

Jesus: the True Vine

When we had just moved in to our home on 227B Street, way back in 1994, we decided to plant some fruit trees in the back yard. We picked out a King apple, a Spartan apple and a Stanley Plum tree and planted them in a row inside the south side fence. A couple of years later, we started to see the first fruits of our planting and, over the years, we have picked lots of apples and lots of plums and enjoyed eating them.

But, there's been a problem with our fruit trees over the past few years. There have been branches shooting up into the sky and it's hard to reach them to cut them down. There are suckers growing out of places that had earlier been pruned and they haven't produced any fruit. In fact, most of the fruit that the two remaining trees produce is out of reach and both the amount and the quality of that fruit is declining every year. What to do?

This was the winter of radical surgery on my backyard fruit trees. I went at it with pruning shears and chain saw and brought down a big pile of branches. The project needs more work, but I'll try to finish it next winter -- these trees have had enough surgery for one year. Will it make a difference? We'll see, but in most cases, pruning is essential to a tree or a vine or a bush being productive, whether it's producing flowers or fruit. A lilac bush that's never pruned will eventually have all its flowers on top, 10' or more up in the air. A blueberry bush that's dominated by older wood will become less productive and its harvests will be inconsistent; one year may be great and the next very small. So, to maintain healthy trees and bushes that are producing year after year, we need to be active pruners.

Jesus used this image during his last evening with the disciples before His arrest and execution the following day. His teaching is recorded for us in John 15, beginning with verse 1 and continuing to verse 17.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch that doesn't produce fruit, and He prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned for greater fruitfulness by the message I have given you. Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful apart from Me.

Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in Me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from Me you can do nothing. Anyone who parts from Me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you stay joined to Me and My words remain in you, you may ask any request you like, and it will be granted. My true disciples produce much fruit. This brings great glory to My Father. (15:1-8)

I'm going to stop there for now. What we have just read is the 'principles of pruning' applied to the growth of the Kingdom and what we've seen is that it's pretty similar

language to that which describes the growth of a healthy tree or bush. If there's old wood that isn't producing fruit, the good gardener will get rid of it. If a branch is cluttered with too many little branches that draw the life out of it, the good gardener will remove some of those little branches to produce a healthy plant. That's the first three verses.

The rest of the passage is simply talking about staying connected to the source of life, staying connected to Jesus who gives us the life that lasts forever. The first promise of this section is that if we remain in Jesus, if we remain connected to the vine, we will produce much fruit. But if we leave that relationship, if we walk away from our faith, we wither and die, becoming useless like dead twigs are, except as fuel for a fire.

The other promise from this section is that if we are abiding in Jesus, if we are connected to Him, if we are living on His Word to us, we can ask for anything, and it will be granted to us.

Now, it seems to me that it is important for us, in order to understand this passage, to be able to answer a few key questions:

1. What is the pruning, who does it and how do I know it's happening?
2. What does it mean to bear fruit?
3. How do we abide in Jesus?
4. What does He mean by "any request you like"?

First, what is the pruning that Jesus is talking about? There seem to be two kinds of pruning: one is the cutting out of dead wood and the other gives the healthy branches room to grow and the ability to produce more fruit. In the prophetic books of the Old Testament, Israel is sometimes referred to as a vine. Unfortunately for Israel, those references are negative ones -- Israel is the faithless vine, the unfruitful vine, the one that bears sour grapes.

For example, in Psalm 80, Asaph pictures Israel as a tender vine that God brought out of Egypt and planted in the promised land. They grew there and prospered, but now things have changed for the worse. Asaph asks God, in v. 12, "Why have You broken down our walls so that all who pass by may steal our fruit?" The answer comes in at least two of the prophets, in Isaiah 5 and Jeremiah 15. Isaiah 5:

Now I will sing a song for the one I love about His vineyard: "My beloved has a vineyard on a rich and fertile hill. He plowed the land, cleared its stones, and planted it with choice vines . . . Then he waited for a harvest of sweet grapes, but the grapes that grew were wild and sour. Now, you people of Jerusalem and Judah, you have heard the case; you be the judges. What more could I have done to cultivate a rich harvest? Why did my vineyard give me wild grapes when I expected sweet ones? Now, this is what I am going to do to my vineyard; I will tear down its fences and let it be destroyed. I will break down its walls and let the animals trample it.

A few verses later, Isaiah explains the image:

This is the story of Yahweh's people. They are the vineyard of the LORD Almighty. Israel and Judah are His pleasant garden. He expected them to yield a crop of justice, but instead He found bloodshed. He expected to find righteousness, but instead He heard cries of oppression.

In Jeremiah 15 God says that the wood from a vine is useless and that He has set it aside to be burned. He then makes it clear that He is talking about Israel and that He will make their land desolate because they have been unfaithful to Him.

Jesus' disciples would have perhaps understood their Master to be talking about Israel as being the unbelieving ones who will be cut off as useless dead wood. The other possibility is that they would have understood Him to be talking about them, warning them that they were at risk of being cut off -- and that may be why Jesus added the next phrase: "You are already clean because of the message I have given you." In other words, "You're okay, the word that I have spoken is still with you, doing its work in your hearts." Notice that Jesus has switched from the image of pruning to the more spiritually descriptive image of cleansing. He actually does that in verse two, although many translations continue to use the word "prune" there. The word used in v. 3 is the same word Jesus used in John 13:10 when He washed the disciples' feet. "And you are clean, but that isn't true of everyone here," He said, meaning that one, Judas Iscariot, was not loving his Lord.

The other kind of pruning, clearing out the clutter, the overfill of little branches, suckers and shoots that impair the fruitfulness of the tree is also done by the Father. He clears things out of the lives of people who really do believe, but whose lives have been compromised, whose thoughts are cluttered with doubts and fears and whose heart, once filled with love for Jesus, has grown indifferent, apathetic.

Our second question was about what it means to bear fruit. The New Testament writers often touched on the subject of fruitfulness and it was typically in connection with character, with the behavior of the believer. A few examples:

Live as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth. (Eph. 5:9)

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness, that comes through Jesus Christ. (Phil. 1:9-11)

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal. 5:22,23)

So, in order to see more love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in our lives, God may have to do a bit of pruning. We can understand this in much the same way we understand the Lord's discipline, His correction in our lives, as He works to convict us of wrong attitudes, habits, thoughts

and actions. Hebrews 12:6 tells us that the Lord disciplines the ones He loves -- so, if we experience something of His discipline, or His pruning, in our lives, we can comfort ourselves with the knowledge that He must really love us a lot!

The third question was, "How do we abide in Jesus?" and this is really the crucial question for us in this passage.

Abiding, or "remaining in" Jesus is the opposite of the branch that is thrown away and withers, worth nothing but fuel for the fire. To me, that says that this word "abide" is talking about remaining connected, staying attached to Jesus and to His Word. This idea is also supported by the image of fruitfulness that is so important to this passage. A disconnected branch cannot produce the fruit it was made for, while one that remains attached or connected to the main branch will produce fruit. Jesus adds that apart from Him, or 'disconnected' from Him, we can do nothing. That doesn't mean we can't brush our teeth or read the local paper -- it means that we can't produce the fruit of the kingdom that we were made for, that we are connected to Jesus for, on our own. The fruit of the Kingdom, the love, joy, peace, patience, etc. that are listed in Galatians 5 -- or the goodness, righteousness and truth that are talked about in Ephesians 5 -- is only made possible by the presence of Jesus with us.

So, we should understand "abiding" or "remaining" in Jesus as maintaining our relationship with Him, keeping in close touch with Him. How do we do that? Through the classic disciplines of the Christian life, especially through prayer, but also through reading Scripture, meditating on it, studying it, learning God's character as we think about it. We also maintain a relationship with Jesus by maintaining a humble and responsive attitude to His leadership in our lives. Put simply, we obey Him when He tells us to do something and we obey Him when He tells us to stop doing something. Our relationship with Jesus grows through exercising faith, which means believing in His goodness when we are challenged, when we face people with hard questions, or when we need to see a miracle and we're asking Him for one. How does He remain in us? He speaks to us, comforts us, leads us, builds our faith as He responds to all those things that we are doing.

Does anyone remember what the fourth question was? It came out of Jesus' statement that if we stay joined to Him and His words remain in us, we may ask any request we like, and it will be granted. Now, these two statements are not disconnected: our remaining in Jesus and His Word abiding in us are not disconnected from the kind of request we might make. So, as Jesus did only what He saw the Father doing, we pray according to the leading of the Spirit and the faith God gives us, and God answers. Another way of saying that is that you might want a Lamborghini Egoista and the Lord might be saying that our request has more to do with our egoista than with abiding in Him and doing His will. But this is tremendously encouraging to us as we go into mission for Jesus. We will have opportunities to pray for people who don't know the Lord. As we follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit, when He says, "Yes, pray for this person's healing, pray for that person's need," and He answers our prayers ... people will get closer to God and to His Kingdom.

The last thing I want to just draw your attention in this first part is that Jesus says, “My true disciples produce much fruit. This brings great glory to My Father.” Just as He is the “true vine”, He has “true disciples” who are connected to Him and who bear fruit for Him. Again, there is a contrast here between the old vine, Israel, who were self-focused and disconnected from the purposes of their God and the new vine and His branches that are bringing the Kingdom, the reign of God on this earth. Israel wasn’t concerned with the glory of God, but more with their own preservation and prosperity. This new vine would be built on faith in God’s care and a desire to see His Name glorified in all the earth - and that’s still true today.

There’s an important section that we haven’t got to yet and we have only a few minutes left, but I want us to tie this into our understanding of the fruitfulness that God requires of us. Let’s start at verse 9:

I have loved you even as the Father has loved Me. Remain in My love. When you obey Me, you remain in My love, just as I obey the Father and remain in His love. I have told you this so that you will be filled with My joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! I command you to love each other in the same way that I love you. And here is how to measure it -- the greatest love is shown when people lay down their lives for their friends. You are My friends if you obey Me. I no longer call you servants, because a master doesn’t confide in his servants. Now you are My friends, since I have told you everything the Father told Me. You didn’t choose Me - I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask for, using My Name. I command you to love each other.

You can’t separate the command to love and the call to obedience in this paragraph. The two go hand in hand. If we love one another, we are being obedient to the command of Christ our Lord. If we refuse to love, we are rebelling against Jesus’ clear command. If we love each other, we are friends of Jesus -- what an encouragement that is, to be called the friends of Jesus, the friends of God!

But love isn’t easy. Jesus says that the greatest expression of love is when a person will lay down his or her life for someone else ... as He was just about to do for those who followed Him. Laying down your life isn’t about doing the easy thing, the fun thing, the personally satisfying thing. It’s about doing the thing that will be best for others, even for those who maybe don’t deserve our love, but who need to be loved, need to be forgiven, need to be valued, accepted.

So here are some applications from our passage today. I’m sure that I’ve taken on way too much, but I encourage you to look over these verses from John 15 later on, think about what Jesus might be saying to you from them, and make your own applications. Here are some of mine:

1. Be humble when you’re going through difficult circumstances. Too often we express disappointment with God or frustration with what we call unanswered prayers when, in fact, He is trying to teach us something, trying to prune out something that is

hindering the work of the Spirit in us. Don't go there. Humility looks first at what I need to be learning, what my part has been in bringing about the difficulties I'm facing, and what I need to change.

2. Obviously, the call to remain in Jesus, to abide in Him, is central to this passage. You and I know what to do, how to build that, but will we do it? Will we take time away from all the entertainments the world offers us in order to grow our relationship with Jesus? Will we step fully in to the great adventure of walking with Him, listening for His voice, doing the things He calls us to do? Jesus says in this passage that His word is important -- "if you stay joined to Me and My words remain in you, you may ask any request you like" -- will we take the time to read and to meditate on the words of Jesus, the great promises and great challenges of His gospel.

3. The third huge call from this passage is the call to love like Jesus did. This is the huge challenge of our day -- where will people see Jesus' kind of sacrificial love being offered freely to people who don't deserve it? Will they see it in our marriages, in our homes, in our service to the community, in our reaching out to lost people? Or will they be left thinking that true love is only found if you're lucky enough to be chosen as the next Bachelor or Bachelorette? If we who are so unworthy of Jesus' love, yet have been accepted unconditionally into His family; if we choose not to love, we reject His command and His promise of fruitfulness.