

## Man's Greatest Challenge (Part 4)

**True Christians**

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This ongoing series of sermons (as I have said before) is inspired, in part, from a 2003 speech given by Michael Crichton. And in this speech he relates what he considers to be the most important challenge facing mankind today. I quote:

"The greatest challenge facing mankind is the challenge of distinguishing reality from fantasy, truth from propaganda. Perceiving the truth has always been a challenge to mankind, but in the information age (or as I think of it, the *disinformation* age) it takes on a special urgency and importance."

And I think he is right. This colossal challenge that he talks about here smashes directly with the fact that we see the end of the age approaching. This is a time, foretold by our Savior Himself in Matthew 24 that is said to be unlike anything that man has ever faced. This will be the worst period of time in man's history!

Yet, as Christians who have been called from among the weak, the base, and the foolish; we are the ultimate targets of Satan's wrath and deception. He wants nothing better than to deceive us and get us off track; he wants to distract us so that we veer off course.

Will we, as God's elect, be able to discern truth from error as these days grow worse? Are we equipped to discern the difference? Do we have what it takes to make these decisions? Do we understand enough; are we able to distinguish the truth-teller from the lie-spinner? Are we able to tell friend from foe and differentiate hindrance from help?

We are up against a very determined enemy who has a plan of his own, a plan of deception. So the question Michael Crichton asks of the world, but which I ask of you is, "Are we up to the challenge of being able to distinguish truth from error, reality from fantasy?"

The first century church's history provides us with a template for what may happen as the end approaches. (Or in some cases it may also help us to understand what has already happened in the church of God.) We know that after the Pentecost described in Acts 2, God sent the apostles preaching the gospel to the known world and, at that time, many were baptized into the church, sometimes hundreds and thousands at a time. We see in Acts 2, Acts 3, and Acts 4 that they were coming in at clips of two and three thousand per day! That is heady growth! It was later said of them that they had turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). Paul and Barnabas especially—the ones spoken of here—had turned people's thinking on its head.

This new religion, this new philosophy as some would think of it, this new group had appeared on the scene and changed everything. And it really did! The coming of Jesus Christ and the

work that He did (not just the work of His sacrifice, but also the founding of the church and sending out the apostles) changed world history. And there were some who were astute enough, even among the Romans and the Ephesians in that particular place who were able to recognize this.

But with this growth there came enemies—sometimes Jews, sometimes Greeks, sometimes Romans, and sometimes there were others. They were able to persecute the church to an extent. They had their ways of getting under the skin of church members and then doing a great deal of damage. Some like Stephen and James and, later, others (including all the apostles except for John) were killed. Many in the church had their goods plundered; many were beaten; and many were martyred. The history is there to read. The church, in the latter part of the first century, did not fair very well under these persecutions. Even the Roman emperors also got into the act, like Nero and Diocletian and some of the others, and they began to persecute the church.

But, amazingly, this was not even the worst part—as terrible as it was. The deadliest enemies of the church turned out to be those who sat among them in church services week after week! Led by persuasive leaders with honeyed tongues and charismatic personalities, these false brethren turned their friends in the church against the apostles' doctrine so that within just a few decades of the initial outpouring of God's Spirit (if you read Galatians 1:6 which was written in the later 50's A.D.) there were some that were already following a different gospel! The visible Christian church, by the time the second century rolled around, bore no resemblance to the one Christ built following His resurrection. That church had moved so far from the teachings of the apostles that the only real connection was the name *Christian*. They had turned to a different gospel!

In II Corinthians 11:26, Paul describes the trials he had endured up to this point in his ministry. He lists *perils of false brethren* as one of the many dangers he had faced. This is right up there with the other persecutions he experienced: the times he was stoned, the times he was beaten, the time he was shipwrecked—and then he mentions false brethren!

In Galatians 2:4 he talks about false brethren secretly brought into the church in order to bring the brethren into bondage. He is referring to the historic account of which we read toward the end of Acts 14 and including Acts 15. Identified are "certain men who had come down from Judea" and began to preach that Gentile converts had to keep the Law of Moses. And in Acts 15:5 it is recorded that these men were "of the sect of the Pharisees who believed." This is what the great conference here is all about and to which James and Peter responded as the will of the whole counsel.

But think about some of these false brethren who were secretly brought in, these "certain men who had come down from Judea who were of the sect of the Pharisees." These were supposedly converted members. They certainly would not have been allowed to teach in the congregation had they not been members of the church. Perhaps they were Paul's long-time acquaintances because Paul, himself, was "a Pharisee of the Pharisees." If these men had come down from Judea they were most likely men whom he knew, perhaps, from before his own conversion. They may have been long-time friends and men in whom he trusted. But he perceived them as false brethren because of what they taught and what they tried to turn the church into. They

were not wheat, but tares (as in the parable). They were wolves among the sheep and he called them what they were. He did not mince words!

It is not my intention to make us suspicious of one another. That is not what I mean to do. But I do intend for us to face reality. The worst persecutions, the worst apostasies, have begun from *within* the church and many have been caught up in both the physical and the spiritual betrayals of those whom we considered brethren. These were brethren whose homes we may have visited, whose tables we may have eaten at, whose children may have played with our own, and with whom we may have joined at work parties and did service projects. These are the people we may have known for years and years and years in the church. But we came to find, after however long a period of time and experience, that we did not all believe the same things. We may need to look back only a few years at our experiences in the Worldwide Church of God to find many examples of this.

Probably with just a little thought you could think of someone whom you knew for maybe 10 or 15 years and did activities with who is no longer with us and who maybe also convinced others not to be among us.

I John 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.  
[They did not have the same Spirit.]

We have already looked into three areas necessary for us to be able to recognize the truth: the true nature of Christ; the true nature of God's Word and the authority of the Bible; and the third part was recognizing His true ministry.

Now this fourth part will be about *examining proofs of His true disciples*. In Luke's account of the Olivet prophecy we read of Jesus' warning of coming deception:

Luke 21:8 And He said: "Take heed that you not be deceived. [This is the first thing that He says about the end times. Evidently it was number one in His thoughts about what we need to do as the end times approach. That was the question, "What signs will there be when these things are about to take place."] For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He' and, 'The time has drawn near.' Therefore do not go after them.

He said, "Be careful of those who proclaim Me and preach in My Name and say that the time is coming. You have to be sharp. You have to be on to them. You have to be thinking."

Luke 21:16-17 "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will send some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake."

Jesus warns of *many* false teachers, false prophets and deceptions leading to betrayal. And who does He say will betray but parents, brothers, relatives, and friends. They will take it to the ultimate extreme of sending true believers to their deaths! The most likely pawns of Satan's malice will be the ones closest to us: our physical family members, our close acquaintances and friends—including our spiritual brethren in the church. Do you think Satan crows in pride and exultation when he can turn one of God's children and then use that person against the rest of his brethren? Oh, it is a coup! It is like winning the lottery! He would like to do that with every one of us!

Jesus says in Matthew 10: 35-36 that our enemies will be those of our own households. That is a frightening thought to consider how vulnerable we are, or can be! I know as a husband I am vulnerable to what my wife desires and this works the same way for any husband or any wife. If you love one another you trust each other. And should he turn one of you, the other, then, becomes extremely vulnerable. How easy it would be to turn a mate. You do not want to disappoint that person. You want to give in or compromise. You do not want to make him or her mad. You do not want to make them uncomfortable.

"Okay, we will not go to church services this week." "If you feel we should go ahead and observe Easter, fine. I do not want to cause any waves."

It could be like that just to please one's mate. Or it may involve a child or a brother or sister you are particularly close to. It could be an aunt or an uncle or a cousin. Blood is thicker than water and we are all too willing to compromise in order to please those who are closest to us. This is not to say we are to distrust them, but we must understand that Satan wants to turn our family members against us! This is reality!

II Timothy 3:13 But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.

Paul warns us that the subtlety and cunning of men will only intensify. This means that the worst of the evil men and deceivers will be around at the end of the age. And guess who has to face them—those who are alive and in God's church at this time! If we are correct in our understanding that this is now that time, then these evil men and wicked imposters are already on the scene!

Yet even so, Satan may score his biggest triumphs over us with lesser deceivers, those who are closest to us and have turned from the truth. These people would like nothing more than to "save us" from our spiritual folly. I read many statements along these lines among the frequent e-mails I receive. People write in and say that we are wrong in one particular teaching or another and give us a long explanation as to why. They then conclude by saying that they want to save us because they believe we are their brethren and they do not want us to go to hell.

They think they are, as Jesus warns, doing God's service by saving us from the folly of holding fast to that which has been revealed to us. It could happen. We are more apt to heed the word of a relative or a friend than some distant, prominent, evil man whom we do not know. We could once again wander into utter deception!

What do we do? How do we distinguish a true disciple from a false one? How can we guard ourselves from deception? How can we face the challenge of being able to tell reality from fantasy?

I am going to give you four hallmarks of a true Christian, a true disciple. These will not be anything new. They are well-known to us and they are our "ammo" against the wicked one.

First of all, there is the "classic" proof of a Christian found in Romans 8:

Romans 8:9-11, 14 But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit which dwells in you...For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

This is the classic hallmark of a true Christian—one in whom Christ dwells by His Spirit. Now, it is hard to see that.. This Spirit does not make one glow; nor does it surround one's head with a halo. It does not place a badge on our lapel which reads, "I am a true Christian!" It does nothing of the sort. It is there invisibly.

There are a few details which Paul brings out that many just brush past. First, he explains in verse 14 that it is all who are *led* by the Spirit of God who are true Christians. This is a tiny, three-letter word: l-e-d (past tense of lead). God's Spirit is not just there like a big lump in your brain. It is engaged in activity—guiding, directing, governing, motivating, and helping. The Holy Spirit *leads* a person.

Secondly, did you notice another little detail in this verse: "as many as *are* led?" This is in the passive tense and implies the need for our cooperation. We *allow* God to lead us and *submit* to His Spirit.

Unfortunately this means that there are some who had once believed, repented, been baptized, had hands laid on them in order to receive the Holy Spirit, and then gone on to do...NOTHING! Or, perhaps worse: they stubbornly *refuse* the prodding of God's Spirit to increase their knowledge of God and grow in grace and good works. They *refuse* to be led into the keeping of the commandments or into sacrifice. They do not do anything! There are some who have received the Spirit of God who are NOT being led by it. Or, in other words, they do not *allow* themselves to be led by it.

We could say that they are tenuously, at best, Christian disciples. They have a problem. They still have a chance, but that chance is slipping away because they are doing nothing with it. Remember the parable of the talents. A certain man (God) gave talents to three of his servants. To one servant he gave five; to another he gave two; and to another he gave one, each according to their abilities.

The first two servants doubled their talents, but the third one did nothing. The last we hear of

him there is weeping and gnashing of teeth! God gave him anything and everything he could possibly use to make things work out in his life just as with the others, but he did nothing and so lost all! This is a sobering, but very real scenario for us today!

There is another parable I would like to rehearse which is found in Luke 8—the parable of the sower. The parallel account is found in Matthew 13.

Luke 8:4-8, 11-15 And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke by a parable: "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold." When He had said these things He cried, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"..."Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no roots, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience [or with endurance]."

It is the parable of the sower which explains the differences among those who receive God's Spirit. Many, it seems, hear and believe for a time. Again, they are baptized and have hands laid on them and are placed into the church. But certain things happen during the conversion process and they fail. So there are many who hear and believe for a while, but ultimately do little or nothing with God's calling and fall away.

Herbert Armstrong would say, at times, that only *half* of the congregation was converted. I think that was an optimistic evaluation. I have heard others say that only a tenth were converted. We now know, by what happened in the Worldwide Church of God, that there were many who had little root. We now know that there were many who were distracted by the cares of this world and fell away. And we know, too, that these took a lot of our brethren with them!

To make matters worse, in the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13), we find that Satan plants his agents in the church and they grow up with us. They appear so much like true disciples that, in Jesus' own words, we will not be able to tell the difference until the wheat matures! That is scary! There is a lot of deception out there!

Are we being led by the Spirit of God? This is my question. Do we also see others who are being led by the Spirit of God? It is invisible yes, but the fruits, the qualities of that Spirit do show on

the outside. And we do have to be educated and have our perceptive skills honed in order to recognize them.

There are three other proofs which are a subset of this one. It begins with our relationship with God through the Spirit and it is His Spirit within us which allows us to manifest these other fruits.

Luke 6:35 "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He is kind to the unthankful and evil.

The proof here is that a true Christian behaves in love toward both friend and foe. It is this quality of showing love which expresses God's nature and marks us as sons of the Highest. We cannot do this without the Spirit of God in us. This is a terribly tall hurdle. We feel the need to stick it to those whom we believe should be "stuck!" We desire retribution and giving what we get. Turning the other cheek is a difficult task and walking the extra mile is a greater distance than we ever realized, but it is this we must do—love even our enemies!

It says in Matthew 5:45 that God makes the sun to shine on both good and evil men and that He indiscriminately sends the rain upon them, too. His children mimic this indiscriminate love and goodness. They are practicing this or otherwise they are not sons of the Highest. We must understand, however, that He certainly favors those who love Him. He favors them with blessings and goes out of His way to help them. But at the same time He never acts in an evil manner toward those who hate Him. This is just part of His nature. He does not do evil even to those who, if they could, spitefully use Him. I know this is almost incomprehensible, but it is a target for which we can shoot.

John 13:34-35 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

These verses bring it home! This quality will set us apart from all other people. It is so rare a quality (having true love for each other) that everyone notices it almost immediately. More than genuine affection, it is the same kind of love that Jesus exhibited—"As I have loved you, that you also love one another."

This gives us parameters for the type of love He is looking for: the same love He showed. What is the biblical standard of godly love? Jesus answers this profound question in John 15.

John 15:12-13 "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

This standard can be called "self-sacrifice"—a willingness to go all the way to the death for another person if need be. It is a sacrificial love. Jesus was willing and indeed *did* die for us! This is one of the conclusions of the gospels. His supreme act for us was that "while we were yet

sinner Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

This shows the Father's love, as well. He sent His Son to die for all of us. They were united in this and want us to be united with Them in expressing this same type of love.

People do notice when we exhibit godly love—looking out for the interests of others before our own. Such a thing is, indeed, rare. It is almost unknown in a world where everything stems from self-interest. Nations act in their own self-interest and every one within each nation is similarly motivated. They have to get their piece of the pie. And so when someone steps outside of this paradigm (if I may use a noun which we may have come to hate), people incline their ears and crane their necks, amazed that someone would conduct themselves in such a selfless manner.

We hear about Medal of Honor winners forsaking the protection of the foxhole and their very lives, taking injury after injury in order to rescue an injured pal and bring him safely back. Another act of uncommon valor is when one man throws himself on a grenade to save his squadron from certain death. We marvel at these brave and selfless deeds because we just cannot imagine ourselves doing such a thing, but to this standard we are called.

We may never find ourselves in a foxhole or having to throw ourselves on a grenade, but there are other ways in which we can give our lives for others. It may be a seemingly insignificant act of service such as visiting a friend or neighbor who needs some company rather than spending an afternoon taking care of our own personal needs. This is giving up a part of our life, sacrificing ourselves in a small way. This is how it must begin as we show love to one another. Jesus, in one place, describes an act even more insignificant than this when He speaks of giving a cup of water to someone who is thirsty. This is a relatively small act of service, a small sacrifice, but this is the gist of what is required. We serve someone for their benefit in lieu of what we may want to do.

We are going to spend some time on this third point. There are five, let us call them "sub-points," to this one.

John 8:31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.

The third point, then, the hallmark we are to glean from this verse is: a true Christian abides in God's Word.

John 8:32-36, 39, 47 "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone [which is a self-deception]. How can you say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed"...They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the

works of Abraham...He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God."

The word abide is a fine translation, but we do not normally use it, although we may speak of "biding our time." We might say "dwell," but the implication here is to "continue." "*If you continue in My word you are My disciples, indeed.*"

If we abide in a house, what are we doing? We are living there. Jesus says, "*If you live in My word, continue to live in My Word, you are My disciples, indeed.*" This is the sense of the instruction here. A true disciple lives in His teaching. Or in other words, he lives *by* His teaching. Everything he does is motivated and directed by what Jesus taught. The nuance is that he does not merely agree with Jesus' teaching, but he makes it his way of life. This is the point we are to take from this.

The context of these verses reveals that Jesus was speaking to people who *believed* Him. They believed Him! They had intellectual agreement with Him. They were right with Him up to this point saying, in effect, "Yeah Jesus, tell 'em!" Then they are told, however, that if they are going to be Jesus' disciples they not only have to believe in what He says, but they must also *live* in what He says. This is a big difference! They must continue *doing* what Jesus commands and not just simply agree as those who cheer on a sports team from the sidelines.

Now the first of the five sub-points is found in verse 32: when we continue to do what Jesus says, when we abide in His word, we will come to know the truth.

What does this mean? Let us put this together. "If you abide in my word you are My disciples, indeed. And you shall know the truth." Think about that. He has just said that it is not enough just to believe. He is saying that we really CANNOT KNOW His word fully just by study or hearing. This is along the same lines as intellectual agreement. We can only fully come to know God's Word by experience—living in it and making it our way of life. There is an element of the knowledge of God which cannot be written in a book. It cannot be ferreted out by study, intellect, or education. It has to be lived.

This is why "death-bed repentances" are "iffy," at best—there is an element of belief involved, but no experience with which to combine it. How deep would be the knowledge of someone who had lived a life of crime or evil of some sort and then, at the very last minute said, "I believe," and then died? What would he have learned? Would he be prepared for what God had in store for him in His Kingdom? All he knows is robbing, raping, shooting and whatever else he may have done. There is a part of knowing God and His truth that can only be learned by doing.

Take the Sabbath, for example; this is so clear. People who intellectually agree with keeping the Sabbath have no idea what it means to use the Sabbath as God intended. They have no idea of the rest we receive, the instruction we receive. They have no idea of the intimacy of the relationship which can be developed with God and His Son, Jesus Christ, only through keeping the Sabbath. And we could go on and on. There are certainly lessons of the Sabbath Day that would never be learned if one agreed with it only on an intellectual level.

God is a practical God. He is not in some ivory tower handing down worthless decrees simply to

hear Himself speak! He expects these instructions to be followed and kept; in doing so even greater truths can then be learned. We have to experience God's Word, practice it, and live it in order to come to a full knowledge of Him and His way of life.

The second sub-point is also found in verse 32. This is a wonderful verse! The truth, we find, makes us *free*. God's Word is liberating! I do not know where these so-called theologians ever came up with the idea that God's Word is confining and that it somehow straps us down, imprisoning us. This is not the way it is! Our Savior tells us, right here, that the truth makes us free! People do not seem to understand that it is Satan's way of life which brings them into bondage. Satan makes us do his will; he makes us do evil; he makes us live like he does. We do not have a choice. Everyone must conform to him and he will force us to do it!

God, on the other hand, opens our minds to the truth and we then have true choice—free moral agency!

Deuteronomy 30:19 "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.

God prefers that we choose life and it is His truth which gives us the choice. And once we make the choice for right and good there are, then, vistas of possibilities which open up to us. This is true freedom! It is only when we put God's way into practice that we begin to come to realize how much freedom truly exists in His way of life: keeping His laws, keeping his commandments. This frees us. We are free from Satan especially and his way of life. And free, too, to live eternally.

Although saved by grace, we are freed by Jesus Christ and His Word—the truth. They all go together.

The third sub-point (found in verse 34) it that *sin* that enslaves us. Jesus says, "I say to you that whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." Why does He bring this up here? Paul tells us in Romans 3: 20 that "by the law is the knowledge of sin." What is He getting at here?

Consider the words in which we are to abide: His laws, His statutes, His judgments, His sayings, His teachings, His instructions! Do you understand what I mean? Do we understand what Jesus is talking about? He is talking about keeping His law! By the keeping of His law we understand what sin is and then we can avoid it.

He could just as easily (and truly) have said, "My true disciples keep God's law." But He did not say that. He exhorted people to abide in His Word and, in effect, said just the opposite: "whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." He does, in fact, say elsewhere that if you want to enter into life keep the commandments (Matthew 19: 17). Abiding in His Word will keep us from the slavery of sin. Again, this is the sub-point: sin enslaves.

The fourth sub-point is found in verse 36. It is amazing how much revelation Jesus could pack into this short passage: "Therefore if the Son makes you free you shall be free indeed!" The point here is that Christ inaugurates our freedom by His sacrifice, His great act of love for us.

We are then justified and brought into a relationship with the Father who gives us grace and then we are free.

The point is that it is Christ's sacrifice which starts the process. Christ is the One who leads us into *abiding* in His Word. To *maintain* the relationship after this, to *maintain* the freedom about which He has been speaking, we must continue or abide—live in His instruction. I am trying to not leave anything out. I want to fill in every detail of the overall teaching.

This final sub-point is brought out in verses 39 and 47. Jesus brings out a clear principle in verse 39: children resemble their parents. He says, "If you were Abraham's children you would do the works of Abraham." They were clamoring, "Hey, we are Abraham's kids! We follow what he says!" Jesus said, "No, you are seeking to kill me!" And they said, "You have a demon!" And He says in verse 40, "No, if you were truly Abraham's children you would do what Abraham did. Abraham would not do this." In another place (verse 56) He said that Abraham looked for this day.

This principle is important because it gets down to what He says in verse 47: "He who is of God hears God's Word." The children of God, the sons of God, the sons of the Highest, Christ's disciples act like God! Verse 39 says, "If you were Abraham's children you would do the works of Abraham." We could just as easily substitute God's name in here: "If you were God's children you would do the works of God!"

Jesus, who was God in the flesh, is our example and the One we are supposed to imitate. Abiding in His Word means living just as He did while He was on the earth. Did He keep God's commandments? You can bet your eternal life He did! And He tells us to follow Him, imitate Him. The apostles told us the same thing and this is all part of abiding in His Word.

The final hallmark of a Christian that I want to bring out is: a true Christian bears *much* fruit.

John 15:8 "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples

This is only logical. Think about it. If a person is led by God's Spirit and he behaves in love and abides in God's Word, should he not begin to produce fruit? One would think this would naturally follow—and it does! Once we are doing these other things, we will see a great deal of growth occurring in our lives.

A true Christian will be happier than he was before (or more joyous). He will be more content and more at peace in order to produce more righteousness (as it says in James 3:18). He will be more apt to do the right thing when a problem arises. He will be more sympathetic to others in their trials, perhaps because he has been through those same trials himself and has learned and grown from them. He will be more helpful, more giving, more hospitable, and more teachable.

We can go on and on and on with examples of the growth that will occur in our lives as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit—and from learning how to love and abide in His Word. We will bear much fruit!

We are warned earlier on, however:

John 15:2, 6 "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away...If anyone does not abide in Me [here is this caveat again], he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned."

If we *fail* to produce fruit we will be taken away and burned like the unproductive branches of a fruit tree. God uses the carrot and stick method quite a bit in His Word. He holds out the carrot of the Kingdom of God and all that will come from it, but He also warns that there is a down side—the stick! He says it right in this chapter on this particular point.

We *must* be producing fruit! And Jesus says in verse 8 that we should be producing *much* fruit. He knows how much He has "dunged" us and pruned us. He goes out to our tree and says, "Hey, look at what I have done for you! Why are you not producing?" He expects a lot out of us. God expects Christ's image to be formed in us. Do we look and act like Christ?

Galatians 5 gives us some things to work on both from a positive and a negative point of view. This passage brings together all the factors about which we have been studying.

Galatians 5:16 I say then [Paul writes]: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

If we do these things, if we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit of God and we are doing them, then we will not be doing the bad things. We will be focused on doing the good things.

Galatians 5:17-18 For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law [you are not under the penalty of the law].

If you do what is right there is no law that is going to take effect because you have not broken any.

Galatians 5:19-21 Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

This is clear—put these works out of your life! This is the negative aspect of producing fruit: the purging, the mortifying, the killing, the putting to death, the crucifying of all that is evil!

Galatians 5:22-23 But [this is different] the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

There is no law that says these should not be done! These are all good things. There is no penalty for doing these things. We should be doing them and adding them to our repertoire of character traits.

Galatians 5:24-25 And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit [if the Spirit of God abides in you], let us also walk [do, live, conduct ourselves] in the Spirit.

It is not only that we have the Spirit indwelling in our minds, but we must allow it to lead us so that our walk gives evidence that it is there.

I am sure that we all have a long way to go in order to do all these things perfectly, but if we are putting off the works of the flesh and putting on the fruit of the Spirit, even little by little, inch by inch, we are showing ourselves to be true Christians. We are giving evidence, we are giving proof that the Spirit of God abides in us.

I John 3:1-3 Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

Allow me to paraphrase this passage, giving you my own particular perspective: "*What an honor it is that God, even now, with all of our imperfections, calls us His children. The world is as blind to us as it is to the true God, but we are the children of God with a glorious future—to be just like God, Himself. How mind-boggling; how fantastic! And since we have this as a goal, our job is to work toward it by purifying ourselves to be just like He is*"

This is a daunting task, but one for which God has given us the tools and the help to accomplish. I hope a little modern English helps.

God gives a wonderful promise, through John, which is written in such a confident tone. I do not know whether anyone could write it more confidently:

I John 5:18 We know that whoever is born of God [this should be translated "begotten"] does not sin; but he who has been born [begotten] of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.

The reason I say that it should read "begotten" is because it is evident that the process has not yet been completed. Those who are truly God's begotten children DO NOT sin! They do not *habitually* sin; they do not *practice* sin; they do not *live* sinful lives.

John was aware that all of us living in the flesh fail from time to time. But we do not sin as a practice. Such people, he goes on to say, *guard* themselves. That is what the word "keep" should be. They *secure* themselves; they *fortify* themselves; they *watch* themselves against deception, against betrayal, against all the wiles of Satan the devil. And God promises, through John here, that the wicked one, Satan the devil, does not even TOUCH THEM!

We not only have God's protection, but *we* are doing something that keeps Satan at bay—more than arm's length away! We have that power as sons of God, as daughters of God, to do this in the face of a powerful spirit-being! It is like a great big shield out there that he cannot get past because we guard ourselves. And what is that guard? It is being led by God's Spirit, doing acts of love, abiding in His Word, and bearing much fruit. These things keep Satan away!

We can immunize ourselves against false doctrine, false brethren—and the evil master-mind behind them! We must immerse ourselves in and totally submit to God's way of life. As Jesus said, if we live in the truth we will become wise to the deceptions of Satan, the father of lies, and truly live as children of God forever!