

PRUNING THE VINE

John 15:1-5

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
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“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (Jn. 15:1-2).

John 15 begins a new phase of Jesus’ farewell teaching, as is signaled by Jesus’ departure from the Upper Room with the disciples. In John 14, Jesus sought to comfort the disciples’ fears in light of his imminent departure. Now Jesus gives the corresponding teaching regarding the disciples’ duty and obligation during his absence. Jesus did this by means of the seventh and last “I Am” statement in the Gospel of John: “I am the true vine” (Jn. 15:1).

In our last study, we noted that the true vine is a good description of Jesus. Whereas Israel as God’s vineyard had failed to bear good fruit, Jesus’ life of perfect obedience succeeded in pleasing the Father. This “I Am” statement also incorporates the activity of the Father in tending the vine: “My father is the vinedresser” (Jn. 15:1). The metaphor is completed by Jesus’ inclusion of the disciples themselves: “You are the branches” (Jn. 15:5). The point of Jesus’ teaching is that as branches of the true vine, the disciples are obligated to bear good fruit for the Father: the fruit of obedience and devotion, the fruit of good works, and the fruit of inward spiritual graces. Whereas chapter 14 told of all that Jesus would do for the disciples once he ascended into heaven – chief of which was sending the Holy Spirit to indwell his followers – chapter 15 provides the corresponding insistence that true believers in Christ will inevitably bear good fruit for God.

FRUITFUL BRANCHES PRUNED

Verse 2 tells us how the Father tends his vine so that it will bear the maximum good fruit: “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.” Last week we identified the fruitless branches as nominal Christians who may attend church and may even affirm certain doctrinal truths, but whose lack of fruit shows that they do not possess the life of the vine. “By their fruit you will know them,” Jesus had taught (Mt. 7:20), and the lack of good fruit enables God to know the dead branches. For the sake of the vine, the Father takes these branches away.

There is also a second activity that the Father performs in tending his vine. Having removed lifeless branches, he then prunes the fruitful branches. This may be contrary to our expectations, since we don’t think of God taking his knife to fruitful branches. But according to Jesus, the Father does just this, simply because it is necessary to make the fruitful branches even more fruitful.

Grape vines require aggressive pruning. After each year’s harvest, the fruitful branches are cut back significantly. The idea in pruning is to remove whatever inhibits growth, and Jesus applies this principle to the Father’s pruning of our spiritual lives. He strips away things that are spiritually detrimental, even if they are otherwise good things. He takes the knife to our bad habits and assails our prayerlessness by giving us things to pray about. The Father applies the pruning knife to our priorities and values, and strips away relationships that would hinder our faith. It is important to note that this is not punishment, but vine dressing. The writer of Hebrews said: “he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness” (Heb. 12:10).

This pruning may take place by means of God’s providential arrangement of our circumstances: we may suffer loss, face a temptation, or experience a reproof. The purpose of all these is to make us fruitful through an increased faith. Peter wrote that his readers had “been grieved by various trials,” the purpose of which was “so that the tested genuineness of your faith... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:6-7). James reminds us: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when

you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness” (Ja. 1:2-3). It is the branches that have been lovingly and carefully pruned by God that bear the most fruit. It is true that the Father’s pruning involves afflictions known only to Christians, the like of which the world knows nothing. But neither does the world know the joy of the harvest in the fruit of eternal life.

Consider, for example, the remarkable spread of Christianity in China today. If we wonder how this unleashing of spiritual power has taken place, we need to consider the severe afflictions suffered by the Chinese Christians under the Communist regime. One example is Samuel Lamb, who for his preaching was imprisoned with hard labor from 1958 to 1978. Lamb spent these years, during which he had no contact with his wife and family (his wife and father died before his release) and despite increasingly poor health, praying for the gospel in China. Immediately after his release, he got a job as a teacher, converted many of his students to Christ, and then formed a church. Soon, his house church was so numerous that he needed a close-circuit camera system so that people gathered in different rooms could see and hear his preaching. “The more persecution, the more the church grows,” he explained.¹ There is, in fact, no explanation for the remarkable power of the gospel in China apart from the persecution of the church, and by this means God’s pruning of his servants to make their lives more fruitful.

What is true for the church as a whole is true for individual believers. There is no other explanation for the remarkable fruit God desires in the lives of his people than Father’s pruning knife as work in us. This tells us that when we endure trials in life – when we find biblical parenting to be overwhelming, when loving our spouse is difficult, when integrity in the workplace is hard, along with the more severe trials involved with sickness, grief, joblessness, or persecution – we should lift our faces to the Lord and ask him to do his work in our life that we might bear the fruit that he desires. Mark Johnson comments that while “the process may be painful..., it will always be worthwhile as it leads to a better and more profitable life in Christ.”² Thus the saintly and much afflicted Elizabeth Prentiss wrote to a

¹ David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2003), 64.

² Mark Johnson, *Let’s Study John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 202.

friend who was suffering under grief: “My dear friend, don’t let this tragedy of sorrow fail to do everything for you.”³ David similarly sang, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word” (Ps. 119:67).

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF PRUNING

One way to understand God’s purposes in pruning his branches is to consider the examples from the Bible. The Bible shows that God’s most useful servants have been those who were afflicted in trials. By briefly considering some of these examples we can glean insight into God’s purpose.

Consider, for example, the experience of Abraham, our father in faith. Abraham was extremely fruitful to the Lord, God’s covenant with him serves as the basis for the salvation of all others who believe. God called Abraham when he was an idol worshiper living in Ur of the Chaldees, saying, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1), and promised to make Abraham into a great nation. Abraham obeyed God’s call, departed from father’s house and made the long and difficult journey to the land of promise. This was fruit in his life that was pleasing to God. So what happened to Abraham in the promised land? Did he find ease and blessing? Not at all, but rather God began pruning his faith through hardships and trials.

Abraham’s chief trials were that while God promised him a people who would descend from him and a land that would be their own, he actually possessed neither of these. Hebrews 11:13 says that Abraham “died in faith, not having received the things promised.” This was a sore trial, and the changing of his name from Abram to Abraham (the latter meaning, “father of a people”) only made it more difficult. God insisted on his promise to Abraham, and by making him wait he taught his servant to trust in his Word. Why did God force Abraham to wait so long for the promised son, and why did God require Abraham to live as a pilgrim in the land that was promised to him? The result is seen in the strengthening of Abraham’s faith in trusting God’s promise. Hebrews 11:10 says “he was looking

³ Cited from Susan Hunt, *The True Woman* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1997), 93.

forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).

We see Abraham’s strengthened faith when God later called him to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Abraham had learned to trust God enough even to do this, and “he considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead” (Heb. 11:17). God likewise wants us to learn to trust him, and this process is not normally possible without trials that prune our faith for greater fruitfulness.

A similar example of God’s pruning ministry is the life of Jacob. The key moment of Jacob’s life occurred when God came to wrestle him beside the Jabbok River. Jacob had struggled to trust God and often resorted to trickery and deceit. But when God laid him bare, removing all the props of his wealth, wives, and children, Jacob had to face God’s demand that he submit in faith. Finally, Jacob relented, placing his hands onto God and crying, “I will not let you go until you bless me” (Gen. 32:26). God may also wrestle with us, seeking for us to take our hands off the worldly things on which we rely and to grab hold of him alone for our satisfaction and security.

A third example of biblical pruning is the life of Jacob’s son, Joseph. Joseph was tragically betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery in Egypt. In this difficult situation, Joseph honored the Lord, refusing to adopt Egyptian morals and refusing the advances of his master’s wife. For this act of obedience to God, Joseph was cast into prison. Why would God take a fruitful believer like Joseph and force him to spend much of his youth in the darkness of Pharaoh’s dungeon? The reason is that God prunes his fruitful branches to make them more fruitful. Joseph’s trials honed his character until he was prepared for a sudden elevation to the very throne of Egypt. At God’s timing, Joseph was made second only to Pharaoh himself, mastering the economy of that great nation and ruling over the affairs of nations, including his father’s people, Israel. God likewise has plans for his fruitful people today, which we can scarcely imagine, and the important works he intends for us to do requires our preparation in hardship and trials, so that we may rely utterly on the him and forsake any worldly salvation.

Lastly, we should consider the New Testament example of the apostle Paul. As Saul of Tarsus, Paul had been the great persecutor of the infant church. When Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road

and called him to be an apostle, Jesus declared: “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). In this case, Christ was breaking Paul’s heart so that he would have compassion on the lost world around him. Paul explained the result:

We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you (2 Cor. 4:7-12).

God may prune us to have a similarly broken heart for the lost world, just as he may prune our faith through trials in order to teach us how to wait on his word, rely on his promises, and rely solely on his grace.

CLEANSED BY THE WORD

We rightly think of God’s pruning in terms of outward trials, but it seems that Jesus refers also to the ministry of God’s Word.

He continued, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you” (Jn. 15:3). The word for “clean” is the noun form of the same word he used in verse 2 for “pruning”. The basic idea of the word (verb, *kathairo*; noun, *katharos*) is cleansing, but in pruning it means the removal of unwanted materials. It is primarily the Word of God, Jesus said, that produces this cleansing. Therefore, when he speaks of the Father’s pruning, he refers to the Scriptures as the agent of our spiritual change and growth. His meaning is similar to Hebrews 4:12: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” God intends for his Word to penetrate our hearts, unmask our true thoughts and desires, and cut away all that hinders our growth. It was with this in mind that Paul said that the Bible is not only “God-breathed” but is also “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

This means that we must come to God's Word not merely to learn spiritual facts but to bring our hearts under the pruning knife of our loving Father, the vine dresser. The saying is true that "soft preaching creates hard hearts, but hard preaching creates soft hearts." Therefore, we should seek not only comforting and uplifting messages when we attend to preaching in the church or when we read our Bibles. Rather, we should seek the truth that will cut away our sin and the challenging teaching on holiness that will stimulate spiritual growth. Most significantly, we should seek in God's Word to see the glory of the Lord in the face of his Son, Jesus, so that God's grace would teach us "to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Tit. 2:12-13).

THE PRINCIPLE OF FRUITFULNESS

So far Jesus has used the symbolism of the vine to describe himself and the vine dresser to depict God's pruning activity for our growth in holiness. He concludes the metaphor by referring to his disciples as the branches, and he provides a single key principle for our fruitfulness: "Abide in me, and I in you" (Jn. 15:4). This saying was likely meant as a command: believers are commanded to abide in Christ in order to bear our fruit.

What does it mean, then, to abide in Christ? To "abide" is to dwell in, with close communion and fellowship. The basic idea, Gordon Keddie writes, is "the active cultivation by every professing Christian of a living spiritual relationship to Christ."⁴ As Paul put it, "For me, to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). He explained, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

Abiding in Christ means that we draw near to Christ spiritually and hold fast to his teaching. Jesus earlier taught, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:31-32). Abiding in Christ's Word involves more than a bare adherence to Christian doctrine and the discipline of Bible reading but also involves a yearning trust in its

⁴ Gordon J. Keddie, *A Study Commentary on John*, 2 vols. (location: Evangelical Press,), 2:156.

promises and a serious application of its lessons to our lives. Abiding in Christ likewise involves a fervent communion with the Lord in prayer. It includes a devoted participation in the worship and work of Christ's church, joining together with other members of the body of Christ for communion with and service to the Lord.

Jesus makes two vital statements connecting our fruitfulness to our abiding in Christ. The first is that by abiding in him we will bear fruit, for the same reason that a living branch bears the fruit of the vine. When we abide in Christ, he abides in us and his Spirit works in us with power. This means that the Christian life is not a calling to self-improvement. Our calling is to abide in Christ, following him through his Word, prayer, worship, and service, and he will bear his fruit in us. The solution to many of our problems is thus simply to walk with Christ over many years. He will lead us, change us, and transform us by the power of his Spirit. This does not mean that Christians are not to strive against sin and labor for holiness. What it means is that the way that we seek our own holiness and fight sin is by trusting Christ, drawing from his strength, and living in loving, personal obedience to him. "Whoever abides in me and I in him," Jesus said, "he it is that bears much fruit" (Jn. 15:5).

There is a vital corollary to this principle, that apart from abiding in Christ we can bear no fruit: "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me... apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:4-5). Apart from Christ we can do many things! We can recruit large numbers, raise huge sums of money, erect glorious buildings, and secure worldly power. On a personal level, we can accomplish many things for ourselves and for others apart from Christ. The problem is that apart from Jesus, all that we accomplish is nothing. It is only by the means God has ordained – chief among them God's Word and prayer – and through a conscious dependence on Christ that we accomplish anything of real spiritual value. However glorious it may be to our own eyes and to the world, all that we do apart from Christ, and all that the church accomplishes by worldly means, is really chaff and dead branches, fit only in the end to be gathered up and burned (cf. 1 Cor. 3:13-15).

MUCH FRUIT

In the Upper Room, Jesus told the disciples of all that he would do to provide for them in his absence. Now, as they walked to the Mount of Olives, Jesus stressed the disciples' duty. As Jesus is the true vine, God seeks and demands true spiritual fruit from his disciples. If we will abide in Christ, his life will accomplish wonders of spiritual power in and through us, and the Father will tend us with his pruning knife to bring forth our fruit.

Does this sound intimidating? Do you doubt that someone like you, with all your weakness and sin, could really bear fruit for the Lord? The good news is the promise essential to this teaching. If you will but abide in Jesus, he will bear great fruit through you. If you doubt yourself, do not doubt our Savior and Lord. In one of his earlier parables, Jesus spoke of those to whom his Word came so that they believed and were saved. Jesus admitted that some of these bore more fruit than others, saying of the believer, "He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (Mt. 13:23). There is a difference between a very fruitful Christian and a less fruitful Christian, but they all have this in common: they bear much fruit, some a hundred and some thirty fold. If you will abide in Christ and live with him and for him, out of your life, your witness, and your prayers, you will make a godly difference in a great many lives and in you God will grow much spiritual fruit, to his own glory. Jesus said as a simple statement of fact: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit" (Jn. 15:5).