

Editorial: For the tough times ahead, grow in Christ now

April 1, 2020

If you are looking for a feel-good editorial, this isn't it. This is a call to action. It's a call preachers, ministers, Sunday school teachers and Christian authors have been making all along. It's a call to action we thought we could heed someday but now has urgency.

If who we say we are—followers of Christ—is going to make the positive difference our world needs now and into the future, then we must grow in Christ now. We must submit our thoughts, decisions and actions to Christ now.

We must submit to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives now so love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control will grow in us now to produce the needed [fruit](#) in the days ahead.

We also need to undergo the rigorous testing of our faith called for by [James](#) and referred to by [Paul](#). In opposition to our normal modes of burying ourselves in the news or seeking constant distraction from it, we need to allow Christ to do his work in us.

Why we will need the Spirit's fruit

My undergraduate degree is in criminal justice. When it became apparent the coronavirus was spreading in the United States and our communities would need to practice social distancing—what morphed into “stay at home” orders—I mentally went back to my education in criminal justice and group dynamics.

From what I know about human behavior—particularly human behavior among stressed groups of people—we are going to need all the fruit of the Spirit we can get. And we can't assume it's going to fall out of the sky. It must grow in us through regular submission to the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Over the intervening weeks, I've been grateful for how many have responded to social restrictions. Many people have done their best to be positive and helpful. We have seen some of the best of humanity, which is a joy.

But ...

As [David Brooks](#) pointed out in an op-ed a couple of weeks ago, we have a difficult time remaining positive under the weight of a pandemic. In fact, we have a difficult time refraining from expressing our worst selves in times like these. The best news I have for you here is I won't give examples. You don't need them. You already know.

Get ready. It's going to get rough.

All indications are things are going to get harder before they get better, and they may get much harder. As more people get sick, more people die, more jobs are lost, money gets tighter, people become exasperated with being cooped up and on and on, it will become increasingly harder to be patient, encouraging, compassionate, hopeful, all the things we need to be.

Decisions will have to be made that no one wants to think about. People will behave in ways they will want to forget. As we reach the end of our reserves—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual—we will begin to act out of what comes naturally.

If such an ominous prediction comes true, then our world will need

followers of Christ to be full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. We must be able to persevere in the midst of trials and suffering. We must, we can, and we will, but not under our own power and strength.

If we will submit ourselves to Jesus Christ and the work of his Spirit in us, we will produce the needed fruit, we will persevere, and God will be glorified in us. What's more, the world will take notice.

Here's something to feel good about: Despite what's true about humans under great stress, the Lord is gracious and good and holds us up through times like this. The Lord also accomplishes great works of redemption during times like this. Remembering the Lord already has demonstrated the character he expects us to demonstrate gives me hope.

Using our new situation wisely

When I was in college, I told a friend I wanted to play the guitar like Eric Clapton. He told me I should have started "last week." It was deflating but true. If I was going to make a guitar sing the way Eric Clapton can, I couldn't think it would happen after a handful of 30-minute self-taught lessons. I needed to dig in and practice seriously. I never did.

In the same way, if we are going to reflect Christ—and we need to reflect Christ right now—we can't expect to live the way we want to live and turn on the patience come crunch time. We still have opportunity to grow in Christian character. We can practice every minute, hour and day we are holed up, whether we are with other people or not.

We have to practice these things, not to earn salvation or to win God's love and approval ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)), but because they don't come naturally for us, because Jesus said what will come out of us is what fills our heart, and because there is good work for us to do in Jesus' name. ([Matthew 12:34](#),

[Luke 6:45](#), [Proverbs 4:23](#), [Ephesians 2:10](#)).

Christian character matters. The fruit of the Spirit matters. During good times, we don't give much thought to these things, but these aren't what anyone would call "good times." This is the big squeeze, and frankly, we ... excuse me, *I* should have cared more about growing in Christian maturity before now.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com or on Twitter at [@EricBlackBSP](https://twitter.com/EricBlackBSP). The views expressed are those solely of the author.