



"You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree can not bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them." (Matthew 7:16-20)

In preparation for the Holy Week, stringent self-examination is essential to gain the full benefit of all the blessed events of this week. It is important to look into our hearts and ask ourselves what type of fruits are we bearing. Are the vine branches strong enough to bear good fruits?

One may ask himself:

- Are prayer and daily Holy Bible reading a spiritual routine for me?
- Do I fast in search of spiritual strength?
- Do I attend Divine Liturgy and remember the Holy Scripture and the reading from the Coptic Synaxarium for family discussion following church services?
- Do I honor and participate fully in the Holy Sacraments of the blessed Church?

- Am I ever mindful that the Lord Jesus Christ died for my sins and was resurrected to provide me with everlasting life with Him in Heaven?

If your answer is an unwavering "yes" your branches are indeed becoming stronger and your spiritual devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ becoming fixed upon His teachings and Holy example.

Then perhaps one may want to ask himself:

- Am I bearing fruits?
- Does my behavior with others demonstrate I am a Christian inside as well as outside of Divine Liturgy and Church services?
- Do I offer service to the church frequently and without regard to the type of service?
- Do I visit the sick and the elderly who cannot attend the Divine Liturgy?
- Do I help those less fortunate than myself?
- Do I open my doors to those who are new to the Church area for a welcoming agape meal?

Or—

- Am I quarreling with another, perhaps a family member or friend?
- Am I critical of others?
- Do I have a sense of entitlement?

- Do I readily believe a report about another and pass judgment upon them although I have personally heard or witnessed nothing?
- Do I take sides in a dispute to the exclusion of another?
- Does work, study, or social activities come before our beloved Lord Jesus Christ?
- Do appearances of an action persuade me to believe falsely against another when I do not personally know their thoughts or intentions?

An example of misguided and unjustified judgment can be found within the history of St. Ephraim El-Surian, the inspirational hymn writer. St. Ephraim the Syrian was a pious monk who was baptized by St. James, the New Testament writer. He was affiliated with the great St. Basil, the Bishop of Caesarea, who knew him by name before ever they met. St. Ephraim performed many miracles, wrote many articles and discourses, and was widely accepted and known to be a holy man. Yet, even with his careful presentation and astute monastic way of life, he was falsely accused of ridiculing the elderly.

St. Ephraim had chronic back pain as a young man. He walked with a stick to ease his pain in a manner similar to the elder monks who had developed the same ailment in late life. Certain monks took it upon themselves to judge that St. Ephraim was ridiculing

the elder monks' by walking with a stick. These monks shared their comments and judgment with other monks within the monastery. Nothing was farther from the truth but St. Ephraim did not defend himself but firmly placed his walking stick into the ground within the El Surian Monastery in view of all. This ill judged stick, sprouted flowers the next day and still thrives today within the monastery as a sign of piety and also a warning not to place judgment upon another. This stick which became a tree is known as the Tree of Obedience and prophetically grows fruit. Being located next to the most ancient of cells in the El Surian Monastery, it is often referred to as "east of the tree of Mar Ephraim are these particular cells and west of Mar Ephraim Tree is this particular cave" in remembrance of a saintly act.

The Holy Bible uses the example of the fruit bearing tree, in particular the fig, often in illustrating the dire consequences of hypocrisy. The fig was grown throughout the Holy Land and was a basic staple in the diet of those who lived in Biblical times. It was sweet, desirable, and often planted alongside grape vines. The large leaves of the fig tree covered Adam and Eve's nakedness and shaded Nathaniel from the sun when St. Phillip called to him "*come and see*" (John 1:46).

Figs could be eaten straight off the vine as our Lord Jesus Christ attempted to do...

"Now the next day, when they had come out of Bethany, He was hungry. And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response to it, Jesus said to it, 'Let no one eat fruit from you ever again.' And His disciples heard it" (Mark 11: 12-14).

Perhaps this fruit tree sprouted early foliage, perhaps it was a first fruit or first crop and its fruit was barren because it had not had time to mature. But the message related to bearing good fruit is predominant. Faith in the Lord should and must bear good fruits.

"Then He said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up ground?'" (Luke 13:7).

Could the same be implied about an individual who attends church faithfully yet, upon leaving church, practices the ways of the worldly? To further emphasize this point in St. James it is asked,

"Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus no spring yields both salt water and fresh" (James 3:12).

Surely this insinuates that contradictory behavior belongs to those who come to church and pray yet whose behavior outside of the church does not allow the partaking of the Holy Communion or the Holy Sacraments of the Church. One must ask oneself the purpose of attending church if not to embrace the Holy Sacraments of the Church in particular this season of repentance and confession.

The Lord Jesus Christ strongly speaks to darkened hearts, to lustful behaviors, to coveting what another has, to those who are overly confident, to lack of humility, and to judging others. What one has does not equate to who one is. Good fruits are essential in defining a person's faith.

St. Clement of Alexandria c.195 writes regarding hypocrisy, "This is how those who are consecrated to Christ should appear. And they should frame themselves in their whole of life just as they fashion themselves in the church—for the sake of gravity. They should seek to actually be meek, pious, and loving—not merely to seem to be so. However, I cannot understand how people change their fashions and manners, depending on the place. It is said that

polypus become assimilated to the rocks to which they adhere and become one in the color with the rocks. Similarly some Christians lay aside the inspiration of the assembly. And after their departure they associate. Nay, in laying side the artificial mask of solemnity, they are proved to be what they secretly were. After having paid reverence to the discourse about God, they leave behind what they have heard. Outside of the assembly, they foolishly amuse themselves with ungodly playing and romantic quavering, occupied with flute-playing, dancing, intoxication, and all kinds of frivolity."

Just as the fruit tree will wither because of its fruitlessness, what about those lacking spiritual fruits?

St. James encourages us in all things to be humble...to forgo judgment of others...to resist the ways of the world...

"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

Look around for those who foster healing and restoration. Look around for those who complain of another and seek to isolate that person from others. Are you siding with peace or bitterness? Do you enjoy the companionship of the fruitful or the fruitless? Are you the withered fig that the Lord

Jesus Christ did not provide another chance to bloom?

St. John Chrysostom teaches, "The fig tree with its broad leaves illustrates the wide road. It also reminds us of the sin in which Adam and Eve tried to cover with the leaves of the fig tree."

Let us pray to the Lord that we will continually seek to transform our lives so that our outward appearance and inward nature bear fruits, flourish, and grow. Glory to the Holy Trinity now and forever. Amen.

Bishop Youssef
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern
United States