

## The Father-farmer and Fruit

<sup>1</sup> “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. <sup>5</sup> “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. (John 15:1–8)

Last week, I was in Cape Town. As the church-planter we support took me around, one of the places we visited was a camp site, that is bordered by the property of a farmer. He had acres and acres of grapevines. They were in neat rows, all of them trained and tied to wire and wood trestles and trellises. They were just beginning to sprout their spring growth. You could see two things had happened. They had been soaked by the winter rains, and they had clearly been pruned back. A summertime of harvest awaits that farmer.

It was that image that Jesus used to explain the Christian life. As Jesus talked with His disciples in the last night before the Crucifixion, He gave them what we've called a Master-Class on the Christian life. He taught them how to live the Christian life without Jesus physically there to guide them. And we saw that as Jesus taught them, He likely moved the eleven from the Upper Room and headed to Gethsemane. He may have passed actual grapevines on the way. According to Josephus, the Temple at the time had a golden vine with grape clusters hanging from it. Perhaps they passed that, and Jesus began teaching on the Christian life by comparing it to a vine.

Now when we introduced this image last time, we did a flyover of the whole thing. We split this image up into the Actors, their Actions and the Accomplishment. The actors are three: vinedresser – The Father, the Vine – Christ, and the branches – true or false disciples. The actions are those of the vinedresser towards the branches, and then the actions of the branches themselves – abiding or not abiding. The accomplishment was the fruit – and we saw four kinds – no fruit, some fruit, more fruit, and much fruit. If the vine is Christ, then the fruit must be His life externalised. Christlikeness in His people.

Today, we want to look more closely at the actions of the Father, the vine-dresser. We want to spend time studying what He does.

Failure to understand what God is doing often leads to disillusionment, and even despair. Christians sometimes ask, “Is God angry with me? What have I done wrong to end up with these problems?” The opposite happens with some, where their relatively problem-free life leads them into a false sense of security.

Understanding how God is dealing with us helps us understand where we are with respect to Him. Am I truly one of the branches? Then I should expect certain actions of the Father toward me. Am I not in Christ? Then the Father's actions will be different toward me. Locate yourself in this image, and you can take the right action to respond to God.

### I. He Props Up Fruitless Branches

Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Now I believe what we have here in the beginning of verse 2 is something different to what we have in verse 6. The key difference is that in verse 2, Jesus speaks of branches in Me. However in verse 6, He explicitly tells us that some branches are not in Him. So all kinds of interpretive problems have come about as interpreters connect verse 2 with verse 6, thinking that the fruitless branches of verse 2, must also be the branches cast into the fire of verse 6.

And though it's easy to see a similarity, similarity does not mean identity. In fact, when we link those two verses, we end up quite a few theological problems, trying to explain how a branch in Christ can be removed. When you take the verses that way, these verses become proof texts for Arminians trying to show that true Christian can be lost.

Instead, I think what we have in verse 2 is two kinds of genuine Christians, and verse 6 speaks of false believers.

Now let's look at verse 2 again. He says, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away." Some branches that are in the Vine, genuinely growing out of the true vine seem to have no fruit. So what does the vinedresser do? The words in almost any English translation will be "takes away". Now that is a valid way of translating this Greek word, *airo*. It's a very common word in the NT, 102 times. It's translated take, take up, take away, carry, collect, bear, bear up, lift, raise up. So you can validly translate it as take away, if your eye is on verse 6, and you think they are referring to the same thing. But importantly, it is never translated in the Bible, or anywhere else, as cut off.

But you can also validly translate this as "lift up", "takes up", "raises". It's used that way 34 times in the NT.

And in fact, when it comes to grape vines, that's exactly what vinedressers do. If the branches of a vine are not lifted up and supported by some kind of trellis, they end up in the dust. They tend to naturally trail down and grow along the ground. In that place, they do not bear fruit. They don't die, but they won't bear fruit, because they are muddy, and if it rains, covered with mildew.

So if a vinedresser finds a real branch from the real vine lying in the dust, he's not going to do verse 6: cast it out. He will lift up, he might wash it off, and then get it supported so it can be in a fruit-bearing position again. The farmer supports those cast down branches to get them from no fruit to some fruit.

That would make these branches true Christians who are not bearing fruit, and this is the Father's action to restore them. This raises the question, can a true Christian be fruitless? The answer of the Bible, and even the answer of this image is, only temporarily. If a branch is truly in the vine, and it is not fallen in the dirt, it will eventually produce fruit. If it is alive, if it is in the vine, it will bear fruit.

<sup>8</sup> For if these things are yours and abound, *you* will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:8)

But I wonder if every Christian here doesn't have a testimony of times of virtual fruitlessness in their lives. Times when worldliness seemed to have the upper hand. Times when some besetting sin choked out everything else. Times when your heart drifted away, and your prayer life went silent, your times in the Word were few and far between. Periods when your witness for Christ was non-existent; you seemed more like the unsaved than unlike them. The writer of Hebrews tells his

readers they are guilty of arrested development: when they should be able to handle meat, their growth has been so minimal, they still need milk.

Now I do not hold to the view of some free-grace advocates that you can be a permanently backslidden Christian, a permanently fruitless believer. No, because, if you are in the vine, the Father is going to get you back to a place where you can bear fruit.

So what would it mean if the Father lifts up, or takes up the believer who is fruitless? Well, we have to be careful of reading too much into every minute detail of an image, and try to find a spiritual analogy for every action. I think we are safe if we simply conclude that the Father is going to work on believers who are not bearing fruit and get them out of the pattern of life that is hindering fruitbearing, and back into a position of bearing fruit.

That could be the discipline we read of in Hebrews 12. It could be warnings and admonitions. It could be encouragements for the fainthearted and discouraged. It could be providing structure and discipline for the weak Christian.

King David fell into a period of fruitlessness, when he sinned greatly against God in his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband, and he says in Psalm 32 : “For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah” (Psalm 32:4)

But if you are a believer who has fallen into a pattern of little to no fruit, then something is happening in your life right now to urge you back into the Word, to urge you back into prayer, to persuade, warn, call you back to regular fellowship, to repent of that besetting sin. It might be a leanness in your soul, a restlessness in your spirit. It might be the unending warning in your conscience. It might be the example and words of other believers urging you to return. It might be living with consequences of sin or disobedience that right now goad you away from more rebellion and towards a loving Father.

Propping up fruitless branches takes them from no fruit to some fruit. That brings us to the second action the Father-Farmer does.

## **II. He Prunes Back Fruitbearing Branches**

and every *branch* that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

From no fruit to some fruit. Branches that bear no fruit are lifted so that they can bear some fruit. And once they bear fruit, the Father takes another action. Instead of just picking the little fruit they are bearing, He prunes them, cuts them back, so that their little fruit can become more fruit.

And you can take a guess what happens to you as a branch once you bear more fruit. He will prune you again, so that your more fruit becomes much fruit.

<sup>5</sup> “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing... <sup>8</sup> By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. (John 15:5, 8)

When God made the world, He filled everything with analogies and meanings for us to discover. He didn't just think of the analogies after He had made things; He made all things with lessons built into them. He made sheep with all the lessons we'd get from sheep. He made water with all the lessons we'd get from water.

And God made plants that need pruning so that we'd get all the lessons we can from pruning. Pruning is not something we'd expect. In pruning, outwardly you appear to weaken the plant. You remove what made it look attractive, a lot of green foliage. You seem to strip away life. During pruning and immediately after, the plant looks worse off than when you began.

It seems to be bare, naked, like a shorn sheep. We imagine the plant almost smarting, crying, wounded from such a cutting.

But what does this cutting away produce? In God's world, removing leaves and dead branches produces fruit. You want the actual grapes? Cut away everything that distracts and diverts the sap from producing fruit. Here are words of the owner of a famous vineyard. He wrote, "Why do we prune? Because if the vine is not pruned it reverts very quickly to its wild nature, climbing everywhere with its long, sinewy trunk and tiny, scraggly bunches of uneven grapes. Every year we need to assess the growth of the vines, and decide whether to prune them back harder, or to let them grow a bit bigger, or return them to the same size and shape they were the year before... If we prune correctly the vine will be balanced. That means it will grow just enough."

It sounds like a vinedresser is more than just a butcher of the bushes. He is more like a surgeon of the shrubs. It is thoughtful, careful work.

So what would this look like for Christians, branches in Christ? I doubt I have to tell you, because your own experience has already taught you. For Christlikeness to live and thrive in you, some things must die. Sometimes it is outright sin. But sometimes it is more subtle: good things that have become bad things. It can be demands, rights, entitlements that we need to give up. It might be priorities that need to be reordered. It might be things we are holding too tightly, worldly attachments. It might spiritual disciplines or duties we've begin to neglect.

Being pruned is not a sign of failure; it's a sign of fruit. It means there's real Christlike life in you, and Father wishes it thrive, without the draining, choking effects of certain things. Remember in the parable of soils, Jesus spoke of the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful. Well, that has to do with receiving the Gospel, but the very same things can enter a Christian's life.

One of the hymns we sang this morning poetically pictures the pruning process:

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,/ My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;/ The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design/ Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

Or as we sang last week, the word of John Newton:

I asked the Lord that I might grow / in faith and love and every grace;/ might more of His salvation know, / and seek more earnestly His face.

I hoped that in some favoured hour/ at once He'd answer my request,/ and by His love's constraining pow'r/ subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this He made me feel/ the hidden evils of my heart,/ and let the angry pow'rs of hell/ assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed/ intent to aggravate my woe,/ crossed all the fair designs I schemed,/ humbled my heart, and laid me low.

"Lord, why is this?" I trembling cried,/ "Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death?"/ "'Tis in this way," the Lord replied,/ "I answer prayer for grace and faith./

"These inward trials I employ/ from self and pride to set thee free,/ and break thy schemes of earthly joy/ that thou may'st find Thy all in Me."

The deep Gospel secret that is everywhere in plain sight if you have eyes to see is that things must die before they live. Death before resurrection, winter before spring, surrender before victory, emptying before filling, tribulation before the kingdom. We must die daily, as Paul said, submit to a thousand small deaths, small cuttings so that life, and life in abundance may be manifest in us.

<sup>8</sup> *We are* hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—<sup>10</sup> always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. (2 Corinthians 4:8–10)

Now the pruning will happen, you don't have to ask for it, nor can you politely decline it. But you can learn to trust the One who prunes. You can learn to sense that those cuts and losses are not malicious, but necessary deaths for you to really live.

Spurgeon “Learn, beloved, especially you under trial, not to see an angry God in your pains, losses or crosses; but instead see a vinedresser, who thinks you a branch whom he estimates at so great a rate that he will take the trouble to prune you, which he would not do if he had not a kind consideration towards you. The real reason is that more fruit may be produced.”

Such is His care to those branches in Christ. But there is a third action He takes for branches not in Christ.

### **III. He Plucks Out Dead Branches**

<sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned.

When a vine grows older, it becomes very large. In Hampton Court near London, there is the oldest known grape vine in the world. Planted in 1768, now over 250 years old, it is 4 metres thick at its base, and its longest branch is 36 metres long. A plant does not need to be that big before you will have branches from other plants growing in and among the true branches.

One of Jesus' ways of speaking of unbelievers was to speak of things that look similar, and seem to blend in, but are not. Small goats and small sheep resemble each other from a distance. Wheat and tares look alike. And in a vine, branches may not originate from the true vine, but be in among the branches.

When the vinedresser prunes, he will cut back the extraneous growth on the true branches. But when he finds alien branches, either dead wood, or simply a different plant, he cuts the actual branch, casts it out. Notice, he doesn't lift it, nor does he prune it. He leaves it until he wants to cast it out altogether. Eventually these cuttings become a dry mass of dead wood, fit only for the compost heap or the burn-pile.

Now it is not hard to understand who Jesus is speaking about. As we'll see next week abiding in Him speaks both of initial faith in Him, and continuing faith in Him. To abide in Christ is both positional, to be a believer in Christ, and flowing out of that is practice of persevering in Him, remaining in Him in living communion.

Someone who does not abide in Christ is someone who is not in the vine to begin with, and so does not continue in the vine. In fact, there was a glaring example that very night for the eleven disciples: Judas. Judas had appeared like a disciple, truly chosen to the office of apostle, given privileges, and indeed power. But Jesus called Judas a devil in year one of His ministry, and again said that one of

them was not clean, that very night. Judas had never repented, believed, and become one of the branches. So it was only a matter of time before the Father would expose him as a false branch, and eventually judge him for his deceit.

Jesus uses this language several times.

<sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 7:19)

<sup>13</sup> But He answered and said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. (Matthew 15:13)

John the Baptist had also said, "Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." (Matthew 3:10)

I don't think this is just the loss of rewards; this is the loss of eternal life. But it happens to those who reject and refuse the life that is in Christ. They are eventually exposed as those not in the vine, and cast out.

It's important to understand that there are two phases to this. There is an imperfect phase, and a perfected phase. The imperfect phase is done now by the church. The church has a responsibility to define who is in the Vine, and who is not. And it does so by the means of baptism and membership in the local church, or church discipline. We cannot know what God knows, but we are still commanded to do this work, though it won't be perfect.

But one day it will be perfect, when the Father Himself, on the day of judgement, separates sheep from goats, wheat from chaff, true branches from false, and sends into the fire those who spurned His love, and rejected His mercy.

Now it remains for us to locate ourselves in this image. But if you know nothing of the life of Christ in you, then there is still time to turn to Him. Instead of just looking like you are in the vine, you can truly be in the vine, if you will give up your claim on your own life, stop living for self, and let your Creator be your Saviour, and Lord. Receive the Son and become a child of God, lest one day you be exposed as a false branch, who was never in the vine.

If you are truly in Christ, and the life of Christ is in you, then the Father will seek the reward of His Son's suffering in your life. He will seek the fruit of Christlikeness growing in you. If there is little to none, He is right now chastening, admonishing, strengthening, restoring you so that His image will again be growing in you. If there is Christlikeness, then the pruning shears of trials are in your life, cutting away the green leaves of immaturity, vanity, worldliness, selfishness, and walking by sight.

And if that is the case, then can you join with the Puritan prayer in the Valley of Vision that says, My trials have been fewer than my sins,  
and when I have kissed the rod it has fallen  
from Thy hands.

Thou hast often wiped away my tears,  
restored peace to my mourning heart,  
chastened me for my profit.

All Thy work for me is perfect,  
and I praise thee.