

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

There are numerous times in the Bible where we can discover the *real meaning of how to live as a Disciple of Jesus* with only a few words. The words simply draw for us a picture we can understand and relate to in our day to day living. The words almost “shout” to us in clarity and calling. Though many of the writings of the disciples, who walked and talked with Jesus are powerful and provide direction in our spiritual lives, *it is the words of Jesus that can reach into our spirit and provide meaning.*

In the Gospel of John, we are in the last days of Jesus’ time on earth before His death on the cross. *Jesus’ words and the subjects He relayed to His followers must have been close to His heart. Words that He knew, when spoken, would be beneficial to us.*

Today’s short Gospel reading is one such example of a few words that give us a clear picture of the way we must live out our lives as disciples. A way we can be affective in whatever ministry God desires for us to do.

However, there is one thing we must be willing to do first and it seems very basic - **trust**. **How many times can we recall that we had to be in control? Do we really trust God? How many times have we been in that situation because we know better? And how did that work out for you?**

“**Trust**” sounds so basic and truly it is. Our foundation, *faith “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* We have the conviction that God is there even when we have not seen Him. **Remember “doubt”, which we all have at times, is not to be equated with unbelief.** We can have a strong faith, but doubt can be there too, after all we just have to look to Thomas for an example of one whose faith had its doubts.

As we go forward studying these verses there will be a better understanding when we are open to His words because we have faith and trust in Him.

Once again our language does not have the words to give us an exact picture. **The original word used here did not mean a seed, but a berry, a fruit.** For a corn of wheat and other cereal grains have seeds inside a seed vessel or pod just as do other fruits and berries.

In order for the plant to bear fruit, the people of Jesus’ day knew that entire seed pod must be put in the ground. Jesus knew he must die, and be buried to rise and produce much fruit! We as His disciples must do the same in order for our lives to become fruitful. We cannot remain in a seed pod and bear no fruit.

Remember the warning in John 15:2 *“he cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more.”* These words are found in the ending chapters of the Gospel of John after the Supper and before going to the garden to pray. These are some of the last teachings He gave to His disciples-- teachings that must have been important. **Think if you were near the end of your time on earth, what would you say to those around you?** That is the point I want to make here, these last words of teaching must carry added meaning for those who follow Him!

Many commentators will say that Jesus was talking about Himself in these verses, however the case is also made that it is a description of the way of life for a disciple . We must die to self in order to be fruitful and become that which God desires for us – the best!!!!

This picture of a seed pod planted in the ground only to grow and be fruitful was understood by the people who heard it, but how do we make sense of these verses for our daily life and spiritual journey? **What was Jesus saying to the disciples? What is he saying to us today? Jesus is answering the question “how can your garden grow?”**

There is a process that begins when the seed pod falls into the earth and dies we know as **“germination”**. Just like that process of germination, **we too undergo a spiritual process called Sanctification or simply more put, the process of becoming more Christ-like.**

Jesus used this picture of a seed falling into the ground, dying, and growing to bear fruit to compare it to the process we must go through to bear fruit spiritually. **So let's compare the seed pod and our own spiritual growth.** After all, Jesus used many such examples, to name one the parable of the seeds falling on the different types of soil and others.

As gardeners know, once the seed is in the ground it can be a hostile environment for the seed – too dry, too wet, too hot, and too cold. However, once in the ground that hard shell of the seed pod begins to soften as the process begins. **We too, like the seed pod, when we turn to God and are shown our sin. Repentance is the “softening” of that hard shell that has prevented us from “breaking out of our shell” and bearing fruit for ministry. Now God doesn't show us all our sin at once, but gives us what He knows we can handle and this process continues throughout our lives.**

I had a friend I used to discuss such a topic with. An answer he gave me once has remained with me. He told me the closer he got to God the more unworthy he felt. But the grace and love of God was always there for him and as it is for us so that we can grow into that Christ-like person.

During the process of that seed pod in the ground within the seed, its starch content turns to sugar. It is the nourishment the seed uses to gain strength to build a foundation, to root itself as it grows. **In**

our life process if we die to self then we become as 2 Corinthians 5:17 says “...any man be in Christ, he is a new creature”.

Just as the seed pod grows, we will not grow and root if we don't feed on those nutrients that will strengthen us. What can be better, more beneficial than the word of God for our growth? Psalm 119:103 *“how sweet your words taste to me; they are sweeter than honey.”* Jesus told us in John 15:5 *“those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from Me you can do nothing”.*

Now with nutrients providing a means to grow and that hard seed pod softened, the seed can grow. When we have wondered if our plantings were dead (doubted), we have dug into the ground and soon discovered there is the plant almost ready to break ground with the pod hanging on as the seed has rooted and is pushing upward. **We too in our process of spiritual growth open to God's word and hear the gentle whisper of the Holy Spirit guiding us!** Romans 8:14 *“for all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”*

Despite a less than perfect environment we find ourselves in, God is there, He loves us with love we cannot begin to understand. I struggle with it **everyday**. How can you love me when I constantly mess up!!! But He does, praise God and thank you Jesus!!!!

Now we see that the seed has grown and has broken through the ground. This plant as tender as it is, is already “giving”! It is giving off life-sustaining oxygen and at the same time receiving carbon dioxide for its own life. **When we have arrived at that point in our life, we too must give to others and the amazing thing is that we will receive more in return.** Any of you that have been on a mission trip know the truth in that Godly principle. I went on such trips thinking I was going to give them so much and they gave back to me and those on the trip many, many times over. This principle is found in Malachi 3 saying in part *“...I open the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows”.*

When we grow in Christ we will become more aware of that which Jesus Christ did for each and every one of us!!! And we will give not out of obligation but gratitude. We give not expecting anything in return. We sing the song with the chorus “freely, freely you have received, freely, freely give” do we??? In Romans 13:8 *“owe nothing to anyone--except to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law.”*

And remember a plant begins the process of giving off oxygen once it has broken through the ground, so if we draw an analogy to our spiritual life, we can give from a very young age to a very old age. You know the stories I have told in the past of those who were givers all their life, no matter their age.

Finally, the seed pod has broken ground and has grown into a mature plant or tree and **will begin bearing fruit. Was it easy reaching this point in its life? I doubt it.** There were likely downpours, dry times, storms with wind and hail, but despite all those trials the time has come to bear fruit. We know every plant has different maturing times. Trees like a poplar can reach maturity much faster than an oak.

The same is true of our spiritual maturity. Each one of us handles the trials, temptations, and challenges differently, coming through at a time and at a different place. It may be a tiny step or large step, but God is with us, right at that place we are. How does your garden grow? – I pray with the grace and love of God.

In closing a story about a tree that began as a seed pod... at a lake there was an old tree. It was 70 feet tall and right at the water's edge. It provided shade to generations of fishermen and was home to countless squirrels and birds over the years. In the fall its colorful leaves were glorious to gaze upon. This tree was such a wonder to behold. It made the lake and the world a more beautiful place just by being in it. However, erosion began to take its toll on the ground around the tree. There came a point when the dirt was so worn away by the lake water that it could no longer support the huge roots of this massive beauty and the tree fell to the ground. Out of the decaying tree new trees grew up.

May we all live our lives as beautifully as this tree did.

May we all live a life that makes the world around us a better place.

May we all live a life of such love, such joy, and such light that we touch countless lives with our spirit.

May we all live a life of such goodness, such kindness, and such oneness with god that we continue to bring beauty, love, and life to the hearts and souls of others even after we have left this world for the next.

Amen.