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1-8-2019

A Botanist's Take on the Fruits of the Spirit

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Recommended Citation

Ploegstra, J. (2019). A Botanist's Take on the Fruits of the Spirit. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1025

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A Botanist's Take on the Fruits of the Spirit

Abstract

"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are all signs of a vital and thriving relationship with Christ, but at the heart of these fruits lies a seed."

Posting about living out Christ-like virtues from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/a-botanists-take-on-the-fruits-of-the-spirit/>

Keywords

In All Things, botanists, fruit of the Spirit, functions

Disciplines

Botany | Christianity

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In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

in things

January 8, 2019

A Botanist's Take on the Fruits of the Spirit

Jeff Ploegstra

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Galatians 5:22-23

If you are from North America, and I say the word “fruit,” images of apples and oranges most likely pop into your head. People from other places in the world may imagine mangos and bananas, or cherries, or durian, or black sapote, or Lychee, or Jack fruit. In any case, it is something juicy—or at least sweet. For a botanist, these kinds of fruits represent only a small and misrepresentative portion of all of the things that qualify as fruit.

From a botanist's perspective, fruit has a developmental definition; and to some degree, a functional definition—not one based on taste or appearance. Developmentally, the fruit is the seed-bearing structure in angiosperms (flowering plants) which develops from the ovary. Functionally, fruits are important for the protection and dispersal of the seed.

Based on those developmental and functional definitions, cucumbers are fruits; tomatoes are fruits; green beans are fruits. Tough-shelled acorns, skinny mustard siliques, dandelion achenes (each with its own feathery pappus), the elaborate buttons of buttonweed, and the spinning samaras (helicopters) from your maple trees are all fruits as well. Each is strategically designed to increase the survival and spread of the seed inside.

Something beautiful happens when you extend this functional understanding of fruit to a consideration of the fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are all signs of a vital and thriving relationship with Christ, but at the heart of these fruits lies a seed. Furthermore, they serve a purpose in the protection and dispersal of that seed.

You have probably guessed where this was headed: What is the seed at the heart of all this fruit? What seed is protected and spread by the fruit of the Spirit? Well of course it is the good news—the gospel of salvation and the hope of reconciliation—it is grace; it is Christ Himself.

So, as you actively love the world—as you show self-control and pursue peace—you lend veracity to the transforming power of Christ and protect the integrity of the gospel. As you exhibit joy, kindness, and goodness, you help the gospel get where it needs to go.

To focus your thinking, consider this botanical perspective within the context of Galatians 5; it is a remonstrance from Paul to avoid choosing the law instead of grace and thereby rejecting the new covenant:

“You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor un-circumcision has any value. **The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”**

These are strong words. How do you see yourself? Is it easy or hard to see yourself as fruitful?

Just as sweet and fleshy fruits represent a small and misrepresentative sample of real fruit, I wonder if we restrict our view of fruitfulness metaphorically as well. Volunteering in your community, supporting charitable organizations financially, and serving in your church are all good fruit, but there are other kinds of fruitfulness that seem to be neglected.

I have heard the term “culture of contempt” used to describe the interactions around some of the contentious issues in US society right now. How is your “faith expressing itself through love” in your interactions on social media? In your discussions around immigration? Climate change? Sexual immorality? Abortion? Racism? Do conversations held by Christians look any different because of the good news we have received? Is there fruit here that demonstrates the power of the gospel and helps spread the truth of Christ?

I think it is worth ending in the same place Paul does in Galatians 5: "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other."

Perhaps the next time that you think about the fruit of the Spirit, you can imagine self-control as the hard shell of an acorn protecting the truth of Christ, or joy as the plumed fruit of an aster spreading the gospel of hope across the landscape. Perhaps each of the fruits pictured here can serve as an inspiration to help you consider how your relationship with Christ produces fruit in your life, and how that fruit serves a purpose as you reach into the lives of others.