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(click to see details):

- Part: 52 [Are you marked in the Ear and the Foot by the Good Shepherd?](#)
- Part: 51 [Blind Eyes Made to See by Jesus](#)
- Part: 50 [Listening to the Master](#)
- Part: 49 [Jesus the Evangelist](#)
- Part: 48 [Believers are Worshipers](#)
- Part: 47 [Are We Like the Woman at the Well?](#)
- Part: 46 [Snakes, Sinners and the Savior](#)
- Part: 45 [Starting Life Over Again](#)
- Part: 44 [What a Wonderful Change has been Wrought in Your Life](#)
- Part: 43 [DO YOU BELIEVE AND HAVE THIS LIFE?](#)
- Part: 42 [Triumphant Living](#)
- Part: 41 [Where Are You On The Spiritual Map of Your Life?](#)
- Part: 40 [Are You Enjoying an Endless, Overflowing, Victorious Life?](#)
- Part: 39 [How to Have the Endless Joy-Filled Life](#)
- Part: 38 [Jesus Is the Lamb of God?](#)
- Part: 37 [Jesus Is the Son of God](#)
- Part: 36 [Jesus in All the Gospels](#)
- Part: 35 [Hearing the Voice of Jesus](#)
- Part: 34 [ARE YOU READY TO STAND BEFORE CHRIST'S THRONE?](#)
- Part: 33 [Do Troubles Push you](#)

Secrets of the VINE



Part 22 (011118AM)

[Return to previous Page](#) | [Print](#)

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This morning we need to do a self-checkup of our spiritual health.

Are you distant these days from God? Can you hardly remember the last time your life was fruitful? Do you feel far from joy and peace, victory and blessing? Do you hope that no one gets too close this morning and asks you personal questions while you are here? Does your Bible feel as heavy as lead when you pick it up?

Do my challenges for you to jump in to serve and speak up for Christ push you away? Do you wonder if you'll get any reward in Heaven. In fact, do you just hope that you will ever get there? Has the zeal you once knew dried up, and become a far off memory?

If these or a myriad of other telltale signs of spiritual listlessness and barrenness have cast their shadows across your path, then Christ's invitation to His spiritual gardening clinic is for you. Come to the vineyard and learn this morning. Listen to Jesus as He introduces us to God's vineyard.

Jesus is talking grapes this morning. Nothing was clearer in the 1st Century Judea than vineyards to these men. They lived, walked, slept and ate often in the very shadow of the vine. The seasons of each Israelite's life were marked by the heavy clusters of fall grapes and the joys of harvest; the winter pruning of the vines; the first buds of spring; the vigorous growth of summer; and the joys of fall harvest again!

Emblematic of their nation, the grape vine was never far from mind or sight. Sadly we are so distant from the world of the Scriptures. The Land of the Book is a distant and often hazy place in our minds, yet so many of Christ's lessons to us in His Word are tied to real places, those places supported real people, who lived with real problems. Those real people found real answers in a real place called Israel 2,000 years ago as Jesus walked among them. We can join Him this morning, and listen as He unfolds exactly what His Father wants to be doing in your and my life TODAY!

As you open to John 15 we will soon be listening to the Gardener.

- Walk down the rows of vines where He takes listless, sometimes empty branches and brings them back to full spiritual vigor.
- Follow His eyes as He examines each branch to see where it is headed, how it is doing, and what needs to be done to improve its fruit-bearing.
- Trace His hands as He skillfully and lovingly lifts up branches that have begun to grow along the ground far from the Light of His Presence.
- Watch as He inspects the leaves caked with the soil of earth and clips, cuts, and disposes of whatever has been paralyzed; cleanses what is salvageable; and weaves back up again into fruitfulness, the restored and pruned branch.
- Then ponder with amazement the huge pile of wilting branches, He cuts away each time He passes down the rows.
- Feel the heat of the flames as all that useless growth is burnt, and the branches look so bare and sparse.
- Remember that the Goal of the Gardener is supreme - getting rid of ANYTHING that impedes the fruitfulness of His branches.

Please walk with me through the Lord's Vineyard in [John 15:1-8](#).

There are 27 reasons in 24 verses why I believe that all of these 8 verses speak about believers headed to Heaven. In fact it was not until I studied this book more intensely than ever before, reading every word dozens of times that two words unlocked this passage. This morning notice those words "in[1] ME" with me starting in [John 6:35](#) (also [6:56](#); [7:38](#); [10:9, 38](#); [11:25-26](#); [12:44, 46](#); [14:1, 10-12, 20, 30](#); [15:2, 4-7](#); [16:33](#); [17:21, 23](#)). Every one of the 27 times John records "in Me" it refers to the believer or His place in relation to our Triune God. So it is hard to imagine the Lord switched gears in [John 15:2](#) and says this one is unfruitful and thus unsaved. All believers go through seasons of fruitlessness, if you want to verify that think back over your own spiritual pilgrimage, right?

Part: 32 [Toward God? Are You Pushed Toward God?](#)

Part: 31 [Is It Chastening or Pruning?](#)

Part: 30 [Our Father the VINEDRESSER](#)

Part: 29 [Fruit Bearing 101](#)

Part: 28 [Are You Cleansed, Clipped and Christ-like?](#)

Part: 27 [Secrets of Fruitfulness-2](#)

Part: 26 [Secrets of Fruitfulness-1](#)

Part: 25 [A Life Useful for Jesus](#)

Part: 24 [Starting Over in Newness in Jesus](#)

Part: 23 [Jesus: I Am the Vine](#)

Part: 22 [Secrets of the VINE](#)

Part: 21 [How to Get Christ's Well Done](#)

Part: 20 [How To Walk Through The Valley Of Death's Shadow](#)

Part: 19 [The Race and the Crown](#)

Part: 18 [Finishing Well With Christ's WELL DONE](#)

Part: 17 [I Go To Prepare a Place](#)

Part: 16 [In My Fathers House](#)

Part: 15 [Who is the LORD - Jehovah or Allah?](#)

Part: 14 [Are You Secure for Eternity?](#)

Part: 13 [Mormonism Is the Wrong Way to God](#)

Part: 12 [Are You Ready to Die?](#)

Part: 11 [Jesus: I AM the Resurrection and the Life](#)

Part: 10 [Is Your Cup Overflowing](#)

Part: 9 [Following Jesus as My Good Shepherd in the Hard Times of Life!](#)

Part: 8 [Is Your Head Oiled?](#)

Part: 7 [Following Jesus As My Good Shepherd](#)

Part: 6 [I AM THE DOOR: Entering Life Through Jesus](#)

Part: 5 [Have You Given Your Life to Jesus?](#)

Part: 4 [Jesus: I AM the Bread of Life](#)

Part: 3 [Jesus: I am the LIGHT in the Wilderness](#)

Part: 2 [Jesus: I AM the Light to follow](#)

Part: 1 [Jesus: I AM the Light to Trust](#)

Now what does all that mean? **It unlocks the truth that *all* of these verses are for *every believer!*** You can be fruitless at times, but not for long. The Lord stops by and starts "lifting you up" out of what ever sin that has soiled you and stopped your fruit bearing. Then as you get back into production He continues until you grow even more! WOW, what a delight to know we are so vital to God's plan He personally in working on us!

Why does it take so much effort on God's part to prune us constantly? Let me share a few insights from a grape arbor. That is what we called ours at home as I grew up in Michigan. We cultivated grapes for my mother's incredible grape jams, jellies, and juice. But we had learned the hard way about the mischievous nature of the rambling, rapid growing grape vines! In every way we are like those vines. Why? The biggest enemy of the grape is itself. Grapes love to grow and expand their territory. In fact they love to do everything but bear fruit, they must be pruned to do that!

- We are so much like the grape vine's tendency to grow so vigorously in every direction!
- We like those vines have a lot of non-fruitful wood that must be cut away each year.
- We like the grapevines can become so dense in all our external leaf productions (ministry, work, family, athletics, amusements, investments, busyness, stress, anxieties, sins, etc.) that the sun (like the Son of God) cannot reach into the area where fruit should form.
- We left to ourselves are just like a grape plant; we will always favor new expansion of our territory over more grapes (fruit for God).
- What is the spiritual result? From a distance our lives look like incredibly green and healthy branches full of luxurious growth, and of impressive achievements. But to the Lord who stands up close, we have an under-whelming harvest.

So as Jesus drew his picture of the vine[2] he knew what he was talking about. Jesus, as so often, is working in this passage with pictures and ideas which were part of the religious heritage of the Jewish nation. One of the glories[3] of the Temple was the great golden vine upon the front of the Holy Place. Many a great man had counted it an honor to give gold to mould a new bunch of grapes or even a new grape on to that vine.

The vine was part and parcel of Jewish imagery, and the very symbol of Israel. The vine was grown all over Palestine as it still is. It is a plant needing a great deal of attention if the best fruit is to be gotten from it. It is grown commonly on terraces. The ground has to be perfectly clean. It is sometimes trained on trellisses; it is sometimes allowed to creep over the ground upheld by low forked sticks; it sometimes even grows round the doors of the cottages; but wherever it grows careful preparation of the soil is essential. It grows luxuriantly and drastic pruning is necessary. So luxuriant is it that the slips are set in the ground at least twelve feet apart, for it will creep over the ground at speed.

A young vine is not allowed to fruit for the first three years and each year is cut drastically back to develop and conserve its life and energy. When mature, it is pruned in December and January. It bears two kinds of branches, one that bears fruit and one that does not; and the branches that do not bear fruit are drastically pruned back, so that they will drain away none of the plant's strength. The vine cannot produce the crop of which it is capable without drastic pruning—and Jesus knew that.

Further, the wood of the vine has the curious characteristic that it is good for nothing. It is too soft for any purpose. At certain times of the year, it was laid down by the law, the people must bring offerings of wood to the Temple for the altar fires. But the wood of the vine must not be brought. The only thing that could be done with the wood pruned out of a vine was to make a bonfire of it and destroy it. This adds to the picture Jesus draws. God is glorified, when we bear much fruit and show ourselves to be disciples of Jesus. The greatest glory of the Christian life is that by our life and conduct we can bring glory to God.

How important[4] and valuable is fruit bearing, then? Jesus says, "I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain" (John 15:16).

Fruit is your only permanent deposit in heaven.

Real fruit always lasts! And it's the main earthly reason you were saved. Paul told Christians they were "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Ephesians 2:10). In practical terms, fruit represents good works – a thought, attitude, or action of ours that God values because it glorifies Him. The fruit from your life is how God receives His due honor on earth. That's why Jesus declares, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit" (John 15:8)

The importance[5] of vineyards in the ancient world is difficult for modern readers to appreciate. Winemaking dates from the earliest days of human history. Genesis records Noah as the first vineyard cultivator and winemaker, with unfortunate results (Gen 9:20 ff.). The production and consumption of wine was an economic mainstay for the farmers of Palestine in Jesus' day. Many Christians today do not drink wine, and most have little understanding of a working vineyard. Wine comes from the juice of the grapes produced by a grapevine.

- If left untrimmed, a grapevine will use its available energy to grow long woody branches and extend its territory, while producing a few meager bunches of grapes. Winemakers learned early on that grapevines could be tamed by vigilant pruning of branches so that comparatively few buds would be allowed to grow.
- When this trimming was done, the vine was forced to direct its life-giving sap into the production of grapes rather than territorial expansion. Under good conditions of both sufficient rain and plenty of sunshine, this resulted in heavy grape clusters and abundant grape juice for wine production.
- Major pruning was done in midwinter, when the vine would lose the least amount of its precious sap. This process of cleaning/ pruning the vineyard left a bare field with small stumps at the beginning of the spring growing season.
- A tidy farmer not only snipped off these old branches, but also hauled them away and burned them so that his vines could grow unhindered from the mature stump each year. Effective vine dressing required that the farmer continue to prune through the growing season to keep the vine's energy focussed on a limited number of grape clusters. Even today the best grapes are produced by developed vines, 12-40 years

Christ's central theme[6] of [John 15:1-8](#) is *not* salvation, how it is to be obtained or the danger of losing it. Instead, the great theme here is fruit-bearing, and the conditions of fertility. The word "fruit" occurs eight times in the chapter, and in Scripture eight is the resurrection-number. It is associated with a new beginning. It is the number of the new creation. If these facts be kept in mind, there should be little difficulty in arriving at the general meaning of our passage. The word which occurs most frequently in John 15 is "abide," being found no less than fifteen times in the first ten verses. Now "abiding" always has reference to fellowship, and only those who have been born again are capable of having fellowship with the Father and His Son.

The Vine and its branches express the true believer's life, as complete dependency of the branches upon the Vine, resulting in fruit-bearing. It is here and now that we are to glorify the Father by bearing much fruit. As A.W. Pink writes:

"Our salvation, our essential oneness with Christ, our standing before God, our heavenly calling, are neither brought into view nor called into question by anything that is said here. It is by dragging in these truths that some expositors have created their own difficulties in the passage."

In the agrarian[7] world of the Bible, pruning was a crucial process in tending vineyards and produce-bearing trees. Pruning embodies a paradox of life—that growth and productivity require deprivation and stress. If left to grow unattended, a vine or fruit tree will produce lush foliage but little fruit. This passage is a full-fledged development of the analogy between Christ as a vine and his disciples as branches. Drawing in minute ways on actual practices of pruning, Jesus pictures the nature of Christian growth, an important part of which is that God prunes every branch that bears fruit, "that it may bear more fruit" ([Jn 15:2](#)). Far from being an image of punishment, pruning signifies nurture, growth and fruitfulness.[8]

The vinedresser. The vinedresser prunes the branches in two ways: he cuts away dead wood that can breed disease and insects, and he cuts away living tissue so that the life of the vine will not be so dissipated that the quality of the crop will be jeopardized. In fact, the vinedresser will even cut away whole bunches of grapes so that the rest of the crop will be of higher quality. God wants both quantity and quality. The greatest judgment God could bring to a believer would be to let him alone, let him have his own way. Because God loves us, He "prunes" us and encourages us to bear more fruit for His glory. Your Heavenly Father is never nearer to you than when He is pruning you. Sometimes He cuts away the dead wood that might cause trouble; but often He cuts off the living tissue that is robbing you of spiritual vigor. How does the Father prune us?

1. Sometimes He simply uses the Word to convict and cleanse us. (The word translated "purge" in [John 15:2](#) is the same as "clean" in [John 13:10](#). See [Eph. 5:26-27](#).)
2. Sometimes He must chasten us ([Heb. 12:1-11](#)). At the time, it hurts when He removes something precious from us; but as the "spiritual crop" is produced, we see that the Father knew what He was doing.
3. But always our Father has to prune us so that the quality keeps up with the quantity. Left to itself, our branch might produce many clusters, but they will be inferior in quality. God is glorified by a bigger crop that is also a *better* crop.

We must remember that the branches do not eat the fruit: others do. We are not producing fruit to please ourselves but to serve others. Several different kinds of spiritual fruit are named in the Bible.

1. One we win to Christ ([Rom. 1:13](#)) is a type of spiritual fruit.
2. Growth in holiness and obedience is another type of fruit ([Rom. 6:22](#)).
3. Stewardship is fruit from a dedicated life ([Rom. 15:28](#)).
4. The fruit of the Spirit in [Gal. 5:22-23](#) is the lifestyle that glorifies God and makes Christ real to others.
5. Good works of serving others is a fruit in an abiding life ([Col. 1:10](#)).
6. Words offered in worship and praise to God, coming from our hearts and lips, is a wonderful fruit to the glory of God ([Heb. 13:15](#)).

A true[9] branch, united with the vine, will always bear fruit. Not every branch bears a bumper crop, just as not every field has a bumper harvest ([Matt. 13:8, 23](#)), but there is always fruit where there is life. If there is no fruit, the branch is worthless and it is cast away and burned. The Lord isn't teaching here that true believers can lose their salvation, for this would contradict what He taught in [John 6:37](#) and [10:27-30](#). We shouldn't build a theological doctrine on a parable or allegory. Here Christ's one main truth is the fruitful life of the believer. Just as an unfruitful branch is useless, so an unfruitful believer is useless; and both must be dealt with. It is a tragic thing for a once-fruitful believer to backslide and lose his privilege of fellowship and service. If anything, [John 15:6](#) describes divine discipline rather than eternal destiny. "There is [for believers] a sin unto death" ([1 John 5:16](#)).

How do we make the application of this passage to believers? The answer[10] comes in two parts. First, a clearer translation of the Greek word *airo*, rendered in John 15 as "take away," would be "take up" or "lift up." We find accurate renderings of *airo*, for example, when the disciples "took up" twelve baskets of food after the feeding of the five thousand ([Matthew 14:20](#)), when Simon was forced to "bear" Christ's cross ([Matthew 27:32](#)), and when John the Baptist called Jesus the Lamb of God who "takes away" the sin of the world ([John 1:29](#)). In fact, in both the Bible and in Greek literature, *airo* never means "cut off." Therefore, when some Bibles render the word as "takes away" or "cut off" in John 15, it is an unfortunate interpretation rather than a clear translation. "Lifts up," suggest an image of a vinedresser leaning over to lift up a branch. But why?

Our First Lesson of the Vine[11] Of The Vine: *If your life consistently bears no fruit, God will intervene to discipline you. Lift up...clean...* I have never read John 15 in the same way again. For the Christian, sin is like dirt covering the grape leaves. Air and light can't get in. The branch languishes, and no fruit develops. How does our Vinedresser lift us from mud and misery? How does He move our branch from barren to beautiful so we can start filling up our basket? The answer to this question is the

first secret of the vine. It's All Up To You. Once believers understand God's motive in discipline, an astonishing truth dawns: *The discipline doesn't have to continue! It's all up to me. I will only experience pain as long as I hang on to my sin.* If you're still wondering whether you are in a season of discipline, ask yourself this question: *Can I look back over my walk with God and see very clearly that a sinful behavior I used to be caught up in is no longer an issue? Are there thoughts, attitudes, or habits that used to dominate my life but don't anymore?* If you can answer yes, you're moving forward and upward with God. If you can't, your grape harvest basket is probably empty and you are undoubtedly being disciplined. I recommend that you now try to understand what degree of discipline God might be using to get your attention. Note Hebrews 12 with me. There are stages of God's chastening in a believer's life.

1. *Stage 1: Rebuke* – "My son, do not...be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him" (v.5). We hear God's rebuke, even though we don't always choose to respond. God can make Himself heard in many ways: a prick of our conscience, a timely word from another person, a Scripture, the preaching of God's Word, or conviction by the Holy Spirit. (Do you see how wonderful and kind it is of God to use so many methods to get our attention and steer us away from peril?)
2. *Stage 2: Chasten* – "For whom the Lord loves He chastens" (v. 5). In other places in the Bible, the word *chastening* is used interchangeably with discipline. But in our text we find a specific use that shows a more serious degree of discipline. Chastening is something you feel as emotional anxiety, frustration, or distress. What used to bring you joy now doesn't. Pressures increase at work, at home, in your health or finance. Many Christians bump along in this level of discipline, yet fail to read the signs. They feel unfulfilled at church, critical of their Christian friends, and "on the outs" with God. When they pick up their Bible, it feels like a lead weight instead of a welcome relief. Their relationship with the Lord seems blighted by a sadness or lethargy they can't quite trace. If any of these symptoms sound familiar, you don't need to go to church more or try to read your Bible with a better attitude. You need to look for ongoing sin in your life, the dirt crusting over your leaves and cutting you off from God's best. If you don't respond, love will compel your Father to take more drastic measures.
3. *Stage 3: Scourge* – "And scourges every son whom He receives" (v. 6). To scourge is to whip, to inflict punishment. It's the same word the Gospels use to describe what the Romans did to Jesus just before they crucified Him. Not a pretty picture! In fact, for the word *scourge* you could substitute *cause-excruciating pain*. What percentage of Christians do you think have experienced scourging? It may shock you to read that God scourges "every son." That means you have most likely already been scourge in your life.

WHAT STOPS GOOD PEOPLE FROM [12] CLEANING UP THEIR ACT? Do you recognize yourself any of these misguided voices?

- "The pain and negative circumstances in my life are the results of natural consequences or fate. They're not connected to my choices."
- If God does discipline me somehow, it would probably be a one-time deal. He's much too forgiving to impose escalating consequences or to intentionally cause me pain just to motivate me to stop sinning."
- "Let's be honest. The enjoyment I get from my so-called sin outweighs any spiritual benefit I'd get from stopping. And anyway, my sins aren't really hurting anybody."
- "I simply can't help myself. This problem goes back to my childhood. So why wouldn't God extend grace rather than impose discipline?"
- "Just because I sin doesn't mean I can't do something for God. Hey, God uses crooked sticks. We can't all be Billy Graham, you know."
- It's not a sin. It's just a weakness, part of my personality, something I struggle with."

If you recognize yourself in any of these misconceptions, do you see what you're really saying? *My sin doesn't have consequences. God won't pursue this. I like my sin too much to quit. I've convinced myself that I can't quit. My sin won't diminish my effectiveness.* And finally. *My problem isn't even a sin.*

THE JOYFUL TURNING The Bible word for his unforgettable, hope-filled change of direction is *repentance*. Repentance is a turning away from the sin that ails you to the bounty God promises you. Neither is repentance a one-time act. It is a lifestyle, an ongoing commitment to keep putting aside our rebellion and receive God's forgiveness. Some sins leave us in such bondage that we need ongoing help and accountability. No one knows this truth better than those who have overcome serious addictions and brokenness in their pasts. *Every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (John 15:2)* God's strategy for coaxing a greater harvest out of His branches is not the one you and I would prefer. His plan is to prune, which means to thin, to reduce, to cut off.

The Second Lesson of The Vine: *If your life bears some fruit, God will intervene to prune you* – the Vinedresser's secret for more is...less. Are you ready for a troubling truth that, once grasped, will free you to view the trials you're now facing in a new light? Even change how you feel about them and reward you with a beautiful harvest for God? Then you're ready for the second secret of the vine. Recently, I read a gardening report that explained why: Because of the grape's tendency to grow so vigorously, a lot of wood must be cut away each year. Grapevines can become so dense that the sun cannot reach into the area where fruit should form. Left to itself, a grape plant will always favor new growth over more grapes. The result? From a distance, luxurious growth, an impressive achievement. Up close, an under-whelming harvest.

PROFILES IN PRUNING [13] In the vineyard, an expert pruner applies his skills in four specific ways: to remove growth that is dead or dying; to make sure sunlight can get to all fruit-bearing branches; to increase the size and quality of the fruit; and to encourage new fruit to develop.

The Third Lesson of The Vine [14]: *If your life bears a lot of fruit, God will invite you to abide more deeply with Him.* His purpose is not that you will do more for Him but that you will choose to be more with Him. Only by abiding can you enjoy the most rewarding friendship with God and experience the greatest abundance for His glory. Abiding is all about the most important friendship of your life. Abiding doesn't measure how much you know about your faith or your Bible. In abiding, you seek, long for, thirst for, wait for, see, know, love, hear, and respond to ...a person. More abiding means more of God in your life, more of Him in your activities, thoughts, and desires.

In this text[15], remaining in Christ is for those who are **in Christ already**. So abiding refers to conscious decisions or choices in living the Christian life. So the burning describes the believer's works that are burned if these works are not of Christ, and it is the Christian's role as a fruit bearer and not his salvation that was discussed in the passage.

Lot would be an example here, as Arthur W. Pink points out in his presentation of this evidence.

"He was out of fellowship with the Lord, he ceased to bear fruit to His glory, and his dead works were all burned up in Sodom; yet he himself was saved! [16]

Ray Stedman writes of this passage,

"When our Lord says: Abide in me He is talking about the will, about the choices, the decisions we make. We must decide to do things which expose ourselves to him and keep ourselves in contact with him. This is what it means to abide in him. We have been placed into Christ by the Holy Spirit. Now we must choose to maintain that relationship by the decisions we make—decisions to expose ourselves to his Word in order to learn about him, and to relate to him in prayer wherein we converse with him. Decisions to relate to other believers in Body Life experiences; that is, bearing one another's burdens and confessing our faults and sharing in fellowship with one another, wherein we learn about and see Christ in one another. All of this is designed to relate to him—Abide in me. If we do that, we are fulfilling this active, necessary decision of the will to obey his Word, to do what he says, and to stay in touch with him." [17]

How much does God want to remove pride[18] in our life? Immensely! The Bible says, "God resists the proud. ..." **James 4:6** NKJV) and "These six things the LORD hates. ... a proud look" (**Prov. 6:16-17** NKJV). Pride was Nebuchadnezzar surveying his kingdom and saying, "look what I've done." The result of pride was Nebuchadnezzar on his hands and knees eating grass in a cow pasture.

- Pride is an acid that turns the finest fruit bitter.
- Pride is a shallow and superficial weed that grows in all soils, without need of water or care. It consumes and destroys every living thing it overshadows.
- Pride is a swelling of the heart filled with ego and self-importance.
- Pride raises you above others until you look down on them.
- Pride is the basis of racism that divides the church and America. There is no white church, black church, brown church, or yellow church in Scripture. There is only the blood-bought church of Jesus Christ.
- Pride is a cancer that rots the soul. A man infected with pride needs nothing...not even God!

Why does God hate pride? Because sin is man's declaration of independence of God.

- Do you want [19] God's blessing upon your life? Then hunger and thirst for righteousness! Jesus said, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (**Matt. 6:33** NKJV).
- Do you want God's protection? Live a righteous and pure life! "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous," wrote the psalmist "and His ears are open to their cry" (**Ps. 34:15** NKJV).
- Do you want God to provide for your children? Live a godly life! In **Psalm 37:25**, the psalmist assures us, "I have been young, and now am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread" (NKJV).
- Do you want God to answer your prayers? Live righteously! "The LORD is far from the wicked," Solomon wrote, "but He hears the prayer of the righteous" (**Prov. 15:29** NKJV). James assures us that the prayer of a righteous man avails much (**5:16**), and the psalmist adds a warning: "If I regard iniquity [sin] in my heart The Lord will not hear" (**Ps. 66:18** NKJV).

I AM THE BREAD OF LIFE (6:35, 41, 48, 51) – Jesus is all I need to BE SATISFIED;

I AM THE LIGHT OF WORLD (8:12) - Jesus is all I need to LIGHT my PATH;

I AM THE DOOR OF life to my SHEEP (10:7,9) - Jesus is all I need to get into God's Family,

I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD (10:11, 14) - Jesus is all I need to make it through life and get HOME,

I AM THE RESURRECTION AND LIFE (11:25) - Jesus is all I need to conquer death,

I AM THE WAY, TRUTH & LIFE (14:6) - Jesus is all I need to not get lost

I AM THE TRUE VINE (15:1) - Jesus is all I need to be fruitful to the last day of my life, apart from Him is only continual withering.

- Jesus says I am the Vine, your source of life and health. The state of your health is all in my hands.
- I will provide for you living grace, enduring declining life grace, and dying grace. Each just when you need them!
- If the vine speaks of all of life as one growing season, then we should get more fruit filled the older we get (ala Psalm 92), if it is many seasons then life is a succession of growing /pruning /bearing /resting and then growing/pruning...
- Believers are **ABIDING IN JESUS WHO IS MY SUPPLY OF ALL I EVER NEED**.

Bruce Wilkinson's helpful Chart

Issue [20]	Disciplining	Pruning
How do you know It's Happening?	Pain	Pain
Why is it happening?	You're doing Something wrong	You're doing something right
What is your Level of Fruitfulness?	No fruit (represented by Basket 1)	Fruit (represented by Basket 2)

What is the Vinedresser's Desire?	Fruit (represented by Basket 2)	More Fruit (represented by Basket 3)
What needs to go?	Sin	Self
How should You feel?	Guilty, sad	Relief, trust
What is the Right response?	Repentance (stop your Sinning)	Release (give God your permission)
When does It stop?	When we Stop sinning	When God is finished

The branches. Many of the images of Christ and the believer given in Scripture emphasize this important concept of *union and communion*: the body and its members (1 Cor. 12), the bride and the Bridegroom (Eph. 5:25-33), the sheep and the Shepherd (John 10). A member of the body cut off from the body would die. The sooner we as believers discover that we are but branches, the better we will relate to the Lord; for we will know our own weakness and confess our need for His strength. Of course the key to this passage is the word *abide*: it is used eleven times in John 15:1-11 ("continue" in John 15:9 and "remain" in John 15:11). What does it mean to "abide"? It means to keep in fellowship with Christ so that His life can work in and through us to produce fruit. This certainly involves the Word of God and the confession of sin so that nothing hinders our communion with Him (John 15:3). It also involves obeying Him because we love Him (John 15:9-10). This abiding relationship is natural to the branch and the vine, but it must be cultivated in the Christian life. It is not automatic. Abiding in Christ demands worship, meditation on God's Word, prayer, sacrifice, and service—but what a joyful experience it is! Once you have begun to cultivate this deeper communion with Christ, you have no desire to return to the shallow life of the careless Christian.

It is important to remember^[21] that not everything in a parable must mean something. A parable teaches one main truth, and to try to make a parable "stand on all four legs" is often the first step toward misinterpretation. The main truth Christ is teaching in this parable is the importance of abiding in Him in order to bear fruit. The word "fruit" is used six times, and "abide" at least fifteen times (but it is not always translated "abide"). The main point of the teaching here is fellowship, not sonship. To use v. 6 to teach that a Christian loses his salvation and is burned in hell if he fails to bear fruit is to twist the meaning of the parable. In the first place, such a teaching contradicts the plain teaching of other verses—John 6:27; 10:27-29; etc. Furthermore, note that the branch Christ speaks of in v. 6 withers after it is cast forth! If this branch pictures a backslidden Christian who loses his salvation, he should "wither" first, then fail to bear fruit, then be cast out. To abide in Christ does not mean to keep ourselves saved:

- It means to live in His Word and pray (v. 7),
- obey His commandments (v. 10), and
- keep our lives clean through His Word (vv. 3-4).

The Christian who fails to abide in Christ becomes like a useless branch, like the salt that loses its taste and is good for nothing. First Corinthians 3:15 teaches that our works will be tested by fire. To be a branch in the Vine means we are united to Christ and share His life. As we abide in Him, His life flows through us and produces fruit. It is possible for the carnal Christian to produce "works," but only the spiritual Christian can bear lasting fruit. Note that the fruitful branches are "purged" (v. 2—same word as "clean" in v. 3) so that they will bear more fruit. God cleanses us through the Word, chastening us to make us more fruitful, which helps to explain why a dedicated Christian often has to go through suffering. As believers move from producing "fruit" to "more fruit" (v. 2) to "much fruit" (v. 8), they glorify the Father. The evidences of the "abiding life" are: a sense of the Savior's love (v. 9), obedience to His Word (v. 10), answered prayer (v. 7), and joy (v. 11)^[22]

What are we to do for Jesus while we wait?

We don't know how long before our Master returns. Jesus said we must do His work until He comes. The best way to do that is to start living right now the way we want to have Him find us at the end when He comes (rapture) or calls (death). I call this some specific Plans for Growing Old in Godliness. These can all be found in Psalm 71. Let's conclude there.

1. I will flee to God rather than drown in my troubles. v. 1
2. I will trust God's Word over my fears. v. 3
3. I will keep reminding myself of God's faithfulness all during my life to this moment. v. 5, 17
4. I will use my mouth so much for praise, no room will be left to complain. v. 8, 14b, 24
5. I will never give up even if I end up all alone, sick or even forgotten by everyone in the world except God. v. 14
6. I will never stop looking for people to share a testimony of God's goodness in my life. v. 15
7. I will seek out younger people and pass on to them my testimony of God's goodness and great faithfulness. v. 18 like Bill Eddy!
8. I will never stop pursuing a deepening experience of knowing God daily. v. 19 like Howard Smith
9. I will see pain and suffering as God's perfect tools for shaping my life. v. 20 like Dorothy Crebs, Joni Erikson Tada
10. I will forsake the stereotypes of old timers and sing and speak and shout about God's goodness. v. 22-24

Jesus describes the relationship between his disciples and himself as one of **remaining**. The Greek verb translated "remain" is *mevw* (meno), occurring 7 times in verses 1-8. In reference to the vineyard analogy it is clear that the branch must "remain" on the vine or else it will die. Likewise, the believer must remain attached to Jesus or face spiritual death. But Jesus describes his relationship to his disciples as being more complex than that of the branch and vine, and in this text brings out additional meanings of *meno*. *Meno* may have the sense of "dwelling" or "living" or "making a home." For Jesus to "remain in us," then, is the same concept as found in 14:23, where Jesus promises that the Father and he will "make our home" with the obedient disciple. This is a two-way relationship. Jesus promises, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." He promises never to abandon his disciples. As Paul so eloquently asked, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" No one, Paul thunders, and his answer still brings assurance and peace to the disciples of Christ today (Rom 8:35-39).

The final promise of the "remaining" relationship in this section is that it will produce a powerful prayer life. Jesus has already made specific promises about prayer requests made in his name (14:13-14). Now he outlines the qualifications necessary to claim the promise. **"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you"** (v. 7). Disciples are not promised invincible prayer power apart from their relationship to Christ, but within the bounds of this relationship. We are to "remain in" him (maintain fellowship with the living Christ) and his "words" must remain in us (obedience to Christ's teachings). If our hearts are aligned with the heart of Christ, our needs will be his needs, and these needs will be supplied. This promise will be restated one more time in verse 16.

First, to abide^[23] in Christ is to continue in the joyful recognition of the value of His perfect sacrifice and the efficacy of His precious blood. Second, to abide in Christ is to maintain a spirit and an attitude of entire *dependency* on Him. IT is the consciousness of my helplessness; it is the realization that "severed from him, I can do nothing." Third, to abide in Christ is to draw from His fullness. It is not enough that I turn from myself in disgust; I must turn to Christ with delight. I must seek His presence; I must be occupied with His excellency; I must commune with Him. It is no longer a question of my sufficiency, my strength, or my anything. It is solely a matter of His sufficiency. The branch is simply a conduit, through which flows the fruity-producing juices, which result in the lovely clusters of grapes.

There^[24] have been many guesses about, what may have occasioned Christ's parable of the vine and its branches. Since the preceding chapter concludes with the words, "Come now; let us leave," it would seem that the Lord and his disciples left the upper room at this point and began that quiet walk across the city of Jerusalem down into the Kidron Valley that brought them to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. If that is the case, they may have passed the great golden vine that decorated the door to the Holy Place of the temple or else the vines that grew close to the great walls of the city and ~ stretched along it.

[1] This is the key Greek preposition *eis* which occurs 711 times translated "in and into" in the Greek New Testament and only 58 times "on".

[2] The vine is a major theme in the Old Testament. Some notes on this are: Over and over again in the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the vine or the vineyard of God. "The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel" (*Isaiah 5:1-7*). "Yet I planted you a choice vine" is God's message to Israel through Jeremiah (*Jeremiah 2:21*). Ezekiel 15 likens Israel to the vine, as does *Ezekiel 19:10*. "Israel is a luxuriant vine," said Hosea (*Hosea 10:1*). "Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt," sang the Psalmist, thinking of God's deliverance of his people from bondage (*Psalms 80:8*). The vine had actually become the symbol of the nation of Israel. It was the emblem on the coins of the Maccabees. Vineyard analogies are relatively frequent in the Old Testament with a variety of applications (e.g., *Gen 40:9-11*; *Ps 128:3*). The "vine" was frequently used as an analogy for the nation of Israel (e.g., *Ps 80:8-19*; *Isa 5:1-7*; *Jer 2:21*; *Hosea 10:1*), often an unfavorable analogy.

[3] Barclay, William, *Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of John - Volume 2 Chapters 8-21 (Revised Edition)*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press) 2000, c1975.

[4] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 21-35.

[5] Drawn from Bryant, Beauford H.; Krause, Mark S., *The College Press NIV Commentary: John*, (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company) 1999, c1998

[6] Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John Volume 3*. Swengel, Pa.: Bible Truth Depot, 1945, p. 286-289.

[7] Pruning in biblical times was done with pruning hooks (*Is 2:4*; *Is 18:5*). These were small, sickle-shaped knives forged at spearpoint and attached to a short handle. As a tool the pruning hook in the Bible is a physical icon symbolizing prosperity and peace, as suggested by three famous parallel passages that speak of beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (*Is 2:4*; *Joel 3:10*; *Mic 4:3*).

[8] Ryken, Leland; Wilhoit, James C.; Longman III, Tremper, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press) 2000, c1998.

[9] Wiersbe, Warren W., *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books) 1997.

[10] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 21-35.

[11] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 39-48.

[12] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 50-59.

[13] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 50-59.

[14] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine*. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 50-59.

[15] Adapted from comments by James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John Volume 4*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999, p. 166-170.

[16] Pink, *Expositions of the Gospel of John*, vol. 2, 408.

- [17] Ray G. Stedman, *Secrets of the Spirit* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1975), 81.
- [18] John Hagee, *His Glory Revealed*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999, p. 25-28.
- [19] John Hagee, *His Glory Revealed*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999, p. 46-47.
- [20] Bruce Wilkinson, *Secrets of The Vine. Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 2001, p. 96-103.*
- [21] Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books) 1992.
- [22] Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books) 1992.
- [23] Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John Volume 3*. Swengel, Pa.: Bible Truth Depot, 1945, p. 307-309.
- [24] James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John Volume 4*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999. p. 159.

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