

142. The Gospel of John—15:1-8

“The Vine and the Branches” Part 3

A message by Pastor Phil Ballmaier

(5/23/21)

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As we open our study in John’s Gospel Chapter 15—we are roughly 11 hours from the Cross.

It was probably somewhere between 10 and 11 o’clock in the evening—the Gospels record that Jesus would be crucified by 9 AM the next morning.

At this point, Jesus and His disciples have left the upper room where they had observed the Passover together, and making their way through the streets of Jerusalem and the Temple courts—they come to the two large bronze doors that led out of the city.

These doors were made of bronze but in the light of the sun they looked like shimmering gold—which is why together they were called—the “Golden Gate.”

This gate was the one they needed to exit the city through to get to the Mount of Olives and in particular to a certain garden located on that mount—the Garden of Gethsemane.

It would be in this garden Jesus would spend several hours in prayer before being arrested and taken to the house of Annas the official Jewish High Priest where He would be arraigned before a quickly assembled gathering of the Jewish High Council also known as the *Sanhedrin*.

REFLECTION: Think of a time when you needed to go to a quiet safe place and pray to the Father?

As they come to the Golden Gate (a.k.a. the ‘Eastern Gate’)—Jesus stops and in the light of the full moon He draws their attention to the grape vines that were carved into these two bronze doors.

I believe it was then that Jesus launched into the teaching we call—the vine and branches discourse.

John 15:1-2, 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 we said last time—the whole goal of the Christian life is that we bear fruit.

In this section Jesus uses one of His many illustrations taken from something they knew very well—the cultivation and care of grape vines. Since the whole goal of agriculture is to bear fruit, something the disciples understood only too well—He uses this illustration to drive home the importance of bearing fruit in our relationship with Him.

Fruit-bearing is such an important part of the Christian life that Jesus goes as far as to say that the only way we even know that we are one of His disciples (saved) is that we bear fruit (verse 8).

This is how the Father is glorified in our lives and so it is His great desire that we bear much fruit.

But here is the all-important lesson about fruit-bearing you must understand (miss this and you will not only miss the whole point of this series—you'll miss the whole point of your Christian life) - **the fruit that is produced in nature is for the benefit of others not for the benefit of the fruit tree or grape vine.**

The same is true with the spiritual fruit produced in a Christian's life, it isn't for our benefit—it is for the benefit of others.

Remember, John 15 is the continuation of the discourse that Jesus began in the upper room as recorded in Chapter 13.

It began with a lesson in servitude that Jesus endeavored to teach His disciples after they refused to serve each other by washing one another's feet.

John 13:12-17 (NKJV)

¹² So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?" ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. ¹⁶ Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

REFLECTION: What are some examples of sacrificial love you received or been able to give to others?

This, I believe, is the context of the Vine and the Branches discourse—**bearing the fruit of sacrificial love by dying to self to serve others. Jesus of course, was the ultimate example of sacrificial love when He willingly laid down His life on Calvary's Cross to pay for our sins so that we could have forgiveness and eternal life.**

In that regard, sacrificial love (God's love) is the greatest fruit that can be produced in the Christian life (Galatians 5:22).

This is a truth that Jesus went on to proclaim categorically when He said in the climax of this discourse—

John 15:12-13 (NKJV)

¹² This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

In that regard, when the fruit of love is produced in our lives—it benefits others whom we love by dying to self to serve. But here’s the problem with teaching the subject of fruit-bearing to those who fill Christian churches today—when they hear that the goal of the Christian life is to bear fruit—they have a whole different way of defining *fruit* and applying it into *their* lives.

>>> *When most of the people coming to church today (especially the younger generation) hear that God wants to produce fruit in their lives—they immediately interpret that to mean that God wants to produce things in their lives that will bless them not others.*

You see, they define ‘fruit’ as the ‘fruit of self-esteem’, or the ‘fruit of self-worth and self-fulfillment.’ Many others define it as the ‘fruit of happiness’, or the ‘fruit of mental health’ or even the ‘fruit of prosperity, success and/or physical healing.’

In other words, in the minds of many professing Christians today, God exists to serve *them*, to give to *them* - in short to bless *them*!

They don’t look at the fruit that God wants to bear in their lives as the fruit of self-denial (as in denying self, taking up one’s cross to follow in Jesus’ footsteps), or the fruit of serving others, or being a blessing to others, or living a life that glorifies God—Oh no!

Their whole focus is on what God is going to do for them and give to them—in other words, their brand of Christianity is completely self-focused and self-centered.

In that regard their Christianity has turned *inward* not upward and outward!

REFLECTION: How do you avoid being a self-centered Christian in today’s modern world?

Remember last time we focused on Jesus’ statement—

John 15:1 (NKJV)

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

As the 'Vinedresser' what the Father desires from our lives as His children is that we bear fruit, more fruit and much fruit! To accomplish this work, the Father carefully prunes the Christian, trimming away sins, distractions, 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 troubles, trials—and even by allowing pain and suffering to touch them (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

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 and ultimately to *use* us. Unfortunately, for many professing Christians today—the biblical subject of bearing fruit is as foreign, irrelevant and meaningless to them as anyone can comprehend.

REFLECTION: How has God pruned you into the Christian person you are today?

George Barna (the Christian pollster) has identified the reason so many professing Christians (especially younger professing Christians) aren't growing in their faith (bearing fruit) or have any desire to serve the Lord in ministry.

He said that the American Church has been infected with a pseudo-Christian ideology called "*Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*" or for the layperson—"a watered-down, feel-good, man-centered, fake view of Christianity."

Barna's organization released a report explaining "*the beliefs first were identified among teens in the early 2000s, and now as adults, they still embrace them, making MTD (Moralistic Therapeutic Deism) 'the most popular worldview in the United States today.'*"

The report continued, "*Nearly four in 10 adults, 38%, are more likely to embrace elements of MTD than other popular worldviews, such as biblical theism, secular humanism, postmodernism, nihilism, Marxism (and its offshoot Critical Race Theory) and Eastern Mysticism*", the report said:

"Three out of four accepting MTD, however, still claim to be Christian. But 95% do not consider obedience to God to be success, 91% do not believe people are born into sin and need salvation through Jesus, 88% say they get most of their moral guidance from outside the Bible, and 76% say "good people" go to Heaven because they are, well, "good."

"In this distorted version of Christianity, the emphasis is on self rather than God, and on emotion rather than truth. Those who adopt MTD views believe in innate human goodness and kindness,"

Barna explained. "*They view God as a powerful but dispassionate observer who remains detached from human experience unless circumstances make Him the solution of last resort.*

They believe that life is about individual happiness and that action producing positive personal outcomes gives meaning and purpose to life."

He added, "MTD is more about believing in and promoting the best interests of self based on currently popular cultural thinking. Its proponents are not likely to prioritize knowing, loving, and serving a transcendent God."

"In their view, the local church exists primarily to offer supportive and upbeat community rather than worship, service, holiness, or a genuine relationship with God.

And MTD is abundantly pluralistic, encouraging people to do whatever works or feels good rather than that which fits with biblical principles."

Among those who express MTD beliefs, his report noted, "75% do not believe God is the basis of all truth, 74% believe in karma, 73% say having SOME religious faith is more important than WHAT faith, and 71% do not believe the Bible is the true communication from God and that the whole goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself."

The report goes on, "The people who hold to MTD believe that there is no such thing as absolute moral truth, and that God allows "good people" into Heaven."

Barna concludes by saying, "The fact that a greater percentage of people who call themselves Christian draw from Moralistic Therapeutic Deism than from the Bible says a lot about the state of the Christian church in America—in all of its manifestations," Barna warned. "Simply and objectively stated, Christianity in this nation is rotting from the inside out."

So welcome to the **Last Days Church!** The question is—how did we get here?

>>> Well, it's safe to say that this kind of thing doesn't spring up overnight—it takes years of planting the seeds in people's heads, watering those seeds with godless and unbiblical teachings before the fruit of this kind of ideology comes to fruition.

I believe this started with the infiltration of **psychology** into the Christian Church during the first half of the 20th Century—and with it the teaching of **self-esteem**.

All psychology is fundamentally self or man-centered and starts out with a faulty premise—that people are basically good and the evil they do and the problems they experience in the way of disorders and emotional neuroses can be traced back to some abuse or trauma they suffered in their youth which has led to a poor view of self (low self-esteem) in adulthood.

These so-called *experts* claim that a poor self-image is the root cause of all of man's problems.

So, in that regard psychology paints man as a *victim*—God sees him as a *sinner*. Even those Christian Psychologists who say, "We don't believe that; we believe man is sinner"—go on to teach that many of his problems can be traced to **low self-esteem**.

Jim Dobson—"In a real sense, the health of an entire society depends on the ease with which the individual members gain personal acceptance. Thus, whenever the keys to self-esteem are seemingly out of reach for a large percentage of the people, as in twentieth-century America, then widespread "mental illness," neuroticism, hatred, alcoholism, drug abuse, violence, and social disorder will certainly occur..."

Dave Hunt responded—"Hatred, violence and social disorder, rather than arising out of willful rebellion and sin,

are caused by a lack of self-esteem, which is somehow “out of reach” for these victims of modern life. Instead of pride and an unwillingness to repent of our sin being the great barrier between men and God, we are now being told that such a message is demeaning to “our authentic personhood” and the paramount need is to build up everyone’s self-esteem.”

Many Christian leaders in the Church are sounding just like their humanistic psychologist counterparts in the world.

Secular psychotherapist Nathaniel Branden in his book, *“The Psychology of Self and Honoring the Self”*, views even criminal violence as a ‘psychological problem’ — *“I cannot think of a single psychological problem, from depression to fear of intimacy to criminal violence that is not traceable to poor self-concept...Until we are willing to honor self and proudly proclaim our right to do so, we cannot fight for self-esteem—and we cannot achieve it.”*

“Hour of Power” preacher Robert Schuller once said, *“A person is in hell when he has lost his self-esteem.”*

Professing Christian and motivational speaker Zig Ziglar in his book, *“See You at the Top”* had this to say, which echoes what many authors and speakers in the Christian community are telling people,

“To build your self-image, make a list of your positive qualities on a card and keep it for hand reference...Brag on yourself from time to time. Get in your own corner...”

You should also set aside a few minutes each day for the sole purpose of deliberately looking yourself in the eye [in a mirror]. As you do this, repeat some positive affirmations of things you have done (use your victory list from step ten). Then repeat many of the things other people have said to you or about you that were positive...There are also cases where plastic surgery can be quite helpful in building a [positive] self-image. This is especially true in cases of an unusually large or long nose, protruding ears...grossly oversized or undersized breasts, etc.”

Christian counselor and psychologist Denis Waitley counsels: *“Perhaps the most important key to the permanent enhancement of self-esteem is the practice of ‘positive self-talk’ (we used to call it bragging). Every waking moment we must feed our self-image positive thoughts about ourselves and our performances, so relentlessly and vividly that our self-images are in time molded and modified to conform to new, higher standards.”*

Well, Jesus talked about a man who had ‘positive self-talk’ down to a science—

Luke 18:10-14 (NKJV)

¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' ¹³ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The whole teaching on self-esteem goes against everything the New Testament tells us to do with self.

The word “esteem” means—“To regard highly; to value greatly, to have a high opinion of.”

Therefore, “self-esteem” would then be—“to regard self highly and to value self greatly, to have a high opinion of yourself.”

Self-esteem used to be called PRIDE and stands exactly opposite to what the Bible says we as Christians are to do with self—“Deny yourself, crucify self, don’t have a high opinion of self...”

REFLECTION: Why is self-esteem a dangerous attribute to the born-again Christian?

Philippians 2:3 (NKJV)

³ Let *nothing be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.

Of course, the *building* of self-esteem would involve working on having a greater view of yourself and learning to love yourself more and more.

Self-love rather than being a *virtue* is prophesied in the New Testament as one of the *sinful* qualities that will characterize the last day's church—

2 Timothy 3:1-2 (NKJV)

¹ But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: ² For men will be lovers of themselves...boasters, proud...

>>> The whole argument for self-love being taught and practiced in the Church is based on a misinterpretation of what Jesus said in Matthew 22:39—*"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

Today that has been twisted to mean that—*"I can't really love my neighbor (or anyone else) until I first learn to love myself."*

That interpretation and teaching didn't start with a person who loved God and was a Spirit-filled believer in Jesus Christ—it actually got its start 75 years ago with an atheistic psychoanalyst named Erich Fromm.

>>> Fromm tried to justify his humanistic view of self-love as biblical (so as to bring Christians into his practice) by teaching that even Jesus taught that we can't love anyone else until we first learn to love ourselves—therefore self-love *"is the greatest love of all"* (according to Eric Fromm and Whitney Houston).

But that's not what Jesus said at all—He *didn't* say, *"Learn to love yourself before you can love others,"* He said, *"Love others as you love yourself."*

Paul went on to tell us how we all love ourselves in Ephesians 5:29—*"We feed ourselves, we clothe ourselves, we shelter ourselves...etc."*—this is how we are to love others. You see, self-love doesn't *help* us to love others—it *hinders* us from truly loving others.

The problem for Christians in loving others isn't a lack of self-love—it's an abundance of self-love! In other words, we spend so much time loving ourselves—we don't have any time (or desire) left to love anyone else.

At this point many would interrupt by saying, *“That’s not true! Not everyone loves themselves! There’s a lot of people who hate themselves!”*

That’s a lie—*“No one ever hated themselves.”* (Ephesians 5:29)

Even the teenager who looks in the mirror and sees her face covered with acne and cries, *“You’re ugly, I hate you”* doesn’t really hate herself—How do I know that?

When was the last time you were upset because someone you hated was ugly?

If you really hated yourself, you’d be *glad* you were ugly—which is why you’re so upset with the way you look.

>>> You’re upset, not because you hate yourself—the very fact that you’re upset with the way you look is a manifestation of self-love!

Again, the Bible says that no one ever hated themselves—and to prove it, Paul the apostle in Ephesians 5 tells us—*“Because we all take such good care of ourselves.”* (Explain)

Actually, studies have shown that even criminals have very high (not low) view of self—or in other words, they possess a great deal of self-esteem!

One author rightly points out—

“Why do thieves steal? They steal because, yes, they want what you have, but why do they want what you have? It’s because they love themselves and not you. When interviewed almost always, thieves will say they took what belonged to others because they believed that their victims didn’t deserve what they owned. Criminals believed themselves to be much more deserving of the things they stole from others. So much so, that they took another person’s possessions and felt completely justified in doing so. And so contrary to the theory that most psychologists (secular and Christian) ascribe to, these criminals, rather than harboring under the stigma of low self-esteem were actually manifesting or demonstrating a high view of self—in other words, great self-esteem (self-love).”

This teaching that we all must learn to love ourselves and esteem ourselves as Christians is perverting our concept of the cross of Christ and why Jesus died for us—as well as destroying our love for and gratitude toward God for what He has done for us.

Robert Schuller in his book *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* says, *“The death of Christ on the cross is God’s price tag on a human soul...[it means] we really are somebodies!”*

Jesus didn’t die for ‘somebodies’—**He died for sinners!**

Robert Schuller—

“Jesus knew His worth, His success fed His self-esteem, He suffered the cross to sanctify His self-esteem. And He bore the cross to sanctify your self-esteem...the cross sanctifies the ego trip.”

Christian psychologist Bruce Narramore echoes this:

“What a foundation for self-esteem! The purchase price tells us the value of an object...What a sense of worth and value this imparts. The Son of God considers us of such value that He gave His life for us.”

Consider the following from Robert Schuller’s book *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*—

"I don't think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality and, hence, counterproductive to the evangelism enterprise than...attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition... The classical error of historical Christianity is that we have never started with the value of the person. Rather, we have started from the 'unworthiness of the sinner...'"

For years the Church has sung, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me..." But now many churches seem to be singing a different tune—"Amazing me how sweet I am that caused God to save a worthy and wonderful person such as me!"

Spurgeon said it well:

"Jesus...did not come to save us because we were worth saving, but because we were utterly worthless, ruined, and undone...[nor] out of any reason that was in us, but solely and only because of reasons which He took from the depths of His own divine love. In due time He died for those whom He describes...as ungodly, applying to them as hopeless an adjective as He could."

Tozer likewise wrote,

"Until we believe that we are as bad as God says we are, we can never believe that He will do for us what He says He will do. Right here is where popular religion breaks down."

At the heart of all of man's problems is not low self-esteem but high self-esteem otherwise known as PRIDE, which is the evil, poisonous 'fruit' of the teaching of self-love now embodied in its most recent evil sibling - "Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism."

REFLECTION: How might you counter the effects of Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism impacting our world and church today?

The result is sin and suffering as we see our world being destroyed—not from low self-worth but from self-love and self-worship run amuck!

The Bible says clearly that you and I are responsible for the choices that we make in life and no one else—we have a free will, and we can exercise it to obey or to disobey what God has said. Man is not an innocent victim inflicted with the disease of low self-esteem which causes him to act wrongly, corruptly, and even violently.

His problem is rebellion against God fueled by pride and selfishness—and he doesn't need years of therapy—he needs to repent and get his life right with God and to start being Christ-centered (not self-centered), esteeming others more important than himself.

**In other words, the greatest love of all isn't self-love –
it's *sacrificial* love; God's love!**

This is the fruit the Father is looking to bear in our lives as His children—a fruit that isn't for our benefit, but for the benefit of others—ALTHOUGH:

John 13:17 (NKJV)

¹⁷ If you know these things, blessed [oh how happy] are you if you do them!

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