

INTRODUCTION

As I wrote last week in Life Support, God willing, and weather permitting, we are planning on gathering together next Sunday, May 17, on our campus. We're going to have a lawn chair service in the parking lot between the Student Center and the Worship Center. We're trying to beat the heat, so we're gathering at 8:30 and the outdoor service begins at 9:00.

But if you aren't ready to come back yet, that's not a problem. We are going to continue to offer a video Livestream next Sunday morning at 10:30. I know it may be many weeks before some of you feel safe to return, so I assure you that we will continue to offer livestream services from now on. Besides I think some of you have gotten used to attending church in your bathrobe and slippers! We'll be sending out more information about the parking lot worship this week, so keep reading your Life Support emails.

And today is Mother's Day. Under normal conditions, we ask everyone who isn't a mother to stand and applaud all the mothers present. Where would we be without mothers? Well, for sure, none of us would be here.

Abraham Lincoln once wrote: "All I am, or hope to be, I owe to my Angel Mother." If your mother is in the room with you, give her a hug right now. If she's still alive call or text her and tell her how much you love her today.

Now open your Bibles to John 15:1. We're going to continue our verse by verse study of the Gospel According to John. Today's message is entitled, "Our Vine Line to God." Before we read the words of Jesus, let's review the setting. Jesus and the eleven disciples have just left the upper room where they had the Last Supper. They leave to begin the half-mile walk down toward the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus will be arrested. Within the next twelve hours Jesus will be tried, tortured, and nailed to a Roman cross.

As they walked that night, we know there was a full moon because it was Passover. I can just see the moonlight glistening on the dozens of vineyards that wove their way down Mt. Zion toward the Kidron valley. I can imagine Jesus stopping at one of the grapevines. He used it as an object lesson to teach His disciples and to teach us about how to be fruitful followers of Jesus. And once again, I'm amazed how Jesus could use ordinary things like water, bread, seeds, birds, and flowers to express deep spiritual truth.

John 15:1-8 CSB. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that does not produce fruit he removes, and he prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown aside like a branch and he withers. They gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask

whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples."

In case you haven't been in a vineyard lately, I visited Kiepersol Vineyards this week to show you what Jesus was talking about. With this simple picture in mind, Jesus has given us a powerful symbolic picture of the Christian life. In this allegory, we must understand what each of the four characters represent:

The Vine is Jesus.

This is the seventh and final "I am" statement of Jesus. He said, "I am the true vine." He calls Himself the true vine because in Psalm 80 a vine is used as a symbol of Israel. God said He dug up a vine in Egypt and planted it in Israel. But because of their continual unfaithfulness to God, they were no longer the true vine.

The Gardener is the Father.

The Father tends the garden and he takes two actions regarding the branches. When one doesn't produce fruit, he cuts it off and burns it. When a branch bears fruit, the Father prunes it so it will produce more fruit.

The branches represent people.

We're the branches. And there are two kinds of branches. Those that produce fruit, and those that don't.

The Fruit represents the nature of Jesus displayed in our lives.

The word fruit appears 64 times in the New Testament and it always refers to some kind of character quality. Fruit is simply the outward expression of the inner nature. But when I see an apple hanging on a tree, I know that's an apple tree—it has the inner nature of an apple. When I see an orange hanging on a tree, I say, "That's an orange tree." When I see spaghetti hanging on a tree, I say, "That's a spaghetti tree." Just kidding. Spaghetti doesn't grow on trees... it grows on bushes I think. So when I see the inner nature of Jesus displayed in a person's life, I can safely assume they are connected to Jesus.

Now that we know what each part of this vineyard represents, let's learn four practical lessons about our vine line to God.

1. Fruit is proof of my relationship with Jesus.

When you buy fruit in the grocery store today, you'll often see a little round sticker on it. That means that somewhere between the tree and the store, someone inspected that piece of fruit. When it comes to people, Jesus said that we are all to be fruit inspectors. In Matthew 7:16 He said, "By their FRUIT you shall know them."

God's plan for your life isn't that you'll be successful. Instead, He wants you to be fruitful. Jesus said, "My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and prove to be my disciples." (John 15:8 CSB)

The best way you can live a life that gives glory to God is to bear much fruit. We sometimes say, "The proof is in the pudding." When it comes to the Christian life, the proof is in the fruit!

In this metaphor, fruit is talking about our character. In these chapters Jesus emphasizes three of these character qualities: love, joy, and peace. These are the first three of the nine flavors of the Fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5.

We studied these nine character qualities back in 2012 and even learned a song about them. Do you remember it? For the fruit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Fruit is the outward expression of the inner nature of the tree. So when I see someone who displays the inner nature of Jesus, I know they are a fruitful Christian. But when I observe someone who seldom or never displays the fruit of the Spirit, I wonder if they are firmly attached to the vine. What do people see when they inspect your fruit?

2. I can't produce fruit; I display the fruit Jesus produces.

There's a difference between producing fruit and displaying fruit. A branch just shows off the fruit that the vine has produced. Jesus is the vine, and I'm the branch. If you get that backwards you're headed for spiritual fatigue and frustration.

Once you know all nine expressions of the Fruit of the Spirit, you may try to manufacture them yourself. Especially, if you're a Type-A personality, your temptation is to put them on a to-do list and then make them your daily goals. So you think, "Today I must be completely loving, totally joyful, absolutely peaceful ..." And you go all the way through the list. If that's you, then you're setting yourself up for frustration and failure. Branches don't produce fruit: they only display fruit.

Listen to the words of Jesus again, "Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me." (John 15:4 CSB)

You can't produce the fruit of the Spirit unless you are firmly attached to Jesus. I once read about village leader from a remote area of Nepal who visited a modern city for the first time. He was fascinated by the electric lights, which he had never seen. He was amazed that he could flip a switch on the wall and a small ball of glass in the ceiling would shine brightly. With the little money the village had given him, he went into a hardware store bought a light bulb and a plastic wall switch.

When the other villagers saw his strange items they asked him what they were. He said, "Just wait until dark, and you will see." When the members of the village gathered that night they

saw the man had tied the bulb of glass to the underside of his ceiling. He had attached the plastic switch to the wall. Finally he said, "Watch this!" And he flipped the switch. Nothing happened, of course. What he didn't know was the switch and the bulbs were useless unless they were connected to the source of power—electricity.

Trying to demonstrate the nine expressions of the Fruit of the Spirit on my own is like that man trying to make lights shine with no power. Fortunately, we have access to a supernatural power to create love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. His name is Jesus.

My friend in heaven, Ron Dunn understood this truth. He wrote: "A branch is just a grape rack that God has there to hang His fruit on. My responsibility isn't to produce fruit; my responsibility is just to be available for God to hang His fruit on me."

3. Fruitful branches are pruned to produce more fruit.

We know what happens to branches (people) who don't display fruit. They get chopped off and thrown in the fire. But Jesus also tells us what the Father does to the branches that do produce fruit. It sounds illogical and counter-intuitive, but Jesus said, "Every branch in me that does not produce fruit he removes, and he prunes every branch that produces fruit so that it will produce more fruit." (John 15:2 CSB)

The worst thing you can do for a grapevine is to just leave the old branches on from the previous season. No, an expert vinedresser will very carefully go through with a set of pruning shears and he will lovingly cut back the fruitful branches.

Imagine you get to the place in your Christian life where you are walking in the Spirit. You have surrendered control of your life to Jesus, and people see all nine personality traits in your life. What comes next? Do you think you'll get a blue ribbon, or a trophy? Not quite. The Divine Gardener comes along He smiles and then He does something totally unexpected. He pulls out a pair of clippers and He begins to cut away parts of your life.

Pruning is painful. When the Lord starts pruning our lives, we want to say, "No, Lord, not THAT! Don't take that away! Don't cut that!" But the loving Gardener says, "I'm doing this because I love you so much that I want you to bear even MORE fruit."

There's a lot you can say about these past two months. But for sure, it has been a time of pruning. Almost overnight, sports were stopped, something nobody ever thought would happen. I don't think I'm exaggerating to say that for many people in American, sports had become their idol.

Dr. Michael Nelson is a history professor at Presbyterian College in Clinton, South Carolina. Every semester he teaches a class called The Religion of SEC Football. The class is always full.

He wrote: "I think for a lot of people in our society sports has become a civic religion. It's the idols we worship. What would compel me on a Thursday to pack up my two boys and drive to Fayetteville, Arkansas 15 hours away? It's a pilgrimage. The stadiums are meccas."

I could make a long list of things that have been suddenly chopped back: entertainment, parties, gambling and even church attendance, which can become an idol.

If you understand what Jesus is saying, God is not doing this punish us but to prune us. To help us to bear more fruit. When sports do start up again, I hope Christians will put it in the proper perspective: Sports are great but they aren't all important. I believe a lot of Christians thought worship attendance was a just a luxury, "Oh, I can take it or leave it, depending on whether or not the Cowboys are playing at noon." I would think God is teaching us that gathering to worship our Creator should take the rightful place as an absolute necessity for our lives.

Through the years, we've often traveled in Northern Israel near the Syrian border. There are Israeli Druze villagers who have transformed the mountainsides into fruit orchards with hundreds of apple trees. Each one is loaded down with apples until some of the branches have to be propped up. They are the most delicious apples I've ever tasted.

My friend Reuven Solomon, our tour guide, said that he visited one of those orchards and he was surprised to see gashes and gouges on the trunks and larger branches. He asked the farmer about all the gashes on the trees. The apple farmer said that they had discovered that if a healthy apple tree wasn't producing much fruit, they would cut the trunk and slash the branches with large knives. There was something in the tree that responded to those wounds and the trees became much more fruitful. The farmer said, "The trees with the most scars produce the most fruit."

What a parable! I know that many of our folks watching have a lot of scars. They have been pruned in many ways. And yet, they aren't bitter or angry. They are some of the most loving, joyful, and patience people you've ever met. They understand the value of God's pruning. So when you are going through a period of pruning, don't rebel against the loving Father. Accept the pruning knowing that He is preparing you to be more fruitful.

4. My primary job is to remain firmly connected to Jesus.

If I cut off a grapevine branch and threw it down here on the stage and said, "Now, grow grapes!" You would think I was crazy. But there are still many followers of Jesus who believe it is their job to try to imitate the fruit of the spirit each day.

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me." (John 15:5)

Apart from Jesus I can't be loving; apart from Jesus I can't be joyful ... just go down the list of all nine flavors of the fruit. Jesus said that my responsibility is to remain in Him. It's the word *meno*, which means, "Stay connected to." And Jesus used it 10 times in these few verses.

J.C. Ryle captured the idea when he wrote: "When Jesus said, 'Abide in me' He meant, 'Cling to me. Stick fast to me. Live your life in close and intimate communion with me. Cast your whole weight on me. Never let go your hold on me for a moment."

Psalm 1 describes a person who meditates on God's Word day and night and when he does, he is like a tree planted by the rivers of water whose fruit does not wither. Once you decide to start actively abiding in Christ, you'll be a busy person. But you won't be busy doing a hundred different things; you'll be doing one primary thing—resting in Jesus. How do you do that? By getting into the Word of God and by spending time in prayer and actively surrendering your life to Jesus.

And let me tell you something else profound about fruit that should encourage you. Fruit grows. I've never walked up to a grapevine and watched a fully ripe grape just pop out on the branch. They start small and grow. God has given you a lifetime to allow His fruit to be displayed in your personality.

To me, John 15 reveals the greatest secret I ever learned about the Christian life. I learned that I can't live the Christian life. It is impossible for me to live it. But when I admit that surrender to the power of the indwelling Christ, He will live His life through me. That's my Vine Line to God.

Major Ian Thomas served in the British Army during World War II. He was a decorated hero who received the flag of surrender from the German Army. He was a perfectionist, a soldier's soldier who lived strictly by army regulations. After the war, he set out to devote that same sense of obedience and perfection to the Christian life. He was determined to be a perfect Christian. He was constantly frustrated because he continually found himself unable to be Christ-like in his actions and reactions.

Thomas was on the edge of spiritual burnout when he fell on his face before the Lord. In his book, *The Indwelling Life of Christ*, he described his conversation with God. "The Lord said to me, 'For seven years, with utmost sincerity you have been trying to live for Me, on my behalf, the life that I have been waiting for seven years to live through you. Since that day you have given mental consent to the truth that I have been in your heart, and have accepted it as a theory. But you have lived totally ignoring the fact. You have been busy trying to do for Me all that only I can do through you.'"

"From that day, I learned to say "Lord Jesus, I can't, You never said I could; but You can, and always said You would. That is all I need to know". From that moment life became the adventure that God always intended it to be."

Why don't you pray, "Jesus, I can't. You never said I could. You can. You always said you would!"

How good are you at juggling? Through the years I've practiced and I can juggle three balls pretty well. The world record for juggling is 13 balls, set last year, but he only was able to catch

each ball once! Could you imagine trying to juggle nine balls? Here's the love ball, the joy ball, the patience ball ... and I've still got six others. Wow! Pretty hard. Oh, but here's just one ball to juggle: Stay connected to Jesus. Stay connected to Jesus. That's the Secret to a fruitful life.

OUTLINE

Symbolic Pictures of the Christian Life:

Vine = Jesus

Gardener = The Father

Branches = People

Fruit = The nature of Jesus displayed in our lives

1. Fruit is proof of my relationship with Jesus.

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes



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