

“Fretful or Fruitful Lives?” [Full, unabbreviated version]

Psalm 37:1-9

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2009, I. Peden
MUMC, Thomasville, NC**

August 16, 2009 : Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

After last week’s sermon I was tempted to ask one question and make a couple of statements and then sit down. Here’s the question: Did we major in a language of praise or a language of complaint this week? Which was it: praise or complaint? If it was praise – which is what we promised God last Sunday – then I am quite certain that our lives were fruitful. However, if it was complaint – which is what we were trying to avoid this week – then I fear that our lives were fretful rather than fruitful. If that is all I had to say and then dismissed you, I could be asking for trouble, so I respectfully ask you to listen to me for a little longer!

Be honest with me now: How have your lives been recently? Have they been more fretful or more fruitful? Let’s look briefly at what characterizes a fretful life and a fruitful life. Then maybe you and I can answer this question unambiguously and candidly.

First, how do we describe **a fretful life**? A starting point is to say what a fretful life is *not*. Clearly, it is not the same thing as legitimate concern. There is a kind of tension that exists in our lives that is normal and natural. It is like the violin string that must be stretched across the bridge of the violin before it can produce a creative sound. May I suggest that – as Christians – creative tension is telling ourselves that we are going to use the power God has given us to do something about a situation that might otherwise cause us to fret. That kind of response is legitimate, necessary, and desirable.

Fret is something quite different from creative tension. It is destructive and malignant. It removes us from the orbit of creative tension where the power of God’s Spirit is released. Instead, it sends us into a vicious, choking cycle of destructive worry.

My favorite cartoonist, Charles Schulz, was also a theologian. He created the *Peanuts* cartoon series. In one of the cartoon strips Schulz produced pictures of little Linus dragging his blanket while he looks at Charlie Brown and observes, “You look kinda’ depressed.” To which Charlie Brown replies, “I worry about school a lot.” Then Charlie Brown adds, “I

worry about my worrying so much about school.” As they sit on a log together, Charlie Brown makes his final observation, “My anxieties have anxieties!”

That’s fret. You see, fret breeds a vicious, strangulating cycle of destructive worry in which anxieties give birth to more anxieties. And in the end, this kind of fret and worry can kill us. A dictionary definition for “fret” captures this destructive potential: To “fret” is “to eat away, to gnaw, to gall, to vex, to worry, to agitate, to wear away.” And, in the end, life itself wears away from too much fretting. The result: death.

When we review what characterizes a fretful life in this way, it is little wonder that our commonsense God tells us through a psalmist in Psalm 37 verse 1 “***not to fret.***” The psalmist had allowed himself to move from legitimate concern to fret about some ungodly, evil people of his day. God told him to stop this: *Do not fret because of the wicked. Do not be envious of wrongdoers.*

Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all life and the focus of our Christian lives, declared in the Sermon on the Mount: *Do not worry about clothes, drink, food, or tomorrow . . . Instead, seek first God’s kingdom.* Now that’s easier said than done! And I am the first to admit it. But God uses the psalmist here to provide us with some steps to follow in order to live fruitful and not fretful lives.

Now before we consider those steps together, let us briefly attempt to describe a **fruitful life**. Is a fruitful life merely feeling strong and successful? Is it when life is on an even keel and we feel confident about the future? I suggest that for the Christian it is more than these things. The Bible provides us with a “rule of thumb” for a fruitful life. We find it in the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Galatians where a list of qualities called “the fruit of the Spirit” has been provided for our guidance. This list is a useful measuring tool for us to evaluate the extent to which our lives are being fruitful. Let me read the list of nine characteristics of a fruitful life, and let us ask ourselves a question about each one:

1. **Love:** How much has love been the focus of our lives these past three weeks?
2. **Joy:** How joyful have we been?
3. **Peace:** To what extent have we been at peace with ourselves, others, and God?

4. **Patience:** How patient have we been with others and ourselves, especially in the face of failure or limitations?
5. **Kindness:** How kind have we been to ourselves and others?
6. **Goodness:** Has the way of goodness preoccupied our actions and reactions?
7. **Faithfulness:** To what extent has our belief in and commitment to Jesus Christ ruled our spirits, our minds, our emotions?
8. **Humility:** How humble have we been?
9. **Self-control:** Have we been able to control our tempers and feelings with God's help?

It's a tall order, isn't it? I don't want us to be daunted with the questions I have posed, nor do I want us to feel that God's standards are beyond our reach. So let me now direct our attention to the practical steps God's word offers to move us from fretful lives to fruitful lives in Jesus Christ. To do this, I will take us back to Psalm 37 where we will find God's prescription for getting out of the mess of fretful living.

The psalmist uses **four verbs** in Psalm 37. **These verbs offer the guidance we need to live fruitful lives.** The psalmist's first word is **commit**. *Commit your way to the Lord*, we read in verse 5. The *Good News Bible* simply says: "Give yourself to the Lord." This is surely where it all begins.

Commitment is much greater than a sentimental decision to change one's life. While I readily admit that emotions may be involved, it must be a strong act of the will. Oswald Chambers once wrote: "I have nothing to do with what will happen if I obey. I must abandon myself to God's call in unconditional surrender and smilingly wash my hands of the consequences."

A true faith commitment means that we wash our hands of ourselves and that we give our all to God – we give ourselves totally, not conditionally. It is the only way to be released from the vicious cycle of fret and to enter a new cycle of victorious Christian living. It demands faith in the character of God and not in the circumstances we see or understand. Although this commitment begins from the first moment we give ourselves to God palms down, it is also continuous. We are human beings, not pieces of crystal. We face new

situations constantly, and over and over new problems are thrown at us. But this process of commitment, once learned, can become a glorious way of life.

Another verb the psalmist uses is found in verse 3: **trust**. “Trust” is a key word in the psalms. *Trust in the Lord and do good*, the psalmist writes. The *Amplified Bible* translates the word for trust as “lean on, rely on, and be confident.” God’s word recommends that we lean hard on the Lord who made heaven and earth . . . who calms the storms and stills the waves. God is the one on whom we lean. All our weight on all of God! We feel lighter after casting our cares on the Lord. We find release through commitment and trust, and then leaning hard comes easier to us.

The third verb the psalmist uses is **delight**: *Delight in the Lord, and you shall have the desires of your heart*. It is rather miraculous how delighting in God purifies our desires! To delight in the Lord means to rejoice in the Lord. It means we revere the Lord. It is a matter of remembering to say, “Thank you, Lord!”

Delighting in the Lord is a process. It’s a practice that could and should become a splendid habit. Ever seen the painting “The Song of the Lark”? It depicts a young gleaner, standing in the field with upturned face, her monotonous work forgotten for a brief moment as she listens to the musical call of the lark. That’s what delighting in the Lord does: it is hearing God’s call in the midst of life’s humdrum and responding with an upturned spirit of praise. As I said last Sunday, it is praising God for who God is, and not only when God’s blessings are flowing into our lives.

The psalmist’s fourth verb found in verse 7 is **rest**: *Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for him*. The meaning of the word in the original Hebrew is “to cease, to be silent, or submit in silence to what God ordains.” This practical step in moving from a fretful to a fruitful life in the Lord requires that we rest . . . that we submit to the belief that God has directives for us which cannot be received clearly until the inner parts of our lives are quiet. A fruitful life anticipates that the still, small voice of God – at any given time – may have something to say to us that will change our life’s direction. If you hear nothing else, I hope you will hear this today: fretful lives are *restless* lives, but fruitful lives are *restful* lives.

Jesus would have known Psalm 37. He would have endorsed the steps the psalmist offers for a free life. But I believe Jesus would have added one more verb which is unique to his message, and that verb is **seek**. *Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you*, Jesus also said in the Sermon on the Mount. This sentence is cast in the context of Jesus' words about not worrying and not fretting. Jesus goes right to the core of the matter. He reminds us that the primary focus of a life of faith is God's kingdom. This was the theme of Jesus' inaugural address: *The kingdom of God is at hand*. What Jesus meant was that the reign of God had been ushered in by his coming among us. The kingdom of God and the Lordship of Jesus Christ over our lives are synonymous themes.

A fruitful life is only possible when we focus on Christ as Lord of all life . . . when we put Christ first . . . when we seek first God's kingdom as this has been supremely revealed to us in Jesus Christ. The fruit of the Spirit is produced only when we allow the Spirit of Christ to enter fully into our lives . . . when we are totally committed to Christ, the Lord of our lives. How do we do this? Jesus proclaims: *The kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the gospel*.

Will you join me in desiring a fruitful rather than a fretful life? If so, then let us first seek . . . seek Christ . . . seek God's kingdom . . . repent, that is, turn away from all that is evil and seek to live in a right relationship with God . Let us commit ourselves fully to Christ . . . let us trust Jesus the Lord of all life . . . let us daily delight and rest in the Lord. Our troubles and problems won't all go away, but we will know serenity, a peace that passes understanding, and calm in the midst of the chaos of life. And what will be the result? Fruitful lives . . . lives that will bear much fruit . . . the fruit of the Spirit. Jesus called this "the fruit that lasts." May it be so! Please, Lord, may it be so!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.