

PROTECTED AND PRODUCTIVE



FOCUS VERSE

Ephesians 6:14

Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth.

LESSON TEXT

Psalms 1:1-3

1 Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

3 And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

John 15:1-5

1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.

2 Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

3 Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

5 I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

Galatians 5:22-23

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

II Peter 1:5-8

5 And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge;

6 And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness;

7 And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity.

8 For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.



FOCUS THOUGHT

The child of God faces many attacks from the enemy of the soul, but God provides the protection of truth to cover and to allow the child of God to be productive and fruitful.



CULTURE CONNECTION

It's Still True

Whatever happened to absolutes? We used to say “things are not always black or white,” but it seems that old maxim needs to be updated to “things are not always tones of gray.” The assumption once fell clearly on the side of true or false, yes or no, right or wrong. Now the assumption seems to be true and false, a little yes and a little no, right for me and wrong for you. What a huge difference it has made to our society when “or” turned to “and.” Uncertainty has replaced certainty. Opinion bullies facts. Ideas that were once the foundation of our civilization now resemble quicksand. Society has lost its trust for those who are assured of their beliefs. One who speaks with certainty

may be thought a fool, but one who speaks foolishly may be elected to office.

It seems that the public forum is dominated by the new prophets of tolerance who preach it is absolutely true that there are no absolute truths. They judge to be evil those who judge anything to be evil. They write long books attempting to prove by rational arguments that nothing can be proven by rational arguments. The world is falling into chaos. What Satan could not do by leading people into darkness, he is accomplishing by leading them into twilight and shadow. But Satan's end has already been determined. Light doesn't mix with darkness; it overcomes it.

OUTLINE

- I. PRODUCTIVITY A PRIORITY**
- II. MATURITY A MANDATE**
- III. TRUTH A PROTECTOR**
 - A. Buy the Truth
 - B. Love the Truth
 - C. Cover Yourself with Truth

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Ours is a dangerous world! This statement would be generally accepted as truth even by those with no spiritual inclination in light of the violence chronicled daily by news sources around the world. A simple web search of governmental and civic institutions designed to protect us from hurts large and small generates hundreds of results. The United States has the Environmental Protection Agency, the Customs and Border Protection Agency, the National Fire Protection Association, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and the list goes on, each agency designed to provide safety from various dangers.

But the world in which we live is dangerous in more ways than the media can report or than governmental bureaucracy can regulate. It is dangerous to our spiritual man in even more significant ways than it is to our natural bodies. The accumulated effect of sin's influence over thousands of years has created a climate hostile toward anyone who would serve God productively.

And yet we are called to do exactly that—to serve the Lord Jesus Christ in productive manners and with spiritual maturity. He has commissioned us specifically to advance the cause of His kingdom in every corner of the world. We are to be both His servants and His soldiers in proclaiming the message of new birth to every man, woman, boy, and girl. As one might suspect, the magnitude and eternal significance of that task incurs spiritual opposition. Therefore, it also demands that careful and intentional steps be taken to protect ourselves from spiritual ruin, ensuring we have the opportunity to accomplish the task to which He has sent us. The protection the Scriptures offer, which allows

us to be productive and mature in His work, is truth!

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. PRODUCTIVITY A PRIORITY

The Scriptures are consistent in their call for productivity. God commanded it from His people and promised it to them. They were expected to be productive in their daily labors. They were expected to be productive in their family structures. They were expected to be productive in their religious exercises. They were commanded to give due attention to diligence in all aspects of life, and in exchange God promised to bless them with productivity in those areas.

In the Old Testament such commandments and promises were largely centered around natural pursuits. This can be seen in God's interaction with the first man, Adam. The Lord placed His highest creation in a lovely world prepared for him, but it was not created just for his ease and pleasure. God also gave him work to do: "And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it" (Genesis 2:15).

God further charged Adam and Eve to be naturally fruitful: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). God intended that this human species created in His own image would enjoy the blessings of productivity and thus populate the earth and exercise dominion over it.

We see this commandment again after God sent the Flood in judgment on the earth. No sooner had Noah and his family left the protection of the ark to enter into a world devastated and uninhabited than God refocused them on His will for their lives. "And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. . . . And you, be ye fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein" (Genesis 9:1, 7). Even sin's proliferation,

which activated God's justice, did not change the command to produce.

In similar fashion, though we do indeed live in a world of convoluted values and confused purposes that seem to approach the evil condition of Noah's day, still we are commanded and compelled to be productive for Him. Our charge today is not to populate the world, but to liberate it with the power of the gospel!

Though we live in a world of convoluted values and confused purposes, still we are commanded to be productive for God.

In the Old Testament account as Israel was receiving God's instructions for living in the law of Moses, God promised that as they lived to please Him, He would bless them with productivity.

"If ye walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them; then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And your threshing shall reach unto the vintage, and the vintage shall reach unto the sowing time: and ye shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. And I will give peace in the land, and ye shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid: and I will rid evil beasts out of the land, neither shall the sword go through your land. And ye shall chase your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. And five of you shall chase an hundred, and an hundred of you shall put ten thousand to flight: and your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. For I will have respect unto you, and make you fruitful, and multiply you, and establish

my covenant with you. And ye shall eat old store, and bring forth the old because of the new. And I will set my tabernacle among you: and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people” (Leviticus 26:3–12).

Surely we should expect no less of Him as we seek to please Him today. If we will but conduct our lives and our labors in a way acceptable to God, He will stand by us in every spiritual conflict. We will be spiritually prosperous and victorious, and our enemy will not be successful in his assaults against us.

This call to and promise of productivity continues into the New Testament. Of course here it is centered on spiritual rather than natural pursuits. As citizens of a new Kingdom brought into existence by Christ’s death and resurrection, we are commanded to expand this Kingdom’s size and scope by proclaiming its message in all the world. To accomplish that, there must be spiritual progress and productivity in our lives individually and in our churches collectively. This is our Master’s expectation of us.

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One of the clearest New Testament examples of this productivity is found in Christ’s words in John 15 in which He draws on the industry of grape cultivation. While the growing of grapes and the uses of their juice might be foreign to most of us today, that was not so with the Lord’s audience that night at the Last Supper. Those eleven men (Judas Iscariot had already departed) would be

well acquainted with the practice of growing and pruning grapevines. To them He offered these words.

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing” (John 15:1–5).

For today’s lesson it would seem verse 2 is the most significant. Jesus made it clear that every branch, of which each of us is one, that does not bear fruit will be taken away. God does not tolerate a lack of productivity. Even if the foliage is deep and rich and even if the stem is strong and lengthy, if no fruit is being produced that branch will be cut off.

This is not to suggest God is capricious in His judgments. He is not rash or lacking in mercy. In fact He is longsuffering and patient, so He does not immediately cut us off after an unproductive day or season. However, such a season must end with our coming back to an altar and recommitting our lives to being fruitful, lest ultimately we compel God’s judgment against us. Witness this truth in a parable Christ taught.

“He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down” (Luke 13:6–9).

Another important point from John 15 is

not related to the branch that bears no fruit. Note what is planned for the branch that does bear fruit. That branch will be purged with the specific intention that it would bear more fruit. Some productivity is not adequate when God sees in us the capacity for more. By His Spirit and His Word, He will purge our lives of unnecessary pursuits of lesser priorities. Anything that interferes with our producing the fruit God desires in our lives will be either dealt with directly by Him or brought to our attention for an appropriate response.

The fruit we are to bear? One obvious application would be the fruit of the Spirit that Paul mentioned in Galatians: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts" (Galatians 5:22-24). But Jesus probably was thinking more broadly than just the fruit of the Spirit. He insisted upon active pursuit of spiritual maturity. No matter how much of that fruit has been present, our Lord looks for more. We are to become ever more productive in both our Christian character through Him and our Kingdom work for Him.

II. MATURITY A MANDATE

For such fruitfulness to increase in our lives, there must be an ongoing maturation in our relationship with Jesus Christ. No child of God can remain static in his or her spiritual standing. Our growth in Him must continually progress, else we have already taken the first step toward the death of our spiritual man.

To realize the serious nature of such a condition, we need only consider how we would seek aggressive treatment for a child who did not grow. If our son or daughter was the same size at age fourteen as at age two, we would not need a medical degree to know something was amiss. We would be seeking experts, and our sole description of the condition would be something like this: "He is not growing! For the last twelve years he has remained the same size." Of course we would never wait that long to seek help because we intuitively know a healthy child will grow and mature.



In April 2012 the Guinness Book of World Records brought together the world's shortest man and the world's shortest woman: 24.7-inch Joyti Amge of India met 21.5-inch Chandra Bahadur Dangi of Nepal. Guinness World Records adjudicator Marco Frigatti stated: "Everyone knew this was a special moment, and the atmosphere was magical." It was special and magical because of the uniqueness of their stature. A lack of growth is not normal.

Why should we consider it any different with our spiritual growth? If years pass with no maturation of our relationship with God, our habits in His Word, our prayer life, and so forth, then it should take nothing more than that realization to understand something is amiss. Every healthy child of God will grow, develop, and mature. Failure to do so is to violate a clear mandate from Scripture, for the Word of God uses this word picture for our understanding. "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2).

Just as it is expected a baby will seek nourishment and grow, so it is expected that each of us in our relationship with God will feed on His Word and grow. And the goal of that growth is a lofty one! "But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). Were one to ask just how "big" we want to grow to be, the answer would simply be "the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

With that as our goal, every aspect of our Christian character should increase. One should love more this year than last. One should know more of His Word this year than last. One should exercise more faith this year than last. One should demonstrate more fruit this year than last.

"And the Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another,

and toward all men, even as we do toward you” (I Thessalonians 3:12).

“That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10).

“We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth” (II Thessalonians 1:3).

“But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another” (I Thessalonians 4:9).

There are a couple of significant differences between physical and spiritual growth. One is that the former simply happens, barring some malady, but the latter is the result of conscious choice. How much and how rapidly we develop in our spiritual walk with God is a direct result of choices we make. We decide if we will be close to God or distant from Him. We decide the level of our faithfulness. We order our priorities. We choose how we will spend our finances. We choose how we will respond to difficulties. Either we order our daily schedules to include prayer and time in the Word or we do not. These choices are purely ours. Made wisely, they will lead to growth and spiritual maturation. Made foolishly, they will leave us in a stunted spiritual condition with withered commitment and dedication suffering atrophy.

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This growth is important as our ministry and productivity in Him is proportional to our personal spiritual development. The spiritually

immature can do some things for Him, but not what they could were they to mature in their relationship with Christ. It is much like the conditions in a home. A young child may be coached to pick up toys, but he or she is not going to do the laundry or cook dinner. Young children lack the maturity to handle such roles in the household. Were they prematurely thrust into it, they would probably suffer hurt and perhaps grave injury.

God has great things for each of His followers to do, but He cannot trust everyone with every job. Some jobs are too big for the spiritually immature. Were He, or we in the church, to compel someone into a role prematurely, it is nearly certain that hurt and possible destruction would result. For many roles, maturation must precede ministry.

The other major difference between physical and spiritual maturation is that the former comes to a conclusion, but the latter is a never-ending process. By about the mid teens and certainly by the late teens, the average boy or girl has reached a point of physical maturity. The brain continues to mature, reaching complete development in the early to mid twenties. But from a physical standpoint, an individual's stature is complete.

However, when it comes to progressing in our spiritual walk, there is no place to stop. We must be closer to God in our fifties than we were in our thirties. Our seventies should see us more committed and connected than did our fifties. Every year should witness our continued progress toward the goal of being like Him.

III. TRUTH A PROTECTOR

In that we are growing and developing in a spiritually dangerous world, we need a protective force to keep us from harm and ruin. There must be a force strong enough that, were we committed to it and surrounded by it, we would be free to grow in our relationship with Jesus Christ, sheltered from the corruption in this world. The good news is there is such a force—truth!

Truth is a person. It is not a collection of philosophies. It is not a creed or a code. It is not a “what.” It is a “who.” Jesus made this clear when He said, “I am the way, the truth,

and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). He was and is the personification of truth. Truth finds its embodiment in the One born of the virgin and crucified on a tree.

Truth is also found in what that One speaks. Every word that comes from His mouth is truth. He taught this during a portion of what is commonly called His “high priestly prayer” in the Gospel of John. The man Christ Jesus made this request: “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (John 17:17).

Jesus was and is the personification of truth.

This author had a young man challenge him one day regarding a clear teaching of Scripture. When confronted with the Word of God, the young man arrogantly pointed at the Bible and declared, “Well, that’s just God’s opinion.” God does not have opinions. God has laws, statutes, precepts, and principles. And when we choose to embrace the truth both in the person of Jesus Christ and in His teachings, we climb inside a shelter in which we can mature in Him and produce for Him.

A. Buy the Truth

In the Book of Proverbs we read a compelling commandment important to our spiritual well-being: “Buy the truth, and sell it not” (Proverbs 23:23). In these simple yet profound words, Solomon stressed the ultimate importance of having a right relationship with truth. It is not a preference that we have truth; it is a mandate that we have truth.

This verse also teaches that truth will cost us. Because Jesus Christ paid the ultimate price of our salvation, the gift of salvation is exactly that—a free gift. But once truth has been freely given to us, there is a price attached to living out its demands. In fact, one man asked an elder preacher, “Will truth cost me something?” “No,” the elder wisely

replied. “Truth will not cost you something. Truth will cost you everything.” It is not so much that we pay a price to acquire truth, but we pay a price to be consumed by truth. And we must be willing to pay any price for that blessing, for only then does truth provide the protection we need.

Every man who has served God for a lengthy season has done so because he valued truth so much he was willing to abandon anything necessary in order to keep it. Paul patterned this behavior. “Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Philippians 3:8). No matter what it may cost us, it is imperative that we close the deal to buy the truth.

B. Love the Truth

Solomon’s instructions tell us not only to be willing to pay any price to have truth, but also to resist any price to part with it. Absolutely nothing the enemy of our souls can offer is of sufficient worth to merit our parting with truth. No amount of money. No amount of fame. No amount of revenge. No amount of hurt. Nothing is worth severing our relationship with truth. Truth is not Someone and something we are burdened with, but a blessing we are to love. Truth is what protects us so we may mature and serve Him ably.

Individuals who abandon truth do not love truth as they should. The life of such a person is on a path to deception and destruction. “And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (II Thessalonians 2:10–12).

C. Cover Yourself with Truth

As Paul described the spiritual armor the maturing Christian is to wear, he connected various pieces with specific purposes. The breastplate of righteousness protects the

heart. The helmet of salvation protects the mind. Truth is depicted as a girdle covering the loins.

In a physiological sense, this piece of the armor protected a man's ability to secure future generations. It guarded him from injuries that would not only affect him but would prevent him from establishing a safe and secure lineage. In like fashion, we should love truth so it not only protects us but is strategically positioned to influence the spiritual heritage we will hand down to our children and grandchildren.

If a man will fervently cling to truth and categorically refuse to part with it, he will secure for his descendants something of far greater worth than precious metals, real property, or a vast stock portfolio. Those things will vanish when life here is finished. But a girdle of truth can affect those who follow us all the way into eternity. Buy it. Keep it. Never sell it. Allow it to influence the generations to come!

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

We are living for Jesus Christ in the midst of a strange and dangerous world. Where once our culture affirmed those who valued heritage

and lessons passed down from their elders, now it lauds and celebrates anyone who has "courage" to cast off what are deemed to be oppressive and restrictive patterns of thought. The individual willing to abandon previously cherished positions is praised for showing individuality and for fearlessly expressing non-conformist ideas.

Nevertheless, in this world we are called to mature in Christ—not to stagnate or to merely survive, but to grow and develop until we become more and more like Him. The reason for that quest is to better serve Him in greater and more productive capacities and to do ever greater works that His kingdom can expand throughout the world.

But how? How can we survive such a toxic climate? By loving truth more than anything else! Pay any price. Suffer any rejection. Weep our way through any hurt that may come. But through it all, we must wear that girdle of truth daily, knowing it allows us not only to survive but to pass on a godly heritage to our children and grandchildren.

We are to love the truth and live the truth. And as we progress and mature in a dangerous world, we need have no fear! "His truth shall be thy shield and buckler" (Psalm 91:4). ■

REFLECTIONS

- Conduct an honest self-analysis of your productivity level for Christ. How can you increase what you are doing for Him? What lesser pursuits might have to be abandoned to do so?
- Consider your spiritual maturity level. Is it advancing? Are you walking closer to Him today than you were ten years ago? five years ago? last year? If so, how can you continue that pattern into the future? If not, what practical steps can you take starting this week to begin the maturation process?
- What price have you paid or what price have you seen paid for truth? Discuss their relative value as compared to truth.
- For what price have you seen people sell truth? Discuss that relative value compared to truth.
- What type of spiritual heritage are you leaving your children and grandchildren? Discuss how that can change drastically for good or for bad from one generation to the next.