

The Status Quo Has Got to Go!

The squirrels beat me to the fruit . . . again.

Living in Florida, I've learned that the sweetest fruit grows right in my own backyard: oranges, pineapples, even mangoes. Especially mangoes. My mouth waters every spring as I watch blossoms develop into fruit on our two mango trees. Tiny orbs smaller than golf balls slowly mature into the sweetest mangoes I've ever tasted—that is, when I actually get to them.

Unfortunately, the squirrels often reach them first. Fruit from trees I cultivated, watered, and fertilized. Fruit I diligently watched as it ripened from green to an inviting shade of yellow-orange. Fruit from which I've inhaled a sweet fragrance proclaiming readiness to be harvested and enjoyed.

One of the great frustrations in growing fruit is watching it develop day by day, only to see it stolen just as it reaches the peak of ripeness. I'd look up to see half-eaten fruit still hanging high on the tree out of my reach, yet not out of the reach of agile squirrels hopping from branch to branch—brazen thieves taunting me as they snatch their mouthwatering treasures.

Even if mangoes are not your thing, you may still recall biting into a ripe piece of fruit on a hot summer day. Maybe it was a peach, a plum,

or a slice of watermelon. Remember the sweet taste as the juice dripped off your chin?

These are not the only types of fruit we're meant to enjoy. God describes several of His attributes as fruit He develops in us. The apostle Paul listed these in Galatians 5:22–23: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. They are not separate fruits (plural). Rather, each one is a display or facet of the fruit (singular) the Holy Spirit grows in our lives. We don't have the option of choosing which ones we like or want. They come as a package of nine. God develops this fruit in us to grow us to be more like Christ. So why do we often feel as if we don't have enough of this fruit? Perhaps it's because this fruit is also the target of a thief.

Spiritual Thievery

The fruit of the Spirit is ours at the moment of faith when the Holy Spirit takes residence in those who receive Jesus as Lord and Savior.¹ Through His presence, He continuously works in each of us to graciously provide both His forgiveness and the characteristics of Christ-likeness.

Still, many of us lack these qualities—qualities we were meant to have in abundance. How often have you and I wished we had greater peace or more patience? Or mourned our lack of self-control? How many times have we longed to be more loving or agonized over the joy stealers in life? What happened to the abundant life Jesus declared for us? Many believers know what God has promised, yet are frustrated because of their lack of progress.

The Bible describes Satan as an accuser, tempter, roaring lion, and serpent.² In John 10:10, Jesus spoke of the thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy—speaking a rebuke against the religious leaders who failed to recognize Jesus as the source of abundant life. Jesus was also clear about whom those leaders belonged to: “You are of your father the devil . . . a murderer . . . and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Their thievery came naturally from Satan, their spiritual father.

When Satan is at work, the result can be a discouraging sense of half-eaten fruit hanging on the branches of our lives. The fruit is there,

but we're cheated out of the full blessing of watching these characteristics fully ripen in us as we live out our Christian faith.

Still, we're not left helpless as the thief schemes to spoil our precious birthright. Just as the Bible speaks of fruit and thieves, it also reveals that God has always been in the recovery business.

- In Genesis 14:14–16, Abraham led the defeat of the four kings to rescue Lot.
- In Exodus 13, the Lord equipped Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery.
- In Romans 8:1–2, we read about the greatest recovery mission of all time, when Jesus set us free from the law of sin and death.

The Power to Steal or Stunt?

A twenty-year corporate career in the financial district of New York City trained me to be goal oriented. And the way to achieve my goals was to try harder, work smarter, and do better. I needed to learn that growing and maturing the fruit of the Spirit is not simply a function of doubling down on my efforts. Instead, the answer was to change my perspective. As theologian and author J. I. Packer noted, “The Christian’s life . . . is supernatural; only the Spirit can initiate and sustain it.”³

Trying harder while depending on our own efforts is not effective. What *is* effective is surrendering to the Holy Spirit. But this does not mean we sit back and abdicate our responsibility. The apostle James wrote, “Submit therefore to God. But resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). It’s not one or the other, it’s both: submission *and* resistance.

As authors Neil T. Anderson and Robert L. Saucy note, “Faith calls for our participation. . . . Living by faith means acting in faith. Some people say that our response should be passive since the Christian life is in reality Christ living His life in us through the empowerment of the Spirit. That we should just wait for God’s power to act. But faith is an active concept, and living by faith requires us to live in obedience to God.”⁴ We can say, “I’m yours, Lord. Have your way in my life.” But we harvest the fruit of the Spirit when our actions match our words.

Author Jerry Bridges describes it this way: “I misconstrued dependence on the Holy Spirit to mean I was to make no effort, that I had no responsibility. I mistakenly thought if I turned it all over to the Lord, He would make my choices for me. . . . But this is not God’s way. He makes provision for our holiness, but He gives us the responsibility of using those provisions.”⁵

We don’t have the power to create the fruit of the Spirit, regardless of how much effort we expend. Only the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, can do that. And since God alone can create this fruit, Satan does not have the authority or the ability to steal what the Holy Spirit has planted in us. However, our spiritual enemy doesn’t need to actually *steal* the mature fruit. All that’s required is to stunt its growth, preventing it from maturing. Similar to a natural fruit tree, immature fruit drops off the branches of our lives, littering the ground with unripe fruit that will never reach its potential. But we play a part in this process. Author, speaker, and photographer Edie Melson explains, “Without transformation, information is just extra baggage. It is our responsibility to apply the things God speaks into our lives.”⁶ Trying harder in our own strength focuses on external behavior modification. But spiritual transformation focuses on surrender to the Holy Spirit. However, don’t mistake surrender for passivity. Surrender is intentional and active!

Have you ever eaten unripe fruit? Unlike juicy, tasty, and satisfying ripe fruit, immature fruit is usually dry, bitter, and unsatisfying. Call our spiritual fruit stolen or stunted, diminished, damaged, or spoiled, the result is the same. We’re cheated out of fully experiencing all the Holy Spirit prepared for us to enjoy. So what can we do to protect the crop of our fruit from enemy attack? How can we nurture good fruit in an evil world ruled by the devil?

How Powerful Is Satan?

When we think of our spiritual enemy, we can be ensnared by either of two opposite—yet equally harmful—mistakes. The first is to think Satan is equal to or greater in power than God. The other is to think the devil is merely a fable: a caricature with horns and a tail, dressed in a red jumpsuit and toting a pitchfork.

Biblical reality corrects these misconceptions while providing both comfort and a challenge. Satan is a created being—a fallen angel. While God is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), and omnipresent (present everywhere at the same time), Satan has none of these attributes. But he is still a formidable and unrelenting foe. The name *Satan* derives from a Hebrew word commonly translated as “adversary.” He’s an adversary we should neither overestimate nor underestimate. But we have the assurance that “greater is He who is in [us] than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

God has granted Satan limited, temporary authority in our world. And once, outside of Christ, we were like prisoners of war (POWs) under that authority. The apostle Paul used similar POW imagery in Colossians 1:13 to describe our release: God “rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” Jesus was also clear that the devil is already cast out and judged.⁷ We are free! So if we’re free, why do we still struggle? Both the apostle Peter and James told us to resist the devil.⁸ And God’s Word would not tell us to do something if it were impossible to do it.

Then what prevents us from resisting the devil—from standing against the devil’s attacks on the fruit God promises us by His Spirit?

The Power of Abiding

While we cannot create fruit, we can position ourselves for the Holy Spirit to have His way with us. Only one position can accomplish this: the place of abiding. In John 15:4–5, Jesus told His disciples, “Remain in Me, and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself but must remain in the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; the one who remains in Me, and I in him bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

What does abiding in Christ look like in daily life? To abide is to live in, to dwell. To remain connected—permanently. A branch does not alternately attach to and detach from the trunk, back and forth depending on the occasion. It must remain connected for life to flow uninterrupted. Abiding requires total and consistent dependence on the Lord. This process of abiding reflects an ongoing prayer life and

an intentional decision to be aware of His presence in and with us throughout our day. Brother Lawrence, a seventeenth-century French monk, called this “the practice of the presence of God”—a lifestyle, whether deep in prayer or in the kitchen cooking dinner.

Satan does not have the authority to steal what the Holy Spirit has already provided. Still, our spiritual enemy can tempt us to neglect our abiding. Just as a branch broken from the vine no longer receives sustenance to bear fruit, our failure to remain connected separates us from everything we need to mature the Spirit’s fruit in us. And our spiritual enemy employs a variety of weapons to accomplish this goal.

The Enemy’s Arsenal

The apostle Paul understood our need to be alert and aware of Satan’s scheming character.⁹ The enemy’s arsenal includes two common tactics.

1. Tempting Us to Doubt God’s Word

Satan wants us to doubt God. Just as in the garden with Eve, he starts with a subtle question: “Has God really said . . . ?” (Genesis 3:1).

Pride can cause us to think we are more alert than Eve to the enemy’s schemes. But consider what happens when we fail to experience the full fruit of the Spirit. What happens when we *don’t* experience joy, peace, patience, self-control, and the rest? We hear Satan’s whispered lies: *Could it be God can’t be trusted? What if He didn’t mean what He said?*

When I read God’s Word and fail to recognize the reality of His promises in my life, it’s way too easy for me to begin to doubt God. Way too easy for me to elevate the reality of my experience over the reality of God’s reliability. After all, if one promise in the Bible doesn’t seem dependable, how can I trust everything else God has said?

2. Attacking When We’re Most Vulnerable

I love watching nature documentaries—until they broadcast scenes of predators sneaking up on their prey. A lion watches a herd of gazelles

from a distance and identifies a weak member, perhaps young or sick. In a flash, the predator charges. Even as the herd flees, the target is isolated and killed in a heartbreaking attack.

It's no coincidence the apostle Peter used the imagery of a prowling lion to describe Satan. We become vulnerable to the enemy's attacks when we pridefully overestimate our ability to withstand temptation. For example, people recovering from alcoholism may visit a bar with friends, confident in their ability to limit themselves to nonalcoholic beverages, only to fail.

Pride isn't the only emotion that leaves us open to attack. Shame is equally effective. If the tactic of doubting God's ability to keep His promises doesn't work, the enemy will shift our focus from the Father to ourselves. Failure often leads to discouragement and shame. I can try hard to "get it right" in my own strength and miss the mark. When that happens, my focus may become all about *me* to an unhealthy extreme. *I'm a failure. I'm worthless. What's the point of trying if I'm never going to get it right?* That unbalanced focus on ourselves leaves God out of the equation. We've ignored His power. His forgiveness. His equipping. And we become spiritual prey.

You would think we'd be alert to the enemy's strategies by now. We should be, right? But Satan fights dirty. A student of human nature from the beginning of creation, he targets our blind spots, our weaknesses, and our deepest self-focused desires. And we fall for his tricks again and again.

The enemy wants us to forget he is already defeated. God's Word reminds us the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.¹⁰ The war was won at the cross. Still, the devil continues to fight skirmishes until Christ returns for His own. Until that day, our spiritual enemy will do everything possible to cause us to live in defeat. The worst of it is, we help him do it.

Does the Devil Make Us Do It?

Years ago, classic comedian Flip Wilson became famous for his tagline, "The devil made me do it!" He rose to fame as that line drew laughs from all who viewed his act. Unfortunately, what started as a

joke has become an excuse to shift the blame from ourselves and our own choices.

The devil cannot *make* us do anything. However, if we let down our guard, the father of lies can use deceit to tempt us with our natural desires. Satan constantly works to draw us away from submission to the Holy Spirit, thus stunting the growth of the Spirit's fruit. We can blame the devil for sin in the world, but it's critical that we acknowledge our part in following his enticements. The apostle John divided our vulnerability into three areas: "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life."¹¹ The better we understand how we are lured away in these areas, the more alert and equipped we will be to withstand their temptations and cultivate the fruit the Holy Spirit intends us to have. But we need the right weapons.

Spiritual Battles Require Spiritual Weapons

In Westerns and crime dramas, occasionally a character brings a knife to a gunfight. We understand the implication. In real life, at least, the person with the knife will lose to the one carrying a gun.

In spiritual battles, Christians frequently "bring a knife to a gunfight." God has given us so much better—everything we need to stand in victory. But how often do we ignore His provision and instead rush blindly into spiritual battle? We fail to properly arm ourselves, then wonder why we're defeated.

The apostle Paul, writing to the early church in Ephesus, described the "full armor of God" available for us to "stand firm against the schemes of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11). The word *schemes* is a translation of the Greek *methodeia*. It sounds like our English word *method*, doesn't it? However, *schemes* is much more sinister, alluding to cunning deception. It's an apt description of our enemy's methods!

God's armor equips us to overcome those methods. Paul listed the armor's components in Ephesians 6:13–17:

Take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist on the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand firm therefore, having belted your waist with truth, and

having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having strapped on your feet the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Each element of God's armor serves a purpose. Truth and righteousness are woven into who we are and how we live. Faith, the assurance of salvation, and a solid foundation based on the Word of God are critical for us to be on guard against the enemy's schemes. All of these, working together, equip us to resist the devil and his work in our lives.

It's no coincidence that before listing the components of the armor, Paul exhorted his readers to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He painted a word picture to illustrate the life we settle for compared to the life our heavenly Father offers us in Jesus Christ. We can be controlled by wine, resulting in excessive sensual indulgence, or we can be filled—controlled—by God's precious and powerful Holy Spirit.¹² The choice is ours.

Intentional, willing, and joyful submission to the Holy Spirit is the key. Again and again the Bible reminds us that everything we accomplish of eternal value is through the Holy Spirit. Be encouraged by these verses:

To Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory. (Ephesians 3:20–21)

It is God who is at work in you, both to desire and to work for His good pleasure. (Philippians 2:13)

His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. (2 Peter 1:3)

Why the Need for Spiritual Battle?

How does all this specifically relate to the fruit of the Spirit?

When the Bible was written, there were no chapter breaks or verse numbers. Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus was just that: a letter. Earlier in it, he wrote about the grace of salvation, the unity of the church body, and the importance of orderly relationships. He specifically referred to the priorities of preserving our relationships with each other in the unity of the Holy Spirit as well as being filled with the Spirit.¹³ With this foundation, Paul then moved into instructions on how to successfully withstand the devil's schemes. Since it's the Spirit who produces fruit in us, the devil logically targets spiritual fruit with spiritual warfare.

For much of my life, I tried to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit because I wanted to be a better person. I wanted others to see me as more loving, patient, and kind. I wanted to be known as a good and faithful person, because, well, that's what Christians are supposed to be. I wanted to be the best Christian I could be.

Did you notice how many times the pronoun *I* appears in the previous paragraph? Six times in four sentences. *I* had missed the point. The fruit of the Spirit isn't intended for me to feel better about myself. Each of the nine displays of fruit serves two primary purposes. First, for us to become more like Christ to give Him the glory among His people. Second, to grow us as vessels through which the Lord blesses others. After all, a tree does not feed on its own fruit. Rather, it produces fruit to feed others.

It's time to take back and own what the Lord has promised us, giving God the glory.

A Fourfold Approach

Join me as we examine each facet of the fruit of the Spirit through a fourfold approach.

1. Recognize the Enemy's Tactics

Successful warfare requires an awareness of our own vulnerabilities. It also requires an understanding of the opponent's tactics. Satan is

sneaky, and lies are some of his most potent weapons. But Jesus called Himself “the truth.”¹⁴ God has revealed everything we need to see through the lies and stop the plunder of our fruit. When we identify the enemy’s modus operandi, we can repair what is broken and shore up our defenses with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, as we’ve already observed, the devil can’t force us to do anything we don’t want to do. So why is he so successful at tempting us in ways that attack the fruit of the Spirit? Perhaps it’s because he appeals to our old nature. The nature in which pride and selfishness rule. Sadly, the enemy doesn’t have to work very hard to stunt the growth of our fruit. All too often we do it to ourselves.

2. Nurture a Right Perspective

The thief operates successfully because he frequently has a better understanding than we do of how God grows His fruit in our lives. God’s perspective is often different from ours. As the prophet Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 55:8–9:

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD.
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

Remember our earlier discussion of the armor of God? Did you notice that all the components of the armor are defensive except one? The only offensive item in Paul’s list is the sword of the Spirit—the Word of God.¹⁵ If we want to nurture a right perspective, it’s critical to understand God’s perspective, found in His Word. We’ll explore each aspect of the fruit of the Spirit and how He cultivates His fruit in us.

3. Recover and Grow

A recovery mission is the next step after we experience defeat. As we apply biblical principles in surrender to the Holy Spirit, we’ll be better

equipped to guard our hearts, recover what the thief has attacked, and nurture new growth.

First Corinthians 10:13 reminds us:

No temptation has overtaken you except something common to mankind; and God is faithful, so He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

The enemy is constantly scheming, but God has graciously given clear instructions on how to take a stand against those schemes. Proverbs 3:5–6 tells us:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
And do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He will make your paths straight.

We cannot succeed by simply trying harder or working smarter. Self-help efforts alone will always fail. The answer begins with surrender to the Holy Spirit.

4. Share the Harvest

Trees produce their fruit to benefit others in two ways. For one, whether cultivated or in the wild, fruit is food, a source of nourishment for both people and wildlife.

Fruit also provides seeds for future harvests. As someone once observed, though you can easily count the seeds in an apple, it's impossible to count the apples in a seed. What a picture of how the Holy Spirit cultivates His fruit both to bless us and to make us a blessing to countless others!

As pastor, Bible teacher, and author Warren Wiersbe noted, “Fruit is produced to be eaten, not to be admired and put on display. . . . We do not bear fruit for our consumption; we bear fruit that others might

be fed and helped, and that Christ might be glorified.”¹⁶ Bottom line: Cultivating the fruit of the Spirit is more about *we* than *me*.

In the following chapters we’ll examine practical ways to share each of the nine facets of His fruit. We’ll also explore ways to encourage others to nurture this fruit in their lives as, together, we yield to the Holy Spirit’s leading.

Finally, at the end of each chapter, you will find questions for individual application or group discussion.

Ready? Let’s reclaim what the enemy has attacked!

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Which of the nine displays of the fruit of the Spirit do you identify as particular strengths of yours?
2. In which of the nine displays of the fruit are you hoping for greater growth?
3. What does abiding in Christ look like in your life? How easy or difficult is it for you to consistently abide in Christ? Why?
4. How has the enemy tempted you to doubt God’s Word regarding the fruit of the Spirit in your life?
5. How have you become vulnerable to the enemy’s attacks through either pride or shame?
6. Which component(s) of the armor of God do you “put on” most consistently? Which do you put on less consistently?
7. How have you been trying to cultivate the Spirit’s fruit in your own strength?
8. Which portion of the fourfold approach (recognize the enemy’s tactics, nurture a right perspective, recover and grow, share the harvest) do you expect will provide the greatest surprises for you? Which do you anticipate will give the most familiar results?