

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Inside-Out: Doing Works versus Bearing Fruit

by Dan Trygg

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they? ¹⁷ Even so, every good tree bears good fruit; but the bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ So then, you will know them by their fruits. ²¹ Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ ²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

Matthew 7:15-23

“You were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), ¹⁰ trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ And do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness, but instead even expose them...”

Ephesians 5:8-11

“And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest their deeds should be exposed. ²¹ But the one doing the truth comes to the light, that his works may be shown to be accomplished by God.” John 3:19-21

“Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that the ones practicing such things shall not receive the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”

Galatians 5:19-25

The word for “work” or “deed” occurs 169 times in the NT, and the word for “fruit” occurs 67 times. There is no way that I could possibly survey all the uses of these terms in this brief space. Yet these two terms cause a lot of confusion and consternation in peoples’ lives. **Bad people can do good actions, and good people can do bad actions. But bad people cannot produce good fruit, and good people cannot produce bad fruit. There is something different about the idea of a “deed”, “work” or “action” and the idea of “fruit” that is crucial for us to understand.** A misunderstanding here can be a fatal mistake, one with even eternal consequences. Can a person be saved, if they do good works? Can you do good works, and *not* be a real, born-from-above follower of Jesus Christ? It can also be a source of grief to the person who is sincerely following Jesus, when they are stuck in a pattern of sin. Are you *not* a genuine believer, if you still see outbursts or episodes of sinful behavior in your life? What about a pattern of sin? How do I address a pattern of wrong behavior, or sinful attitudes or thoughts? What am I to think of this confusing reality in my experience, ...and how do I address it? How does looking at my salvation as an “inside-out” reality and dynamic affect how I am to understand and deal with these matters?

The first thing to realize is that “works”, “actions” and “deeds” are just that: outward behaviors, choices made and expressed in action. Those “works” may not be an actual representation of our true spiritual condition. Bad people *can* do good deeds, ...and genuine, born-from-above disciples of Christ *can* make sinful choices. The fact that the scriptures tell us over and over that salvation does not come by doing works of righteousness is a clear point of fact. **Sinful people can make choices to do “good things”, and be left unchanged. Good deeds are not transformative to the heart of the person.** Keeping the Law never saved anyone. In fact, the apostle Paul said that no one could ever be justified, or saved and acceptable to God, by doing works of the Law (Rom. 3:20,28; Gal. 2:16; 3:11; Eph. 2:8,9; Tit. 3:5). This was the stumbling block that many of the Jews tripped over. They had a zeal for God, but they did not have a clear understanding. They did not know about the righteousness God provided as a gift to those who believe in Christ, and they sought to establish their own righteousness through keeping works of the Law, ...religious practices and rituals, attempting to be good, and outwardly doing good deeds. The problem is that **none of those external practices have the power to change the heart. “Outside-in religion” does not work.** It does not transform the heart.

False teachers can put on an outward show of religious behaviors, ...they can “talk the talk”, and, to a certain extent, “walk the walk”, at least in regard to religious externals, ...but they are no more successful at transforming their hearts. They are soon to be discovered as “savage, ravaging wolves” posing as sheep. **It is just a matter of time and proximity, and their real nature will become visible. They will become evident by their “fruit”,** which is apparently a somewhat different concept than merely their “deeds”. We will come back to this in a moment.

On the other hand, Paul tells the Christians in Romans 6 that they are dead to sin, and alive to God in Christ Jesus, and therefore they ought to no longer make themselves available to sin. But, he makes it quite clear that **it is**

possible for Christians to sin. They will experience the consequences of their actions, but they will not “lose their salvation” just because they gave their members over to sinful behavior. In Ephesians 5, above, the apostle exhorts the believers to no longer “participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness”. Why did he say that? Because it is *possible* to do that! **Does he say that they will lose their salvation? No. He does say, however, that such actions are “unfruitful”, ...they won’t lead to producing fruit in your walk with Christ.** In Galatians 5, Paul describes “the works of the flesh”. **Are these things that Christians still may struggle with? Are these behaviors that genuine believers may get caught in? Absolutely!** That is why Paul wrote about these practices! These are very real temptations that *come from the flesh*, ...from the old nature, if you will. When he says that “those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God” is he saying that they will lose their salvation? No. I don’t think that is what his point is, at all. We often tend to read this passage that way, but the Greek word for “inherit” can simply mean “come to possess”. The ones practicing these things will not experience or possess the reign and rule of God, because they are living in a way that is incompatible with that. Their habitual behavior *may indeed* reveal their unredeemed nature, ...but certainly **they are missing out on the experience of their kingdom privileges by the fleshly choices they are making.** They may, however, just be “caught” in a besetting or continual sin that they need help to escape from (Gal. 6:1-5). Paul’s admonition to the Ephesian believers to “no longer live as the unbelievers live, in the futility of their minds” (4:17f.) is clearly an indication that **sinful behavior, foolish and shortsighted thinking are still possibilities for us.**

The point is: Bad people can choose to do good works, and good people (redeemed believers) can choose to do sinful works. “Works” or “deeds” are choices we make. They don’t necessarily reveal our actual spiritual condition, ...but they can and will be an indication of our spiritual health, soundness and maturity. These are “external choices” that may or may not reveal our true inner nature. **“Fruit”, however, is different. “Fruit” is the expression or outworking of our genuine spiritual nature and condition. “Fruit” is the outward manifestation of our true inner spiritual reality.** As Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruit.” **“Fruit” is the relentless and inevitable outworking of our inner spiritual reality into maturity and full expression.**

It is interesting to consider that, in Galatians 5, Paul listed the “works” of the flesh, but the “fruit” of the Spirit. The word, “works”, is *plural*, but the word, “fruit” is *singular*. This is significant, because the sinful urges of the flesh can be manifested in a variety of ways. **Not all people will fall into all these categories of sinful behaviors described there, ...but they are all expressions of the sinful “fleshly” orientation. The “fruit of the Spirit” is different. It is the nature of the Spirit to encompass all of these qualities.** The mature life of someone who is filled with the Spirit will *always* look like these qualities, ...because that is who HE is.

Another important aspect of the notion of “fruit” is that there is a process of development involved. “Fruit” is potentially set within the spiritual DNA of a believer, but it will take time to develop and mature. **BUT it is the nature of anyone who is in Christ to come to be like Him in character and maturity.** We will grow up to become like Him, as we walk with Him in this life, ...and then, when He returns, every hindrance of understanding or immaturity will be removed and we will “shine like the sun”, because we will be like Him (Matt. 13:43; 1 Jn. 3:2). Remember the parable of the tares in the field. The tares and the good wheat looked the same when they first came up, but, as they grew, their true nature became evident. It became fully evident by the nature of the fruit they were bearing. Wheat heads do not look at all like tare seeds. “You will know them by their fruit.” In the same way, **those who are growing in Christ will look more and more like Him. They will see more and more growth and transformation in their lives, ...more and more of the fruit of the Spirit manifested through them. Their true inner nature will become evident by advancement and development of their outer walk.** Again, however, because we still carry around this “outer person”, this “old person” who is continually being corrupted by the lusts of deceit (Eph. 4:22), the potential for sinful temptation and behavior remains with us. **BUT we see the true condition of our hearts through the growth of Jesus’ life within us.**

So, what if we do struggle with sin, ...or we are frustrated with the lack of fruit in our lives? What if we see that there is a lack of Christlikeness developing in us? Certainly, that tells us that there is something wrong. Either we are *not* genuinely born-from-above people, ...or the dynamics of our lives are not feeding that new inner Christ-nature that is within us. **If you doubt the reality of your faith, it is as simple as asking for God to give you His righteousness in Christ. Offer Him your life, and ask Him to work out His purposes for you. Ask Him to place His life within yours.** Colossians 2:10 says that “in Him you were made complete”. The word for “complete” literally means “full”. He has given you the necessary spiritual DNA *in Him*. It means that **He has given you everything you need. Now it is simply a matter of growing, maturing and giving expression to that new life that is inside you.** You need to feed and sustain that new life by communion with God in conversation, learning His word, sharing your journey with other like-minded Christ-followers, and seeking to obey the new promptings and leadings of the life of the Spirit in you. If you struggle, or are stuck in old behaviors, share that with others who are more mature or who are good fellow-travelers in Christ, so you can receive prayer, counsel, encouragement and accountability. **Remember, it is not about doing good works, ...it is about developing and bearing the fruit of your life in Christ.**