

WHAT IS “THE FRUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS”? AN EXERCISE IN ASKING AND ANSWERING INTERPRETIVE QUESTIONS

⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11)

In v. 11, Paul brings his prayer for the Philippians to an end by saying that he wants them to be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.” This phrase provides us with an opportunity to ask some good interpretive questions as we seek to discern Paul’s intended meaning.¹

If Paul was concerned enough to pray that the Philippians would be “filled with the fruit of righteousness,” then I ought to be concerned with understanding exactly what Paul meant by that request. These were more than just pious words, Paul actually had something in mind when he wrote this—something he wanted to see God do in the lives of the Philippians. But what was it? *What is “the fruit of righteousness”?*

Part of finding the right answer is asking the right questions. We’ve already begun with the basic question we are seeking to answer: *what is “the fruit of righteousness”?* Now we need to move on to ask questions that will help us come up with an answer.

WHAT IS “THE FRUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS”?

There are several parts to this question. We have to determine:

1. What is “fruit”?
2. What is “righteousness”?
3. How does “fruit” relate to “righteousness”?
4. How does “the fruit of righteousness” relate to the phrases around it?

Let’s look at each one in turn.

Question 1: What is “fruit”?

By itself the Greek word translated as “fruit” can have several meanings.² Using my Greek dictionary, I found the word is used to mean one of five things:

- 1) The fruit produced by plants and trees (cf. 1 Cor 9:7)
- 2) Human offspring, (e.g. “fruit of the womb”)
- 3) Spiritual “offspring” through conversion (cf. Rom 1:13)
- 4) Some kind of gain or profit (cf. Rom 15:28)
- 5) The deeds of someone’s life, i.e. moral performance.

¹ Remember, the only meaning that matters is the meaning author intended. We discussed this in **Lesson 2**.

² We will talk about doing effective word studies in **Lesson 7**.

To determine which meaning Paul is likely using, we ought probably look at other places where Paul uses the word “fruit.” Paul uses the word fruit 11 times in his letters.³ Beneath I have included all the times Paul uses “fruit”, except for Philippians 1:11. After each verse I have included which of the five meanings of the word Paul likely intends.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some **harvest (lit. “fruit”)** among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. (Romans 1:13, use #3)

But what **fruit** were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the **fruit** you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. (Romans 6:21-22, use #5).

When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them **what has been collected (lit. “this fruit”)** I will leave for Spain by way of you. (Romans 15:28, use #4)

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its **fruit**? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? (1 Corinthians 9:7, use #1)

But the **fruit** of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, (Galatians 5:22, use #4)

For the **fruit** of light is found in all that is good and right and true (Ephesians 5:9, use #4)

If I am to live in the flesh, that means **fruitful** labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. (Philippians 1:22, use #3)

Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the **fruit** that increases to your credit. (Philippians 4:17, use #5)

It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first **share (lit. “fruit”)** of the crops. (2 Timothy 2:6, use #1).

So Paul uses the word “fruit” in a variety of ways, all based on the context in which he uses them. Sometimes he is using a horticultural illustration to make a point (use #1: 1 Cor 9:7; 2 Tim 2:6), other times he means the Spirit’s “product” of conversions through his ministry (use #3: Rom 1:13; Phil 1:22), still other times he means the moral character and actions of an individual’s life (use #5: Rom 6:21-22; Gal 5:22; Eph 5:9; Phil 4:17). Only once does Paul clearly use the word “fruit” to refer to material gain (use #4: Rom 15:28).

³ You could find out this information by using a good Bible concordance. We’ll talk more about using tools like a concordance in **Lesson 7**.

It would seem most likely that Paul's use of fruit in Philippians 1:11 has to do with their own moral character and actions (use #5), since Paul talks about the Philippians themselves being "filled" with this fruit. The other four meanings wouldn't make sense with the verb "filled."

So "fruit" in Philippians 1:11 likely means "the moral character and actions" of the Philippians.

Question 2: What is "righteousness"?

Now that we've determine the meaning of fruit, we need to determine the meaning of the word "righteousness" in Philippians 1:11. Paul uses this word much more frequently—57 times (and 33 times in Romans alone!) I'm not going to list all the uses, but like "fruit," the Greek word for "righteousness" have several possible meanings.

- 1) the moral quality of justice and fairness (i.e. God is righteous, that is, he does what is right and just).
- 2) the judicial status of being in the right, especially before God.
- 3) being morally upright in practice
 - a) moral uprightness in a general sense
 - b) basic outward conformity to God's law

Quite a bit of the time in Paul's writing, he specifically has use #2 in view—especially in the book of Romans.

Paul uses "righteousness" four times in Philippians. The first time is in Philippians 1:11. The other three times are in Philippians 3:6 and 3:9.

as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to **righteousness** under the law, blameless.
(Philippians 3:6, use #3b)

and be found in him, not having a **righteousness** of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the **righteousness** from God that depends on faith (Philippians 3:9, use #3b and #2)

Note that Paul twice uses the word "righteousness" in relationship to the word "law." This would point us to the idea that in those places he means a kind of outward conformity to God's law (use #3b). The other time in Philippians 3:9, that kind of "righteousness" is contrasted with "that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

This gives us a few options of what "righteousness" could mean, but in order to determine what the word means in Philippians 1:11, we need to look at its context. Specifically, we need to understand how the words "fruit" and "righteousness" fit together.

Question 3: How does "fruit" relate to "righteousness"?

Based on the grammar, the phrase "fruit of righteousness" could have a few different meanings. It could mean:

- 1) “the fruit which *is* the legal status or standing of righteousness before God”
- 2) “the fruit which *is* moral/ethical righteousness (uprightness of character and action)”
- 3) “the fruit of moral/ethical righteousness which is the *result* of a legal standing of righteousness before God” –that is, the fruit that is produced by possessing status of righteousness in God’s cosmic courtroom.

By this point, some people are exhausted and just want to pick one meaning—usually whichever meaning they like best. But this is the point where we need to persevere and continue to do the hard work of biblical interpretation!

Based on the meaning of the words themselves, any of these options are viable. So what do we do when we reach this point? We need to look at the context!

Looking at the Context

Remember that there are several different levels of context, and most often we want to work from the inside (that is, the smallest level of context—the phrase or sentence) to the outside (that is, the largest level of context—the whole Bible).

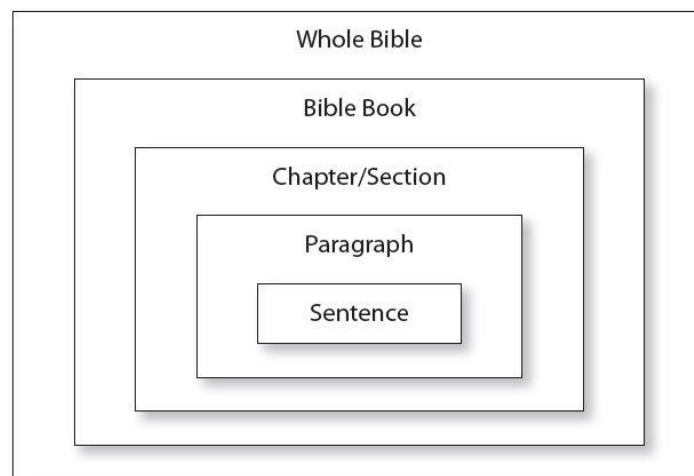


FIGURE 3.1. LEVELS OF CONTEXT

(from Beynon and Sach, *Dig Deeper*, p. 34)

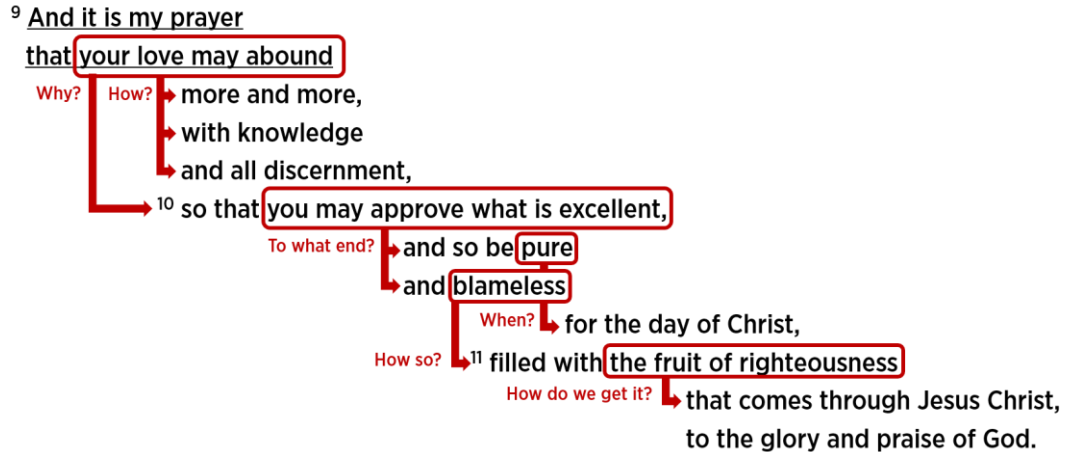
So we will look first at the immediate context of the phrase “the fruit of righteousness,” and move out to look then at the whole book of Philippians to help us determine Paul’s likely meaning.

The e Context of the Sentence

Paul has a tendency to write in long sentences, so the first level of context for “the fruit of righteousness” is the whole of Philippians 1:9-11. Trying to break down the relationships

in such a long and complex sentence can be tricky, so this is where sentence phrasing can be a really helpful tool.⁴

Here was my initial attempt at phrasing for Philippians 1:9-11.



In my phrasing, I made some guesses as to how each of the elements of the sentence relates to the others. Actually, since I've finished this study, I've changed my mind about a few things. But while this phrasing might not be perfect, the overall point of the sentence is still fairly clear. Paul seems to be writing about the Philippians moral character, evidenced by his prayer for that their "love may abound," that they "may approve what is excellent," and that they may be "pure and blameless." This would probably eliminate option #1 above. Paul's meaning has something to do with the moral character and actions of the Philippians.

But is it option #2 (the fruit *is* moral righteousness) or #3 (the fruit of moral uprightness comes as a result of the legal standing of righteousness we have before God)?

To determine this, we will need to look at another level of context:

The Context of the Book

Since Philippians is relatively short, it's not too difficult to get a feel for how Paul might pick up on the themes in Philippians 1:9-11 in other places in the book.

If Paul is talking specifically about the moral character and uprightness of the Philippians, then we probably ought to see if there are any similar statements elsewhere in the book. After reading over the book, I picked out a few that might be helpful.⁵

⁴ We learned about sentence phrasing in **Lesson 3**.

⁵ This is where having read through the book multiple times and become more familiar with its structure may prove to be very helpful. We learned about this in **Lesson 2**.

Only **let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ**, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, (Philippians 1:27)

Here, Paul is concerned that the Philippians lives reflect the gospel of Christ in their actual practice. The ESV has a footnote that says the Greek phrase translated “let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” literally means “behave as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ.” It is interesting to note that to be a “citizen” is a legal status. Behaving worthy of citizenship is to live in such a way that befits your legal status.

Therefore, my beloved, **as you have always obeyed, so now**, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling**, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)

In these verses, Paul gives the sometimes-troublesome command that believers are “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” What we can be sure Paul does not mean here is that we are to work for our salvation. This would be totally contradictory to what he teaches elsewhere in Philippians, what he teaches in his other letters, and what the rest of the Bible teaches about salvation.⁶ What matters for our present purpose is that Paul’s concern here is for believers to obey in such a way that it is consistent with the trajectory of their salvation. But just in case anyone was concerned, in v. 13 he makes sure we know that our working out of our salvation is only possible because “it is God who works in you.”

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but **I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own**. (Philippians 3:12)

Here Paul assures the Philippians that he is not perfect, nor has he attained the fulness of the salvation that will be his when he dies and is glorified. But he does tell the Philippians that he “presses on” (a word that denotes vigorous pursuit) to make this a reality in his life. (this = “to know Christ” v.7, “gain Christ” v. 8, and to be “like him in his death” v.10). The reason he can do this is because “Christ Jesus has made me his own.” His pursuit of Christ is based upon Christ’s possession of him.

These other verses in Philippians would indicate to me that Paul has in mind that he wants the Philippians to exhibit the moral qualities (“fruit”) that should characterize believers *as a result of* their legal standing of righteousness before God.

⁶ This is an issue of biblical and theological correlation. We will talk more about this in **Lesson 5**. It also assumes that the Bible is a consistent book in which all the parts fit together and do not contradict. This is a key part of our understanding of the doctrine of Scripture, which we discussed in **Lesson 1**.

We see this even more clearly when we realize that Paul's discussion in Philippians 3:9 of the righteousness that believers possess is a righteousness "which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith." The righteousness that Paul is talking about here is the legal declaration of right standing with God that we receive when we place our faith in Christ. We could spend some time looking at other passages in Paul's writing to demonstrate this, but you need only look to Romans 3:21-26 to see that this is likely what Paul is talking about here.

So, my conclusion is that "the fruit of righteousness" in Philippians 1:11 probably means "the fruit of upright, godly moral character and action that is produced as an outworking of one's own right standing before God."

Question 4. How does "the fruit of righteousness" relate the phrases around it?

The last step is to determine how "the fruit of righteousness" fits with the phrases immediately preceding and following it.⁷

...in order that you might be pure and blameless, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ...

"That you might be pure and blameless"

The ideas of being "pure and blameless" have to do with moral character and action. Since this is the case, we might surmise that being "pure and blameless" is roughly equivalent to being "filled with the fruit of righteousness."

"Filled"

Paul's prayer is that the Philippians would be "pure and blameless" on the day of Christ—that is, the day that Christ returns. Paul talks about this idea of being morally pure on the day that Christ returns a number of times in his letters (see 1 Corinthians 1:8, for example). In fact he has just mentioned this in Philippians 1:6, where he tells them that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion *at the day of Jesus Christ.*"

So in the immediate context, Paul has already expressed his expectation that God will have completed the good work he began in the Philippians when Christ returns.

The question with the word "filled," however, is a question of when that "filling" takes place. Is Paul speaking to the Philippians about their present condition (that they are currently filled with the fruit of righteousness) or about their future condition (that by the time of the day of Christ they will have been filled with the fruit of righteousness)?

⁷ We could also look at how it relates to other parts of the prayer in Philippians 1:9-11, as well as other places in Philippians, but for the sake of space we'll limit our study to just the phrases immediately preceding and following "the fruit of righteousness."

One way to get an idea of what Paul might be getting at here is to compare different translations of the text.⁸

ESV	NIV	NASB	NKJV
“pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness”	“pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness...”	“sincere and blameless until the day of Christ, having been filled with the fruit of righteousness...”	“sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruit of righteousness.”

Based on the Greek grammar, the NASB has probably translated the verb “filled” most accurately. The verb refers to something that has happened in the past that has continuing effects into the future (called a “perfect” verb). So from Paul’s perspective, he is looking back on something in the past.

But in his prayer, is Paul 1) simply looking forward to the day of Christ, saying “in that day you will be pure and blameless because you have *already, right now*, been filled with the fruit of righteousness”? Or is he 2) saying “when the day of Christ comes, you will be pure and blameless because *on that day* you will have been filled with the fruit of righteousness?”

The answer we give will be somewhat dependent on what we’ve determined the phrase “the fruit of righteousness” to mean. If it means “the fruit which is itself legal right standing with God—our justification in Christ,” then theologically we would say #1 is probably correct.

On the other hand, if we decided, as we did above, that it refers to the fruit that comes as a result of the legal standing of righteousness before God—our sanctification in Christ that flows from our justification in Christ—then we would say that #2 is correct. Again, we see this earlier in Philippians 1 when Paul said that the good work will continue to be worked toward completion until “the day of Christ Jesus.”

“that comes through Jesus Christ”

Again, this is where phrasing can come in handy, at least in showing up the different options:

Is it...

- 1) the fruit
of righteousness
that comes through Jesus Christ

In this option, it is the fruit that comes through, so “righteousness” and “that comes through Jesus Christ” are two separate ideas that both modify “fruit.”

⁸ We’ll talk more about using different translations of Scripture in **Lesson 8**.

Or is it...

2) the fruit
 of righteousness
 that comes through Jesus Christ

In this option, the phrase “that comes through Jesus Christ” modifies “righteousness”, and the whole phrase “righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ” is one idea that modifies “fruit.”

Given the choice between the two, we need to ask ourselves if Paul has used the idea of something coming “through Jesus Christ” elsewhere in Philippians? The answer, as we have seen above, is yes.

In Philippians 3:9, Paul says that he desires to be found in Christ “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but **[a righteousness] which comes through faith in Christ.**”

It is certainly theologically true that the fruit produced in our lives as a result of our standing before God is not simply something we drum up from inside ourselves. In fact, we saw above that Paul made that point in Philippians 2:12-13, that it is God’s working in us that allows us to work out our salvation. But the parallel passage in Philippians 3:9 would indicate to me that Paul’s precise meaning in Philippians 1:11 is that the fruit produced in our lives is a result of the legal standing of righteousness which we have received through Christ.

So then, we might paraphrase the logic of the passage like this:⁹

...that you might be pure and blameless in your moral character and conduct on the day that Jesus Christ returns—this is, that your life may be shown to be filled with the fruit of moral purity and godliness that is worked in you as the inevitable result of your legal standing of righteousness before God, a legal standing that has come to you only through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

And all of that came from asking interpretive questions about four words.

⁹ We’ll talk about paraphrasing the logic of a passage as an interpretive tool in **Lesson 6**.