

141. The Gospel of John—15:1-2, 8

“The Vine and the Branches” Part 2

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John 15:1-8 (NKJV)

¹ "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit...

⁸ By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

As I pointed out last week—this passage (John 15:1-8) is one of the most important in all the New Testament.

It contains, through illustration, some of the great principles of the Christian life—

- *Abiding in Christ*
- *The importance of fruit bearing in the Christian life*
- *The Father’s work of pruning in His children’s lives as a prerequisite to bearing more and more fruit*
- *And it even touches on answered prayer as a blessed consequence of the Word of God abiding in our hearts.*

As I tried to bring out last time—understanding the context of this section in John’s gospel that we have labeled *“The Vine and the Branches”* discourse is vitally important if we are to get the true *interpretation* which will then allow us to make the proper *application* into our lives.

As we said last time, to get the correct interpretation of this passage, we need to put ourselves in Jesus’ shoes that night and try to understand what was weighing most heavily on His heart and mind as He was just hours away from the cross—because none of His teachings were devoid of context, so what was the context that ‘birthed’ His vine and branches teaching.

- We know that the **Father** was on His mind because He had talked quite a bit about His relationship with His Heavenly Father earlier in the evening and how He would soon be going back to the Father.
- We know that the **eleven disciples** were weighing heavy on His heart that night because He had spent the better part of the 14th chapter comforting them.
- We also know that He was thinking about **Judas** on that night.

Earlier in the upper room as He washed the disciple’s feet He said—

John 13:10-11 (NKJV)

¹⁰ ..."He who is bathed needs only to wash *his* feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." ¹¹ For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean."

The thought that one of those disciples who had *appeared* to be connected to Him for the last 3 ½ years (saved) but was only *‘superficially’* connected to Him (not saved)—was definitely on His mind.

- Therefore, on that night Jesus was thinking about the Father, whom He loved and who loved Him in return—whom He would soon be returning back to.
- He was also thinking about the eleven disciples who He loved and who loved Him back—those who were genuine and truly connected to Him by saving faith.
- And He was also thinking about Judas whom He loved but who didn't love Him in return, who was a *phony* disciple, a *deceiver*—and was not really connected to Him by saving faith.

Now, I believe that that forms the background for this all-important teaching.

I believe that all of this was on the mind of Jesus that night as He led His disciples through the Temple area on their way to the Mount of Olives.

As they came to the Golden Gate that led out of the city and seeing the grape vine carvings in the light of the full moon—that this became the impetus for giving them this discourse using the illustration of the vine and the branches. It shouldn't surprise us then that this illustration would contain references to *all* of the people on Jesus' heart that night and their relationship to Him which He then weaves into this illustration.

- **Jesus Christ** is the 'true vine'—verse 1
- **The Father** is the 'vinedresser'—verse 1
- **The eleven true disciples** are the branches that bear fruit or what some have called '*Jesus branches*'—verses 2, 5
- **Judas**, and all who are like him, are referred to as the branches that don't bear fruit or what some have called '*Judas branches*'—i.e. phony or counterfeit disciples. People who look genuine but are only *superficially* attached to Jesus Christ—verses 2, 6

Jesus said that we would know the true from the false by their fruit (Matthew 12:33)

I. The True Vine—Jesus Christ—verse 1a

John 15:1 (NKJV)
¹ "I am the true vine...

By saying this Jesus is likening the whole human race to *branches* and Himself to the only *True Vine* and is saying to people everywhere—"*I alone am the source of life, nourishment, fruitfulness and fulfillment!*"

So many have attached themselves to "*vines*" other than Christ as a source of life and fulfillment—money, education, sex, fame, political power, social connections, business success, and religious affiliations—are just some of the many "*vines*" that people have attached themselves to looking for happiness and fulfillment—but they are "*false vines*".

But only Jesus is the "True Vine"—the source and the sustainer of eternal life.

This life (spiritual and eternal life) flows only from Him into and thru those who are connected to Him by saving faith.

This morning we want to focus our attention on the work of the Father as the vinedresser.

II. The Vinedresser—the Father—verses 1b-3

John 15:1 (NKJV)

¹ "I am the true vine, and **My Father is the vinedresser.**

Author Andrew Murray said—

"Christ is about to teach His disciples about them being branches. Before He ever uses the word or speaks at all of abiding in Him or bearing fruit, He turns their eyes heavenward to the Father watching over them and working all in them.

At the very root of all Christian life lies the thought that God is to do all; that our work is to give and leave ourselves in His hands, in the confession of utter helplessness and dependence, in the assured confidence that He gives all we need.

The great lack of the Christian life is that, even where we trust Christ, we leave God out of the count. Christ came to bring us to God. Christ lived the life of a man exactly as we have to live it. Christ the Vine points to God the Vinedresser. As He trusted God, let us trust God, that everything we ought to be and have, as those who belong to the Vine, will be given us from above."

The Christian life is not lived through hard work and raw determination—it's lived in total dependence and calm assurance of our Father's care and strength.

A. The Work of the Vinedresser—verse 2

In the first century, a vinedresser would have two duties:

1. Cut off the branches that weren't bearing fruit—verse 2a

John 15:1-2 (NKJV)

¹ "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² **Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away...**

This was done because any branch on the vine that *wasn't* bearing fruit was sapping energy away from the branches that *were* bearing fruit. By removing these 'fruitless' branches, it would allow the fruit bearing branches to produce more and larger fruit.

In verse 6 Jesus goes on to tell us what happens to the branches that didn't bear fruit—

John 15:6 (NKJV)

If anyone does not abide in Me [i.e. 'bear fruit'], he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned.

Of course, what's in view is judgment—which would have been very familiar language to these Jewish disciples—

Ezekiel 15:6-8 (NKJV)

⁶ "Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: 'Like the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest, which I have given to the fire for fuel, so I will give up the inhabitants of Jerusalem; ⁷ and I will set My face against them. They

will go out from *one* fire, but *another* fire shall devour them. Then you shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I set My face against them. ⁸ Thus I will make the land desolate, because they have persisted in unfaithfulness,' says the Lord GOD."

So, first of all the work of the vinedresser was to:

1. **Cut off the branches that *weren't* bearing fruit—verse 2a**
2. **Prune the branches that *were* bearing fruit—verse 2b**

John 15:2 (NKJV)

² Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; **and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.**

The vinedresser would prune the branches that *did* bear fruit, cutting off the little '*sucker*' shoots that would grow up from the branch and would sap away energy and thereby diminish its fruit bearing capacity. This was done so that each branch would bring forth the most fruit possible.

That's what the Father desires from our lives as well (verses 2 and 8), that we bear fruit, more fruit and much fruit!

To accomplish this work the Father carefully prunes the Christian, trimming away sins, distractions (not necessarily evil practices—but simply anything that distracts from the Person and work of Jesus Christ), hindrances, and evil habits in order to allow that Christian to achieve—maximum fruit-bearing capacity.

One of the most effective ways the Father prunes a Christian's life is with trouble, trials—and even by allowing pain and suffering.

This is not to say that every Christian who is ill, or suffering, is necessarily being pruned by the Father. But in many cases the Father allows trials and adversities to come our way in order to remove from our lives anything that is hindering our walk and relationship with the Lord Jesus and ultimately diminishing our fruit-bearing.

Unfortunately, pruning has to be done with a **knife**—and therefore pruning is always painful.

There are times when we wonder if God knows what He is doing because it hurts so much it seems more than we can bear.

Sometimes we wonder why God seems to be doing an awful lot of pruning in our life—while other Christians don't experience the same type of pruning. But all we can do is trust that the Father knows what He is doing.

The valuable lessons He teaches us through suffering, trials, and troubles awaken us to the changes we need to make—what we need to add to our lives and what we need to remove.

The Father causes this pruning in many ways:

- It can be anything from sickness to financial hardships—such as the loss of a job.
- It can be the loss of a loved one or of a good friend.

Pruning can come through frustration, disappointment, pressure, and stress.

It is important to understand that the Father prunes our lives, not because He loves to *hurt* us—but because He loves to *grow* us.

Pastor and author David Jeremiah—

“The Gardener is loving and devoted. Someone has said, ‘The Father is never closer to the vine than when He is pruning it.’ That statement is right on the mark. You will find this truth consistently affirmed in the lives of wise, godly people who have faced disruptive moments. They will look at you and say without hesitation, ‘Never in all my life have I sensed the closeness and provision of God as I did when I came to the bend in the road. Never before have I been more fruitful than I’ve been since I came through the bend in the road.’”

Lamentations 3:21-24 (NKJV)

²¹ This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. ²² *Through* the LORD'S mercies we are not consumed, Because His compassions fail not. ²³ *They are* new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. ²⁴ "The LORD is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!"

Don't turn against God when trials come, He hasn't forsaken you or turned against you—He's trying to do good in your life—

Jeremiah 29:11 (NKJV)

¹¹ For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.

B. The Tool of the Vinedresser—verse 2b

1. The pruning knife

The pruning knife may hurt now and then—but it's worth it.

Have you ever thought about what the Father's pruning knife actually is? Is it suffering, troubles, or frustrations? I don't think it is any of those.

John 15:3 tells me the pruning knife is the Word of God.

Andrew Murray—

“What is the pruning knife of this heavenly Gardener? It is often said to be affliction. By no means in the first place. How would it then fare with many who have long seasons free from adversity; or with some on whom God appears to shower down kindness all their life long?

No; it is the Word of God that is the knife, shaper than any two-edged sword, that pierces even to the dividing asunder of the soul and spirit, and is quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart. It is only when affliction leads to this discipline of the Word that it becomes a blessing; the lack of this heart-cleansing through the Word is the reason why affliction is so often unsanctified.

Not even Paul's thorn in the flesh could become a blessing until Christ's Word—"My strength is made perfect in weakness"-had made him see the danger of self-exaltation and made him willing to rejoice in infirmities.”

“**Prunes**” in verse 2 and “**clean**” in verse 3 both come from the same Greek word—

John 15:2-3 (NKJV)

² Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

This is the same Greek is found in John 13:10—

John 13:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash *his* feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you."

Here the word is used in the context of salvation—i.e., “you are saved (cleansed of sin)—but not all of you (speaking of Judas who was never saved).

John 15:2-3 (NLT2)

² He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. ³ You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you.

John 15:2 (b)

...and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.

The word translated “purge” is *kathairo* from which we get our word “catharsis,” referring to a cleansing process. *Kathairo* is used in John 13 when Jesus cleansed the feet of His disciples. In fact, in virtually every case in New Testament language, *kathairo* being translated not “purge” but “cleanse,” I believe the use of “purge” here in John 15 is a mistranslation. If you put these thoughts together, you get an understanding of what Jesus is really saying—and it's wonderful. It's not terrorizing; it's terrific. It doesn't cause consternation, but rather comfort, for He says, “Every branch in Me that bears not fruit, I lift up. And every branch that bears fruit, I cleanse that it might bring forth more fruit.”

You see, in vineyards, it is not uncommon for branches to become so heavy with fruit that they sag to the ground—leaving them vulnerable to the mud from the rainy season sure to follow. Consequently, the vinedresser, seeing a branch in the mud, lifts it up and braces it. And if there is fruit on it, he washes the mud off the fruit—lovingly, carefully, and tenderly.

Thus, Jesus paints a picture not of the Lord lopping you off, but of Him lifting you up; not of Him cutting you, but of Him cleansing you. How do I know this with certainty? Look at the next verse....

John 15:3 (NKJV)

Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

In following this analogy, in keeping with the flow logically, what Jesus is saying is, “I lift the downtrodden branch; I wash the contaminated fruit. How? Through the Word.” You're clean through the Word. Gang, how do you bear more fruit? Not by the Lord butchering you or bloodying you, but by being in the Word. How do we get our lives cleaned up? How does more fruit come? Fruit comes by a commitment to the Word, a receptivity to the Word, and by staying in the Word. The psalmist said the same thing in Psalm 119 when he said “How shall a young man cleanse his way? How does a young man walk in a clean way? By taking heed thereto according to thy Word.” And Paul picks up the same analogy in Ephesians 5 where, talking about husbands and wives, he says that the bride is washed by the water of the Word.

Jesus gives us an important, absolutely essential exhortation when He says, “I am the True Vine. You’re the branches. When you’re downcast or dirty, the Father will come and pick you up and wash you off via the Word through your morning devotions, Wednesday evening Bible study, home groups.” Being in the place where the Word is taught, where we are basing our beliefs on what Jesus said, has a cleansing effect upon our lives.¹

How does the Father prune us? Sometimes He simply uses the Word to convict and cleanse us. (The word translated “purge” in John 15:2 is the same as “clean” in John 13:10. See Ephesians 5:26–27.) Sometimes He must chasten us (Hebrews 12:1–11). At the time, it hurts when He removes something precious from us; but as the “spiritual crop” is produced, we see that the Father knew what He was doing.

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away: The branches that are taken away were never properly abiding in the vine, demonstrated by the fact that they did **not bear fruit**.

- There is an alternative understanding of this passage that bears consideration. James Montgomery Boice (among others) believes that the ancient Greek verb *airo*, translated here as “**takes away**” is more accurately translated “lifts up.” The idea is that the Father lifts up unproductive vines off of the ground (as was common in the ancient practices of vineyard care). They lifted them up off the ground that they might get more sun and bear fruit better.
- **Every branch that bears fruit He prunes:** This word for **prunes** is the same word translated *cleanse* in other places. They used the same word could apply to either “pruning” or “cleansing” in ancient Greek.
- **You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you:** The word of God is a cleansing agent. It condemns sin, it inspires holiness, it promotes growth, it reveals power for victory.²

Let’s come at this passage looking at the concept of ‘**pruning**’ as both—“*taking away*” and “*lifting up*”—as both “pruning” and “cleansing”.

I believe that in verse 3 Jesus is referring to two kinds of cleansing for His disciples.

a. *Their initial salvation comes through hearing the Word.*

John 13:10

Jesus said to him, “He who is bathed needs only to wash *his* feet, but is completely clean...

b. *Their continual purging and pruning is done by the Word.*

Ephesians 5:25-26 (NKJV)

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, ²⁶that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word.

2. The handle of the knife

“I thought you said God uses adversities to prune our lives and now you’re saying it’s the Word not the adversities—I’m confused”

He uses the adversities in the process of pruning but the actual cutting is done by the Word.

¹ Courson, J. (2003). *Jon Courson’s Application Commentary* (p. 563). Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

² Guzik, D. (2013). *John* (Jn 15:1–3). Santa Barbara, CA: David Guzik.

➤ “So what then are the adversities?”

They are the handle that God uses to apply the pressure of the Word to our lives and allow it to cut and prune us.

“It is generally thought that our trials and troubles purge us: I am not sure of that, they certainly are lost upon some. It is the Word (verse 3) that prunes the Christian.

Affliction is the handle of the knife, the grindstone that sharpens up the Word; the dresser which removes our soft garments, and lays bare the diseased flesh, so that the surgeon's lancet may get at it.

Affliction makes us ready to feel the word, but the true pruner is the Word in the hand of the Great Vinedresser.”

Psalm 119:67 (NKJV)

⁶⁷ Before I was afflicted I went astray, But now I keep Your word.

Psalm 119:71 (NKJV)

⁷¹ *It is good for me that I have been afflicted, That I may learn Your statutes.*

Psalm 94:12 (NKJV)

¹² Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O LORD, And teach out of Your law,

Have you ever noticed how much more sensitive you are to the Word of God when trouble comes? Have you ever noticed that, when you have a particular need or problem, certain verses will leap off the page? That’s the Spirit of God applying them to your heart.

The object in this pruning is never to condemn but to chasten, correct, challenge...

You have no right to say, when a man is afflicted, that it is because he has done wrong; on the contrary, just the branch that is good for something gets the pruning knife. It is because the Lord loves His people that He chastens them.

“Let those who would know all the Vinedresser can do for them, all the Vine can bring forth through them, seek earnestly to yield themselves heartily to the blessed cleansing through the Word.

Let them, in their study of the Word, receive it as a hammer that breaks and opens up, as a fire that melts and refines, as a sword that lays bare and slays all that is of the flesh. The word of conviction will prepare for the word of comfort and of hope, and the Father will cleanse them through the Word.

All ye who are branches of the true Vine, each time you read or hear the Word, wait first of all on Him to use it for His cleansing of the branch. Set your heart upon His desire for more fruit. Trust Him as Vinedresser to work it. Yield yourselves in simple childlike surrender to the cleansing work of His Word and Spirit, and you may count upon it that His purpose will be fulfilled in you.”—Andrew Murray

One author identifies the true focus of this section on the vine and branches—

“The central truth the Lord wanted to communicate in this symbol is the importance of abiding in Him (verses 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10). In the most basic sense, whether or not a person abides in Christ reveals whether they are saved

(verses 2, 6). It must be noted that this simple and, I think, obvious premise rescues the text from many unnecessary misinterpretations. And it is only to the degree the redeemed abide in Christ that they can bear spiritual fruit.”

If you would like to know more about what it means to be a Jesus-follower— please, reach out to us. It would be our greatest privilege to lead you into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

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