

# A Pruned Branch, and a Fruitful Bough

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I believe one of the richest passages in scripture in the New Testament is found in the gospel of John in chapter 15, about the vine and the branches. It is so deep, so multi-layered with truth that to meditate upon this chapter is to enrich our very soul. I have entitled our message today “A Pruned Branch and a Fruitful Bough” for it is the pruned branch that bears fruit as we will see in our passage today.

Regarding this passage in John, chapter 15, scholars disagree on the location where the discourse was given. Some scholars believe that this discourse took place while Jesus and his men were still in the upper room and the vine spoken of, the vine of the cup they were drinking, as the illustration used. Other scholars say that perhaps a tendril of creeping vine came up the trellis by the open window where they sat and this was the reference made to the vine. Other Bible scholars point to John 14:31 where Jesus says to his disciples, “Arise, let us go hence,” inferring that they had left the upper room while this discourse was made along the way to Gethsemane where as they crossed the Brook Kidron they saw the bright fires lighting up the nighttime sky from the vine cuttings which were being burned. I like that. It is striking imagery isn't it?

I like to think this discourse occurred while they were walking along in their little band with Jesus leading the way and the disciples keeping up with him and hanging on every word that fell from his lips as they made their way to Gethsemane where Jesus would be taken from them and arrested and they would each flee like cowards, each deserting him. Jesus knows this is one of the last moments he will have with them as a group before his arrest and crucifixion. And he wants to impart to them some vital truths which will get them through this trying and difficult time ahead where he will be taken from them as he has just informed them in the upper room.

Allow me to read this passage in John, chapter 15, beginning in verse 1 and following to verse 8, which is our framework for our message today, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them

into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.”

Verse 1 of chapter 15 is very interesting in the Greek language where Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.” In the Greek it reads, “I in contradistinction to anyone else am the genuine vine.” Isn’t that rich? Jesus is announcing his distinguishing and utter difference from mankind. No one else is quite like him. All others are fakes compared to him. He is the genuine vine, the one true God, the living God. He is the real Messiah, he is the Savior. There is no other way to heaven but through him. All others who make that claim are false prophets. He alone is the genuine vine. He is also stating that he is entirely different from us. His thoughts are not our thoughts nor his ways, our ways. His ways are in contradistinction to our feeble human means.

Now, notice what Jesus says about the Father. He states, “My Father is the husbandman.” In the Greek, it is translated, “And my Father is the tiller of the soil.” This entire passage speaks of agriculture and farming, growth and fruit production. God the Father as the husbandman, as the tiller of the soil. It is God himself who holds the divine pruning knife with skilled hands which perform the masterful work on the branch. The sovereign tiller of the soil. The husbandman performs his work on the branch pruning it, making it more productive, turning it into a fruitful bough that others can enjoy and derive benefit from and whereby he receives all the glory. Is that not striking imagery? Is that not true of how God deals with us, his children?

Now, look at the wording in verse 2. “And every branch that beareth fruit,” he does what to it? “He purgeth it,” he prunes it. Why? That it may bring forth more fruit. We see that for a branch to bear more fruit it must be pruned, purged. God the Father is the one who yields the knife of pruning upon us through affliction, suffering, trials and tribulations. All to prune back the deadwood, the unproductive in us. To bring forth the green produce of a fruitful bough. He does this for our good and his glory. But we shy away from the pruning knife for who wants pain?

I remember preaching this sermon to a group of pastors one evening at a Bible institute. I had brought with me two men whom I was discipling at the time with the instructions that they were to sit at the back of the room and pray their hearts out while I preached to those ministers. I believe in the power of prayer and the operations of the Holy Spirit, don’t you? Well, that particular evening God must’ve heard the prayers of those two men because suddenly the atmosphere changed in that little room while I was preaching. The faces of those pastors became serious as they were gripped with eternity and the God of eternity. I was hitting home hard this message of the divine pruning knife. After the meeting, an older pastor approached me and hugged me and he looked me in the eye and with solemnity in his voice he said, “Tonight, brother, I’m going home and I’m gonna get down and kneel by my bed and I’m gonna ask God to get out his pruning knife on me and my ministry.”

Did that take courage? You bet it did. Will God bless the desire of that man's heart to get serious with him? You bet he will. How badly do we want God? How badly do we want usefulness for him? How desperate is our prayer to him to make us fruitful boughs which he can use? If you want the fruit of a vibrant, vital ministry, friend, then be prepared for the pruning knife. There's no escaping it. And the more you desire usefulness to God, the more pruning you will experience as the divine husbandman makes you more Christ-like.

What is that passage from Hebrews? It is found in Hebrews, chapter 5, verses 7-9. Let me read it to you for it bears significance to our subject here today. "Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him." Yes, that's it. You see, friends, this whole matter of usefulness to God is wrapped up in this pruning of ourselves by the Master's hand.

Listen friends, a life of usefulness for Christ will be a life of suffering for Christ beneath the pruning knife. Do you desire usefulness? Then be prepared to suffer. Usefulness arises from the furnace of affliction. A fruitful bough will emerge often from the furnace of affliction and pruning.

One great example of this is found in the life of Charles Spurgeon. I have a photo of Spurgeon where the great British preacher is sitting at his desk with quill pen in one hand and the other hand resting beneath his bearded chin. Spurgeon's eyes are framed by deep circles of wear and fatigue. The dark circles beneath his eyes are so prominent in this photograph that they look as though they were made by a black magic marker. Spurgeon's face reveals a great Atlas-like weight upon him. Weariness and burden is written all over his tired face. He sits there regally, like a tragic king whose kingdom is heavy upon his shoulders.

He is marred by life and Christian service. His painfully sad eyes betray a deep manic depression. He sits there absorbed in his work yet detached. Perhaps his mind is off to a more pleasant locale, like Menton, France, his beloved winter retreat. He sits there as an object of pity yet how can this be? He is the great Spurgeon but he looks like a worn out old man, yet, he is just 56. He carries the weight of the Metropolitan Tabernacle upon him, the Pastor's College upon him, his orphanage upon him and his theological battles upon him with his peers. The burden and care of the ministry mark his once cheery countenance. He is not the jovial Spurgeon here but one who is acquainted with grief. He is a man well familiar of a life lived under the divine pruning knife. This knife which cuts away, strips away, peels away.

And when one looks at Spurgeon's face in this photo, his face reveals another visage staring out from behind the human form. The face of Christ peers out beautifully behind Spurgeon's sagging face. The Man of Sorrows is there with him comforting him, encouraging him on in the work of the kingdom. For to be Christ-like is not to receive awards, accolades or applause. Rather it is to be deeply familiar with great suffering and

emptying. To be Christ-like is to know what it means to be misunderstood, an object of ridicule and a target for enemies. To be like Christ is to experientially know reproach, rejection and even abandonment of close friends. Our Lord Jesus hung publicly in naked humility on a bloody tree. He was ridiculed, scorned, spat upon, rejected by his own people and nailed to an ignoble cross like a common criminal. He bore reproach. The great weight upon Christ on the cross would've been too unbearable for us. For he bore the sins of the world and he suffered the turned face of the Father who cannot look upon sin. The photo of Spurgeon reveals just how Christ-like he really was.

Well friends, as we ponder this passage from John, chapter 15, I often refer to it as the pruning chapter yet it is also the abiding chapter. This whole matter of our walk with God is tied up in the abiding life, wrapped up in it. All of our usefulness to God, all of our fruitfulness to God flows out of our abiding to the vine, the genuine vine.

In verse 4, that word “abide” in the Greek is the word “meno” which means to dwell, to remain, to remain under, to be patient. We are to walk closely with God in a daily quiet time with him. A lover's tryst with him, so to speak, where we meet him in fellowship, in intimacy, in communion. We communicating to him what is on our heart and he revealing to us what is on his heart. And we absorbing that experience and getting on our heart what is on the heart of God and eternity.

But look at verse 5, “I am the vine, ye are the branches, he that abideth in me and I in him the same bringeth forth much fruit for without me ye can do nothing.” This abiding principle is so true in the fruit of the harvest and it applies to the spiritual fruit in our lives. For when we abide in him like a branch in the vine, we will have the constant flow, the continual source of the divine sap through the Holy Spirit coursing through us as a blessing to others. And because of our pruning to be more *like him*, our abiding *in him* through a close walk *with him*, we will bear much fruit *for him*.

And when Jesus says, “Without me ye can do nothing,” that means nothing worthwhile eternity wise. Apart from him, the church can do much activity in the flesh with money and man power but without Holy Ghost power real fruit, fruit that impacts eternity, flows from our abiding in a close walk with God and a life lived beneath the pruning knife of God.

Have you ever seen a bowl of plastic fruit? When I was a little boy a neighbor lady always kept a bowl of plastic fruit on her coffee table in her living room. I picked up an apple one day. The fruit looked real until you picked it up and handled it. And I've known churches like that. They look good on the outside with much activity in the name of their Lord but they are empty inside, void of Holy Ghost power and spiritual fruit which impacts eternity and shakes the gates of hell.

But we have a command from Christ here in chapter 15 of John's gospel. Look at verse 16, “Ye have not chosen me but I have chosen you and ordained you that ye should go and bring forth fruit and that your fruit should remain that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it to you.” Fruit that remains, friends.

D. L. Moody died in 1899, yet, his church and Bible institute in Chicago continues on as a testimony to the fruit that remains from Moody's Christ surrendered life.

Do you, friend, desire more usefulness for God? Do you wish to be a fruitful bough for God? Then you must submit to the pruning knife of God and you must walk closely with God in a life of abiding in him. In a life of utter reliance upon him. Then, what spiritual fruit that springs forth from you, from your life as a blessing to others, will be worthwhile and lasting for all eternity. The pruning knife and the fruitful bough go hand-in-hand in the hand of God. Amen.