's power. It assumes that there are situations in which God begins the work but fails to finish it within the time He Himself has appointed.

The thief on the cross and Aaron's rod carry the same message. God is not limited by natural processes, nor by the time we consider necessary. He may use years of discipline and gradual growth, but He can also use a few hours of intense fire to bring a soul to maturity. What matters is not the length of the process, but the power of the One who is at work.

Church history is full of such examples. There have been people who were converted and, shortly afterwards, were called to martyrdom. Sometimes only a few days passed, sometimes only a few hours. Yet in that short span their faith was tested, their love for Christ was proven, and their self-denial and obedience were brought to light through the fire of trial. It is not the length of the road that is decisive, but the fact that God carries His work through to completion.

That is why the case of the thief on the cross should not be seen as an exception that cancels the need for spiritual maturity, but as proof of God's power to bring to completion very quickly what in other cases He works out over many years. The thief and many martyrs do not show that fruit is unnecessary, but that God can hasten the ripening when He sees fit. The thief is a living testimony that He who begins the good work also has the power to finish it, whether He has

decades or only a few hours.

Scripture speaks constantly of growth, of being built up, of perfection, of coming to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ, and of fruit that reaches maturity. God is not presented as a Father who merely gives life, but as One who watches over the one who has been born again, feeds him, disciplines him, prunes him like a branch that must bear more fruit, and leads him on to the fulfilment of His plan.

If we come to believe that God can begin this work but does not normally intend to finish it, we risk losing sight of His declared intention. The apostle Paul says plainly in Philippians 1:6: "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." God does not begin a work aiming to leave it unfinished, but aiming at its perfection.

We see the same principle in the parable of the barren fig tree. The owner did not plant it in order to cut it down right away; he came looking for fruit. Even when he found none, the vinedresser asked for extra time to dig around it and tend it, saying: "Lord, let it alone this year also." The goal was not to destroy the tree but to bring it to fruitfulness.

Notice that the emphasis in the parable falls on the patience and care given to the tree. It is dug around, tended, fertilised and waited for. All of this shows that the owner's intention is fruit. God invests time and effort in His children because He wants to see in them the character of Christ grown to maturity.

God did not give us new life through the new birth in order to leave us unfinished, but so that the divine seed placed in us would grow, develop and bear fruit that ripens. Just as a tree is planted for its fruit, so the believer is called to reach maturity in the character of Christ, bearing the fruit of the Spirit to the glory of God and for the good of His Kingdom. Birth is the wonderful beginning of God's work, but maturity is the goal toward which He leads this new life.

The Lord Jesus urges us: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me." (John 15:4). The seed is the word of God, and our spiritual life comes from God. It is not a natural life, but one born of the Word of Christ, brought to life by the Spirit. The Spirit has a purpose clearly defined by God: to renew us, to make us grow and to develop us until we reach the stature of the Lord Jesus.

Just as a child is born to grow and to live, not to die, so we too are called to grow spiritually. God does not bring His children to birth in order to leave them in infancy, but to lead them to maturity, until the image of Christ can be seen in them.

In 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 we read: "Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

This is God's purpose for every believer: to be transformed into the image of Christ and to grow to spiritual maturity. Spiritual death does not come from God, but from an evil heart of unbelief

that departs from Him.

To understand what this transformation means, we must look at what Scripture calls "the fruit of the Spirit": "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." (Galatians 5:22-23)

It is important to notice that Scripture does not speak of the "fruits" of the Spirit, but of the "fruit" of the Spirit. It is the character of Christ formed in the believer through the work of the Holy Spirit. This fruit is not the product of human effort, nor the result of religious ambition. It is the work of the Spirit of God in the person who remains united with Christ.

Yet the fact that the fruit belongs to the Holy Spirit does not mean we have no responsibility. God works in us, but not without us. Our part is to abide in Christ, to listen to His voice, to submit to His Word and to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord Jesus says: "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me." (John 15:4)

The branch does not produce the sap. It does not create the life, nor the fruit. But it can stay attached to the vine, or it can wither by being cut off. In the same way, the Holy Spirit produces the fruit, but the believer must remain obedient, must not grieve the Spirit, and must cooperate with His work. When the Spirit prompts us to forgive, to let go of a quarrel, to answer gently or to humble ourselves, that is exactly when the fruit is being formed.

We are called to examine ourselves and see how much this fruit has grown in us. How much love do we have? How much peace? How much gentleness? How much longsuffering? Spiritual growth is a continual process, like a blossom that over time turns into fruit. At first only signs of life appear; then the fruit forms, grows and finally ripens.

But how do we come to gentleness and longsuffering?

The Lord Jesus tells us: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls." (Matthew 11:29)

We notice that the meekness and lowliness of Christ are directly linked to rest for the soul. The person who constantly resists, who fights for his rights, who answers every offence and always wants the last word, cannot have peace. His soul is permanently troubled.

Instead, the Lord Jesus teaches us the way of non-resistance: "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil." (Matthew 5:39)

This teaching is not weakness; it is God's way of destroying the root of anger and forming longsuffering in us.

Longsuffering does not appear instantly, nor through a prayer said just once. It is formed as we walk with God. The process is simple; it may be short or long, but it is often painful.

Perhaps someone insults you. The old nature wants to hit back immediately. But the Holy Spirit urges you toward silence and gentleness. If you obey, you have taken the first step toward forming longsuffering.

At another time, a new situation arises. Once again you are provoked, criticised or treated unfairly. The flesh wants to defend itself, but once again you choose to leave your case in God's hands. At that moment, the Holy Spirit is working something within you.

After experiences like these, you notice that the things that used to set you ablaze no longer have the same power over you. Not because you have become indifferent, but because Christ has grown in you. Where there was anger, peace appears. Where there was revenge, mercy appears. Where there was resistance, trust in God appears.

This is how we come to longsuffering, which must grow to maturity.

A practical example might be a husband who repeatedly receives unfair criticism from his wife. At first he answers back, justifies himself and gets into conflict. Later he learns to keep quiet and pray. In time, he stops being ruled by other people's reactions and keeps his peace even when provoked. It is not the circumstances that have changed, but the inner man that has been transformed.

In this way the Lord's promise is fulfilled:

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls." (Matthew 11:28-29)

Rest for the soul does not come because people stop hurting us, but because we stop fighting for ourselves and learn to leave everything in God's hands. When we give up resisting, constantly justifying ourselves and wanting revenge, the soul begins to enter into the rest of Christ.

Gentleness is the opposite of malice, anger and harshness. A gentle person is not a weak person, but one who has surrendered his strength to God's control. He does not shout, does not look for conflict and does not pay others back in their own coin.

In Colossians 3:12-13 we are urged: "Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any."

This is the soil in which the fruit of the Spirit grows: forgiveness, humility, obedience and dependence on Christ.

We deceive ourselves if we think we can reach the final destination without this fruit ripening. God is looking for the character of Christ in us. He is looking for love, gentleness, peace, goodness and longsuffering. In most people He finds only knowledge, theories and religious forms, like a tree full of leaves but without fruit.

The Lord Jesus left us two very powerful pictures of this. The first is the fig tree full of leaves. From a distance the tree looked promising and gave the impression of having fruit, but when the Lord came near, He found nothing to eat. It was mere appearance, without fruit. In the same way, a person can have a great deal of Bible knowledge, can attend meetings, can talk about the things of God and can have a good religious reputation, and yet, when God looks for gentleness, humility, love and longsuffering, He may find nothing but leaves.

The second picture is the parable of the barren fig tree in the vineyard. For three years the owner came looking for fruit and found none. He did not come looking for leaves, or shade, or outward beauty, but for fruit. This is also the purpose for which God has given us His life. He is not looking merely for a profession of faith, but for the character of Christ formed in us. That is why the vinedresser asked for extra time to dig and tend the tree, so that it might finally bear fruit.

These examples show us that God is interested in fruit that has reached maturity. Just as a tree is planted for its fruit, so the believer is called to bring the fruit of the Spirit to ripeness. Leaves are necessary, blossoms are necessary, but none of these is the final goal. The goal is ripe fruit.

Here we see one of the enemy's most subtle strategies. If he cannot prevent God's seed from being sown, he tries to change the purpose for which it was sown. God sows the seed to produce fruit and to form the image of Christ in a person. Satan, however, tries to convince the believer that the beginning is enough and that the final goal is no longer necessary. In this way attention is shifted from fruit to leaves, from inward transformation to piling up information, from character to knowledge.

So many come to regard the forgiveness of sins as the final destination, when in reality it is only the entrance gate. The new birth is the beginning of God's work, not its end. ***Just as a seed is not sown to remain a seed, but to become a tree and then fruit, so the believer is not saved merely to receive forgiveness of sins, but to be transformed into the likeness of Christ.***

For this reason, many people's attention has drifted to the leaves. There is much discussion of complex theological subjects, prophetic timelines, doctrinal details, whether salvation can or cannot be lost, the order of events at the Lord's coming, and many other topics, important in their place. Yet all the while the essential question often goes unasked: Is the fruit of the Spirit ripening in us?

What good is it to know how to explain prophecy if we flare up at the slightest provocation? What good is it to be able to sustain long doctrinal debates if we cannot forgive from the heart? What good is it to have answers to every theological controversy if we do not have the gentleness of Christ? God will not come to the tree to see how many leaves it has, but how much fruit it has borne.

This does not mean that sound teaching is unimportant. It is very important. But teaching is like the roots and leaves that sustain the life of the tree. The fruit, however, remains the purpose for

which God planted the tree. If all our concern stops at knowledge and never moves on to the transformation of character, we have lost sight of the purpose for which we were called.

That is why we must examine ourselves honestly. The main questions are not how much teaching we have accumulated, how many theological subjects we have mastered, or how many religious activities we are involved in, but rather: Has love grown? Has gentleness developed? Is there more peace in us than there was a few years ago? Are we harder to provoke and quicker to forgive? Has longsuffering grown? Have we learned not to resist, to leave justice in God's hands and to find rest for our souls in Christ? These are the signs that the fruit of the Spirit is nearing maturity.

The Lord Jesus said: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." (John 15:5)

God is not looking only for life in the tree, but for fruit on the tree. He is not looking only for leaves, but for ripe fruit. He is not looking only for the beginning of His work in us, but for its completion. That is why the whole work of the Holy Spirit pursues a single aim: forming the character of Christ in the believer until the fruit of the Spirit comes to full maturity.

So the believer's chief concern must be to abide in Christ and to bring the fruit to maturity. The seed is sown to produce fruit, and God has ordained that every fruit should ripen. In the same way, the new life received through the new birth must grow to the full maturity of Christ's character. The sowing of the seed and its reception made the forgiveness of sins possible, but God's final aim is ripe fruit: the character of Christ formed in us and a life that reflects His glory before the world.

The process begins with spiritual infancy, continues with childhood, then youth, and moves on toward maturity. As the believer abides in Christ and walks in obedience to the Holy Spirit, the fruit grows, develops and ripens, until his life becomes a reflection of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. So what began as a work of grace ends in likeness to Christ, to the glory of God.

May the Lord help each one of us to work at the fruit He expects from us. Lord, help us to bear the fruit You are looking for in us. Amen.

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