

Pruning for Fruit 3-16-03

John 15:1-8

John 15:1-8 (NIV) ¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² 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. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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. ⁵ "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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

This Scripture is filled with analogies and metaphors. They are rich with meaning. Though we can sometimes get carried away in our interpretation of the details. You may think I'm going out on a limb at times this morning, but I'll try to keep to truths that have other Scriptural confirmation.

Jesus begins this passage by saying, "I am the vine and my Father is the gardener." This is a metaphor. Jesus isn't literally a vine, but He is using the description of a vine to teach us about His relationship with us. Throughout the prophets, Israel was referred to as a vine (Jeremiah 2:21, Hosea 10:1). The coming Messiah is referred to as the Branch (Zechariah 3:8). So this is a concept His listeners are familiar with. Jesus says that He is the true vine, the genuine article. That implies that there is a false vine or many false vines. The gardener is God the Father. He is the One who cares for the vine. He will give the vine what is necessary to bear fruit. That sounds great, until you get to verse 2.

² 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. Yikes! When He talked about God being the gardener I was thinking about feeding, watering and protecting. What is this about cutting off branches? Sounds like pain and loss to me. Anyone who cares for fruit bearing trees knows that the key factor to fruit production is the pruning. The Father is looking for branches that aren't productive so that He can prune them off. One kind of branch we prune is called a sucker. It is easy to spot a sucker, they point straight up. They would end up dominating the trees energy and light if you just let them alone. I have seen some old trees in which the sucker was never pruned out. It took over. If left long enough you can't really prune it out without doing damage to the tree. Suckers produce leaves, but little or no fruit.

The Father looks into our lives for suckers. What is taking your energy but not producing fruit? Funny thing about suckers, they just keep springing up on their own. Consistent pruning over years can limit them and keep them manageable, but

Commented [notes1]: ²¹ I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine? Jer. 2:21 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 1 Israel was a spreading vine; he brought forth fruit for himself. As his fruit increased, he built more altars; as his land prospered, he adorned his sacred stones. Hosea 10:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes3]: ⁸ "Listen, O high priest Joshua and your associates seated before you, who are men symbolic of things to come: I am going to bring my servant, the Branch. Zech. 3:8 (NIV)

they still show up. You have to stay after the suckers! Even when you think you have dealt with them all, leave the tree alone for three years and a sucker will have begun to take over. Suckers in our spiritual life often have to do with the way we spend our time, or our thought patterns. Do you have some fruitless time expenditures that are demanding more and more? Do you have a thought pattern that is fruitless but beginning to dominate things? Let the Father prune it off.

The other kind of fruitless branches are the ones that grow downward. They are not growing up into the light. They don't have that dominating power that a sucker has, but they subtly steal the energy nonetheless. Fruit may develop on them, but because it is in the shade it will not become sweet enough by harvest time. The result is poor fruit that is really worthless. This type of branch in your life is not so easy to detect. It is hidden, but the Spirit of God will point it out. The Master Gardener can show you those under-branches that need to be eliminated. They are the ones that you make excuses for and justify as not being bad. Yet, they draw energy away from the fruitful branches just like the suckers do.

The reason they need to be pruned is so that the energy and light can go to the branches that will be fruitful. Larger fruit buds in greater quantity will develop on those fruitful branches because the light stimulates the flower cells. More nutrient available to the good branches means the fruit will not drop off but go on to maturity.

Even the fruitful branches need to be pruned. You see, a healthy branch will send out more branches and get so divided that the energy is disbursed in too many directions. We have to decide how many different branches the main branch can handle. We look at the direction of growth. The dominant line should continue instead of going a whole different direction. The side shoots should not be allowed to take over.

Every area of gifting in your life has a main thrust. Sometimes you get sidetracked. If that sidetrack becomes dominant, you may lose the original direction God had you going and end up settling for the good that is not the best. The branch will not be as fruitful, so the Master comes and prunes off the extra shoots and nips the end of a side shoot that is trying to take over.

It is amazing how many parallels there are to our walk with the LORD. Don't you find one of the greatest problems is trying to stay on task and not be diverted from the thing God has called you to? The good is usually the biggest distraction from the best. The Master Gardener often has to come and take a branch away or nip the end of a good branch to help us see we've been distracted from the best. And why has He been so gracious to do that for us? He wants to see our lives bear fruit.

We haven't yet addressed just what this fruit is. The Bible tells us in Galatians 5:22-23 that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Fruit has the seed within it to reproduce another of the same kind. So you could say the fruit of a Christian is another Christian. We share the word of God, and if the seed of the word is received on good soil, He

brings life into their soul. *"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you,"* Jesus said. The word of God sets them free from sin, and they become a fruit-bearing tree.

Sometimes a branch will get overloaded with fruit and break. Disconnected from the tree it becomes lifeless. It receives no nourishment.

⁴ 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.

In the winter, we often can't tell which branches have died, but come spring, it is quite obvious when there is no life in the branch. The dead branches allow an entry point for pests and have to be cut off for the health of the tree. You can only bear fruit when you are connected with the life-giving source. You can try all you want, but without the connection with the tree you will not bear fruit. Instead, you'll be an opening for pests to enter the tree.

Then to emphasize the point, Jesus repeats the thought. *⁵ "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.* Those dead branches are lifeless. They can't even produce a leaf let alone any fruit. Do we really see that we must be drawing from the life of Christ to produce anything of lasting worth? The visible tree is a mirror image of its root structure. The life above reflects the life below. If a root is severed, something above will suffer. Are we drawing from that invisible life below the surface? Are we reflecting the invisible life of Christ? The presence or absence of fruit will give the correct answer. Remaining in Christ guarantees fruit. You don't force it to happen. It is the natural by-product of Christ in you. Branches don't develop a program and then make a huge effort to carry it through. They just remain connected to the tree, receiving the nourishment from the roots and God's design produces fruit.

What if we were to cease everything we do and only do what God directs? What would change? I think a lot of what we do is because everyone else does it that way, or because we always did it that way. Instead of depending on the life from the vine, we have drawn from the ways of man and expect to produce fruit on our own efforts. It will never happen. Fruit comes from being in the vine. Jesus keeps reminding us of this point because it so contrary to human nature. As a church, as individuals, can we lay it all – I mean everything – on the altar? Can we allow Him to prune what is not out of the vine? Could we come to the place where we refuse to act unless we discern the direction of God? That is the only way we will see fruit.

⁶If 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.

The last time I was in Israel, we passed by a vineyard where the prunings were being burned. I immediately thought of this verse. What a warning! A life that is severed from the source of life dries up. After pruning an orchard, we gather all the prunings and pile them up to burn. They aren't good for anything. They will never produce fruit.

⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

That life giving sap is the Word of God. If you are living in the Word and the Word in you, your desires will conform to the will of God. Your prayers will be according to His will. He will work His will and His plan into the earth through your prayers. You will be a co-laborer with God. We have had an emphasis on prayer. Here is a Word from God that is a guideline for productive prayer. We must remain in Him and His word in us. We can't emphasize prayer to the neglect of God's word. The two go hand in hand.

⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

God's intended purpose for your life is to glorify Him. This verse tells us how we do that. It is by bearing much fruit. That shows the world that you are a disciple of Christ, a learner of the nature and attributes of God. As you express the fruits of the Spirit that are a natural by-product of living in Christ, God receives the glory. People don't point to you and magnify you. Instead, they are turned toward God to wonder at His love and graciousness toward them.

As we look at this passage we come face to face with some eternal realities. We live and breath to glorify God. The way we glorify Him is in bearing fruit, expressing His character and life. The only way we can do that is by being in His word and letting His word live in us. If we do that, the fruit will form on its own, naturally. We could say supernaturally, since it is the work of God in us. When we bear fruit the Father, the Gardener, comes and prunes off the unproductive branches. He snips off the areas in which we could become sidetracked. He whacks off the suckers that would dominate our lives and those downward branches that would steal our nourishment.

God wants to produce fruit here at this church. Our part is laying everything on the altar and remaining in Him. If we will do that, living in His word, He will produce the fruit. He will be gloried. Then we will pray and see mighty answers as we pray according to the leading of His Spirit. We will see new branches growing in healthy directions.

I believe this church has been through a winter. The Father has been pruning. Sometimes we hate to see a good branch go, but the Master Gardener knows it is for the purpose of bearing much fruit and glorifying Him. He wants the best fruit. The same may be true of your personal life. Has God been pruning off some unproductive areas? Have you felt the slice of the shears and wondered why God allowed something to be cut off. That is a good sign. It says that you are still in Him. It is the fruit bearing branches that He prunes for the purpose of producing more fruit. He prunes to keep you growing in the right direction for His glory. Pruning is followed by the flowers of spring and their pollination that produces fruit. Don't fear the pruning; welcome it. Know that spring is just around the corner. The Master Gardener can produce an abundance of fruit in your life if you will remain in Him.