

Root and Fruit

From the Series, “The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe”

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Introduction

You’re looking right now at a picture of roots; Various kinds of roots. These come from a plant nursery. Apparently, someone wanted people to understand roots, so they took some and nailed them up to a wall.



Right now, you’re asking, “What does this have to do with anything?” And as always, I’m glad you asked.

If I were to ask you, “What kind of plants do these roots belong to”, I’m sure nobody here would know. I don’t. If we only look at the roots, it’s hard to tell.

The next image is a picture of fresh fruit and vegetables. Now, this makes more sense. We can eat fruit. Especially when it’s beautiful fruit like this.



Let’s start off with a point: ***In order to have any particular kind of fruit, you need the right root.***

Why is this important? Why do we care? Well, let’s consider another kind of fruit.

The next image is European Spindle. It’s a very pretty plant. As you can see, it’s got a pink outside with an orange center. If you could package this, you could sell it at the checkout counter of any convenience store. There’s only one problem: *It’s poisonous*. And it’s deceptive. It takes 12-18 hours for the poison to take effect, so it’s not uncommon to have people who are deathly ill who don’t remember what they ate.



So, here’s another point: ***Some fruit is good to eat, some is poisonous.***



Let's look at one more picture. This is an apple. Apples are normally good to eat, but this one is a little suspicious. That's because it's made from wax.

Every now and then, a farmer plants a fruit tree, such as an apple tree, but doesn't get any fruit from it. Imagine that it's harvest time, and a farmer finds such a tree. He's got a problem. Now, imagine that the farmer decides to solve the problem by running down to the craft store to buy some wax. He then fashions the wax into the shape of an apple. If he hung that wax fruit on his tree, would that solve his problem? No, of

course not. So, we see a principle:

In order to have any particular kind of fruit, you need the right root.

- **Some roots produce good fruit.**
- **Some roots produce poisonous fruit.**
- **Some roots produce no fruit.**

We're in our series, "The King and I – Matthew Tells Us About the King of the Universe". Today's message is entitled, "Root and Fruit". Matthew wrote his book, which we know today as "The Gospel According to Matthew", at a time when the world was dominated by farming. Because of this, there are numerous times when Jesus and his followers used examples from farming to illustrate spiritual truths. Today, we're going to see that "root and fruit" is an important principle for us today. Let's dig in. We'll start by revisiting some points that we learned in our last session.

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:1)

In our last session, we met John the Baptist. Let's review a few things about him. We learned that John was a herald: He announced that the great king was coming ("the Kingdom of heaven has come near"). He also prepared the way by encouraging people to prepare their hearts ("repent").

We also learned last week that there was something amazing about John's life. An angel appeared to his father; a man named Zechariah. The angel told Zechariah that his child, John, would be "filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born". (Luke 1:15)

Let's learn one more thing about John before we look at the rest of today's passage: "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John..." (Luke 7: 28). Jesus himself said that there was no one who was greater than John. Understand that Jesus is talking to a Jewish population. When they think of great men, they're thinking of people like Moses, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jesus says John is right up there with those men.

We close our summary of John the Baptist by being reminded that there were no miracles associated with John's life (John 10:41). This is important because we're talking about being filled by the Holy Spirit. Many people today believe that being filled with the Spirit means that a person has constant, obvious supernatural acts associated with their lives. These acts include things like speaking in tongues and healings. *We must respectfully, yet forcefully disagree.* The Scriptures clearly teach that John had no miracles.

We said in our last session that we're certainly happy to see miracles when they come. Jesus certainly had miracles associated with his earthy ministry. We will talk a lot about miracles and their place in the Christian life as we work our way through Matthew. However, being filled with the Spirit does not require a life filled with miraculous events.

For more details on our last few points, you can listen to our last session, "Prepare the Way" by visiting our web site: www.TrinityTeaneck.org.

As we study Matthew's book, we find ourselves asking questions of ourselves. Last time, we asked one of those questions: "Are we filled with the Holy Spirit?" Do we know what that looks like? Well, this week we begin our quest to find out what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit. Let's start by digging deeper into the life of a man who was filled with the Spirit even before he was born.

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:1-2)

In our last session we talked a lot about the message that John brought, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." However, we didn't talk about the environment that he chose to bring his message. We're told that John was preaching "in the wilderness". John was out in an unpopulated area, far away from the crowds. We're going to learn that the ability to understand wilderness is an important component in the life of a disciple of Jesus Christ. We'll come back this point in a bit.

Let's read more:

4 John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:4-10)

Having looked at our passage for today, we can see where we got the title for today's message:

Verse 8 "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

Verse 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

So, we see the farming image of root and fruit. The next thing we need to do is ask a question: What do these images stand for? We see that these pictures stand for things in our lives. ***The picture of roots represents our hearts. Fruit represents choices and actions.***

Once we see this, we see something that will happen all over Matthew's book. As we read, we will meet people. We'll see the choices and actions of those people. We will see people who choose and act well. We will see people who choose and act badly. In every case, we'll see that the choices and actions of people are a result of their hearts.

So, let's look at the choices and actions of a man filled with the Holy Spirit, John. Matthew has also brought along some other people whom we'll meet today. We'll also look at their choices and actions. We'll compare. But we'll also look at something important: ***the source of John's power.***

When I was first invited to serve as pastor of Trinity Church, I had to give some prayerful thought to the messages I would bring on Sunday mornings. I could have started with Matthew right away. But if I did that, we would have a problem. Matthew is filled with these examples that I just mentioned: On the one hand, people who make good choices and who do good things. On the other hand, people who make bad choices and who do bad things. Matthew closes his gospel with the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). We're told there that we are to make disciples. We're told that the disciples should be taught to obey the commands of Christ.

If I just went through the book of Matthew giving you commands, if all I said week after week was "do this!" and "don't do that!", if I did that, something bad would happen. We would find wonderful, sincere people who would go out every week trying to do all the things they were told. Sometimes, they would succeed. But often, they would fail.

We would have a church full of people who would eventually become very discouraged. Some would peel off and just stop coming. Others would faithfully come, but they would tune out and not really listen when we read the Scriptures together. Others would do something that I have to say is a bit odd: They would realize that they fail a lot, and they would see the job of the pastor to slap them every Sunday. My job, in this view, would be to walk into the pulpit every week and say, "Look at you – you all failed again!"

We would all find that if we view our Christian lives as a long list of "do's" and "don'ts", that somehow our lives become empty rather than full. That's why we started our time together with messages that re-introduce us to our great God. Our God is a being of incredible

generosity and love. He created a wonderful world and gave it to humans for free. He made us in his image. He did that because His desire it to share with us the most valuable thing in all the universe; Himself!

He shares himself with us in all kinds of ways. One way is to give us commands. If we choose to obey, we are rewarded with knowledge of him. If we choose badly, or if we fail, we still learn things about him - We learn about his mercy and his grace. And today we'll learn that he doesn't merely give us a choice. **He gives us the power to obey. He gives us his Holy Spirit.**

Having said all that, we're ready to take this passage apart. We'll learn first about the importance of wilderness.

I. The Importance of Wilderness

In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea...
(Matthew 3:1)

As we said, John chooses a place for his ministry that is far from the crowds. Why did he do that? Because Spirit-filled people seek out wilderness when they can. They do it for many reasons; one being that wilderness is a great way to remove distractions.

In those days, the world was a much less populated place than it is today. John was preaching in near the Jordan river. Here, you see a map of Israel in the days of Jesus. You can see two arrows. The one on the left points at Jerusalem. The one on the right points at the wilderness of the Jordan river. The two points are only 20 miles apart. But, those 20 miles mark two very different areas. The Jordan was wilderness. Jerusalem, on the other hand, was a symbol of civilization. It had buildings. It had lots of people. There were lots of things to do and see. **That means, there were lots of distractions.**



Israel at the Time of Jesus

Here we learn a very important principle: The Wilderness is a great place for the Holy Spirit to work. This means, find a place where you can avoid distractions.

Don't get me wrong. The Holy Spirit can work anywhere and anytime. But, there is something about finding an uncluttered place, a place free from distractions, that can make it easier to hear the Holy Spirit when he leads.

You can start small. For some, it's a place called the "prayer closet". That's a place where you can close the door and keep the noise out. It also means turning off the radio and the TV sometimes. It means putting down the headset. It means stopping the video game. Would you like to be filled with the spirit? Don't start your day by turning on the TV or the radio. Find a quiet place. Go there every day. Pray. Read God's Word. Reflect on what you've read.

From there, you can move up. Find a **location** where you can get away. There are all kinds of parks and campgrounds where you can spend extended time alone with God. You can also visit a retreat center and hear leading teachers of the Bible - The people who sought out John the Baptist did just that. They left the comfort of their homes and travelled along rocky desert roads to find a man filled with the spirit. That's why wilderness is an important principle in the Christian life.

II. Things that distract us.

Sometimes, things that distract us become out-and-out corruptions. Jerusalem wasn't just people - it was other things. It was the center of learning for the region. As such, its residents



believed they had sophistication. But it was also a place of corruption. To see that, let's look at one of the most important buildings in Jerusalem.

This is an artist's concept of the great Temple of Jerusalem. It was a magnificent building made of the best materials. It was lined with gold. If you worshipped there, you heard the best music and the best musicians.

Do you know who built it? A man named Herod.

If you've been listening over the last few sessions, you're confused right now.

Wasn't Herod an evil king? Wasn't he the one who killed children in Bethlehem in his quest to murder the Messiah, the great king of Israel? Yes, that Herod.

Why did he build a great temple? **Because buildings can be a great way to cover up bad hearts.** Again, don't get me wrong. Buildings can be a good thing. Our church has one. In future sessions, we'll talk about how to honor God by properly maintaining our place of worship. And of course, some big church buildings are full of good people. Some though, are full of problems.

Remember the wax apples we saw earlier? Some people fill their lives with things that look wonderful on the surface, but underneath, they're fake. For Herod, that temple was a gigantic

wax apple. Later, Jesus would prophecy that it would all be torn down. We'll learn about that towards the end of Matthew's book.

Here's an important principle: ***Spirit-filled people don't need big buildings and big crowds.***

I worry when people tell me they can't be happy in a church because there aren't enough people and the building isn't big enough and the worship team doesn't play the music they like. - That's not what Spirit-led people say.

Let's read on.

John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. (Matthew 3:4-6)

John was a man of the wilderness. He wore rugged clothes made for the outdoors. Camel's hair and leather weren't comfortable, but they were tough. They held up in the harsh environment that surrounded John.

John's clothes were more than useful: His clothes were the type worn by the prophet Elijah. So, John's clothes were useful for his environment, but they also reminded people that John was a prophet following in the line of great men of the Hebrew faith.

John ate the kind of food that you could find locally in the desert. Locusts were the only kind of insect considered kosher. You had to look around and work to gather them. Wild honey is available in the desert, but it doesn't ooze from every rock. Again, you had to look hard.

People came from all over to hear John's message. One of the things in his message was baptism. We'll talk about baptism in detail next week. For now, baptism was a sign that people lives were being changed. So, there's an important principle for us: ***Spirit-filled people don't love riches, luxury and comfort. They love to see people's lives changed by God.***

Let's read on.

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. (Matthew 3:7-8)

Now we meet some new players, the Pharisees and Sadducees. Each of these groups could take many sessions to discuss. We'll have to content ourselves with learning about them in more detail as we run into them in later chapters of Matthew. For now, let's do a high-level summary.

For each of these groups, think “no fruit”, “wax fruit” and “poison fruit”.

The Sadducees were the self-appointed intellectuals of the Hebrew religious scene. They thought of themselves as the “smarties”. They rejected anything that didn’t look “smart”. They rejected notions of the supernatural. They didn’t believe in angels. They didn’t believe in the resurrection. They believed in God, but how do you believe in a supernatural God with no supernatural events?

There’s an important principle here. ***As a practical matter, when there is no supernatural, then there is no reward for good behavior or punishment for bad behavior. Spirit-filled people believe in both.***

Later, we will learn that the Sadducees were very wealthy. This was because they controlled the temple. Whenever someone came to visit the Temple, the Sadducees imposed all kinds of expenses, which they collected for themselves. They ran the Temple for profit. They didn’t believe that they could be punished for this. Because of this, they were a king of poison for faith. The Sadducees are the reason Jesus had to overturn the tables of the money-changes.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, believed in the supernatural. They believed in angels and the resurrection. Sadly, they also believed that the supernatural could be manipulated by our actions on earth. To the Pharisees, everything was rules, rules, rules. By following the rules, you earn God’s favor. By breaking the rules, you earn punishment.

By the way, the Pharisees defined the rules. They went far and beyond the commands of God in Scripture. There was no mercy, no grace. But their hearts were evil, so the results of their rules produced fake fruit. They were a small, exclusive group of pompous people who deeply believed they were better than others. They were “us four, no more”. They thought they were the only people worthy of a resurrection.

Both groups, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, believed that only the Jewish people would see any of the benefits of God. All Gentiles were forsaken.

We have been learning that God offers us opportunities to know him. He does that sometimes by giving us commands. When we obey, through the power of his Holy Spirit, he is our reward. When we disobey, even then we learn of him through his mercy and grace.

And so, we see another principle:

Spirit-led people obey God because they love God.

-He is their reward.

Spirit-led people know that God extends mercy and grace when they fail.

Spirit-led people welcome everybody from every nation!

When John saw the Sadducees and the Pharisees, he compared them to poisonous snakes. They were a “brood of vipers”! They poisoned everyone’s faith.

Let's read more:

And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.
(Matthew 3:9-10)

The Sadducees and Pharisees both relied on their heritage as Jews for their eternal state. Abraham was the great father of faith. These groups said, "our father is Abraham, so we're in." "Everyone else has a different father, so they're out." To these people, behavior did not matter. -Heritage mattered. John said that's not the point. God can raise up children for Abraham from the stones if he wanted to. What matters is choices and actions. These come from the heart.

So that gives us another point.

Spirit-filled people don't rely on the actions of their parents or anyone else.
Spirit-filled people know that what matters is the condition of their hearts.
Spirit-filled people know that what matters is their choices and actions.

I know people who seem to believe that what matters is that their parents are Christians, and that their parents had somebody sprinkle water on them as babies. We're sorry, it doesn't work that way. What matters is your heart, your choices, and your actions.

So, how does this work?

Spirit-filled people know that what matters is their heart. Good choices and good actions follow a good heart, led by the Spirit of God. When Spirit-filled people see bad choices and bad actions in their own lives, they know that the solution isn't the way of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The answer isn't just to try to do good things. Sometimes attempts to pile on good works only leads to wax fruit, or worse yet, poison fruit. The answer isn't to find a big building and crowds. The answer is to head to the wilderness, to the quiet of our prayer closet or a spiritual retreat. Once there, the answer is to repent, to recognize sin in our lives and to ask God's help to change our bad hearts. Then, we ask God to fill us with his Spirit to empower us to make good choices and to perform good actions. That's how we produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Conclusion

So, we've learned today about root and fruit. We looked more closely at John the Baptist, a man filled with the Holy Spirit even before he was born. We learned that we seek the Holy Spirit best in the wilderness, in the quiet place. We need to ask God's Holy Spirit to point out our sin so that we can repent. We need to ask God to change our hearts, so that we can produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

We met people like Herod, and the Pharisees and the Sadducees. People who failed to realize that their problem was the condition of their hearts. Their lives were characterized by no fruit, wax fruit, and poisonous fruit.

John closes us today with a warning.

The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:10)

If you seek God, if you are willing to go out into the wilderness to find him, there is mercy and grace, generosity, and every good thing about our God. You are the sheep that the great Shepherd watches with love and kindness. You are the bruised reed that he will not break, and the smoldering wick that he will not extinguish.

But, if you will not repent, there is severity. The ax is ready at the root of the trees, ready to cut down all plants with no fruit to throw them into the fire. Repent today. Let us tell you how. We want you to know the love and kindness of God. Find out more by visiting us on the Web at: www.TrinityTeaneck.org. Do it right away! You'll be glad you did.