

FRUITFUL LIVING A SERMON ON JOHN 15:1-17

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Most people are familiar with Jesus' teaching that He is the way, the truth and the life. Not a way among many, but **the** way. In my last message, we learned of the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit, so that as we walk along the way, we will never be alone. In today's text, Jesus talks about the kind of life transformation that happens when we have the Holy Spirit indwelling us.

Let's reconstruct today's scene as it may have happened. Jesus and his disciples have finished dinner and he has been talking with them. Immediately prior to this passage, Jesus says, "Come, let us leave". They leave, cutting across the city going east. They pass through the interior Valley Gate and Huldah Gate before exiting through the main wall at the Golden Gate. With the temple rising over the walls of Jerusalem directly behind them, they made their way northeast, stopping shy of the Mount of Olives as they arrived at the Garden of Gethsemane. Along the way, they come across a grape arbor and Jesus, being a masterful teacher, uses the opportunity to teach. Remember that this was an agricultural society and all around the Mediterranean, grapes were a very common crop. All through the ancient world, the grape vine was a common literary symbol. Almost all the ancient Mediterranean cultures frequently used vine imagery in their literature. However, the imagery strikes modern ears as kind of odd and it leaves us with some questions: What is this fruit? What is this about cutting off branches? What is this about pruning? Let us view our text for the day, John 15:1-17.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are

picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.

First Question: What is this fruit that He's talking about? What does it mean to bear fruit? Look at verses 10-13 (If you obey my commands...). Here, bearing fruit is about obeying Jesus' commandments, particularly the commandment to love one another. So here, bearing fruit is about action — the positive action of loving one another.

What about the rest of the New Testament? The first place to go when talking about fruitful living is Galatians 5:22. Paul here contrasts the fruit of the Spirit against the acts of the sinful nature. Most of these fruits speak for themselves — they are feelings and states of being that have outward results. Fruits are also actions — Look at Titus 3:14 and Ephesians 2:10. Fruit is right orientation of the heart and right action. I want you to notice something — these are all positive commandments. They are all, “Yes, do this.”

Christ calls us not to focus on a life of “no” but to a life of “yes” of fruit bearing. Behind every “thou shalt not” is an implied “thou shalt” to which we're called to aspire. You shall not kill because you shall honor the image of God in your fellow humans. You shall not commit adultery because you shall, through the quality of your marriage, give the world a picture of God's love for his people. You shall not covet because you shall recognize all the blessings he's already given you. By obeying God's commandments, particularly the commandment of love, you bear fruit and you experience great joy.

Second Question: What is this about cutting off branches? Remember that Jesus says “I am the vine” — this is a poetic image that parallels “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Jesus is the vine. He is the only way we tap the soil of God for nutrients. Apart from Jesus, we do nothing of lasting significance. Verse 2 — “He cuts off every branch that bears no fruit”. Bible teacher Bruce Wilkinson has revolutionized my thinking on this verse. You may recall last year when his little book, *The Prayer of Jabez*, conquered the bestseller lists by selling 8 million copies. Wilkinson followed up *The Prayer of Jabez* with his book *The Secrets of the Vine*, which explores in detail this very passage. If you have not read that book, get it and read it this week. It will, I hope, inspire you to great things in Jesus Christ.

In explaining this passage, Wilkinson first shows that the Greek word used here for “cut off” can also be translated as “lift up”. This horticultural term is very important, as Wilkinson soon demonstrates when he relates a long conversation with an acquaintance who owned a vineyard in northern California. Here’s how he describes the conversation:

“As we sat across the restaurant from each other, he began to talk about the life of a grower — the long hours spent walking the vineyards, tending the grapes, watching the fruit develop, waiting for the perfect day to begin harvest.

‘New branches have a natural tendency to trail down and grow along the ground,’ he explained. ‘But they don’t bear fruit down there. When branches grow along the ground, the leaves get coated in dust. When it rains, they get muddy and mildewed. The branch becomes sick and useless.’ ‘What do you do?’ I asked. ‘Cut it off and throw it away?’ ‘Oh, no!’ he exclaimed, ‘The branch is much too valuable for that. We go through the vineyard with a bucket of water looking for those branches. We lift them up and wash them off.’ He demonstrated for me with dark, callused hands. ‘Then we wrap them around the trellis, or tie them up. Pretty soon they’re thriving.’”¹

There are some of you here who may feel like your life hasn’t been bearing fruit. If you are one of those people — You don’t feel that joy or peace. You don’t live a life of self-control. You haven’t been living a life of love. You know that Jesus wants these things in your life, but they’re just not there yet. Hear this — Jesus isn’t coming after you with the shears and the weed basket. He’s coming with a bucket of water. He’ll clean that mud and mildew off you — those attitudes and assumptions that hold you back from fruitful living. He’ll cleanse you and purify you.

Realize however that it takes years for a vine to become strong enough to bear fruit. Similarly, it may take some time to bear spiritual fruit. Don’t give up. Hold on to Philippians 1:6 “...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to

¹ *Secrets of the Vine* by Bruce Wilkinson, 33-35.

completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” No matter where you are in your spiritual life, Jesus isn’t done with you yet.

Third Question: What is this about pruning branches that bear fruit? Those of you who are gardeners understand this. Think about your lawn. What is the natural tendency of grass — to grow up high. However, if you allow it to grow tall, it will start to thin out — only the tallest blades will survive. This is why we cut grass. When we regularly trim our grass, that growth energy is redirected toward root development, which allows for new blades to spring up and for more thickness. Interestingly, those who use the old-fashioned rotary blade mowers rather than gas-powered mowers have an additional benefit. The gas mowers break the blade, making a traumatic wound that takes longer to heal. Meanwhile, the rotary blade mowers slice the grass like scissors, leaving a thin wound that heals quickly, and thus allowing more energy to be put into root development.

The same is true in our spiritual lives. As we grow, we will discover that there are some things in our lives, even good things, which have to go to make room for deeper spiritual growth. Has there been something in your life that has always worked for you, but it seems to be offering diminishing results? Perhaps it is time to prune that from your life so you can focus your energies on more profitable exercises. For instance — it has long been my practice to read 2 books every Christmas season — *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Great Divorce* by C. S. Lewis. These books display insight into human nature and, in the past, helped focus me for a new year. But this year, the rewards of returning to them were less. I didn’t have the flashes of insight that I expected; there wasn’t as much joy in the experience that I had before. I think that God might be prompting me to lay down this practice to focus on some other things. As I heard Donn Rubingh remark last week, “The enemy of the great is the merely good.”

Picking a new book to read is among the simplest of adjustments. But sometimes pruning is quite painful. God may be calling us to let go of something quite dear, but not helpful, to our spiritual lives. God may even allow us to suffer for a time in order to get to a new level of fruit bearing. Look at Hebrews 12:7-11.

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on,

however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

It's hard surrender to God's stroke. But there are times when it must be done. If we could just let go of that intellectual pride, that old grudge, that need to be right, that tendency to look at the mistakes of others rather than our own mistakes, then we might become spiritual hothouses, growing fruit of our own and enabling those around us to bear more than they ever imagined.

Everything we do here — the worship, the witness, the study, the sharing, the serving — is designed to help you bear more fruit than you are currently bearing. Some are so beat up by life that they aren't bearing any fruit at all: Jesus washes them and ties them up and lets them heal in his grace. If this is you, then long for and expect Jesus' soul therapy. Some are bearing some fruit, but could be bearing so much more — Jesus identifies those areas of their lives that are sapping your growth and sets about the process of removing them. If this is you, then look for those places in your life that seem to be holding you back and cooperate with Jesus in getting rid of them. Do that, and you and those who love you will enjoy abundant fruit like you've never imagined. You think about the joy in that harvest. Amen.