The Vine

John 15:1-5

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[Bring up 4 baskets with varying amounts of fruit in each one]

When I was growing up our neighbors had a vineyard. I can remember playing football in our backyard and stopping to eat so many grapes that I would get a stomachache. I also have memories of throwing grapes at my sisters – they left great stains on their pretty dresses! For some reason the owner of these grapevines let us gorge on as many grapes as we wanted. We’d pick pails of them when they were ripe and make grape juice, grape jelly, grape pies, grape brownies, grape fillets, grape lasagna and grape casseroles. We included grapes in everything! They became condiments or the main course, depending on how big the harvest was.

Over time, the owner of the grapevines got sick and was no longer able to take care of his vineyard. The vines became overgrown and the grapes got smaller. Each year the harvest dropped significantly, until only grape cadavers were available (that’s what raisins are, by the way).

Now, in contrast to our neighbor’s negligent vineyard, the largest grapevine in the world is over 240 years old, located in England, called simply the “Great Vine.” [**Show PPT slide**]

This vine grows in a greenhouse, where a man and his wife, who serve as the vine keepers, have the responsibility of caring for this magnificent plant. This competent and caring couple do everything they can to keep the vine alive so that it will produce fruit – amazingly, this one grapevine still yields between 500 and 700 bunches of grapes each year!

Please turn in your Bible to John 15:1-5 and follow along as I read: ***“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2Every 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. 3Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide 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. 5I 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.”***

Last week we drilled down into John 14 where Jesus declared that He is the only way to the Father. The focus was on salvation; today we’re going to look at our sanctification. We learned about coming to faith and now we’re going to challenged to be fruitful. We’re moving from knowing Christ to growing *in* Christ. Here’s our big idea today: *If we are faithful, God will make us fruitful.*

The sermon last week was strong, wasn’t? There’s no watering down what Jesus said. *If we believe the Bible, we must say that Jesus is the only way.* A new Edgewood member posted something on Facebook this week that made me smile: *“I’m looking forward to the sermon this weekend and I think I'll have a girl from work with me. She wanted to make sure our pastor wasn't a ‘feel good’ pastor. I knew what she meant and told her to buckle up for a truth filled sermon…”* I take that as a compliment.

When Jesus says that He is the Vine, He is employing an image that is very familiar to His followers. He often used elements from nature to illustrate His teaching – water, seeds, soil, wheat, fig trees, flowers and birds. Grapes were common everywhere and have always been central to Israel’s agriculture and economy. In fact, the grapevine was the emblem of Israel, much like the Bald Eagle is for us. Grapes appeared on coins during the period between Malachi and Matthew. At the time of Jesus, a golden vine hung over the entrance to the Temple.

In our culture, it would be as if Jesus were walking through a field of corn or soybeans and drawing life lessons from them. But the image of the vine and its fruit has far deeper spiritual symbolism. The grapevine represented Israel’s fruitfulness in doing God’s work on earth. Psalm 80:8: ***“You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.”*** Unfortunately, His people neglected to keep the vine nourished and, as a result, they ended up going wild and losing their fruit. We see that in verses 12-13: ***“Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.”***

## God’s Grape Expectations

God has always had “grape expectations” for His followers. He is so sold on fruitfulness that He breaks out into a sad song in Isaiah 5:1-4. Instead of producing sweet grapes, His people had offered only sour substitutes: ***“Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?”***

This lament continues in another refrain in Jeremiah 2:21: ***“Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?”***  God’s people had become like Zombie grapevines – that sounds like the title to a horror movie! Actually, it was horrible – they were filled with hypocrisy, greed, and all kinds of evil instead of the fruits of righteousness, justice, and mercy.

God’s desire has always been for His people to be fruitful. This goes all the way back to Genesis 1:28 when He said, ***“Be fruitful and increase in number.”*** In fact, a Christian who does not produce fruit is a contradiction in terms. According to John15:16, we have been chosen to bear fruit ***“that will last.”***  We just sang about that a few minutes ago: *“Like a tree planted by the water we will never run dry. Its time for us to more than just survive, we were made to thrive.”*

In an unforgettable display of God’s expectations of fruit for us, Matthew 21:19 tells us that one day Jesus went for a walk ***“and seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it and found nothing on it but only leaves. And he said to it, ‘May no fruit ever come from you again!’ And the fig tree withered at once.”*** It is unacceptable and unnatural for a follower of Christ to be unfruitful.

Now, let’s set the context for today’s text. Next weekend is Palm Sunday in which we remember Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem as depicted in John 12:13: ***“They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!’”*** Amidst the excitement, Jesus drops a bombshell and tells them that He is going to die. He then gathers His disciples together in a quiet place, in the upper room for one last supper. Lamb is served for the Passover meal because He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Bread is broken because He is the bread of life and the fruit of the vine is consumed because He is the true vine.

He then provides comfort to the distraught disciples in John 14:1 by saying, ***“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”***  Later in this chapter He promises that the Holy Spirit will be their encourager, teacher, and comforter. Look now at the last phrase of the last verse of chapter 14: ***“Rise, let us go from here.”***

During this time of year there would have been a full moon casting light on a variety of vineyards on the lower slopes of the hill as they’re walking to Gethsemane. It’s likely Jesus stopped and held up a vine filled with blossoms of a promising harvest and said, ***“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.”*** This is a remarkable revelation and quite a contrast as the scene changes from palm branches in the midst of a noisy crowd to the leaves of a vine on a quiet night.

## Characters in the Vineyard

There are three characters in this extended allegory.

**1. Jesus is the true vine** (1a).The word ***“vine”*** literally means, “root,” or “trunk.” It’s the part that comes out of the ground and is often not much to look at. This is a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:2: ***“For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.”***

In contrast to faithless and fruitless Israel, Jesus is the fulfillment of all that they were not. We could translate it this way: *“I myself am the vine, the real one.”* The word ***“true”*** means, *“genuine and real.”*  This claim of Jesus is a manifestation of His Messiahship.

**2. The Father is the farmer** (1b-2).The ***“vinedresser”*** is literally, *“one who tills.”* The gardener’s primary task is to grow grapes. In order for that to happen, the ground must be cultivated and fertilized, pests must be controlled, weeds must be pulled, the roots must receive water, the vines must be cared for, the grapes must be cleaned, and pruning must take place. A vine needs a gardener in order to produce grapes.

A vineyard is planted for a different purpose than a flower garden. We plant flowers because they’re pretty. A vineyard is planted in order to get grapes. The goal is not flowers, but fruit.

**3. We are the branches** (2-5). Our job is simple. *If we are faithful, God will make us fruitful*. And the only way for that to happen is if we stay tenaciously and faithfully connected to the foundation of the trunk.

## A Walk in the Vineyard

### Are you ready to buckle up? I see four levels of fruitbearing in our passage that are demonstrated with these four baskets.

#### Basket 1 (verse 2a) *“does not bear fruit”* NO FRUIT

**Basket 2** (verse 2b) ***“does bear fruit”* MEAGER FRUIT**

**Basket 3** (verse 2c) ***“bear more fruit”* MORE FRUIT**

**Basket 4** (verse 5) ***“bears much fruit”* MUCH FRUIT**

One author believes that *50%* of all Christians bear little fruit and only about *5%* bear a lot of fruit. Do you think that’s true?

Here’s the principle. God the Gardener loves us so much, and is so committed to displaying His glory, that He actively cultivates our lives so that we will move from no fruit, to meager fruit, to more fruit, to much fruit. Friend, which basket represents your life right now? If today were harvest day, how many grapes would be in your basket?

Here’s the good news. More is always possible because you and I were created for this very purpose. According to Matthew 7:20 fruit bearing is a sign of spiritual life: ***“Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”***

**4 Fruit Baskets**

Let’s look first at the basket with no fruit.

John 15:2 has been the cause of a lot of confusion because it seems like its saying that a Christian can lose his or her salvation: ***“He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit.”*** Verse 6 adds: ***“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.”***  Let me say it clearly. If you’re truly saved, you’re totally secure. Eternal life is eternal. John 10:28-29: ***“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”***

The simple explanation comes from the context. Just hours before, Jesus announced that there was a traitor on the team. In John 13:10 Jesus said, ***“And you are clean, but not all of you,”*** referring to Judas. A couple chapters later in John 17:12, Jesus said, ***“Not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction.”***  Judas had no fruit because he had no faith. His real god was greed. As a result, he was cut off and thrown into the fire. John the Baptist shook up the religious crowd when he said this in Matthew 3:10: ***“Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”***

This is similar to what we read in Romans 11:20 where Israel is pictured as an olive tree and some branches are broken off because of unbelief. In their place, believing Gentiles are grafted in. This is shocking to many Jewish people because they think they’re good to go. But, if they don’t confess Christ, they will be cut off.

Listen. Some of you are holding on to your church background even though you might not have Christian belief. You can be connected to a church and not be converted. I talk to some who assure me quickly that they’ve been Baptist all their life but there doesn’t appear to be any fruit. Let me say it this way. If you don’t have any fruit (pick up basket), it might be because you don’t have saving faith. You may think you’re a Christian but you’re not following Christ. A true Christian *will bear fruit.*

Let’s focus now on the other three baskets. How do we move from little fruit to a lot of fruit? How do we go from *meager* fruit to *more* fruit to *much* fruit? *If we are faithful, God will make us fruitful.*

**Finding Fruit**

There are three ways to grow more fruit according to this passage.

**1. Prepare for Pruning.** Notice the last part of John 15:2: ***“…every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”*** [ **Hold up Baskets #2** **and #3**] Pruning is done so that those who bear a meager amount of fruit will bear more fruit.

New shoots, called “sucker shoots,” must be sliced off because they can end up sucking the life out of the vine, causing grapes to not grow. I’m told that most new grape growers fail because they don’t prune enough. Good pruning creates a strong root system, improves the health of the vine and most importantly, increases the yield.

A watched a video this week about a vineyard in California that covers 30 acres and learned that it takes 500 man-hours to prune 13,000 vines. The wife of the gardener of the Great Vine in England spends about three months a year scraping branches with a knife in order to remove loose flakes of bark. She does this because grapevines have numerous parasites. Pruning must take place in order for grapes to grow. Dead wood must be ruthlessly removed and live wood must be cut back drastically. I saw this near our house this week when a whole row of bushes were totally cut back because they were getting out of control. You and I have been reborn in order to reproduce but the only way for that to happen is through a painful purging process.

Bruce Wilkinson describes what happened when he moved to the country one spring. The fence that he shared with his neighbor had a large grape vine on it and he and his family were looking forward to enjoying some juicy grapes that fall. A couple days later he noticed his neighbor was hacking away at the vine with some large shears so he went outside and asked, *“I guess you don’t like grapes?”* The neighbor replied that he loves grapes. Seeing the confusion on his face, the gardener explained, *“Well, son, we can either grow ourselves a lot of beautiful leaves filling up this whole fence line. Or we can have the biggest, juiciest, sweetest grapes you and your family have ever seen. We just can’t have both.”*

Let’s go back to the purpose of a vineyard. The goal is grapes, not lush leaves or creative colors. Everything else must be sacrificed for the sake of the harvest. Are you being pruned right now? If so, ponder these points:

* **God does not prune us indiscriminately.** He knows what He’s doing because He always follows a precise plan. Since He’s working to make us more like Christ, He only removes what is necessary and avoids unnecessary injury.
* **Pruning involves pain.** The Father’s pruning knife is sharp but it is not designed to ultimately damage or destroy us. He uses all sorts of unpleasant things to prune us – circumstances, failures, ruptured relationships, illnesses, and trials in order to get us to bear more fruit.
* **Pruning can last a long time.** The pruning process doesn’t continue for one day, or for one week, or one year. We really can’t say, *“Well, I’ve been through that, and I’m glad there’s no more pain coming my way.”* In fact, the longer a grapevine is alive, the more pruning it needs. Some of us who are older in our faith may need more pruning than we think we do.

Is God pruning you right now? If so, remember it’s not ultimately for your pain but for your gain and for His glory. David realized this when he wrote in Psalm 119:67, 71 ***“Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word…It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.”*** Do you want to be more fruitful than you are right now? The only way for that to happen is to go under the knife.

**2. Deal with discipline.** Look at verse 3: ***“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.”*** In the natural course of time, a branch will grow rapidly but will not necessarily go where it should. Left to itself, it will head to the ground, where it will become coated with dust and eventually get covered with mud and mildew. A gentle gardener will pick up the branch, wash it off, and tenderly tuck its tendrils back into the trellis where it can do what it was created to do – bear fruit.

Friend, are you playing around in the mud of sin? Allow the heavenly gardener to clean you off and pick you up. Sometimes He sends discipline our way in order to get our attention. These painful measures are designed to bring us to repentance so that we can get back to the business of bearing fruit. This has been referred to as *“the best good news you didn’t want to hear.”*

Deal with the discipline that God may be sending your way and remember that the Gardener corrects in order to redirect. Hebrews 12:11: ***“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”*** The Gardener has plans for you, and His actions are intended to move you towards the place He wants you to be. Sometimes He disturbs our slumber so He can shock us with growth.

He also uses the Bible to get our attention. Listen to Hebrews 4:12 in the New Living Translation: ***“For the Word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are.”*** We see this in John 15:3 where Jesus says that He uses His Word to cleanse us.

You may wonder what the difference is between discipline and pruning. While they both hurt and they’re both for our good, discipline primarily comes as a result of sin while pruning deals with the problem of self.

You don’t have to stay where you are right now. You can fast forward to fruitfulness but you must run to Him, not away from Him any longer. God’s discipline is always intended to be redemptive and restorative. He is more interested in propelling you toward fruitfulness than He is in punishing you. Is there a meager amount of fruit in your basket? Don’t spend a minute longer languishing in the muck and mire of sin. You are not stuck where you are with no way out. Allow Him to lift you up. *If we are faithful, God will make us fruitful.*

I love the prayer found in Psalm 80: ***“Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine…Then we shall not turn back from you; give us life, and we will call upon your name! Restore us, O Lord God of hosts!”*** (Psalm 80:14, 18-19).

**3. Resolutely remain in Christ.** When we come to verses 4-5, we see the first command in the passage: ***“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 we want our baskets to be full of fruit, then we must actively abide in Christ [**Hold up Basket #4**].

This is a call to vigilance. We must stay closely connected to Christ at all times. To ***“abide”*** means, *“to stay,”* *“to dwell or remain,”* or *“to settle in for the long term.”* Jesus is saying something like this: *“Live in such a manner that you are at home in Me and that I am at home in you.”* The word ***“abide”*** is used 11 times in John 15 and 40 times in the Gospel of John.

John 15:8: ***“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.”*** This is not a suggestion but an imperative. When we settle in with the Savior we will demonstrate abundant fruitfulness and bring glory to God. Conversely, if we do not remain in fellowship with Christ, our baskets will be barren and we’ll bomb out spiritually.

Listen, apart from Christ, you will not be able to grow fruit that remains: ***“For apart from me you can do nothing.”*** 2 Corinthians 3:5: ***“Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.”***

I was curious to see if there are any grapevines still growing in my old neighbor’s backyard. I know the woman who lives in the house we grew up in so I asked her to send a picture of how things look 40 years later. What do you think I found? Nothing. Zero. Nada. No trace of any grapes or grapevines or grape cadavers anywhere.

If you have the courage to take a look at your life and can’t find any fruit, you need to figure out why that is. Perhaps you’re not saved or maybe you need to repent of some sin in your life.

The Christian life is a supernatural life and none of us can live it apart from a dogged dependence on Christ. We can do nothing apart from Him. All our attempts to produce Christian character will be fruitless and frustrating apart from cultivating a close relationship with the Vine. Have you been drifting spiritually? Are you neglecting the spiritual disciplines? A branch disengaged from the vine will dry up and decay. It’s time to strengthen your attachment to Him. James 4:8 says, ***“Come near to God and he will come near to you…”***

Here’s the encouraging thing. Our job is not to produce fruit, but to bear fruit. Faithfulness is our obligation; fruitfulness is God’s concern. It’s not a matter of me trying to get some fruit to flourish; my job is to trust and obey and abide, and He will grow His fruit in me and through me. My responsibility is to stay as close connected to the vine as I can. *When I am faithful, I will be fruitful.*

The result of spiritual fruitfulness is that God will be glorified, we will grow and we will go with the gospel so that others will come to Christ.

One example of a woman who is both faithful and fruitful is Ruth Darr. Ruth’s greatest thrill is to invite people to Edgewood and to see Jesus help them make a comeback in their lives: *“The joy of my life is to help people come to Jesus or come back to Him if they’ve been straying.”* Ruth is struggling with failing eyesight. This motivates her: *“I’m doing what I can while I can. I might lose my eyesight but will never lose my vision. That’s a promise.”* You can see Ruth and her guests every Sunday in the second row. She also fills up a table with people during SecondWinders.

How about you? Will you take a yard sign and some invites and do what you can, while you can?

As the playwright George Bernard Shaw was nearing the end of his life, a reporter asked him a question: *“If you could live your life over and be anybody you’ve known, or any person from history, who would you be?”* Shaw thought for a moment and then replied, *“I would choose to be the man George Bernard Shaw could have been, but never was.”*

Be the man or woman God has created you to be. He has formed you for fruitfulness. Prepare for some precise pruning. Deal with discipline. And resolutely remain in Christ. If you do, you’ll have more fruit than you can handle.

It’s time to ask Christ to take our lives and use them for His glory because apart from Christ the Vine we *are* nothing and can *do* nothing. *When we are faithful, God will make us fruitful.*

**Closing Song: “Take My Life”**

*Here am I, all of me. Take my life, it’s all for Thee.*