

Fruits of the Spirit as Living Stories

We are invited to look, every day, for God in the faces of others. Christians are often reminded, we are the only Bible some people read, so they should **be able to see God in our faces**. We are urged to allow the Spirit to use our words, our hands and feet, to help us somehow be Jesus in our world. When we live as vibrant disciples, our witness, our first and highest desire, is to **show at least a glimpse of the face of God--a picture of Him**.

Joy

Jason is a worrier. His sisters are no longer attending church, and have begun to display actions in their lives that make Jason fear they do not have close relationships with God. When he is with them, he tries to find ways to bring conversations around to things he knows are important - church attendance, daily worship and devotions, healthy diet. He doesn't want to be judgmental, so he says things like, "You know I love you, but. . ." and "I'm not trying to be pushy, it's just that. . ." His sisters start to frown and roll their eyes. Freeze frame. If heaven took a picture of Jason's face right this second, would there be joy? What about his sisters' faces? What is the result of Jason's well-intended witnessing attempt?

What would happen if Jason first cultivated God's joy in his life, praised God in his prayers every night for his sisters' health and generosity and liveliness? What if he then spent his time with them hunting for anything in them that reminded him of God and showed his joy in those things?

It's still tricky. If he says, "Your flute-playing takes me straight to heaven!" his sister may think he's trying to get in a dig, especially if he's set up a preaching-type mind-set. At first he might not be able to mention God or heaven at all. But if he affirms and encourages every sign of love he sees in them, especially when he can honestly be grateful for things they've done for him directly, he may find doors opening and the Holy Spirit developing more love in them. (And him.) After all, all good things come from God. All of them. God is already at work in those thousand ways Jason knows nothing of. We can ask ourselves: Would it be effective for someone to worry me into heaven?

When I witness, does the joy show?

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Peace

Sharon knows her friend Rose knows about the Sabbath. She is sure if she can just put the arguments logically enough, convincingly enough, Rose will eventually “come to the truth.” The problem is, lately it’s getting to the point that Rose doesn’t even like spending time with Sharon anymore. She certainly doesn’t want to come to church with her.

When the angels watch over this friendship, do they see peace? Do they see a love that clings to peace even when it’s hard, knowing that God loves Rose and Rose loves God, and conviction is the Holy Spirit’s job? What if Sharon stopped asking Rose to church and went to church with Rose instead, looking for every chance she has to agree with what she finds there, and learning to love her friend and her friend’s friends? We can ask ourselves, When I witness, does the peace show?

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Patience

We've all heard the stories of the wife who patiently, silently, over years, even decades, prays for her husband. Loves him, is a companion to him, interests herself in his interests, and talks to her friends about what a good man he is. We've also heard the stories where the wife is judge, jury, and executioner, sure that her husband is under the frown of heaven and losing no chance to tell him so. Let's say, for the sake of argument, both of these husbands die without visibly giving their hearts to God, so far as human watchers know. Just at a guess, which one has the better chance of surprising us by meeting his wife in the air on the way to King Jesus? When we witness, does the patience show?

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Kindness

Brother Aaron is one of the pillars of his church. He is the Keeper of the Lists. That is to say, Brother Aaron knows who has done what, when, and where for the past twenty years. He keeps track of who really pays “a full tithe,” and who watches what on television. He is also able (and willing) to list to his neighbors and relatives just which parts of God’s law they are breaking and what they should do about it. Brother Aaron is fond of mentioning 1 John 1:9, the first part, about making confession of sin, and something about “weeping between the porch and the altar.” No one knows quite what he means by this, and furthermore, no one has any intention of asking. If the conference gets a letter, detailing its own shortcomings or those of its constituents, it may have come from Brother Aaron. If you asked, Brother Aaron would say he is a faithful witness for the Lord. When we witness, does the kindness show?

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Goodness

The family who were burned out of their home were closely related to a preacher. They had been talked to and preached to and taught until they no longer heard a word he said. They let it be known in no uncertain terms that they were not interested in church, God, or anything to do with either.

Then the fire came. A local church mobilized to find them places to stay, help them deal with insurance hassles, replace clothes and necessities, and clean up the mess. There were ears to listen to their story, over and over again, shoulders to cry on, arms to hold those who had lost irreplaceable things like childhood mementoes and family photos. That was the church they joined.

When we witness, does God's goodness show through?

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Faithfulness

Henry and Louise tried to raise their kids right. They had worship with them, took them to church, taught them principles of health. They can imagine no greater heartache than to watch their children turn away from God. There are no easy answers to this. God gave us free will, and He will never force anyone to accept Him. But we know one thing -- nagging will not save our children. And reminding is nagging. Yes. Reminding. Just once. That's nagging.

God has given us promises. He loves our children. He knows what's really in the bottom of their hearts, where we can never see. Let's practice faith - not just in God, but in our kids, and everyone else to whom we witness. Can we find things that remind us of God in them and affirm those? When we witness, does our faith show, both in God and in the intelligence and discernment of the person to whom we're speaking?

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Gentleness

Maria is one of the strongest Bible students in her church. She has been studying the Bible since childhood, and knows the scriptures backward and forward. If someone has a question about where a particular thing is found, they ask Maria. She can “rightly divide the word of truth” and is a favorite teacher and Sabbath School superintendant. And Maria loves God with all her heart, and would dearly love for every person on the planet to come to the realization that God loves them.

So Maria had a hard time the evening she went with the pastor to study with a family who were trying to figure out a difficult Bible truth. The husband kept bringing up one text after another and trying to use them in a way they had never been intended to be used. The wife was an able assistant in trying to bolster clear error with the misuse of these texts! Why, then, was the pastor so quiet? Why did he just smile and look interested, as if he were waiting for them to teach him? As if he agreed, almost! “Really?” he would say meekly, and read the text with interest.

“Well, that’s not exactly what I’m looking for,” the husband would mutter, flipping the pages of the Bible. The Holy Spirit was busy, and Maria managed to take her cue from her pastor and stay quiet, too. By the end of the evening, the family had taught themselves the truth, to their own amazement. But it was Maria who felt she’d learned the most. When we witness are we gentle, peaceable, teachable? Or do we already know it all?

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Self-Control

“Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words,” said Francis of Assisi. Sometimes, like Maria, we need to realize that the most important thing we can say is nothing at all. Love may show best when it’s not obscured with words. There is no way for this sermon or any presentation, or even the Bible itself to teach us when to speak and when to be silent. Only the Holy Spirit knows the heart of the one we are trying to reach, and if we are not in daily, hourly, momentarily contact with that Spirit, we’d better be silent indeed! There is no such thing as sharing of faith by one who cannot listen to the guidance of God.

We will mess up, of course, and speak when we shouldn’t have, and not speak when we should have. We will have to ask the forgiveness of God and of the other person. Believe it or not, those moments of vulnerability and human frailty can sometimes be just the moments the other person may be waiting to hear. When they see us fall and fail they learn whether we really do believe that Jesus died for our sins, that forgiveness and abundant grace are truly available for us, and for them. If we try to hide our frailties out of some mistaken idea that we will weaken their fledgling faith, then what they learn is that we are not authentic people after all. Because, make no mistake, they do know we’re faulty. Our masks aren’t that good! And if we can’t own up to our stumbles and humbly ask forgiveness, then why should they listen to anything we say, especially about a God we claim has infinite love and forgiveness?