“How Can We Bear the Fruit of Love?”
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John 15:1-4 NIV
I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

Fruit is the central issue in today’s passage. It’s mentioned five times. How can fruit grow in our lives?

Since love is called the greatest commandment by Jesus, and since love is named the first fruit by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control), the question about fruit becomes this question: How can love grow in our lives?

Love is the greatest. Love is not trite. Love is not simplistic, but complex and challenging and wonderful and amazing and significant. Love can transform our soul. To help us understand how love can grow in our lives, Jesus used the metaphor of the grape vineyard in our passage today. Back then, everyone knew about grapes, but today, we are less familiar. We need to understand this metaphor in order to understand the message.

Let’s proceed verse by verse.

John 15:1
1 I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

Jesus is literally saying he is the real vine. This identification must have irritated the Jewish authorities because Israel is named in the Hebrew Scriptures as the vine of God – the true and real vine of God. Jesus does not agree when he says he is the true vine.

Today, we are so familiar with trees and the root, trunk, and branches. Vineyards have the root, the vine, and the branches. God is the gardener or the vinedresser, as some translations have. God takes care of the garden. God has overall responsibility.

Notice that Jesus refers to God as “my Father.” He rarely talks to the disciples using the less personal name of “God.” Jesus uses the personal “my” instead of “our” or “the.” This metaphor is a matter of family. It’s personal. Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. God
the Father has oversight of our relationship with Jesus. God watches, waters, weeds, and waits for the fruit to grow for harvest. How will this growth occur?

**John 15:2**

> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

The word “he” refers to God the Father, of course. Not only does God watch, water, weed, and wait, but God also whacks, as some gardeners call it. God cuts. The polite word is “trim.” The harsh word is “harm.”

Cutting means removing. The gardener who owns a vineyard knows that dead branches are not helpful. They burden the vine. They have to be cut and removed. God doesn’t cut off without discernment. God cuts the branches that don’t bear fruit.

But further, God also prunes.

We must illustrate the difference between cutting and pruning, and leave trimming out of consideration. We trim to create shapes and figures. For example, the Getty Museum in LA has an amazing garden of trimmed hedges and trees. The famous British gardens demonstrate another example of excellent clipping of plants and trees. Trimming can bring forth beauty, but it’s not the central issue in this verse.

Like cutting, pruning is necessary. The vine that is not pruned will produce smaller and smaller grapes that are not tasty. Pruning has to occur. Jesus says branches need to be pruned even though they produce fruit in order that they produce more fruit.

**John 15:3**

> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

The word for clean is “cath” (English: “catharsis”). John used the prefix of the word “prune” to provide help for the disciples and to help them understand Judas.

The disciples are clean (have been pruned) because Jesus spoke to them. Jesus preached to them. Jesus proclaimed God’s Word to them. The very words of Jesus pruned the disciples, and thus made them clean – although not all of them.

It’s interesting to compare this verse to John 13:10 when Jesus responds to the objection by Peter – “Then Lord, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well.” Jesus says, “Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you.” Then John adds a footnote to help us
understand why Jesus said, “Not every one of you.” Verse 11 – “For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean.”

So, how are we pruned? Here’s the simple answer: By hearing, studying, and applying God’s Word.

Let’s look at a few examples from scripture, both from the book of Hebrews.

**Hebrews 4:12-13**

12 For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. 13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

It is God’s Word that prunes and judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing is hidden. Nothing is secret. All is laid bare before God.

Pruning often hurts. It stings. It can be embarrassing. It can hurt our pride. It can wound our souls. To be honest, pruning sometimes feels like God is disciplining us.

**Hebrews 12:4-11**

4 In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, 6 because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? 8 If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. 9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! 10 They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Discipline yields a harvest. Pruning produces good fruit, but at the time it feels unpleasant. If you don’t want to be pruned, if you don’t want to receive the discipline of God in your life, and if you don’t want to grow, then stay away from the Bible!
Stay away from God’s Word!
Stay away from the Word made flesh!
Stay away from Jesus!

But if you want to grow, allow God’s Word to get in you, get to you, get to the very being of your person, and get into your attitudes and actions. Remember the end of the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus identifies the difference between the wise and foolish builders. Both build a home. Both faced the same storms. But the wise man build on a rock which meant he build his home by hearing the Word and putting it into practice, while the foolish man build his home by hearing the Word, but did not put it into practice.

John 15:4
4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

Christ calls you to remain in him. Christ wants you to stay close in him, to be related to him, and to have a relationship with him. To remain in Christ means to be connected to him. It means making your home with Christ and allowing Christ is make his home in you.

Many translations use the word “abide.” NRSV: “Abide in me, as I also abide in you.” I don’t know what the word “abide” means. The Greek word literally means “stick with me.”

Here’s what I think. Jesus wants his disciples to make sure about their relationship with the Master. They are unable to bear fruit unless they stick with him, unless they stay connected to the vine. The vine is the source of all nourishment for the branches. On their own, the branches are nothing.

In a practical way, how can we stick with Jesus? I have four practical suggestions.

**First, listen and talk.**

Listen to what Christ says through the scriptures. Read the Bible. Study in a regular way. Allow God’s Word to rumble in your heart and mind.

Then talk about what you hear. Talk to God! Some call it prayer, but it doesn’t have to begin with “Dear God” and doesn’t have to end with “amen.” Discuss with God about anything on your mind. And when you do talk to God, use any words you so desire.

**Second, meet and eat.**

You can’t make a home with Jesus without contact with others who have similar interest. Meeting means worshipping together. Meeting means fellowship.
And make sure to eat together, especially around the communion table.

I believe in table theology. I have three parts in my table theology. First, sit at a table with people with whom you agree and with whom you don’t agree. Talk. Listen. Discover. Enjoy humanity around the table because humanity is not the same. We are and look different; we talk differently and we think differently. Enjoy the diversity. Second, sit at a table after working together – whether it is helping build a Habitat for Humanity house, or creating clean water for a family in Ghana, or working at Crosslines together, or making sandwiches to give away, or singing to those who are homebound, or helping your neighbors clean out their garage. After working, eat together and laugh and telling stories and cry together and allow the table talk to bond you together. Third, sit at the Lord’s Table together. Break bread and share the cup of blessing. Table theology!

**Third, be personal with others.**

You can’t be personal unless you’re in a small group. My wife and I have been in over thirty small groups. Right now, Joyce leads a small group Bible study once a month at her church, and has dinner with them two weeks later. She also attends a weekly Thursday afternoon study and prayer group.

You can’t be personal unless a group is small enough to be personal with each other. Trust needs to occur, and trust can’t happen in a large group.

If a group is not happening in your area or within your convenience, then start one. Begin by praying. Then look around. I’m convinced God will guide you to the persons who also need a small group just like you.

Thirty-five years ago, I taught the Women’s Bible study at the church I served. Since we had about one hundred women, everyone met in small groups ahead of time. Then I gave a lecture about the same passage they studied. One day, Rosemary wanted to speak to me afterwards. “I'm lonely,” she said. “I need a friend. We just moved here and I need someone I can trust.” David, her husband, had just accepted the Assistant Superintendent position at the Salinas School district. I said, “Let's just pray about it, and ask God to reveal who that person would be.” We prayed right then, and Rosemary promised to continue praying. As she walked to her car, Jean approached her. Jean’s husband had just been hired at Smucker’s. “Rosemary, I’ve been praying to God about a Christian friend, and I just saw you talk and pray with Bob. Can you be my friend?” They hugged each other and cried. Both of their prayers were answered so quickly. Rosemary called me in the afternoon to tell me the good news. “It's so amazing!” she said.
One year later, Rosemary’s husband got dizzy one night. He was 37 years old. After several tests, they discovered he had a brain tumor. Rosemary continued to attend Women’s Bible study even though her heart was broken, and shared honestly with her small group. But, it was her relationship with Jean that gave Rosemary stability. In the evenings, when David came home under hospice care, Rosemary helped him get comfortable in bed and then went into her bathroom. They lived in the country and she could see the stars in the sky through the bathroom window. Each time she would say to herself, “Those stars were seen by Jesus long ago, and he sees me now.” Then she called Jean who asked her every time, “Rosemary, did you look at the stars in the sky?”

You need to be personal if you are going to grow as a Christian.

**Fourth, keep the command to love.**

Love has so many dimensions. It’s not mushy or meek. Love is strong and willful.

*1 Corinthians 13:4-8a*

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. 8 Love never fails.

This week I had a great conversation with a church member about love. Do you think love is a noun or verb? Although the New Testament writer’s use love both ways, the dominant message is about the activity of love. Love is action. Love is making something happen. Love is being a Christian in a practical way.

Love is not theory. Love is not an idea. Love is not thinking or saying. Love is doing.

How can we stick with Jesus? How can we have fruit grow in our lives?

Listen and talk.
Meet and eat.
Be personal with others.
Keep the command to love.