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Fruitfulness Explained: Growing in God



Part 40 (041114am)

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Perhaps the most fruitful servant of the Lord in the New Testament was Paul the Apostle. Perhaps the most afflicted, pressured, troubled man in the New Testament was Paul the Apostle. Perhaps the most useful servant of the Lord in the New Testament was Paul the Apostle. Do you see a pattern between Paul's troubles and His usefulness?

Paul was pruned in every way imaginable—**shipwrecked** (that would be a patience builder), **imprisoned** (that would be a faith builder), **beaten repeatedly** (that would be a bitterness antidote), **mocked, scoffed and ridiculed** (that would be a love builder), **out of touch with everyone dear to him** (that would be a hope builder), **weak and sick and tired** (that would be a prayer builder, with only the Lord to talk to), **fighting demonic attacks 24/7** (that would be a daily spiritual warfare workout), and on we could go through the endless opportunities Paul had to grow through all those problems in life. And guess what? He took most of them. He let God prune away at him until there was almost nothing left but what was constantly useful to the Lord!

What is fruitfulness for the Lord? It is simply being useful for Him. When we are tools that God can use, we are fruitful.

This morning anything that is useful to you, that serves you in some way—that object has been captured and harnessed to become so useful. Take for instance some common useful items that serve us. Look at **their** existence from **their** perspective,

- **The glass** you drink from at lunch started its existence peacefully resting with billions of other grains of silica, soda ash, and limestone on earth's surface. But to be useful to you everything changed. It was mined, sifted, poured into a dark tube, dumped into a fiery cauldron, burned until it melted with trillions of other crystals into a glassy sea, poured into a mould, pressed into a shape, cooled, finished, boxed, shaken, and shipped to where you will eat today. Then after resting briefly again in darkness, it was pulled out, filled with freezing cold ice, poured over with a drink, plopped on a table, used by you, dropped into a plastic tub, placed into confinement, sprayed with scalding hot water laced with chemicals, heated hot until dry, and placed in a ready spot to be used again until broken and cast away to reside again in the surface of the earth. If the glass was plastic (and by the way a "plastic glass" is an oxymoron) its existence is even more harsh and brief.
- **How about that spoon?** Blasted and scraped up from the ground where it had laid since creation, it became a river of ore shipped, smelted, blasted with fire into a molten liquid steel, mixed with carbon, chromium, manganese, phosphorus and sulphur to become stainless, squeezed into a bar, pressed into a thin sheet, rolled into a coil, shipped to a factory, stretched, surfaced, cut, and shaped into a spoon. All that to just be useful in such a small way.
- **And then that paper napkin?** Just think of living in a quiet and peaceful forest, growing in the fresh air, sunlight, rains, mists, and seasons. Then came the roar of chainsaws, the tug of chains and bulldozers, the sting as cables strapped you onto flatbed trucks, the piercing stream of water that stripped off the bark, the cutting jaws of a chipper, and then being boiled alive in a cauldron of acid, ground into a thick sludge, bleached white, pressed into paper thin sheets, rapidly dried, and finally cut into shapes, stamped, folded and boxed—all to be useful for only moments.

God wants to **capture us** by His love, **harness us** by His Spirit, **shape us** by His Word, and **change us** into usefulness by His PRUNING! That is what our lifetime is all about. The shaping, refining, pruning Hand of God is with us all through life—either we accept it and grow, or resent it and miss the eternal blessings.

Have you ever wondered why the Christian life seems so hard? It is a constant battle with sin, a relentless struggle against our flesh, an endless guarding against an ambush by the devil's terroristic demons who lurk about to plant roadside bombs along our daily path. And then there is the struggle with pain, aging, our emotions and the fears that seem to fly at us from every corner. Do you think you are alone in this struggle? Don't ever think that again. Listen to a fellow struggler. His name is Paul. Open to [II Corinthians 4:7-18](#) and listen as I read from Eugene Petersen's

Part: 28	For Jesus The Good Life Accepts the Word
Part: 27	The Good Heart Accepts The Word
Part: 26	The Good Heart
Part: 25	The Crowded Heart
Part: 24	Are you marked?
Part: 23	Blind Eyes Made to See
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Part: 19	Is there Another Way to God--Through Mary?
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Part: 7	Unpardonable Sin
Part: 6	The Gospel Explained by Peter
Part: 5	The Experience of Peter
Part: 4	Christ's Finished Work
Part: 3	The Message of Jesus
Part: 2	The Gospel Presentation in Acts - 2
Part: 1	The Gospel Presentation in Acts 1

paraphrase of these verses called *The Message*:

We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us—trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us—he lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus' sake, which makes Jesus' life all the more evident in us. While we're going through the worst, you're getting in on the best! So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever.

TRUTH NUMBER 1: Jesus Never Neglects Any Branch That He Owns

If you are in Christ He is at work somewhere in your life – trimming, lifting, cleaning, or pruning. Whenever we have fruitless times, God steps in to change that.

TRUTH NUMBER 2: Jesus Wants My Desires to Become His Desires—So I will be Useful

My desires become His; My actions are surrendered to His control; My pleasures are found under His authority, and so on we saw the steps of surrender we go through to become useful.

TRUTH NUMBER 3: Jesus Will Make Me Fruitful – One Way or Another

Remember the first lesson we learned when we started this study of John 15? Grapes love to grow and expand their territory. In fact they love to do everything but bear fruit. They must be pruned to do that! We are so much like the grape vine's tendency to grow so vigorously in every direction! We, like those vines, have a lot of non-fruitful wood that must be cut away each year. We, like the grapevines, can become so dense in all our external leaf productions (ministry, work, family, athletics, amusements, investments, busyness, stress, anxieties, sins, etc.) that the sun (like the Son of God) cannot reach into the area where fruit should form. We, left to ourselves, are just like a grape plant; we will always favor new expansion of our territory over more grapes (fruit for God). What is the spiritual result? From a distance our lives look like incredibly green and healthy branches full of luxurious growth, and of impressive achievements. But to the Lord who stands up close, we have an under-whelming harvest of God's glorifying eternal fruit!

He can **chasten us**. Chastening is a negative step of drastic intervention taken by God to prevent us from further damaging ourselves by sinful choices we have made in our lives.

He can **prune us**. Pruning is a positive step of refocusing, redirecting, and renewing that makes us healthier, and more fruitful.

How Can I Tell the Differences Between Chastening and Pruning?

- **Chastening is punishment.** It is Negative and does not lead to a reward earned for enduring. It is a call to immediate repentance and change. All the time resisting or just enduring chastening is wasted and empty time. Chastening is something you feel as emotional anxiety, frustration, or distress. What used to bring you joy now doesn't. Pressures increase at work, at home, in your health or finance. Many Christians bump along in this level of discipline, yet fail to read the signs. They feel unfulfilled at church, critical of their Christian friends, and "on the outs" with God. When they pick up their Bible, it feels like a lead weight instead of a welcome relief. Their relationship with the Lord seems blighted by a sadness or lethargy they can't quite trace. God can **chasten us**. Chastening is a negative step of drastic intervention taken by God to prevent us from further damaging ourselves by sinful choices we have made in our lives.
- **Pruning is positive and leads us into seasons of great reward earning.** Pruning makes us a wise investor of our time, treasures, attitudes, and actions. The times of pruning lead to deeper fellowship, greater fullness of joy in the Lord, and to increasing usefulness for God's glory and Kingdom. He can **prune us**. Pruning is a positive step of refocusing, redirecting, and renewing that makes us healthier, and more fruitful. "The act of pruning appears harsh. The vinedresser cuts back the lush, growing branches just as they are about to flower. The wise gardener knows that good must sometimes be sacrificed for better. Grape branches or tendrils can grow very fast and very long (twelve to twenty feet). But as they develop length and size, they use resources that could be channeled into making fruit. Pruning focuses the growth and energy of the plant. A lush vine with little fruit has failed its purpose. God's pruning of our lives can be painful. He may limit or remove achievements, objects, and abilities. These may not be wrong in themselves, but God knows they will detract from our fruitfulness. We must not resent God's pruning. Instead, God's discipline should cause us to turn to him with renewed desire to be productive."

Pruning is God our Vinedresser pinching away parts of our lives that are presently not useful to Him and in the future will be unproductive for the fruitfulness that He seeks from us. The Greek word means, literally, "cleans." To clean of excess foliage is to prune, but the context also calls to mind cleansing from sin. Our Father's work with us is the careful trimming away of sins, hindrances, and evil habits so that we gain the maximum fruit-bearing capacity. Among the most effective ways our Father prunes us is with trouble, even pain and suffering. When God is **pruning**, we are like Paul. We rejoice in our weaknesses so Christ can work through us. As troubles come we have a growing peace. And in our struggles we find ourselves drawn closer to the Lord. **Pruning** also hurts, but when troubles come do you seek help, strength, and guidance from the Lord? Then He's **pruning** you. We are pruned because we are doing something right. During **pruning** even though it hurts – we remain joyful, we read God's Word with hunger, and we talk to Him often in prayer. We soon sense the nearness of our Heavenly Father **pruning** us, and we respond to God's challenge

for increased growth. When **pruning** starts God is affirming to us that we are already bearing spiritual fruit—and He is helping us to bear even more fruit. In times of **pruning** we learn how to even more fully turn from our self and flesh. **Pruning** make us feel relieved, trusting, and expectant of God's even greater blessing. Our response to **pruning** is greater surrender of more of our lives to God. Does **pruning** stop? **Pruning** will only stop when God is finished with that area of our life. But soon He moves to another area, so **pruning** as we see in Paul's life, lasts all the way through life. So that we are more and more useful to God the older and older we become.

God wants to **capture us** by His love, **harness us** by His Spirit, **shape us** by His Word, and **change us** into usefulness by His PRUNING! That is what our lifetime is all about. The shaping, refining, pruning Hand of God is with us all through life—either we accept it and grow, or resent it and miss the eternal blessings.

- **Pruning Lets Us See Things Clearly** : Job 42:5-6 "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, **But now my eye sees You**. 6 Therefore I abhor myself, And repent in dust and ashes."
- **Pruning Pulls us Back to God** : Psalm 119:67 Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word; Psalm 119:71 It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.
- **Pruning Declares God's Sovereignty**: Psalm 66:10-12 For You, O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined.11 You brought us into the net; You laid affliction on our backs. 12 You have caused men to ride over our heads; We went through fire and through water; But You brought us out to rich fulfillment.; Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (NIV); Genesis 45:5-8 But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For these two years the famine has been in the land, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. 7 And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. 8 **So now it was not you who sent me here, but God**; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. Genesis 50:20 But as for you, **you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good**, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.
- **Pruning opens us to Greater Ministry**: John 12:24 Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; **but if it dies, it produces much grain**.
- **Pruning Certifies us for Encouraging Others**: 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, **who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God**. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.
- **Pruning Cultivates Christlikeness** : 2 Corinthians 4:7-10 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. 8 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, **that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body**.
- **Pruning brings Christ's Rewards**: 2 Corinthians 4:17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is **working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory**.

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Major ingredients of common glass: Silica Sand 60%; Soda Ash 20%; Limestone 15%; Alumina-Silicate 4%; Salt Cake 0.9%

Major ingredients of stainless steel: Carbon (0-0.12), Chromium (17.0-19.0), Manganese (0-2.00), Nickel (8.00-10.0), Phosphorus (0-0.045), Sulphur (0-0.030), Silicon (0-1.00).

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The basis for these contrasts is drawn from a chart by Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, pp. 96-103.

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