

JOHN 15:1–8. (EHV)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off. And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I am going to remain in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples.”

It’s getting to be that time of year, time for spring cleaning. And spring cleaning doesn’t just mean cleaning up inside; it also means fixing up the yard outside. Which often means pruning to one extent or another. Some pruning is purely aesthetical, like when shrubs are squared or rounded. But other pruning encourages new growth or helps what is already growing to be even healthier or more fruitful.

Pruning is especially essential if you own a vineyard. Without good vine dressing, as it’s called, the grapes won’t be as healthy, and if the grapes aren’t as healthy, the wine doesn’t taste as good, and when the wine doesn’t taste as good, people will purchase other wine, and the livelihood of those connected to the vineyard will take a hit.

Jesus spoke these words on Holy Thursday. Perhaps they passed a vineyard as he and his disciples proceeded from the upper room where they celebrated the Passover to the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives where Jesus would be betrayed. Or perhaps he was thinking about the wine he had just drunk with his disciples in the Passover or the wine he had used in part to institute the Lord’s Supper. Whatever the case, Jesus used the opportunity to talk about the vine and the branches in a much more important vineyard.

1. Jesus Is the Vine

Jesus begins this discourse by saying that he is the vine. First he says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener” or vinedresser. Later he says, “I am the Vine; you are the branches.”

In order to understand this metaphor, it will help to understand vine dressing. In one method of vine dressing, the vine trunk is topped off at a certain point, so that it stops growing vertically, and two of the branches are then trained to grow along a wire horizontally. These two branches are known as cordons. The cordons are cut off at a certain point, and they eventually become a permanent extension of the vine. From the buds on the cordons grow the branches, perhaps ten to twelve on each side, and there are dozens of buds that could potentially grow on each branch, and each of those buds could potentially yield two clusters of grapes.

All of that life in the branches comes the vine. If there were no vine, there would be no branches and thus no grapes, no fruit. The vine is everything to the branches and to the fruit. The

difference in this comparison is that, in an earthly vineyard, there would be many such vines, but in God's vineyard, Jesus is the only vine.

Jesus is the source of our life. He is our life. Jesus says, "A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me. ... The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." If Jesus is the vine, that means trying to accomplish anything of substance without him or apart from him is futile, just like if a branch were to yank itself out of one of the cordons and jump to the ground below and say, "I can produce fruit on my own just fine, thank you very much!" It can't, though. It will be picked up with the other dead sticks and branches and burned.

Isaiah says the same thing when he says, "All flesh is grass, and all their beauty *or* goodness is like a flower in the countryside. Grass withers [and] flowers fade" (Isa. 40:6). That's what happens if we try to go it alone, without Jesus.

It seems like more and more people today are realizing the meaninglessness of life when it's just the same old routine, the same old hard work, day after day in an effort to make a living, provide for your family, and hopefully do some things that you love in your free time, or at least when you retire—when that's all that life is and nothing more, until you die. The problem is that critics of that kind of life think that the antidote to it is finding a way to do only what you love doing or are passionate about, and if possible, avoiding all routine as they do so, embarking on something new and different as much as possible. The problem with that antidote is not just that, if everyone adopted it, we'd be woefully short on garbage collectors, janitors, cashiers, factory workers, morticians, and countless other jobs that very few people dream of doing, but are vital to our economy and life. The bigger problem is that they're substituting one branch lying on the ground separated from Jesus for another branch lying the on the ground separated from Jesus. With Jesus, even the most boring, day-in-day-out routine of a life is filled with beauty, meaning, and purpose, and is a fragrant offering to God. Without Jesus, it doesn't matter how exciting your job is or how passionate you are about it. You're still doing nothing of substance, nothing that will endure before God. You're still living a life that ends in death, a life that ends in hellfire.

Jesus is the vine. He is the source of our life. He is our life. Without him we are dead, even while we live, and can do nothing. With him, we are fruitful.

2. We Are the Branches

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. We already mentioned that the branches grow from the buds on the cordons, perhaps ten to twelve on each side, and there are dozens of buds that could potentially grow on each branch, and each of those buds could potentially yield two clusters of grapes. We already talked about how if those branches are cut away from the cordons, they are useless, fit only for the fire.

But what about those branches that remain in the cordons? Can they just remain as is and grow however they want? No, if those branches are simply allowed to grow as they wish and all the buds on them are allowed to produce clusters as they wish, there won't be enough nutrients to support all of them. The grapes will never fully ripen, and so even though the branches will produce fruit, the fruit will not be abundant and will essentially be useless.

So the vinedresser prunes the branches so that they only get to keep a few buds, and he also looks for suckers and other offshoot growth to prune. Then the clusters that grow from those buds will fully ripen and the grapes will be large and delicious and beautiful, and anything produced from those grapes will be of the highest quality.

If you look over at the vines growing along the parsonage property fence, you will see why I said that the trunk-and-cordons method is just one method of vine dressing. The parsonage vines do not fit that description. Nevertheless, the principle of pruning is the same. My first year here those vines hardly produced any grapes, and the grapes they did produce were very small and worthless. You know why? I just let them grow as they pleased. The only pruning I did was to make sure I could go in and out of the gate. Last year those vines produced a bunch of nice grapes from which I was able to enjoy my first ever glasses of homemade wine. I was even able to give some grapes away. Why? Because I actually took more time to prune the vines. I kind of just did it by feel, but cutting off the suckers, other offshoot growth, and some of the branches caused the branches that remained to produce much larger and tastier grapes.

Now we would be taking Jesus's illustration too far if we concluded from it that Jesus must not be very good and nutritious vine if he doesn't have enough strength and nutrients for all of us to simply grow wild as we wish. That isn't Jesus's point. His point is that we draw our life only from him and that, just as the branches on a vine need to be pruned in order for them to be as fruitful as possible, so also the same is true of us. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off. And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit."

Now imagine if the branches could talk. What would they say as they are being pruned? "Ow! You're cutting parts of me off! That really hurts! Why did you stop me from growing that? That had a lot of potential! Now I'm not going to produce as much fruit."

And that's how it feels when God prunes us too, when he sends hardship into our lives through which something is removed. It hurts. And it often looks like God is ruining something good that could have been in our lives. For instance, a good Christian athlete might have all sort of competitive plans for the future, but then he gets injured or gets into an accident and has to use crutches, or a cane, or a walker, or a wheelchair, maybe permanently. God is using that injury to draw that Christian even closer to him, to produce better fruit. Maybe the athlete was starting to let the success get to his head and failing to praise and thank God. Maybe that sport or its competition were turning into his god, occupying a larger place in his heart than God. Or maybe his disability will drive him to more frequent prayer. Or maybe it will put him into contact with someone else that God wants to graft into the vine. Maybe it's a combination of all of them. Maybe it's something else entirely.

We could also think of more difficult examples. For instance, if a Christian goes into a coma for several months before dying, how was God using that to make that person more fruitful? I don't have all the answers, because the Bible doesn't give them. But God does not lie. Depending on what that person's life was like before, perhaps just lying there breathing to the glory of God and letting other Christians care and pray for him or her *is* being more fruitful. Or maybe the person already reached the peak fruitfulness on earth that God intended, and now God is using that person's hospital stay to make other Christians more fruitful.

These are just a couple examples; I'm sure you could each provide many more from your own lives. The point is this: God prunes us because we need him to do so in order to produce the best fruit, in order to keep producing any good fruit at all.

There's a play on words here that very few English translations capture. Jesus says that God *prunes* every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit. Then he says, "You are already *clean* because of the word I have spoken to you." There seems to be no connection. But in Greek, the word for *prune* and the word for *clean* come from the same root. In other words, in Greek, *pruning* a vine is *cleaning* or *purifying* a vine. So Jesus is telling his disciples that being clean or pure is both a current status and an ongoing process. We are clean and pure right now because of the word Jesus has spoken to us. His gospel makes us perfectly clean and pure through faith. But God also needs to continue to clean and purify us, or prune us, so that we continue to cling to his word in faith and deepen our trust in it, thus becoming more fruitful.

Jesus says, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." And then Jesus tells us what those who remain in him will wish for and pray for: "My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples."

Jesus is the vine; we are the branches. If we remain in him through faith and he remains in us through his word, we will bear much fruit, because without him we can do nothing. God grant that we may continue to bear much fruit and prove to be Jesus's disciples. Amen.