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Have you ever bitten into a beautiful red tomato only to be disappointed by the flavorless, mealy, pale flesh inside? It's not that it isn't ripe, per se, but more like it's lacking its, well, tomato-ness. I recently learned that the fruit* we buy at the grocery store has, in fact, been becoming less flavorful. Not only are taste and color fading, but research suggests fruit in the United States today is less nutritious too, containing up to 40% fewer vitamins and nutrients than the fruit that our grandparents ate. It's remarkable how accustomed we have become to fruit that's not-so-good. I forget how rich it is supposed to be until I taste a tomato or a strawberry grown in a carefully tended garden. There's no comparison.

Most of the fruit at U.S. grocery stores is grown by large-scale conventional farming operations. These farms grow produce for the market, where success means fully stocked grocery stores with large, perfect-looking fruit. Their farming techniques prioritize size, uniformity, and fast growth, ensuring the fruit can withstand the shipping process. The downside is that our fruit gets tougher, its flavor is diluted, and its life-giving nutrients are diminished.

What exactly is corrupting the inherent quality of fruity goodness? Scripture tells us that the quality of the fruit results from "the care it has had" (Sirach 27:5). Science agrees: A fruit's goodness — or lack thereof — is largely determined by where it's planted and how it's tended.

In other words, the foundation of good fruit lies in healthy soil. There is a whole secret world underground that contributes to what grows from it. Good soil contains a balance of minerals, nutrients, air and water. Tiny organisms live and interact there, shaping the environment for new life to take root and flourish above ground.

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When soil is over-tilled — a common practice in conventional farming — it disrupts that balance and depletes the life-giving work of those microorganisms. Eventually, they simply wash away. It then becomes necessary to apply so-called inputs to the

crops to replace what was lost. But nitrates, fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides are expensive and poor substitutes for healthy soil.

The best fruits grow from protecting the goodness inherent in the soil. For example, regenerative farmers plant crops to cover the soil in fallow fields, nourishing and preserving the soil's richness until the next growing season. Success in regenerative farming means amplifying the abundance in God's design to, God willing, regenerate life-giving soil.

Scripture often uses fruit as a metaphor for human conduct and behavior — particularly how people speak. We are assured that one's fruits cannot be separated from one's character and that character is revealed through speech (Sirach 27:5). Jesus contrasts good and bad fruits (Luke 6:39) and affirms that "the mouth speaks from the fullness of the heart" (Luke 6:45). My experience has shown that so much is revealed about a person by whether they say "thank you," "I'm sorry" or "please," by how they talk about and to others, and by how they talk about themselves.

Character is either rooted in love or it bears bad fruit. Scripture teaches that good fruit is seen in words and acts of love, kindness, acceptance, patience and humility. Bad fruit grows from entitlement and deception. It is relatively easy to recognize bad fruit as it ripens into words of hypocrisy, feigned outrage, scapegoating, cruelty and mockery. We see bad fruits that dehumanize others to stir up resentment and fear.

But in these times, when not-so-good fruit has become the norm, how do we cultivate the richness of our spiritual soil? How does your garden grow?

- **Are you over-tilling?** Consider how your energy is being unsettled and lost to the weight of outrage or worry. Outrage at injustice and concern for the future are completely justified. But has the need for retribution become a driving force for you? Are you doomscrolling on social media, feeding your anxiety? Do you revisit your fears or grievances often? Do you allow others to "stir the pot," opening yourself to a sense of violation?
- **What kind of pesticides and herbicides is your spiritual soil exposed to?** What's your poison? What narratives drive you, and how do they shape your worldview? Where do you get your information? Are you lost in the brambles of disinformation, conspiracy, outrage and finger-pointing (i.e., Fox News)? Are you drawn to sources that stoke your fears or inflame your anxieties (i.e., MSNBC)? Regular exposure to these toxic patterns will slowly

poison your spirit.

- **Most importantly, how do you cultivate the spiritual richness within yourself?** Do you tend to the invisible, interior players that do the heavy lifting of God's work within you? Do you listen for the still, small inner voice nudging you toward deeper awareness of our shared humanity? Are you asking God to take root and grow new life within you?

The tension in the United States isn't between good and bad people. It's between open-handed and closed-fisted people. Between those who cultivate compassion and those who cultivate contempt for those with less or those who are different. Between those who pour their energy into discerning truth and those who seek talking points to confirm what they already believe. In today's environment, it's far too easy to accept not-so-good fruit as good enough.

Media sources not only inform us — they form us. The market for outrage continually peddles half-truths and outright lies to feed our fears, resentments and self-pity. Next time you watch the news or scroll through social media, pause and pay close attention if something doesn't sit right or seems mean-spirited. That is a good seed trying to take root.

These are times when those in the highest levels of government perpetuate prejudice, traffic in lies and divide our communities. As followers of Jesus, we are called to love on a greater scale than that. Our task is to resist having our humanity diluted, our agency diminished and our compassion demonized.

**Yes, a tomato is a fruit, but these trends apply to vegetables, too.*