

Join in the Mission of Jesus

John 15:1-5, 8

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Where I grew up, our neighbors had a vineyard. I remember playing football in our backyard and stopping to eat so many grapes I would get a stomachache. Also, I 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. When they were ripe, we'd pick pails of them 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 became sick and was no longer able to take care of his vineyard. The vines became overgrown with weeds and the grapes were 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 250 years old, located in England, called simply the "Great Vine."

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 it will produce fruit – amazingly, this one grapevine still yields between 500 and 700 pounds of grapes each year!

Our topic today is, "Join in the Mission of Jesus" from John 15. Here's the main idea: *If we faithfully follow Jesus, He will make us fruitful.*

We're wrapping up our Discipleship Matters series this weekend. By way of reminder, here's a summary of what we've learned.

1. **Discipleship Defined:** *A disciple is a believer who lovingly follows Jesus and intentionally helps others follow Him.*
2. **Live in Light of God's Word:** *A disciple loves, learns and lives God's Word.*
3. **Love Like Jesus Loves:** *A disciple is one who loves like Jesus loves.*

4. **Love Jesus Above All:** *A disciple loves Jesus more than anyone or anything else.*
5. **Deny Your Dark Side:** *A disciple must deny self before following the Savior.*
6. **Daily Embrace the Lord's Will:** *A disciple must die to his own desires daily.*
7. **Follow Jesus by Obeying Him:** *A disciple is one who follows Jesus no matter what.*

Let's stand and read John 15:1-5, 8 together: ***"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing...by this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."***

By saying He was the vine, Jesus was employing an image 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 have always been central to Israel's agriculture and economy and were found everywhere. 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 this in Psalm 80:12-13: ***"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. Instead of producing sweet grapes, according to Jeremiah 2:21, His people had offered only sour substitutes: ***“Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?”***

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 multiply and fill the earth...”*** This call to be fruitful was repeated and reinforced after the flood in Genesis 9:1: ***“And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...’”***

Since a disciple must exhibit fruit which comes from faithfully following Jesus, a Christ-follower who does not produce fruit is a contradiction in terms.

An unforgettable display of Christ's expectations for fruit-bearing followers is found in Matthew 21:19. 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.

After leaving the upper room where they celebrated the last supper, Jesus and the disciples walked to the Garden of Gethsamene. During that time of the year, there would have been a full moon casting light on a variety of vineyards on the lower slopes of the hill. It's possible 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 from a few days earlier 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 they were not. It could be translated like this: *“I myself am the vine, the real one.”* The word **“the true”** means, *“the trustworthy, genuine, and real one.”* This claim of Jesus is a manifestation of His Messiahship.

There’s more going on here. This is the seventh time in the Gospel of John that Jesus used the phrase, **“I am...”** linked to some vivid metaphors – **“I am the bread of life...I am the light of the world...I am the door of the sheep...I am the good shepherd...I am the resurrection and the life...I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”** The **“I am”** hearkens back to Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush when God self-identified as **“I AM WHO I AM”** (Exodus 3:14). Jesus is calling Himself Yahweh.

2. The Father is the farmer (1b-2). The **“vinedresser”** is literally, *“one who farms or tills.”* The gardener’s primary task is to grow grapes. In order for growth to happen, the ground must be cultivated and fertilized, pests must be controlled, weeds must be pulled, roots must be watered, vines must be cared for, grapes must be cleaned, and vines must be pruned. 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 faithfully follow Jesus, He will make us fruitful.* The only way for fruit to form is if the branch remains tenaciously connected to the foundation of the trunk.

A Walk in the Vineyard

I see four levels of fruitbearing in our passage.

(verse 2a)	“does not bear fruit”	MUTED FRUIT
(verse 2b)	“does bear fruit”	MINIMAL FRUIT
(verse 2c)	“bear more fruit”	MORE FRUIT
(verse 5)	“bears much fruit”	MUCH FRUIT

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

John 15:16 tells us God expects us to bear fruit. That's why we're alive today, ***"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide..."*** Here's the principle. God the Gardener loves us so much, and is so committed to displaying His glory, He actively prunes, purges and purifies our lives so we will move from muted fruit, to minimal fruit, to more fruit, to much fruit. If today were harvest day, how much fruit would you have?

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."***

John 15:2 has caused a lot of confusion because it seems like its saying a Christian can lose his or her salvation: ***"Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away..."*** 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.

During this series, we've been lifting up the importance of disciples who make disciples. Our heart is to connect everyone at Edgewood in a discipling relationship. If you want to be discipled, we'll do our best to get you together with someone who can disciple you. If you want to disciple someone, we'll work at finding someone for you to disciple. Or better yet, you could begin praying for someone to disciple and see who God leads you to. If you're interested in being intentional in your discipleship, I invite you to an Exploratory Meeting this Thursday night at 7pm.

Right now, there are at least 30 people in disciplemaking relationships. We're using a guide called, "Growing in Christ," which utilizes Scripture memory and Bible Study to help new and growing believers grow in assurance and develop disciplines for Christian living. The first passage to memoize is 1 John 5:11-12: ***"And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life."***

I've been meeting with a new believer named Andy and we just finished memorizing this amazing promise of eternal security. One of the questions in the first study focused on what kind of fruit a believer is seeing. It made me smile to see Andy checked every box.

- √ Inner peace
- √ New awareness of sin
- √ Victory over sin
- √ New love for God
- √ Desire to read the Bible
- √ Attitude changes
- √ Sense of forgiveness
- √ New concern for others.

The simple explanation of a cut off and thrown away branch comes from the context. Just hours before, in John 13:10, Jesus announced there was a traitor on the team, "***And you are clean, but not all of you,***" referring to Judas. 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 since his real god was greed. As a result, he was cut off and thrown into the fire.

How do we move from little fruit to a lot of fruit? How do we go from *minimal* fruit to *more* fruit to *much* fruit? *If we faithfully follow Jesus, He will make us fruitful.*

Finding Fruit

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

1. Expect pruning. Notice the last part of John 15:2: "***...every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.***" The person with false faith is cut off while the faithful follower is cut back. If the branch is not fruitful, the Farmer removes it, but if it bears minimal fruit, He prunes it so it will have more fruit. I like the old English in the Adams Clarke Commentary: "*The branch which bears not fruit, the husbandman taketh IT away; but the branch that beareth fruit, he taketh away FROM it...everything that might hinder its increasing fruitfulness.*"

It makes sense the Gardener would remove the upproductive branch, but we don't really like that He prunes the productive ones also. Jesus performs the ministry of

pruning and purifying on “*every branch.*” No one is exempt from the cutting and cleansing which comes from the caring hands of our gracious Gardener.

We tend to think productive branches just need a gentle trim but personal pruning is often way beyond what we think we need. During certain times of the year, some grapevines are reduced in size by 80-90%.

I’m told 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.

Some time ago, I watched a video about a vineyard in California that covers 30 acres and learned 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. You and I have been reborn in order to reproduce, but the only way for that to happen is through a painful purifying and purging process. Pruning yields a bigger and better crop. We all need this because we come into the Christian life with our flesh and the world in us. God is gracious not to hack it all away at once or we’d never survive. But if we want to be like Christ, it’s got to go. (idea from another pastor)

One author wrote about a large grape vine on the fence he shared with his neighbor. 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. He went outside and asked, “*I guess you don’t like grapes?*” The neighbor replied 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. Because the goal is to grow grapes, the focus is all about fruit, not the lush leaves or the creative colors. Everything else must be sacrificed for the sake of the harvest. Are you being purified or pruned right now? If so, ponder these points:

- **God does not prune us indiscriminately.** Because He always follows a precise plan, He knows what He’s doing. 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 may last longer than a day, or a week, or a 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. Allow the Word to wash you. 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.

Brothers and sisters, 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 us back on track. These painful measures are designed to bring us to repentance so we can bear fruit again. This has been referred to as “*the best good news you didn’t want to hear.*”

Remember, 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. 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.

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

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 minimal fruit in your life? If so, prepare for some pruning. *If we faithfully follow Jesus, He 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. Stay connected to 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.”***

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, 40 times in the Gospel of John, and 27 times in John's epistles.

This is a call to vigilance. We must stay closely connected to Christ at all times. If you abide in Christ, you *will* produce fruit for the glory of God. Fruit happens when we hold on to Christ. A branch doesn't struggle to grow grapes if it stays connected to the life source.

Some of us think fruit bearing is difficult and just for the super saints. Actually, it's not hard at all to bear fruit. Your responsibility is to be faithful and fruit is the result. If we want our baskets to be full of fruit, then we must stay connected to Christ.

Faithfulness is our obligation; fruitfulness is God's concern. It's not a matter of me trying to get some fruit to flourish; my task is to trust, obey, and abide, and He will grow His fruit in me and through me. My responsibility is to stay as closely connected to the vine as I can. *If we faithfully follow Jesus, He will make us fruitful.*

I'm not in charge of the quality or quantity of my fruit. My responsibility is to stay connected to the vine. He will produce the quality and quantity that brings the most glory to Him. The result of spiritual fruitfulness is that God will be glorified, we will grow, and we will go with the gospel so others will come to Christ and be disciplined.

Discipleship is all about having a close, growing relationship with Jesus Christ. The phrase "*in me*" is used six times! There are a lot of people "*in*" church or "*in*" religion but that doesn't mean they are "*in*" Christ.

Apart from Christ, you will not be able to grow fruit: "***For apart from me you can do nothing.***" The word "***nothing***" means, "*not even one thing, not the least thing.*" Our work and our witness is completely worthless if we try to do it on our own.

What does bearing fruit look like? Steven Cole suggest three basic fruits we should see when we stay faithfully connected to Christ.

1. We become more like Him. Colossians 1:10: "***So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.***"
2. We behave more like Him by living out the Fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22-25: "***But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.***"
3. We are burdened for souls like He is. John 4:35: "***Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest.***"

A few years ago, 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 50 years later. What do you think I found? Nothing. Not even one. Zero. Zilch. Nada. No trace of any grapes or grapevines or grape cadavers anywhere.

If you have the courage, take a look at your life. If you can't find any fruit, you need to figure out why that is. Perhaps you're not saved, or 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...***"

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 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.

- Expect some pruning.
- Allow the Word to wash you.
- Stay connected to 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. *If we faithfully follow Jesus, He will make us fruitful.*

I close with John 15:8: "***By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.***" When we bear much fruit we give evidence to being His disciple. When we faithfully follow Him, we will intentionally help others to do the same...and that's fruit that will last.

Recently, Matt Williams was teaching at Mainspring and asked how many young adults were in a discipling relationship. Nearly everyone raised their hand! Watch this video which shows a young disciple in our Mainspring Ministry exhibiting the fruit which comes from faithfully following Jesus.

Video – Reagan LaBerge