

***John 15:1-8***

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 bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.

"If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.

First of all before we dive into this text, I want to make sure we follow one simple rule of Biblical interpretation. We are to always interpret the difficult by what is easy. Never interpret the easy by what is difficult. At first read, this passage can be somewhat difficult and has caused people to be very concerned about the implications of the imagery that is used when it talks about branches that have dried up and are good for nothing but being tossed into the fire.

The first thing we have to keep in mind is that Jesus is talking to the disciples in parables and as such we have to treat the text as a parable. Secondly, we can determine right off that this has nothing to do with the possibility of a person losing their salvation. Again, we have to always look at what is simple and clear to understand what might otherwise be confusing.

***1 John 5:13***

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.

John tells us that we can know that we have eternal life. It is not something that is in question in any way shape or form. Peter confirms this when He says:

***1 Peter 1:3-5***

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

These words need to become permanently affixed in your brain: an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you. Besides, this promise is protected by the power of God; what better assurance could you have. In addition, in ***John 14:16*** Jesus said that the Father would send the Holy Spirit and He would never leave us. The operative word is “never.” And the Holy Spirit in our lives is the very evidence that we will spend eternity in heaven.

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*Ephesians 1:13-14*

And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.

So based on these passages which are not spoken in a parable and are very easy to understand, it is clear that if you have been born again, then your position in eternity, your inheritance, is safe and secure, protected by God, and will never be jeopardized. Therefore, getting back to our passage in John 15, the first thing we can determine with all certainty is that this passage does not give some veiled threat to believers that they might lose their salvation if they do not remain in the vine. I believe this is why, in *verse 3*, Jesus said, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. In saying this He breaks from the vine and branch metaphor just long enough to throw in this comment about their having been cleansed by the Word of God which they have received. I believe this was Jesus way of giving them assurance that what He was going to say next had nothing to do with the promise of their inheritance, for He has already made them clean; thus, they did not have to worry.

So what is this passage talking about—especially the part about the branches that are tossed into the fire? Well, first and foremost this passage is less about the fire than it is about bearing spiritual fruit—about what He wants to do through you. Remember, in this whole dialogue Jesus has been talking about why we can trust ourselves to Him and in this passage He finds another clever way to elaborate on

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that point. Jesus uses the metaphor of a branch, a vine, and a gardener and He probably picked this metaphor because of their immediate surroundings. Jesus and His disciples had just finished eating the “last supper” and they left the upper room ventured through the city of Jerusalem on their way to the Mount of Olives. They probably passed many vineyards on their way and it prompted this illustration.

Jesus is the vine, the Father is the Gardener or the vinedresser, we are the branches, the unmentioned player is the Holy Spirit who is the sap that comes from the vine, and the fruit is what results from our being connected to the vine and our being nourished by the sap. Let’s look at how this parable describes each of these players.

First of all, Jesus being the vine is the source of life and fruitfulness. The sap flows from the vine; thus, there can be no life for a branch unless it is connected to the vine and there can be no fruit produced except for the vine providing the necessary nutrients to the branches. The vine is firmly planted in the soil and it does not move. Everything that a branch needs the vine provides. The branch does not need to be planted in the soil and it does not need its own source of water; it only needs to be connected to the vine. This imagery is a colorful way for Jesus to communicate the same truths He has been communicating through this final lesson to His disciples: He is our way, our truth, and our life; He is our “I Am” – our beginning and our end and our source of all that we need. He is the life to whom we must desperately cling.

Second, the Father being the vinedresser is always busy tending to His vineyard. He is overseeing the whole process and He finds the branches that are producing and He prunes them so that they will have greater fruitfulness and the branches that have been severed or snapped off He gathers together to be tossed into a pile to be burned. He is constantly working the vineyard to ensure its health. A vineyard that

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produces lots of fruit brings glory to the vinedresser as it is a testament to His skill, His care, His patience, His hard work, His attention, His ability to fixate on all the details and to know exactly what is needed based on the soil, the weather conditions, and so on. The job of a vinedresser is constant.

Third, are the branches and we believers are the branches. In this story, the branches are either connected to the vine or they are not. If they are connected to the vine they receive all that they need in terms of nutrients, via the sap, and they then naturally produce fruit. If, however, they are not connected they just dry up and produce no fruit; in fact, any fruit that might have been growing just withers, rots, and dies. The branches that become disconnected from the vine just cannot survive for they have no independent means of receiving the nutrients they need; thus, they are daily dying. It is a process that may take some time, but the end result is always certain. For a while a broken branch may look green and it is even flexible and hard to break. But just give it enough time and the sap that remains in the branch will dry up and soon the branch will become hard, rigid, and is easily broken. After a while, the broken branch is just in the way of the vinedresser as He moves about caring for the vineyard, so He gathers up the broken branch and tosses it into the fire.

Fourth, there is the Holy Spirit, the sap that flows from the vine to the branches. The sap gives life to the branch and provides everything that the branch needs in order to be healthy and produce fruit. It is the sap that causes the branch to bud with leaves, to flower, and provides the nutrients which converts the flower to fruit. Then once the fruit is picked, the sap continues nourishing the branch and this processes repeats.

And fifth, there is the fruit and it is the fruit that brings glory to the vinedresser. If the vinedresser were to leave the fruit on the branch, it would just get rotten and

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no one could enjoy it. In fact, the vineyard would probably become infested with flies and other annoying bugs that help with the decomposition process. But the fruit is meant to be harvested and then either eaten or converted into something else that is marvelous, like a lovely cabernet or a tasty jam.

The fruit is unique in that it is meant for others and does not in any way serve the branch. In fact, the branch cannot utilize the fruit; it cannot eat it, it cannot drink it, it cannot even enjoy its beauty, it can just naturally produce it for others to enjoy. And when others enjoy the fruit and realize how marvelous it is, the praise, the glory, the appreciation does not go to the branch, it does not go to the sap, it does not even go to the vine, but it goes to the one who is caring for and nurturing the vineyard—the vinedresser. When tasting a fine wine, no one says, “Wow that must have been an amazing branch.” They say, “Wow whoever is managing that vineyard is so wise, so knowledgeable, so dutiful, so talented, and so amazing.”

So that is a blown up view of this metaphor. But let’s talk about this in terms of our life and the Father’s goal for our life, fruitfulness. The first thing that has always hit me hard as I study this passage is that the only thing the branch has to do is stay connected to the vine; that is it! The vine does no work other than staying connected. It does not have to extract the nutrients, it does not have to try and make itself be useful to the vine, it cannot prune itself, and it is wholly incapable of caring for itself. All the branch needs to do is to be continually connected to the source of its life and then it will do exactly what it was created to do. This is why Jesus said:

***Matthew 11:28-30***

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

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Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

God does not want us or need us to do anything for Him; He just wants us to be connected to Him. For if we are connected to Him, His life will produce in us the fruit that He desires. We become a vessel, a branch, through which His life flows. His requirements on our life are not this big list of disciplines, duties, and “to-do’s” but we are merely to tuck ourselves safely way in His life. This is why He says His burden is light and easy.

One of our problems, however, is that we generally don’t seem to understand this to be an actual issue of faith—a truth we must believe and live. Instead of resting in Him our lives get all messy and complicated as we focus on being busy and “doing” for God. In fact, for many of us, some type of formal ministry has been our way of life; we could hardly imagine what we would do if we were not “doing” some form of ministry. This paradigm is so hard to escape because it is pervasive and widely expected when you become part of a church or Christian organization. It is a burden we carry that God has not asked us to carry; a burden we put on others that God has not placed on them.

I think there is something endemic to our old sinful nature that just loves to carry burdens and loves to be responsible. For example, the other week this person came up to me and said they had really been struggling and have felt guilty all week long. Our conversation went something like this. Guilty? Did you do something wrong or have you been disobedient in anything that you know God has told you? No its nothing like that, she said, but God seems to be talking to so many

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people and telling them about things they need to work on and areas where they to trust Him deeper and I feel that I might be missing something. Maybe I am not hearing Him or maybe I am just doing it all wrong but either way I want Him to tell me something that I need to work on. I said, have you ever thought that maybe, just maybe, God is really pleased where you are at and you just need to rest in that. If He wants to teach you something or have His hands press on some area of your life He will make it clear; but it is absolutely ok to just enjoy Him and enjoy where He has you right now. He has done so much in you over the last number of years that I bet you He is just enjoying your company and smiling at you with a look of total approval. Therefore, you don't need to strive, you don't need to feel guilty and you really can just rest in the relationship you have with Jesus. Just enjoy Him as He is enjoying you.

After this conversation I started to think about my own life and my own struggles with trying so hard to serve God and I was reminded of all my attempts to be a good Christian. I remember ever so clearly how much work it was and how no matter what I did it seemed to never be enough (it was not light and easy). Of course, I attributed that "feeling" to God and His incessant demands on my life. I just knew He wanted me to be a more faithful and dutiful servant, but I was wrong; it was just my wrong belief and my refusal to believe that His load is truly light and easy and all He wants of me is to abide.

This also made me go back a bit further in my Christian experience and I realized that this was not how I always understood God and His expectations of my life. There was a time where I knew what it was like to daily experience God in such a light and easy way. When I first became a Christian I was taught how it was so important to just love Jesus and to surrender yourself to Him so that He can do whatever He wants with you, whenever He wants. When I first heard this message



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I loved it and I believed that this is how God wanted me to enjoy Him. This message was such a relief especially compared to the guilt and duty-bound mindset which dominated my thinking during my Catholic upbringing.

My early days with the Lord were filled with wonder and amazement as I watched the amazing miracles that He was doing in my family as everyone was giving their lives to Him. He also had placed within many in my family a desire to pursue Him and experience Him in every way possible. If there was a bible study or prayer meeting, we were there. If there was no bible study going on, we had one in our garage and invited the neighbors. We were just about being with Jesus.

It's funny to say now, but as I look back on those days a big influence on my understanding of how to be in relationship with God actually came from Christian music. I got saved towards the end of an amazing work of God in America that is called "the Jesus movement." Springing up from this movement was a lot of musicians that were radically in love with Jesus. One of these was a man whom Jimmy Hendrix and Eric Clapton said was the best guitar player in the music world, and that was Phil Keaggy. His music seemed to me to always be anointed by the Holy Spirit, and whenever I heard it I started to worship. Even today when I turn on some of the old music it draws me into the presence of God. There were two of Phil's songs that really impacted me. One was "Walking with our Lord" and a few lines in this song were:

Follow Me He calls us. Come to Me, He wants us. Trust in Me, He tells us. Abide in Me, He loves us. When He calls we'll go. When He calls, we'll follow. We can surely trust Him. His voice, we surely know. Walking with our Lord, talking to our God, He is compassionate. Give you a peace that you never can forget. Singing every heart, ringing every bell, loving His tenderness. Giving Him the praise and His holy name we'll bless—oh yes!

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The other is a song called “Take me closer” and it simply goes:

Take me closer to Your side. Take me closer to You. Your love is like the dawn, beautiful as the moon; Your love is as pure as the sun, keeping all life in tune with You. I love you Lord. You’re the source of my life sweet Jesus bringing forth the good fruit. Like a branch clinging to the vine, so I’m clinging to you. I need You Lord, I need You Lord.

Then there was a song by a band called the Second Chapter of Acts which always stuck with me throughout the years and it went as follows:

Now that I belong to you, my life has changed; my thoughts rearranged all because I love you. And I never will forget the day you gave me life and spoke to me at night and said that you would be there to take my hand and see me through the night then you said oh my child: take this life I give to you cause I want to live through you. All my life I give to you that’s all you ever asked. I am weak but that can’t last when you breathe upon me. And one thing I know for sure you loved me first and I never have to thirst because you’ll be there to give me living water every day, my Lord and God Jesus, take this life, I give to you cause I want to live through you. Take this life! Take this life!

To me these songs spoke of the simplicity of just holding on to Jesus, loving Jesus, and enjoying everything about Him. They spoke to the reality of our desperate need for Him in all things and how on our own we cannot do anything for God; in fact, He does not even want us to try. He just wants us to give ourselves completely to Him, letting His word be our absolute *priority* and the ultimate *authority* over our lives, so He can live through us. He wants us to be in love with Him and find who we are only in Him—that includes finding our self image our security and our very personhood in the fact that we belong to Jesus.

I believe that this message has in a large part been lost in the Christianity of our day. Too often we do not get taught about a life of simple connection and dependence upon Jesus for all things; rather, its message which now more closely embraces the work ethic of our American society. We want Christians to be productive and effective for the kingdom; thus, we train believers in the tried and true methods that have been proven throughout the ages to be effective, of course with a new modern spin. Then we set them off for service and tell them that they must go and take their work place, their neighborhood, their city, and the world for Jesus. Unfortunately, we forget that anything we do for God that does not directly derive from Him is absolutely worthless to God.

This is critical that you fully understand and believe this next point. Jesus said in *verse 4* that apart from abiding in Him we can do *nothing*—and He meant *nothing!* That means that if our service for God and the things we do in our relationship with God do not derive from our clinging to Him, it is just *nothing!* It is just wasted effort. It does not matter how hard we try or how sincere we are in our efforts, it is just *nothing!* It does not matter if God, in His mercy, even uses your efforts to bless another person or many people for that matter, with regards to you and God it is still *nothing!* It does not matter how much you believe and are fully convinced that you are doing the right thing, it is *nothing!* It does not even matter how many other Christians are doing it, it is *nothing!*

Going back to my early days of Christianity, after my first year or two, things seemed to mutate. What I was then taught about being a Christian had little to do with just being connected to Jesus and more to do with what I had to do: the habits I need to adopt, the disciplines I needed to follow, the things I needed to not do, the duties I needed to perform, and so on. And the more that I focused on doing for

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God I found the less I was actually connected to God; and I knew inside that something was not right. There was separation.

So I tried harder to get back that sense of belonging and intimate connection that I had once experienced (I started striving in my time with the Lord trying to feel what I had once felt). I figured that I must be the problem and was not being a good enough Christian. I had to be doing something wrong (the burden I placed on myself just got heavier). So I tried harder to not sin and harder to be about the work of the ministry. I became very busy for God and desperately wanted Him to notice how devoted I was and I wanted Him to take pleasure in how hard I worked for Him. After all, I was doing it for Him. But to my dismay, God lovingly showed me that all that I did which derived from my own misguided religious notions of trying to “do” for God, trying to find favor with God, trying to please God, or just trying to be a good servant of God, was just a bunch of *nothing*.

A lot of Christians that I talk to about this truth have a very hard time accepting it; in fact, they don't like it at all. Too often they find who they are—their identity and how they are validated in this life—in what they do for God and to think that it might all be *nothing* is horrifying. When God first confronted me with this truth, I was horrified. I did not want to believe it. I had worked so hard and I really thought He owed me something for how good I had been and how hard I had worked on His behalf. Now under normal conditions I would have never said anything as arrogant as that, at least not out loud (it does not come across very godly to say that God owes you something). Of course, none of us believes God owes us anything because of how hard we have labored for Him—right? Ha!

Unfortunately, I quickly came to realize that what I would never say publically I let flow privately—and boy did it flow. Once God started to bring difficulty in my life (when He decided that it was time for some serious pruning of my branch), I

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found that I was extremely mad at Him. Why was He doing such a thing to me? Why was He making me suffer? He owed me better; I deserved blessing not trouble. I was so confused. What had I done to deserve this? Sure I had sinned, everyone sins; but come on my sin was nothing compared to how much ministry I had done for Him and how many lives I had impacted—and to my credit, with all appropriate sarcasm, I had impacted a lot. I know it sounds ridiculous, but deep inside I really believed He owed me and I became so disillusioned with what He was doing with my life.

Honestly, I was furious with God and I wasted so much energy bringing my complaint to an unyielding, and very focused, God who was busy tending to the vineyard. I really wanted Him to relent of His injustice and He just kept pruning and cutting back and clipping here and cutting there. He was relentless with me until I finally realized that I was the one who had to relent. I had to be willing to let His word be authoritative over my life and accept the truth that God owes me nothing because I cannot do anything for Him. I simply can't. And what's more, I never could. I learned the hard way (actually I was brought back to the simple beginnings of my faith) that the only thing that really matters is His life in mine; His life through mine. And He wanted me to not only know this truth but rest in it. He wanted it to become my truth and not just a truth, so it would mark how I chose to live my life in Him.

You see, all our own efforts to serve God, to please God, to “do” for God are like those branches that are good only to be gathered up and tossed into the fire. And this is exactly what will happen one day. The Bible speaks of a judgment of believers where we will receive our rewards and be set free from all that is not of God. Be certain, this is not a judgment unto eternal condemnation and separation from God like what unbelievers will experience. Our judgment will be more akin

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to purification where the bride of Christ is prepared for her husband—where she takes off her old dirty clothes and puts on the clean white wedding dress.

In this judgment all that is worthless and rotten, dried out and broken (all that we have done on our own power, wisdom, and strength), will (using the language in Jesus' metaphor) be tossed into the fire and burned. Why? Because we had parted from Him and were not abiding in Him; we were off doing what we thought He wanted us to do. Simply said, they were not His works; they were ours and therefore are worth *nothing!*

The good news is that this fire will not touch, or do any damage to, all that God did in and through us. All of those works—all of His perfect works—will remain and will be our reward throughout all eternity. Paul explains it this way:

***1 Corinthians 3:11-15***

For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

So I want to once again emphasize the important of understanding the truth about the *nothingness* of all that we try and do for God. There is only one way you will receive the rewards that will follow you into eternity and that is by clinging

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with total desperation to the vine where He is free to do with you as He wills, when He wills, how He wills.

Does your life exhibit this kind of desperate surrender? Does your day-in-and-day-out life from beginning to end reflect an active belief in this truth? Are you willing to bet your life on this truth? Remember, apart from Him you can do *nothing*—absolutely *nothing!* This is an unbending, unrelenting, and unyielding truth. That is why you must cling to Him, abide in Him, and remain in Him. If you do, then He will produce an abundance of fruit in your life.

Keep in mind the imagery. If we are connected to Jesus then it is His life in ours, His sap in our veins, His nutrients that are flowing through us producing His works; and it has nothing to do with us—nothing! It’s all from Him and for Him. The verb “abide” is in the aorist, active, imperative tense. This means we are commanded to always be active about remaining in Him and it is to be our existence from beginning to end. This means we must get out of the way and not longer act as if we are the way, the truth and the life. We must let Him have that those roles in our life. In fact, this absolute dependence is what uniquely defines us as true disciples of Jesus Christ.

In *verse 5* Jesus said that those who remain in Him will produce much fruit. In *verse 8* Jesus said that when our lives produce much fruit, it is the very evidence that we are His disciples. This is very similar to the comment He made in *Chapter 13:35* when He said, “Your love [agape] for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.” In these two passages Jesus essentially says the same thing, He just uses different descriptors. But the point is that love [agape] and the fruit that God produces is exclusive to a person that derives their daily sustenance from being in love with Jesus. This whole concept is beautifully summarized in the book of Galatians.

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*Galatians 5:16, 22-23, 25*

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law...If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

Notice that it does not say that the fruit of the Spirit is a big world-wide universal ministry, a big church, many converts, a daily TV show, a block buster movie, record breaking CD, many top selling books on how to be a Christian, or abundant health, wealth, and prosperity. It is sad but in big segments of Western Christianity we have really been deceived for so many of us tend to equate at least some of these things with the fruit of God in our lives (I know I used to). But that is just not the case. God may do some of these things with your life and if He does that is wonderful, but that is just His to do.

However, the true fruit that He will produce, if you cling to Him for everything, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Do you see that this list has little to do with going out and doing some ministry for the Lord, but everything to do with the quality of the relationships in your life?

The true sign of our walking with God has nothing to do with the things in our life, the events of our life, or the success and failures we might experience as a result of trying to serve God and trying to be a good Christian, but it has everything to do with the way we are in relationship with others.

For example, if you want to Biblically evaluate the legitimacy of any ministry then don't look to the popularity of the pastor, the type of leadership structure it



has, the layers of accountability, the method or the ministry philosophy it employs, the size of the ministry, the financial condition of the ministry, or any other traditional measurement of success and blessing; rather, look to the lives of those within the fellowship. Do the lives of those within the ministry or fellowship exude the fruits of the Spirit of God? This is all that matters; all else is either not ours to worry about (because it is just what God is doing) or it is “*nothing*” as we discussed earlier because it is result of our own efforts.

But either way, if people within the fellowship are experiencing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control then you know that they have learned how to be in love with Jesus and how to let Him be their “I Am.” And since these are the fruits of the Spirit, they might be imitated by some, but they will only flow consistently through the lives of those who are desperately clinging to the vine—those who seek to find their life and their breath in all that He is. This is to be our life—from beginning to end—and it is possible!

Next week we will continue with this passage.

Let’s Pray