

Reading: John 15:1-17

Theme: The Vine (3)

We have been looking at this passage and have seen Jesus is showing important truths using word pictures - allegories. We saw 2 of those pictures previously – **1stly the picture of the Vine** - the truth it represents about the intimate, the close connection between a true believer and Christ - a living union. Last time we saw the 2nd picture: **the picture of the Father as the Vinedresser** and of the work He was involved in as He wisely and correctly pruned branches on the Vine. We will move on in this passage and consider 2 more pictures. Some things we will look at will involve going over things as they are there again. We see from this passage:

3. The picture of the unfruitful branch.

We've seen that a vine is pruned really hard to maximise its fruit. It is not like an oak tree grown for its timber. If a vine becomes too woody or dense, its fruit bearing capacity is greatly reduced. God the Father, the Vinedresser, knows how to deal correctly with each branch. There are 2 understandings of what goes on here:

Firstly, we are shown that non-fruit bearing branches are cut-off (v2) and in v6 such a branch is then pictured as withering, thrown into the fire and burned. Again, pause and consider who this picture represents. It pictures those who have the appearance of being part of the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ - of whatever denomination in the world. These ones may say and do the right things; may be very religious, moral, nice people, but if they are not connected by a living union to the Vine, they are really unfruitful branches, are parasites upon and within the church they belong to. Yes, they may be lovely people, moral, nice, religious, educated, but if not born-again of God's Spirit, they are not a partaker of the life of the Lord Jesus and cannot produce the fruit of the Spirit in their lives, for they have no life of the Spirit, Christ, or God in them.

They are imitation, pseudo-Christians, who look, play, pray the part; have moral values, good lives, even live disciplined moral lives, but are not alive in Christ. They never had a work of saving grace in their lives, never been converted, never been brought into a living relationship with the Vine.

This should cause us all to pause and examine our own lives. Is it possible we could have a form of godliness, but do not know the power of God in a saving life-changing way? Perhaps we have just a head knowledge, a mental acceptance only, may have always accepted there was a God, been taught such, but we are a stranger to such a God. We think we are alive, but are really dead to God, only have an intellectual acceptance of the Bible and salvation truths. Sadly, some have taught and some still teach that all we need is an intellectual acceptance of salvation truths and we are fine. It is known by the name of Sandemanianism and seems to be creeping into many people's ideas of what becoming a Christian is! Yet being a Christian is more than an intellectual notion, for it involves the work of God in our innermost being and a life lived for God's glory. What a sad and tragic situation to be in. All of us should seek to make our calling and election sure i.e. make sure we really are Christians and look for the evidence of God's grace - the fruit of the Spirit, for no true Christian can be without some measure of fruit to God as they go on in their lives.

Those without any spiritual fruit are not true branches and will be cut-off. This will most clearly be revealed in eternity, when it will be too late to call on Christ for salvation and be cast into hell, everlasting punishment. Yet such pruning can also occur in this life – no evidence of fruit shown in their lives and it will be clear they are not true fruit producing branches.

This can be shown by adversity or by prosperity. In adverse conditions such ones' true colours can be shown. Usually some statement like *"If God allowed that to happen, I am not believing in*

Him anymore!” They dump God as useless, as inconvenient. Others may show they have no true spiritual life by abandoning the faith they once professed as they get prosperity. As if Christianity is only for the poor, the weak, the struggling, the uneducated; but a rich, cultured, successful person does not need to rely on Christianity or God. Perhaps they become successful or/and enticed by sin and its pleasures.

I wonder what would most effectively test and expose us? If we find we are ever exposed as fruitless, or even have abandoned Christianity, then fear in case we remain a fruitless branch and are cut-off in our life time. For unless we seek God as a result of seeing that, we will be cut-off for all eternity!

In many ways that is the traditional, the standard 1st understanding and application of that verse. Yet it is not the only understanding of it. Perfectly allowable alongside that, from the language and the grammar, is a **second understanding** and application under this heading of the picture of the unfruitful branches. What I have said, I stand by and agree with, but I allow that this 2nd understanding has much searching truth and relevance in it and I would agree with it in alongside of the first understanding.

Sadly, some Bible teachers dismiss the first understanding and also dismiss God’s work in such pruning, even His justice, wrath and even hell. **I do not.** We need to have in view God’s perfect justice, but also have this 2nd understanding in view, which emphasises the mercy and the care of God! All this is from the same words and may appear to be a seemingly opposite view.

While total unfruitfulness indicates no life connection to Christ, realise there are some true believers who, through disposition, circumstances, lack of teaching, ingrained habits, may produce **little or seemingly no fruit** for Christ. These are not cut-off and never will be. The dying thief who believed on Jesus produced no visible

fruit for Christ, people who experience a deathbed conversion to Christ have no visible fruit at all and yet they are saved eternally – such is God’s grace and mercy.

The 2nd understanding of this verse, is that the word translated “*cuts off*” or “*taketh away*” can also be translated “*lift up, raise, take up*”. It is used in that sense in various places in the NT - as Jesus was tempted by the devil who says that angels would *bear Him up* if He cast Himself off the temple (Matthew 4:6); or when Jesus told the paralysed man to *take up* his bed and walk in Mark 2:9, the same word is used of his friends *carrying* his bed in v3 and the man *carrying* his own bed away in v12. It is used of *taking up* the leftover bread and fishes at feeding of the 5000 (Mark 8:19); of *taking up* our cross (Mark 8:34); in Acts 4:24 it is used of prayer “*raised their voices*”.

Here the Vinedresser, God the Father, can lavish special care and mercy on living branches who are struggling. The whole picture is a true and accurate one of horticultural practice and in keeping with spiritual principles of our God not breaking the bruised reed or quenching the smoking flax, of Him carrying the little lambs in His arms as He deals gently with them and us.

I need to say at this point, we are not to take false comfort in this 2nd understanding or use it as an excuse not to be concerned over unfruitfulness in our lives. Remember the first understanding is true and certain. The comfort of the 2nd is that we are encouraged to produce fruit. Ultimately there is no comfort from barrenness of life for Christ’s and God’s glory.

4. The picture of the fruitful branch.

This is a big area and important for us to learn from, develop, apply and work out in our own lives. Only as we are in a living ongoing union with Christ will we be fruitful. Our spiritual life in Him is the basis of our spiritual life - it flows, pulsates in and through us to

produce fruit to the glory of God. We have the duty to consciously remain in Him and He will remain in us - primarily by and through His word and prayer. Our God desires more fruit and to that end He will prune us - again using adversity and prosperity to do such and show us we are His disciples producing fruit to His glory.

That is the general overview and it would be easy just to leave it there, but we will not! These general principles are basic to our Christian life, yet they are also high and lofty in their awesome truth and so necessary in their application and their out working in our lives.

As believers in Christ, we are in a living union with Him and it is not a list of dos and don'ts, rules and regulations, but a living, loving relationship. There is a living and eternal connection, union between the newest believer in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are living branches in the Vine the moment we believe on the Lord Jesus as our Saviour. This is not only here in this picture of us in the Vine, but is shown in NT in many ways - born-again, converted, given new life, alive in Christ, in His body, taken from darkness to light, from death to life, have sins forgiven. This is a primary truth - we need this saving experience through God's grace and mercy.

Yet it does not end there. Our lives must bear fruit to and for God - to God's glory as His disciples. This is only possible because the life of Christ is in us and we are in union with Him. We are to abide, remain in Him - a conscious, deliberate resolution and attempt to go on in Christian things, to obey His words and He remains in us. It is never *"Let go and let God"* - let God do it all! If that were the case, the writing of half the NT was a waste of time, as it tells us of things we are to do, work out, apply, strive, obey. Nowhere do NT writers say *"Leave God to do it all"*. We can do nothing on our own, but God does not do it all for us. **We** are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling! How and why? Because it is **God who works in**

us to will and act according to His good purpose. (Philippians 2:12-13)

Generally, Paul writes his letters in 2 parts: 1st part is doctrinal, saying this is true of us as Christians; then in 2nd part it is applied, worked out in the nitty-gritty of our messy lives - often a negative, a positive and then reasons why - with practical and doctrinal matters mingled. As Christians, we are born-again of God's Spirit and there is spiritual fruit to be borne and shown in our lives to God's glory - **Galatians 5:22-23** *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."* Note these are not the **fruits** of the Spirit, but the **fruit** - all present to a greater or lesser extent in our lives for God's glory and pleasure.

As we grow as a Christian, as we remain, abide in Christ, our heavenly Father, in love and mercy, will at times lift us up to encourage growth, for us to bear much fruit, He will also, in love and mercy, prune us, cut us back. Many areas of our life that can affect our being productive. We have to have those things dealt with and He will deal with us in different ways and at different times in our lives - just as a young vine will be treated differently to a mature one.

Sometimes we can be unaware of the pruning process as it could be like topiary - a snip here and snip there - going on gently, slowly yet it surely goes on - as our every thought and motive is being shaped, gently trained by our Lord in His wisdom. This is the ongoing process of sanctification as God's word is applied and worked out in our lives, for it abides, remains in us and affects, influences, shapes, reshapes our thinking, motivation, our conduct and our lives. Never ever underestimate the necessity of the word of God in our lives and we neglect it at our peril. It is for our benefit and most often used as we see in v7 where God's word and prevailing prayer are linked.

Yet other times God prunes us by adversity as well as prosperity. Prosperity prunes us by testing our hearts in the heady atmosphere of success and praise. We are to keep our feet solidly based on God's word and ways in successes. Prosperity brings its own subtle prunings by exposing us to the dangers of pride, self-sufficiency, forgetting God and prayerlessness. The old Puritans spoke of needing a steady hand to carry a full cup! The dangers to our spiritual welfare and unfruitfulness from successes are often far greater than the dangers from our failures e.g. Joshua at Ai after success at Jericho! Prosperity is a way of pruning which we often fail to appreciate, but it can be used – as Proverbs 27:21 says *“The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise he receives.”*

Most often our loving heavenly Father uses the pruning knife of dark providences - illnesses, bereavement, sad times, trials, when things seem to go wrong, when we hurt, grieve, are low, cast down and seem to walk in darkness. For then it is not always easy to remember our Father loves us, is working all things together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. It is not then easy to gladly say *“I'm going to bear more fruit to His glory!”* It hurts, it really painfully hurts, but in His love, yes, His love, and His wisdom, He uses that painful knife as He knows it is best for us and His people e.g. Joseph – God means it for good.

We may feel it is not going to produce fruit in or through us for His glory, but He has more to accomplish in us and through us than just a life of sunny days and happy times. He may know that sunny days will accomplish much in and through us, but He may know that **His glory** will be proclaimed by us proclaiming His goodness, His love even if we have little, or suffer much etc. His grace is sufficient for us in all situations and we may be called on to prove that - as was Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 *“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. But he said*

to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Usually, in His grace, mercy, love and wisdom, we have a mixture of blessings and sufferings. Yet in all the changing scenes of life we are to bring glory to Him by producing fruit - the fruit of the Spirit. As do the changing seasons of the year for fruit. As I bring this message, I feel my words are inadequate to convey the wonder of our Saviour's words here - perhaps my limitations are to develop your patience and kindness to me! I really do appreciate how much of those graces you have already shown me!

Our Lord and Saviour is looking for us to ongoingly and on growingly produce the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, so these things are evidenced **practically** in our words, lives, thoughts, actions and reactions. The fruit of the Spirit is a topic on its own and well worth picking up some time... Basically, we are to produce and show the same fruit in our lives as did our Saviour in His life. We will never do so as perfectly as He did, but in union with Him and by, through His enabling Holy Spirit, we are to produce fruit to the glory of the great God who has loved us, given His darling Son for us and equips us to live for Him in every area of our lives. Pray we, as individuals and as a church, would be a very fruitful and productive people, that all the glory would go to Him - both now and in the future.