

March 21, 2016

Dear Members, Co-workers and Friends:

With the emergence of springtime, our thoughts begin to focus on the Holy Days of God that will shortly be upon us. It is a time when we reflect upon the great Sacrifice of Jesus Christ that we have the opportunity to embrace, by having our sins forgiven. But it is also a time when we consider whether we are holding up our end of the deal! Jesus Christ has willingly taken the responsibility to offer His life as a sacrifice for our sins so that we do not have to bear the burden of the penalty of death. This is a gift that is given to us freely by the immense mercy of God. Our responsibility, if we are willing to accept this gift, is to discipline our behavior according to the model of righteousness provided by Jesus Christ Himself. We are reminded to continually examine our behavior and make changes in our life to turn from sin and bear fruits of righteousness. The time is now that we need to reflect on our actions to make sure that we are indeed, bearing fruit.

It is the fruit of the Spirit that helps to identify us as Christians. As we read in Romans 6:21-22, "What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life." Clearly, if we consciously choose to bear the fruit of a sinful life instead of following in the path of Christian righteousness, we will not be able to claim the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ as a means of escaping death. Instead, the fruit that we bear must be holy, leading to life. That is how we must be known (compare Luke 6:44-45).

While the symbol and metaphor of bearing fruit is a helpful way to imagine our job as Christians, it may be challenging to put this into practical terms. But still, when we examine our behavior to determine if we are bearing fruit, we need to apply changes in real ways. What we need to do is consider the effects of our behavior. Just as fruit is the product of the work of a plant, spiritual fruit is the product of our spiritual work. A good question that we can all begin to ask ourselves in the process of examining our lives is, "What was the effect that my behavior produced?" This is how to evaluate the fruits of our lives.

The answer to the question about what kinds of results of our actions produce provides us with a measure of our work. Does our behavior actively result in an outcome of love, joy, and peace? Are we living examples of longsuffering, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control? Do we cause faith to increase in ourselves? Are we good examples of faithfulness to others? If we can cite evidence for being involved in causing these products to flourish in our lives, we bear the fruit that we need to and live in the Spirit as God has commanded us to do (compare Galatians 5:22-25). But if we find that we produce other effects, such as hatred, jealousy, selfishness, lewdness, and other results that are contrary to the fruit of the Spirit, we have some work to do (compare Galatians 5:17-21). Analyzing the products of our behavior is an effective way to help us learn what we need to do to improve our way of life so that we are worthy of Christ's Sacrifice.

When we evaluate the effects that our behavior produces we may learn—in fact we will certainly learn—that we have areas of our life that need work. How will we respond? One of the most humanly natural reactions is to become discouraged when we learn that we have failed in our attempts to live up to the standard set by Jesus Christ's life. While we must acknowledge the fault of our sin and be sorry for our failure, to let our sorrow turn into discouragement is a very dangerous way to respond. If we reflect upon the effect of such a response regarding the evaluation of our behavior, the product is simply the discontinued effort to live righteously. Discouragement, once it has taken root, will cause even the most mighty to give up. Satan will use this tool on whomever he can because he knows that

it is one of the most effective ways to turn people against God. Discouragement produces the opposite kind of fruit that we are directed to bear, and therefore it must not be the way that we react to self-examination.

When we find that we have areas in our life that need to be improved, we must not be overcome with discouragement. God has given us an unprecedented opportunity to be forgiven of our sins and continue trying to correct our path. As many times as we stumble on our path to righteousness, the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ offers us the necessary, helpful gift of repentance and forgiveness to get us back up onto our feet so that we can continue our life's work with the help of Jesus Christ living within us. We must be encouraged by the promise that the fruit of the Spirit can be produced in us. Each day gives us new ways that we can do the work to grow the fruit that God expects. We must always be reminded of the hope of our opportunity to become perfect in our ability to bear fruit. This hope should grow so greatly within us that there is no room for discouragement to find any kind of entrance. "Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit [which] was given to us" (Romans 5:5).

In Christ's Service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Eric Rank". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Eric" being more prominent than the last name "Rank".

Eric Rank

PS Enclosed is a new pocket calendar card for the annual Holy Days for 2016-2022. The information is also posted on our websites (under: About/Holy Days).