

Good Fruit

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(Excerpt from Present Over Perfect)

You don't have to sacrifice your spirit, your joy, your soul, your family, your marriage on the altar of ministry.

Just because you have the capacity to do something doesn't mean you have to do it. Management, organization, speaking and traveling: you must ask not only what fruit they bring to the world, but what fruit they yield on the inside of your life and your heart.

I didn't want to admit it, but I was surprised to find a holdout of that old, terrible doctrine: if it hurts just awful, it must be God's will for you. And the other side of the same coin: if it produces fruit, it must be God's will for you.

As I laid out those ideas, peered at them and through them, held them up to the light of God's Word, I saw that they were half true at best, possibly less.

First, we focus so often on the fruit for other people—it worked, people liked it, people gave me great feedback, and on and on.

I've spent all my life surrounded by pastors and their families, and I have seen a thousand examples of fruit in their churches and starvation in their marriages and families. I would not call that blessed, or whole, or healthy, or God's intent.

Our family is not perfect, but I grew up with a dad who communicated to me in no uncertain terms that our family life mattered immensely, that I mattered to him, that the time we spent together was sacred time. I can't thank him enough for that.

In recent years, one reason I chose to write instead of working at our church is because I knew my own capacity to throw myself headlong into the immense and ongoing needs of the church, at the expense of my family. I saw too many of my peers doing it, and I knew I'd be just as vulnerable as they are—maybe more so—to the seduction of public fruit and private wreckage.

But one year I took forty work trips. Who's to say that my family wouldn't have preferred me to be at the church, home in the evenings at least, as opposed to all those nights in hotels and airports? When we speak of regrets, this is my greatest one: that I allowed other people's visions for my career and calling take me away from what I know in my heart was the best, most whole way to live. It's an honor to be invited into those churches and conferences and colleges and bookstores, and I said yes and yes and yes, because I wanted to help, because I was honored to be asked, because of that warped idea that if there's fruit, it must be God's will.

That faux theology very quickly degenerates into basic supply and demand. Your calling is not defined only by the fruit it provides to the kingdom. Another way to say it: your family and your very self are included in the kingdom you wish to serve, and if they are not thriving, the whole of your ministry is not thriving.

Our family fared reasonably well during this season. Our boys were small, and my husband is an extraordinary parent, and we are so very thankful for four loving, present, connected grandparents, and aunts and uncles who care so well for our boys.

I, however, did not fare so well. I was wound up like a bottle rocket, sleeping poorly, eating terribly, prone to weird sicknesses and pains. Vertigo, for one. I threw up whenever I was stressed out, frequently in airports and parking lots. And yet I kept going, because I had learned

long ago that one's body is a perfectly acceptable offering on the altar of ministry. It did not occur to me that "stress barfs" are a warning sign.

I knew better than to let our family suffer. My regret, though, and it is sizable and tender, is that I let myself suffer and deteriorate, body and soul, and it's naïve to think that didn't have profoundly negative effects on my children and my husband. I know it did. I cared for all three of them the best I could, but the person I was dragging back to our home, week after week, was a poor substitute for the wife and mother I wanted to be.

I was not well, but I was very, very productive. And it didn't occur to me to stop.

In a thousand ways, you live by the sword and you die by the sword. When you allow other people to determine your best choices; when you allow yourself to be carried along by what other people think your life should be, could be, must be; when you hand them the pen and tell them to write your story, you don't get the pen back. Not easily anyway.

I was an author who didn't know how to author her own life. I thought that outside forces would guide me benevolently, rightly. They did not. And it was not their job. It was mine. I abdicated authority for my own choices. And what it led to was a broken body and depleted soul.

And now some years later, I know that I am responsible for stewarding my own life, my desires and limitations, my capacities and longings. I can do far less than I originally believed.

And I'm reveling in the smallness of my capacity. This is it. This is who I am. This is all I have to give you. It's not a fire hose, unending gallons of water, knocking you over with force. It's a stream: tiny, clear, cool. That's what I have to give, and that small stream is mine to nurture, to tend, to offer first to the people I love most, my first honor and responsibility.

The twin undercurrents of being a woman and being a Christian is sort of a set-up for getting off track with this stuff—women are raised to give and give and give, to pour themselves out indiscriminately and tirelessly. And Christians, or some anyway, are raised to ignore their own bodies, their own pain, their own screaming souls, on behalf of the other, the kingdom, the church.

It has been tremendously helpful to think of myself as a part of the kingdom, a part of the church. I am not building the kingdom if that work is destroying this member of that kingdom. If you burned down your garden in order to make more room to host and feed your friends, you would find yourself shortsighted the next time you wanted to feed the people you loved, right?

I set myself aflame as often as necessary, whatever it took to keep going, to build, to help; but I'm learning slowly that wholeness prevails.

As I sit now, the sound of the waves and the boat engines in the distance, the fishermen drifting by the peninsula, the flaking paint on the Adirondack chair on which I sit, I hardly recognize the woman I was for those years, and I breathe a prayer of gratitude for this new way of living. I have been saved, and I feel all the vigor of a zealot, a recent convert.

This is what I'm finding, every day, every hour: there is a way of living that is so sweet, so full, so whole and beautiful you'll never want to go back once you've tasted it.

Do you know what it's like to be rested? Truly rested? I didn't, for about two decades.

Do you know what it's like to feel connected, in deep and lovely ways, to the people you love most?

Do you know the sweetness of working hard and then stopping the working hard, realizing that your body and your spirit have carried you far enough and now they need to be tended to?

I feel like a newborn in all this, blissful and delighted each time I take care of myself, like a new skill or a present.

What I am leaving behind doesn't leave me empty: it leaves me full, and powerful, purposed and stronger than I've ever been.

I'm not building a castle or a monument; I'm building a soul and a family. I'll tell stories all my life, writing on napkins and on the backs of receipts, or in books if they let me, but this is the promise I make to my God: I will never again be so careless, so cavalier with the body and soul you've given me.

They are the only things in all the world that have been entrusted entirely to me, and I stewarded them poorly, worshiping for a time at the altars of productivity, capability, busyness, distraction. This body and soul will become again what God intended them to be: living sacrifices, offered only to him. I will spend my life on meaning, on connection, on love, on freedom. I will not waste one more day trapped in comparison, competition, proving, and earning. That's the currency of a culture that has nothing to offer me.

It is not too strong to say that on this summer morning, sitting at a fire pit on a peninsula on Lake Geneva, I'm offering myself and the whole of my life, once again, to Jesus, and in that, I'm leaving behind both my tangle with achievement and workaholism and my neglect of my body and my spirit. I'm offering to Jesus a body, a mind, a spirit, a life, a voice, a table.

Here's the distinction: *it is for him*. It is not for all Christian events and publishers and causes. It is not for the building of my brand (a term I abhor) or the wider Christian brand (another term I abhor). It is for Jesus. More important, it is *with* Jesus.

I gave myself away indiscriminately. Be careful how much of yourself you give away, even with the best of intentions. There are things you cannot get back, things that God has not asked you to sacrifice.

And at the end of your life, I believe you will account for what you gave yourself to. Be very careful that you are not giving yourself to a pale imitation of life with Christ—life about Christ, or life generally near to Christ.

I live in the very belly of the beast: the breakneck competitive suburbs of Chicago where everyone's building something, part of a church that I adore but definitely errs on the fast-paced side of things, part of a family that regularly runs itself ragged and then runs itself ragged on vacation, the quintessential work-hard/play-hard family.

But I'm out of that game, because I came too close to losing the only thing I really have: myself. I believed I was invincible, that my body would listen to my mind if I was forceful enough with it, believed that I wasn't one of those delicate flower ladies who had to drench herself in silence and green juice in order to function.

Black coffee, red eyes, old school, old guard. With enough coffee and eyeliner I could stand on any stage. But I did throw up more than is probably normal. I cried hot tears in the car or in the shower. I administrated my children more than I did snuggle and listen to them, because snuggling and listening required emotional resources I'd long since depleted.

Part of the crazy of it is that we don't allow people to fall apart unless they're massively successful. You can't be just a normal lady with a normal job and burn yourself out—that's only for bigshot people. And so the normal, exhausted, soul-starved people keep going, because we're not special enough to burn out.

Burnout is not reserved for the rich or the famous or the profoundly successful. It's happening to so many of us, people across all kinds of careers and lifestyles.

If you're tired, you're tired, no matter what. If the life you've crafted for yourself is too heavy, it's too heavy, no matter if the people on either side of you are carrying more or less. You don't have to have a public life or a particularly busy life in order to be terribly, dangerously depleted.

You just have to buy into the idea that your feelings and body and spirit aren't worth listening to, and believe the myth that busyness or achievement or both will take away the pain.

And you can buy into those things as a stay-at-home parent or a brain surgeon, in Manhattan or on a farm, whether you're fifteen or eighty-five.

And if you, like me, have also internalized some twisted-up theology that this healing and restoration that Jesus offers are not for you, that you're a server in this great restaurant, a crew member aboard this lovely ship, then you are destined to exhaust yourself, tugging on the bootstraps of your soul, lifting something that was never meant to be carried alone.