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The Fruit of the Spirit and the Loveliness of Christ

Galatians 5:22

Prayer: *Father God, we do again thank you and praise you for your gifts. We thank you especially for the gift of your son. We just marvel week after week as we come before you, as we open up your word to look ever deeper into what it is you have given us in the gift of your son. And this morning, Lord, as we start a new series, I pray that you would guide us, that you would accompany us, again that we would have the privilege of the presence of your Holy Spirit opening up our eyes, our ears, our hearts, and our minds and that again you would allow us to make this of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

As I just alluded, we are starting a brand new series today. We're going to be spending a good deal of time just looking at two verses in the book of Galatians. In *Galatians 5:22-23*, the verses are:
But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. These nine fruits of the Spirit represent the loveliness of who Christ was as expressed by those

who bear his image. Bearing this fruit, having these nine qualities define how you live as a child of God is the essence of bearing the image of Christ. It's also the key to bringing glory to God. And I want to start off by trying to put into context what this whole idea of fruit bearing is all about, and it stems from an analogy Jesus Christ repeatedly used to describe what his disciples were all about. This is what Jesus said in *John 15:1-8*, he said this: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, if you are one of his, you are connected to Christ as the source of life in the same way that

a branch of a vine is connected. The vine represents life itself as well as nourishment, sustenance, and even direction, as it is the vine that is the source of all of these things. Cut the branch off a vine and it instantly begins the process of shriveling and dying. Christ is our source of life on earth. He is the vine itself, and the Father is the vinedresser. It is his providential hand that shapes and molds the vine by how it addresses each individual branch. If you are truly one of his, then you are a live branch that the Father will prune. If you never were one of his, well, you represent dead branches that the Father will remove and cast into the fire. Now if that sounds harsh and unloving, remember, Christ is the vine, his Father is the vinedresser, and his ultimate concern is not so much as it is for the branches as it is for the vine. And the vine, Christ himself, he understood that he was on earth to bring glory to his Father, and so this too is the reason why we exist. See, we often times put the cart before the horse and we tend to see ourselves as the center of God's universe when the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit see God at the center, and they see our primary source as bringing glory to God. In verse 8: *"By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."*

There are many, many Christians who no doubt think of fruit bearing as this kind of an optional icing on the cake of what it means to

be a Christian. You know, it sure would be great if I could be a little more patient, maybe more gentle, more faithful. But that's not how Jesus sees this at all. Fruit bearing is the sine qua non of the Christian life. There's another fancy phrase for you. "Sine qua non," sounds like a fifty cent word but it's really just a three-word Latin phrase that sums up better than any other phrase the importance of fruit bearing. It's a phrase that means "without which not." In other words, the Christian without the fruit of the spirit, someone who doesn't abide in Christ, is a person who is simply not a Christian. Without fruit, you are not a Christian. Again, verse 5: *"I'm the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."*

You see, rather than being optional, consider that fruit bearing is the very reason why we exist. You know the catechism says: What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. We do that by bearing the fruit of the Spirit. See, I think unconsciously we all operate from the standpoint that it is fruit bearing that really defines our existence, and Jesus' analogy of fruit bearing has become a way all of us tend to think. I don't think we realize how fruitfulness

guides our thinking process. We speak of people who are untried, who are unready, not quite ready, as being green. Something that's frustrating, something that's not productive we describe as fruitless. We think of investments and opportunities as ripe when they're timely and when they're productive and all of this stems -- pun intended -- from Jesus' words: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."* You see, the stem is in fact the vehicle that connects the vine or the source to the fruit. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches and the Holy Spirit is the life force coursing through the vine to the branches. The Holy Spirit is the living water that causes each branch to produce fruit, and it's that fruit that gives God the glory. And there's a reason why, and the reason why is this, the fruit itself equals Jesus. Again, *the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.* That fruit is the living embodiment of the loveliness of Jesus, and it's something that God has determined to grow in you and me.

Romans 8:28 says this: *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.* We've heard this many, many

times before and again we notice that God defines for us what the good is that all things work together for. And despite what the prosperity preachers say, it is not health, it is not wealth, it is not prosperity, it is what God says it is. And what he says is it is conformity to the image of Jesus Christ. And so when God says all things work together for good, he means every single event in the life of those that he's called has what the Greek language calls a "telos." And that means an end, a point, a direction. God says every single event in the life of his chosen ones is directed towards shaping and molding them into a unique image of his Son Jesus Christ. You cannot reflect Jesus Christ like I can. And I cannot reflect him like you can because each of us is unique in the reflection we each bear of the Son. But understand, the reason we were put on earth is to bear that image and so bring glory to God.

So how are you and I to do that? I mean, how are you and I to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, God's son? Well, again, a large part of that is the process of fruit bearing. You see, we glorify God by manifesting his character and his attributes, and what that means is that the way that we live our lives will demonstrate to our neighbors and to the spirit world something unique, something about who God is, what he is like, and how he has affected our lives. I've said it often, the reason we exist is to be walking, living billboards expressing uniquely the character of

the God who created us, and God calls that fruit bearing. And we bear fruit the very same way that a vine bears fruit. And like any vine or tree, the quality is demonstrated, manifested, and revealed not by the roots and not by the vine itself and not by the branches but by the fruit. You know, if you have a tree or a vine with great roots and vines and branches and the fruit is of poor quality, well then you all know the tree and the vine, it's of poor quality as well. Jesus himself said a tree's quality is established primarily by the fruit that it bears. *Matthew 7:18: "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."* You see, Jesus understood all about trees and vines and fruit bearing, and his knowledge of these things influenced his analogies about fruit bearing itself. And I have a little bit of this knowledge myself because fruit trees and vines and grafting fruit trees, that kind of thing have been my hobby for years, and when you know a little bit about how these things work, you realize how perfect an analogy fruit bearing really is.

You see, there are three main things that you need to produce quality fruit. One is a host tree or a vine, the other is the heritage of the grafted branches, and the third is a knowledge of horticulture, you need to be able to put all of this information

together. So a host, a heritage, and a horticulture is what combines to enable us to honor God by bearing fruit, and this is how it happens. You see, long ago people recognized that fruit trees or vines, they could be combined to achieve the best qualities of a number of different trees in one. You know, you may have an apple tree that has a wonderful root system that's able to draw in nutrients and moisture from the ground more efficiently than any other root system, and it may have wonderfully strong branches that support the fruit throughout the entire tree but at the end of that branch is a dry, mealy, worthless apple. Now on the other hand, you may have an apple tree that produces wonderful fruit on very spindly and weak branches, and it's attached to a root system that has to have constant nourishment supplied to it at all times or else it will collapse. Well, the solution is to combine the best qualities of both. And so presto! You grow one tree for its rootstock and you graft onto that wonderful sturdy rootstock another tree that you grow just for its fruit production, and you have a final product that combines the best of both. In fact, you can't buy a fruit tree today that's not a combination of two that are grafted together. Now, when it comes to you and I producing fruit, it is critical that we be grafted into a host tree or vine that has roots that can sustain us, that can provide nutrients and protection in the form of a strong and healthy vine. Jesus made it quite clear that he is that host, he is the vine, and

without his grace, without his strength and protection, we have no hope of ever being productive. That's why he says in verse 5: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."*

Now, the second part of fruit bearing, that's the heritage, that's the heritage of what it is that's being grafted into the rootstock. We know that Jesus said it is the fruit itself that determines the quality, and once that quality's been established, then the branch that's grafted on to the vine becomes the determining factor of what kind of fruit it's going to produce. Now, I have apple trees on my property that grow three different kinds of apples on them. And one of the apples I've called 581 because that was the street number of my parents' house and my parents happened to have a great apple tree in their backyard and I really, really enjoyed the apples, so I just cut a bunch of small branches from that, grafted them on to some trees that I had at my house about 15 years ago and they're these now massive branches that produce the exact same apples that my parents' tree did. And they do so because the heritage of the graft determines the quality of the fruit. If you had an old poorly producing apple tree and you knew somebody who had a good one, you'd just take a few branches of that good one from the tree and you graft it on to the new growth of your lousy

tree, and within a few years it's going to start producing according to the heritage of the graft that you put on it.

Well, when it comes to looking at each of us as good potential branches, branches with a heritage worthy of being grafted on to the tree or vine of God, well God says there was none to be found. In fact, he says it was much worse than that. This is what he says in *Romans 3:10-19*, he says: *As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes."* Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

So here's what God is saying, God is saying there were no branches whatsoever of a heritage fit to be grafted onto this vine. Ever since the fall of Adam, every son or daughter of Adam that has ever been born has a heritage of fist-shaking rebellion against their creator, and just like Adam and Eve did when God sought them out,

we too hide from God. We too find our fig leaves and cover up our nakedness. We too fear him. We too want no part of him in our lives. God says in verse 11: *No one understands; no one seeks for God.* So instead of worshiping him, we either deny him his existence which is exactly why the idea of naturalistic evolution is so incredibly hideous in God's sight, or we construct elaborate means of justifying ourselves before him. We construct elegant religious traditions that serve to show God we don't need his help to be made worthy of heaven itself.

Consider the ten commandments. Most people today genuinely believe the ten commandments are a list of rules that God gives so that Saint Peter can stand by heaven's gate with a check list and a scale and that as you stand before God's judgment seat, he's going to weigh your good deeds against your bad deeds by those ten commandments, and if your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds, off to heaven you go. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I mean, nothing could be more of an elaborate lie from the pit of hell. In fact the ten commandments were given by God to demonstrate that his law is perfect, that no human being is capable of living up to it. I mean, the ten commandments were given to deliver a crushing blow to those who thought that their righteousness would be good enough for God. They were never good enough because God says these ten laws are reflections of his

righteousness which is perfect. So if you're going to attempt to enter heaven by means of these laws, then you have to do every one of them flawlessly. *Romans 3:20* says: *For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it -- the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* And so what God is saying is that all the world stands guilty before a holy God and we all stand guilty of the crime of falling short of his glory. What God is saying here is that God who is transcendentally flawless holds us accountable because we as his creatures are not. But here's the good news. Verse 23: *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and -- thank God for "and" -- and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.* You see, the point of the law is to show us God's character and to point out that we are in no way capable of meeting the requirements of that law. And then having shown us that we've fallen short, *Romans 5:6* says: *For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.* That's us. Christ died for the ungodly. Not the righteous, not the morally upright, not the good people, but ungodly sinners like you and me. Because God substituted his

perfectly lived life for ours, he's now free to justify us not because of our righteousness but because of his mercy.

But here's the incredible part that has to do with this whole idea of fruit bearing. See, God doesn't just free us from the penalty of sin; he goes way, way beyond that. He adopts us into his family as one of his own. He gives us his heritage. *Galatians 4:4* says this: *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.* You see, our adoption as sons goes directly to this analogy of fruit bearing because we as God's children now have a heritage that is capable of producing that good fruit. We had no righteousness on our own but now that we've been adopted, now that we are God's own sons, we have by the grace of God a heritage of Christ himself. We have been washed clean not by our own efforts but by receiving the word of God as the absolute truth that guides our life. *1 Corinthians 6:11: But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

Now, Jesus in his analogy of fruit bearing acknowledges that very

cleansing as being capable of making us worthy to be grafted into the vine that he is. Look at what he says. He says: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."* Here he goes. *"Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."* And so what we have here is our host, Christ himself, our heritage, our adoption as sons of God through Christ, it's what enables us to produce good fruits.

And finally, there's the horticulturist. He's the one responsible for pruning and shaping the tree, for the vine, and Jesus tells us right off the bat who that horticulturist is. In *John 15:1* he says this: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."* You see, the horticulturist's job is to maximize the production of the highest quality fruit which is precisely what the Father does. What Jesus is saying is that fruit bearing is what glorifies God, and the Father as the vinedresser is committed to that goal above all other goals.

So what should be hanging from the lives of redeemed believers is the fruit that represents the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through the vine that represents Jesus himself into the branches that are trimmed and pruned by the Father to maximize production of that fruit. Jesus defined how that happens. He says in *John 17:4*, he says this: *"I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."* Now he explains how he does that. He says: *"I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."* You see, to manifest is to make something known. Jesus defines his glorifying his Father as making his name known. That's the same task that we've been given. This is what we do when we bear fruit. Love and joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are the manifest expressions of the loveliness of Jesus Christ. He was perfectly loving, perfectly joyful, perfectly peaceful, and so on. And so when these fruits begin to manifest themselves in the lives of transformed believers, then God is glorified.

Now it is how these fruits become manifest in our lives that requires some study and some reflection. I mean after all, everyone would love to be more loving and more joyful and more

peaceful, patient and kind, I mean, every one of us wants to manifest that because not only does it represent the loveliness of Christ, it would represent the loveliness of anyone who possessed it. You know, if somebody used those nine words to describe you, you would be one extraordinary person regardless of whether or not you were even a Christian, and that's really the problem. You see, I know atheists, agnostics, and flat out pagans who often seem to have more of what might certainly appear to be the fruit of the Spirit than people I've known as Christians for years and years. We have a very hard time differentiating between the fruits of the Spirit and the ordinary earthbound fruits that go by the very same name. And so the question is, is there a difference between the fruit of the Holy Spirit and simple human virtue? And the answer is yes. There is at least three critical differences. They have to do with the quality, the quantity, and the source of the fruit. And the first one is the difference in the quality not of the fruit necessarily but of the fruit bearer. You see, fruit bearing is really optional for human virtue. Not so for a Christian. Fruit bearing is an absolute necessity for a Christian. Human beings have survived as human beings since Adam while missing some or most or all of these fruits. Not so for the Christian. A Christian who is missing the fruit of the Spirit is someone who is not abiding in Christ and he is by definition not a Christian.

Let me go over it again. Verse 5: *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."* Very sobering words here. Jesus says the quality of the fruit in your life is proof that you are a true branch connected to the true vine or not. *Matthew 7:18* again: *"A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits."*

The second difference between the fruit of the Spirit and human virtue goes to quantity. As I said, you know, human virtue can embrace any number of the fruits and still be successful. But the fruit of the Spirit is not a smorgasbord of nine fruits where we get to pick which ones we want. It represents nine different aspects of the life of Christ himself. And when the Holy Spirit of Christ is flowing through us, all nine of those fruits should be growing as well.

And the third difference between the fruits of the Spirit and human virtue, perhaps the most important one is the source. The fruit of the Holy Spirit comes from the Holy Spirit. It doesn't come from

us. Now the world's version of that fruit is rooted in the person who demonstrates it. You know, for a Buddhist priest to sit absolutely silent while he douses himself with gasoline and turns himself into a human torch requires an extraordinary amount of self-control. That self-control is not at all the same as the Holy Spirit's self-control that's the fruit of the Spirit. It is in fact like the world's wisdom which James describes as earthly, unspiritual, and demonic. Human virtue can be the result of personality or training or parents or temperament and it always reflects back on the person who exercises it. Like I said, the self-control of a Buddhist monk who is emulating himself silently, well that's a reflection of the monk's extraordinary self-control. No Buddhist is going to tell you that his exercise of self-control is a reflection of the grace of Buddha. That's precisely what the fruit of the Spirit is. It's a reflection of the grace of God born by the Holy Spirit flowing through the vine which is Christ into the branches which is us. So the fruit of the Holy Spirit stems not from me but from the Holy Spirit.

You see, fruit bearing is not something we do to become Christian. Instead it is something that we automatically produce as a byproduct of the grace of God because we are Christian. We can't decide that we're going to grow fruit to become Christians any more than a male deer can decide to grow antlers in order to become a

buck. If he is truly a buck, he will grow antlers. Antlers are a sign of something; they're not a requirement. The fruit of the Spirit is a sign of something; it's not a requirement. And it's because we are a living part of the vine that that fruit will grow on us.

So now the big question. The big question is okay, how does this happen? How do we practically apply this fruit bearing to our lives? How do we grow the fruit of the Spirit? Well, the answer may appear to be counterintuitive. You see, you don't grow patient by studying about patience, and you don't grow peaceful by studying about peace, and you don't grow more gentle by studying about gentleness, you grow each of these fruits and the other six by hanging out with the one who is the creator of these fruits. Let me just go over it once more. Jesus says: *"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my*

disciples."

Now, you might not have noticed it but in that paragraph, there's one word that occurs seven times, and it's the key to producing the fruit of the Spirit. It's the word "abide." This is what it means, it means to stay in a given place, state, relation, or expectancy; to continue; to dwell; to endure; to be present; to remain; to stand; to tarry. My 21st century slang definition of "abide" is "to hang out with." I've said it many, many times before that what Christ is saying here is simply the more you hang out with me, the more like me you will become. We have proof of that. We have proof of that in the book of Acts. You know, Peter and John were not exactly considered to be refined literary gentlemen. In fact we all know they were rough and tumble fishermen when Jesus Christ called them into discipleship but they had three years of abiding in Christ, and those three years produced an astonishing change in them, a change that was so astonishing it was noticed even by their enemies. In Acts 4:13, it says this, it says: *Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.*

So here's a question for all of us. Would your circle, would the

people that you know, your friends, your relatives, those that you hang out with, would they ever be astonished at you? Would they ever say or at least think perhaps it's because you've been with Jesus? What if I told you that God is determined to produce a level of fruitfulness in your life to make that the case and that he's quite willing to discipline you in order to produce it. You see, where we go astray particularly with discipline is that we almost always associate discipline with anger, with wrath, with God is just ticked off and he's getting back at us. See, God has already told us that he died for us while we were still sinners. He said, look, I died for you while you were ungodly. Here's the part that we have to grasp to hold on to and that's that God has already seen the worst thing you will ever do in your entire life. He's already seen it in its entirety and he saw it over 2,000 years ago because he saw it when he paid for it and yet he has still decided to fix his love on you. Listen to what Jesus said in *John 15:16*, he said: *"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide."*

So Jesus is making it clear that fruit bearing is what we were chosen for, it's what we were put on this planet for, and what we don't realize is the depths to which God will go to produce those fruits in us. See, the good news is that God is the one who grows

the fruit, he is the vine; we are the branches. And if he has chosen you, if he has appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, he will never let you go because you represent the very image of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The bad news? Well, the bad news is that God's love is fierce and it's jealous, it's a consuming love, and he will discipline those whom he loves. So the good news and the bad news of this are one and the same. They are that God has decided to fix his love on you and that love will see to it that we bear fruit, no matter how much it's going to hurt. *Hebrews 12:5* says this: *And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the ones he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."*

God says chastening is painful but it is proof of the love of God. If you've ever gone by a vineyard, if you ever looked at grapes in vineyard, you'd know that the vines themselves, these very thick kind of stubby affairs with little tiny branches coming off this very thick branch, and the reason for that is because grapevines need to be pruned radically in order to produce at their maximum. And years ago I was really into that and I bought this very fancy grapevine and I planted it and I kept up with it and I pruned it, and for a while it produced wonderful grapes. Eventually I just

lost interest in it. And I hadn't seen it for a couple of years. It's still growing. I went out and I checked on it, it has this massive unfettered growth now and it produces very poor quality, misshapen fruit that is barely edible. My fancy grapevine is now a complete mess. But you know, it's a visible sign no longer of any love or care that went into it; it is a visible sign now of my complete indifference. God is unwilling to treat us with that level of indifference, even though there are times when we might desperately want that very thing. But you see, God is determined that we will produce fruit or face the chastening of a Father who is too wise and too loving to let us squander the grace that he showered on us. Much of our frustration as Christians can be traced to a failure to be fruitful and a failure to recognize how serious God is about growing fruit in our lives, and so instead of seeing the hand of the gardener, we blame fate or luck or circumstance or even God himself, and we waste so much time and energy looking at everything but God's pruning hook because we forget who we are. We forgot what we're here for.

You know, it should -- it has been said and it should be obvious that Christians should be by far the loveliest people on the planet. Do I need to say that we're not? Everybody gets that. I mean, consider our advantage. God is growing loveliness into us for his glory. We either respond to that process and grow more

faithful and more fruitful or we fight it resenting deeply the hand of the vinedresser. You see, our choice as believers is not fruit or no fruit; it's fruit or discipline.

Now if there's little or no fruit in my life, how do I know if I'm a believer under God's discipline or a dead branch that's headed for the fire? Well, the answer to that is actually very simple. Dead branches don't care. They don't care because they're dead, and they're dead because not only are they dead, they don't know that they're dead. And they don't know that they're dead because they don't care enough to know. Sometimes they're just too busy being religious to care. The religion leaders in Matthew 7 were classic examples. Listen to what Jesus said to them. This is *Matthew 7:20*, he says: *"Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"* See, these were people who never turned God's discipline back on themselves. They never asked the right questions because they didn't care to.

And so I guess the question we have to ask ourselves this morning is this, do I really care about bearing fruit? Is God trying to get your attention? If you are his child, God has a word for you from *John 15:16*, it's this: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide." Next week we'll begin looking at how that works in each individual fruit. Let's pray.

Father God, I do thank you for the gift of fruit bearing, I thank you for the warning. Lord, this is a very difficult thing and Lord, to understand that we are either to produce fruit or to be under your discipline. You are the vinedresser, Christ is the vine, we are the branches, and you are determined for your Son's glory that we will produce fruit. Father, I pray that we would get that, I pray that we would understand that, and I pray that we would understand the way we produce fruit is to abide in your Son. I pray that you would give us the understanding of that deep, deep within our souls, and that you would give us the ability to move in that direction and that everything that we do might bring honor and glory to you, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.