

PRUNING THE VINE

INTRODUCTION

What on earth is God doing? Every week seems to bring more crisis and conflict and disaster and unrest. Just when we thought that 2020 was over, and perhaps things would get better, things got even worse.

We've talked about the Grand Story of God's purpose; that in eternity past He determined to raise up a people for His own name, a Bride for His Son, a people who are, as the Scripture says,

[1 Peter 2:9 \(ESV\)](#) — 9 ... a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, [and the reason is] so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

We've talked about the fact that Jesus Christ is building His church, a unique gathering, or assembly, or family, which is built on His work as Savior, His authority as Lord, and His nature as God human flesh.

Many seem to think that we are left on our own in terms of spiritual growth and sanctification. They think that whether someone wants to grow in Christ is up to them; whether they pursue sanctification is up to them. They think that Jesus did all the important things when He was here. Once He left, we were on our own. If someone really wants to pursue a devoted, passionate, holy life, that's fine (maybe a little weird or annoying), but the rest of us are free to just coast and live our own lives while we wait.

What does Jesus say about this period of time? He says that it is a time for being fruitful, and that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are determined to bring every Christian to full maturity and fruitfulness.

Let's look at [John 15:1-11](#).

› Pray!

DEFINING THE RELATIONSHIP

Jesus gives us meaningful pictures of His relationship with the Father, and our relationship to Himself and the Father.

God the Father and Jesus Christ.

[John 15:1 \(ESV\)](#) — 1 “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

If you ever happen to see a vineyard – there are a lot of them in California, where we’re from – you’ll see rows and rows of grapevines:

What you may not know is that the roots of these grapevines grow together, so that over time they become a single plant, a single organism. Years ago I saw a video that explained that because of this, when one vine becomes diseased, the rest of the vineyard will become diseased as well. But, if a farmer grafted in a vine that was resistant to the disease, that resistance would spread to the rest of the vineyard.

As you might image, the whole point of a vineyard is to produce fruit. They aren’t planted for decoration. As the growing season begins, the vine begins putting out branches, which should eventually bear fruit.

The farmer’s job was to keep the vine healthy. A healthy vine puts out branches. Healthy branches produce fruit.

So in this picture, **Jesus is the vine** – the root and source of life for the entire vineyard – and **the Father is the farmer**. In verse 5 He makes our relationship clear: **I am the vine**, He says; **you are the branches**. Jesus doesn’t go into greater detail, but we can reasonably say that the entire vineyard is His entire church over time, and clusters of branches – of Christians – are local churches.

FRUITFULNESS = SECURITY

In [John 15:2](#) Jesus describes people in this way:

[John 15:2 \(ESV\)](#) — 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

There are two kinds of branches on a grapevine; those that bear fruit, and those that don't. I don't need to tell you that, when it comes to grapevines, leaves are not fruit.

Within a cluster of branches, there will be some that bear fruit, and some that don't. The same is true within a local church. There are those who bear spiritual fruit, and those who don't.

NOW, WHAT IS SPIRITUAL FRUIT?

It's everything that Scripture describes in the life of a genuine Christian. It is the very life of Christ in us. He is the vine, we are the branches; every true Christian has the life of Christ within him or her, and that life manifests itself in specific ways: faith; repentance; love of the Word; submission to the Word; obedience to Jesus Christ; the fruit of the Spirit; righteousness; holiness; love of God the Father, love of Jesus, love of the Holy Spirit; love of the brethren, and so on.

Spiritual fruit is NOT doing good things; it is a transformation of our nature.

Ezekiel prophesied of the New Covenant, which comes through Jesus Christ:

Ezekiel 36:26–27 ESV

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

The New Covenant is not a theory written on paper. It is the work of God in saving a sinner. It is the full application of Jesus' atonement to those for whom He died. Until God does the work of the New Covenant in our lives, we are dead in our sins and facing judgment. Once God does the work of the New Covenant in our lives, we are regenerated and born again.

REMOVING THE FRUITLESS

Jesus says that when a branch fails to produce fruit – that is, a so-called Christian has no faith; repentance; love of the Word; submission to the Word; obedience to Jesus Christ; the fruit of the Spirit; righteousness; holiness; love of Jesus; love of the brethren – they will be cut off. It's not that they lose their salvation; they were never saved in the first place, because they were never in Christ. Rather, it's that they are removed from the church – the cluster of branches. They had some experiences – [Hebrews 6](#) talks about them being enlightened, tasting the heavenly gift, tasting the goodness of the Word of God, and so on – but they themselves were never born again. How do WE know that they are false? Most of the time we don't know, because the fruit the Father desires is not outward works, but inward transformation. John is very clear, though:

1 John 2:19 ESV

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.

This is not an arbitrary decision made by the Father. These men and woman call themselves Christians, but lack anything of Christ in their lives. The Lord will not allow them to remain in hiding forever. Does that sound harsh? It shouldn't. Could there be anything worse than THINKING that you're a Christian when you're not? If the Lord didn't take some action to reveal our own lost state to us, we would never see it on our own. Being "cut off," as Jesus puts it, gives them an opportunity to see and understand their lost state, and truly repent and trust in Jesus.

PRUNING FRUITFUL BRANCHES

But Jesus also says that fruitful branches will be pruned.

John 15:2 (ESV) — **2** Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Since the purpose of being in Christ is to be saved and transformed, this pruning can only be a good thing. Pruning a vine means removing unproductive shoots, so that the fruit that is produced is maximized. Pruning is an affirmation of our salvation. [Hebrews 12](#) says,

Hebrews 12:7-8 ESV

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Christian, the Father is conforming your life and mine to that of Jesus Himself. Until we are like Jesus in every way, without exception, He will continue His work.

Philippians 1:6 ESV

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

SECURITY IN CHRIST

This still makes us a little uneasy; what if the Father has so much pruning to do that He decides to just be done with me? Here's the promise: He won't. Jesus makes it clear that His people are secure in Him:

[John 15:3 \(ESV\)](#) — **3** Already you are clean [forgiven and justified] because of the word that I have spoken to you.

The basis of forgiveness is His cross; the moment of forgiveness is when He speaks it to us, and the Holy Spirit applies it to us. Likewise, the basis of justification is His righteous life; the moment of justification is when the Father declares us to have full credit for Jesus' righteousness. The Father joined us to Christ; the Father forgave us through Jesus' blood; the Father justified us by crediting us with Jesus' righteousness. We did nothing to join ourselves to Christ, or to bring about our forgiveness or justification. God did it all. We are secure in Jesus because of that truth.

GOD WANTS FRUIT

John 15:8 (ESV) — 8 By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples.

Now, why does the Father do all of this? Why does He cut off fruitless branches, and prune fruitful branches? Because He is glorified when we are made recipients of the New Covenant, when we are born again in Christ, and filled with the Spirit, and are transformed from sinners to saints. I'll remind you again that fruitfulness is not doing good things, especially things that other sinners think are good, but spiritual transformation: faith, repentance, love of the Word, submission to the Word, obedience to Christ, the fruit of the Spirit, righteousness, holiness, love for Jesus Christ, love of the brethren.

WHAT IS OUR PART?

We naturally want to do something; we want to be involved. And even though God does everything that makes us fruitful, there is something that we must do as well. We must continue on in Jesus Christ.

John 15:4-7 (ESV) — 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it **abides** in the vine, neither can you, unless you **abide** in Me. **5** I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever **abides** in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. **6** If anyone does not **abide** in Me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. **7** If you **abide** in Me, and My words **abide** in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Do you see how many times the word “abide” is used here? It appears 11 times between verses 4 and 11. Do you think Jesus was serious about you and me abiding in Him? I think so.

It makes sense. If you cut a branch off of a grapevine, it will die. It won't be unhealthy; it won't become less fruitful; it will die. This is so basic that even city boys like me get it. A branch cannot bear fruit unless it remains intimately joined to the vine, and receives everything the vine gives it.

We must remain in Christ; we must continue in Him; we must abide in Him. If we do, we will bear the fruit of spiritual transformation. If we don't, we will show that we were never intimately attached to Jesus to begin with. Apart from Him we can do nothing to bear spiritual fruit. We can't muster up faith or repentance on our own. We can't make ourselves submissive and obedient. We can't produce the fruit that only the Holy Spirit can produce. We will not be righteous or holy. We will not love Jesus, or His people.

Alright, we get that; we need to abide in Christ. But friends, I get tired, and I get weak, and I get discouraged. Maybe you don't; maybe your faith never varies, and your hope never flags. But I get weary.

What a blessing there is in [John 15:5, 7](#) – Jesus says that HE will abide in US.

John 15:5 (ESV) — 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in ME and I in HIM, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

John 15:7 (ESV) — 7 If YOU abide in ME, and MY WORDS abide in YOU, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

We abide in Christ by remaining devoted to His Word. He abides in us through means of His Word, as well as His Spirit. He keeps a grip on us when we are unable to keep a grip on Him. He clings to us when we are too weak to cling to Him. Even in our weakness and discouragement and weariness, there is spiritual fruit being produced. A strong, willful, determined man or woman is usually in an unstable position. They trust their own strength of will, their own abilities, their own determination to win. Weakness, on the other hand, doesn't hinder us at all:

2 Corinthians 12:10 *ESV*

For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

MUTUAL ABIDING

John 15:7 (ESV) — 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, **ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.**

We always understand Scripture within its context; we don't simply grab a verse or a phrase and twist it into saying something that it doesn't say.

Jesus is NOT saying that as long as you go to church, or pray the right kind of prayer, you can ask Him for any imaginable thing – an airplane, a million dollars, perfect health - and God is duty bound to give it to you.

Jesus IS saying that if this mutual abiding exists – you in Him, and His Word in you – that you can ask for whatever you need to be fruitful, and it will be given to you. Did you know that plants ask for what they need? It's true. An attentive gardener recognizes when a plant needs more water, because the plant itself tells her. It will tell her if it is overwatered. Plants will show signs of mold, or bug infestations.

So, as a branch in Christ, you can go to Him in prayer and pray, “Lord, I’m dry; I need Your Word and Spirit to fill my heart,” and He will provide it. You can pray, “Lord, I feel overwhelmed and drowned; I need rest and refreshment,” and He will provide it. You can pray, “Lord, I’ve been weakened by sin,” and He will forgive and restore you. And remember, the Father is the best farmer there ever was. He is already at work in you specifically, according to your unique needs and circumstances, to bring you into conformity with the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

BRINGING IT HOME

It may not sound overwhelming to you, but it does to me. There is so much going on, so much to pay attention to, so much potential for failure and loss, that it makes me a little afraid.

We have a good God, a Good Father, a Good Savior and Lord, the Good and Holy Spirit!

Listen to the words of your Savior:

[John 15:9-11](#) (ESV) — 9 As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide in My love. **10** If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. **11** These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

What a statement! Jesus loves us just as the Father loves Him. He commands us to abide in His love by keeping His commandments – keeping His Word – just as He kept His Father’s commandments, and so abides in the Father’s love. It is simply true that God does not love all people the same way, or to the same degree. But it is also very true that the love of God for His own people is extraordinary and magnificent, glorious and grace, pure and peace, safe and secure.

Abide in Him!